

**JASO-online**

---

**Journal of the  
Anthropological Society  
of Oxford**

•

**In association with**

**School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography (University of Oxford)**

**and**

**Oxford University Anthropology Society**

**New Series, Volume X, no. 1 (2018)**

**JASO-online**

---

***Editor: Robert Parkin***

***Web Editor: David Zeitlyn***

***Reviews Editor: Emilia Groupp***

**ISSN: 2040-1876**

© Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford

51 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6PE, UK, 2018

All rights reserved in accordance with online instructions.

**NB:** Copyright for all the articles, reviews and other authored items in this issue falls under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence (see <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/>).

**Download current issues and back numbers for free from:**

**<http://www.anthro.ox.ac.uk/publications/journal-of-the-anthropological-society-of-oxford/>**

## CONTENTS

|  |         |
|--|---------|
| <b>Robin Smith</b> , An economy of trust: chains of debts and favours in rural Istrian business relationships  | 1-21    |
| <b>Malvika Gupta and Felix Padel</b> , Confronting a pedagogy of assimilation: the evolution of large-scale schools for tribal children in India                             | 22-47   |
| <b>Anita Sharma</b> , Nomadism and the frontiers of the state  | 48-60   |
| <b>Goran Aijmer</b> , Ancestors on high: musings on an east Chinese case   | 61-82   |
| <b>Emilia Grouppe</b> , <i>Review article</i> : new perspectives on secular ritual   | 83-92   |
| <b>BOOK REVIEWS</b>  | 93-132  |
| <b>Constance Classen</b> , <i>The museum of the senses: experiencing art and collections</i> (Yuxin Peng)  | 93-94   |
| <b>Tsypylma Darieva, Florian Muelfried and Kevin Tuite</b> (eds.), <i>Sacred Places, Emerging Spaces: Religious Pluralism in the Post-Soviet Caucasus</i> (Michael Costello) | 94-96   |
| <b>Fredrik Hagen and K.S.B. Ryholt</b> , <i>The antiquities trade in Egypt 1880-1930: the H.O. Lange Papers</i> (Emilia Grouppe)   | 97-99   |
| <b>Peter Harries-Jones</b> , <i>Upside-down gods: Gregory Bateson's world of difference</i> (Kåre Stokholm Poulsen)  | 99-102  |
| <b>Ian Heywood</b> (ed.) <i>Sensory arts and design</i> (Rachel Hall)  | 102-105 |
| <b>Andrew Irving</b> , <i>The art of life and death: radical aesthetics and ethnographic practice</i> (Josephine Elliott)  | 106-107 |
| <b>David Le Breton</b> , <i>Sensing the world: an anthropology of the senses</i> (Saumya Pandey)   | 108-111 |
| <b>Carol A. Mortland</b> , <i>Grace after genocide: Cambodians in the United States</i> (Vicente Lozano Lovelace)  | 111-113 |
| <b>Annamaria Mortescu-Mayes and Marcus Banks</b> (eds.) <i>Visual Histories of South Asia</i> (Ratan Kumar Roy)  | 113-116 |
| <b>Alex Rhys-Taylor</b> , 2017. <i>Food and multiculture: a sensory ethnography of East London</i> (Suhaila Al Behandy)  | 117-119 |
| <b>Arnd Schneider</b> (ed.), <i>Alternative art and anthropology: global encounters</i> (Nina Khamsy)  | 119-122 |
| <b>Lucien Scubla</b> , <i>Giving life, giving death: psychoanalysis, anthropology,</i>   |         |

|  |         |
|--|---------|
| <i>philosophy</i> (Luisa Schneider)  | 122-125 |
| <b>Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov</b> , <i>Two Lenins: a brief anthropology of time</i> (Joshua Potter)  | 125-127 |
| <b>Paul-François Tremlett, Liam Sutherland and Graham Harvey</b> (eds.), <i>Edward Burnett Tylor, religion and culture</i> (Lai Hung Yu) | 128-129 |
| <b>Roy Wagner</b> , <i>The invention of culture</i> (Emilia Grouppe)   | 129-132 |

## FILM REVIEW

|  |         |
|--|---------|
| <b>Olivier Jourdain</b> (director), <i>Sacred Water</i> (Charlotte Rastas) | 133-134 |
|--|---------|

AN ECONOMY OF TRUST:  
CHAINS OF DEBTS AND FAVOURS  
IN RURAL ISTRIAN BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS

ROBIN SMITH<sup>1</sup>

**Introduction**

It was summer and just months before the grape harvest in Istria, Croatia. Danilo, a winemaker, visited his nearby agricultural input supply shop (*agraria*) urgently seeking a spray to combat a common vineyard disease. It was also the middle of the tourist season in this popular vacation destination on the Adriatic coast, increasingly visited for its wine. Prior to World War II, Istria had been part of Italy and was known for its Malvasia and Teran wines. As part of Yugoslavia, the region's wine production increased, due to the introduction of state wineries and the proliferation of small-scale family winemaking. In the early post-socialist period, restrictions on private winemaking were lifted. State wineries were eventually privatized beginning in the early 2000s. With the help of the Istrian Tourist Board and other local institutions, winemaking in the region has grown and been professionalized at a rapid pace, such that in recent years Istria has been likened to Tuscany and other important winemaking regions of Europe. Croatia's EU accession in July 2013 marked the midway point of my two years of doctoral fieldwork in the region, during which time Istrians were adjusting to market and legislative changes that challenged them to change everyday business practices. However, I found that some less than optimal business practices were increasingly being relied upon as coping mechanisms to deal with the rising issue of illiquidity. Many businessmen find themselves in the situation of being in long-term debt to clients, waiting for long-term debts to be repaid, or most often both. The personal nature of so many business transactions, along with the long process of formally pursuing debt collection, contributes to this business environment of debts. In Danilo's trip to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Post-doctoral researcher, Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, University of Leiden, Pieter de la Court Building, Wassenaarseweg 52, 2333 AK Leiden, Netherlands. Email: [r.e.smith@fsw.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:r.e.smith@fsw.leidenuniv.nl). Currently working on project, *Food citizens? Collective food procurement in European cities: solidarity and diversity, skills and scale*, funded by the European Research Council under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant no. 724151). Research for this article was undertaken in Istria as a doctoral student at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Oxford, and was made possible through the generous financial support of a Clarendon Fund scholarship.

*agraria*, he had not anticipated a long-term debt to arise, but eventually this is what occurred, leading the respective transactors to turn to a debt resolution practice common to the region.

When Danilo earnestly visited the *agraria* that day, he did so without cash, but the *agraria*'s owner Italo gave him the supplies with a verbal assurance of payment in due course because Danilo is a long-term customer and neighbour. Italo was confident that he would be paid because it was the high season for tourism, when he knew that Danilo would be making the bulk of his cash wine sales. Indeed, Danilo expected to run out of wine before the season ended and was worried about how to fill those committed orders. Meanwhile, not spraying the vineyards risked losing an entire harvest in a matter of days. However, in the weeks that followed, events conspired that made paying the *agraria* impossible, Danilo later explained. He wanted to resolve this situation because he needed to maintain a good relationship with Italo to have continued access to inputs. Yes, he could buy supplies elsewhere, but this *agraria* is conveniently located between his home and his vineyards, he explained, and the next nearest one is an inconvenient distance away in a different municipality. Further complicating matters, he said, this is a small community, and it was not worth the risk of developing a bad reputation. The debt was 12,000 kuna, which is approximately two months' salary for many rural residents. In speaking with Italo, they agreed that Danilo would try to 'close the debt'. This is how Danilo explained the situation and how he ultimately resolved it:

I bought 12,000 kuna of chemicals from an *agraria*, even though I did not have cash, because we were friends, and we agreed that I would pay him when I sold my wine. I sold 2,000 bottles of wine to a *gostione*, which sold my wine but failed to pay me. Thus, I could not pay the *agraria*! Now, I have to find a person who owes the *gostione* who is also a client of the *agraria* who will pay the *agraria* and close the debt. Probably I will not find someone to resolve one hundred percent of the debt, but if I can resolve eighty percent, maybe that will be small enough for the *gostione* to manage to pay me. I have to call my friends and everyone I know and communicate with people to find a solution.

Eventually, Danilo found Marko, a builder who owed the restaurant for various items he had bought second-hand and was also waiting for payment from Italo at the *agraria* for work he had done, decreasing Danilo's debt to a point where it was possible for Danilo to pay the small balance in cash. Locally, they call this debt resolution process *lanac kompenzacija*, or 'chain compensation', so called because businessmen construct a chain of debtors to write off debt. Danilo explained that finding such common clients to close debts is an exercise in using and

even broadening his market knowledge, as he must communicate in detail with businessmen in his community about debts and business relationships. The pervasiveness of this system means that the details of the business dealings of Danilo, as of Istrians in general, are not private, but rather circulate through society on an as-needed basis.

*Lanac kompenzacija* is a common way to resolve debts in Istria's business community. It forms part of a larger system of *kompenzacija* transactions used to resolve long-standing debts that have grown in importance in the context of rising economic precarity in Croatia in general.<sup>2</sup> Using this system, if a businessman can figure out through conversations who owes his debtor and who owes that debtor's debtor, and so on down the line, he can construct a *chain* of debtors. Joining a debt chain allows a businessman to write off the debt of one client by virtue of a second businessman writing off his debt to him. Although the businessman is not paid in cash, he also has one less debt of his own. This means that cash does not necessarily enter into a *lanac kompenzacija* transaction. Once a chain has been constructed and the values of the debts confirmed, all parties circulate a receipt called a *statement of clearance*, and sign, stamp and fax copies down the chain. In Danilo's case he was able to find Marko, who closed the debt chain enough for Danilo to pay the balance. However, it is common for there to be ten or more participants, and for no cash to be involved because the chain balances the various accounts.

Despite its utility, *lanac kompenzacija* is far from the preferred system, and as such is often the topic of debate and lamentations in village cafés. The debt resolution practices prevalent in Istria's business community today have in common the fact that each transaction began with the expectation of cash payment for the goods or services. However, after months pass by, instead of being paid, the increasingly impatient businessman must ultimately request or demand payment from his debtor. Sometimes, as in Danilo's situation, the debtor may initiate the resolution. Nonetheless, regardless of who initiates, the outcome is that the transactors must negotiate new terms because the debtor either lacks the cash or the *will* to fulfil his payment obligation. Of

---

<sup>2</sup> A second form of debt resolution and trade without monetary compensation is what people in some parts of Istria call *cessione*, which may be described as debt off-setting to a third party who is a friend of both original transactors and assumes the debt as a favour. A third form that is prevalent throughout Croatia is what I call 'hostage *kompenzacija*'. This mode of debt resolution is generally used by large firms in a predatory way to preserve liquidity at the expense of clients who are forced to choose between alternative non-monetary options to resolve outstanding debts after much time has passed and the original goods or services have already been used or sold by the debtor firm. In extreme cases, this latter form may be used to manipulate local market prices of goods to the benefit of larger firms in the same sector. The characteristics of these other debt resolution systems are complex enough to warrant separate articles.

course, these new terms serve the interest of the *debtor*, who is on his way to avoiding paying cash. The owed party, desperate to resolve a debt, often agrees to *lanac kompenzacija* or other *kompenzacija* arrangements. In reflecting on the pervasiveness of *lanac kompenzacija* in Istrian business transactions, a winemaker quipped that, ‘See, Istrians are wizards. We know how to do business without money’.

Initiating *lanac kompenzacija* is not a neutral act. Rather, it is sometimes expressed by informants as feeling uncomfortable, as the mere voicing of needing to be paid can feel like they are revealing they are in such dire financial straits that they are desperate for cash — and by extension, they are admitting to being *bad* businessmen, incapable of managing their own finances. A wife of a winemaker telling such a story said regretfully, ‘It makes him feel like he is less of a man. It is embarrassing for him, but it should be embarrassing to *him* [the debtor], not my husband!’ Indeed, in relaying another debt collection story, one winemaker described feeling *ashamed* for having to approach his debtor. Such expressions reveal the social tensions at play in these business relationships. These debt resolution practices may thus be understood as unsatisfactory coping strategies. Cash is nearly always preferred to non-cash resolutions — at least from the perspective of the person who is owed.

Importantly, a businessman waiting for payment who also owes another firm payment will agree to join the chain at the request of his client as a *favour*. The debts of clients thus initiate a process that is repeated throughout the economy in such a way that diverse business actors find themselves related to one another in new and interesting configurations. New favours and obligations tie these new relations. *Lanac kompenzacija* thus shows us how debts may ultimately create new relationships that extend beyond the initial transactors.

### **The sociality of debt**

As he packed his wine bottles into cartons in his wine-tasting room in a hillside village in northwest Istria, Lorenzo explained that agreeing to *lanac kompenzacija* is a favour because with cash, of course, he can decide to pay employees’ salaries or utility bills, whereas *lanac kompenzacija* simply writes off a debt. Joining helps a client urgently resolve their debt, so the businessman is *choosing* to forego a continued wait that could finally result in a payment in cash. Importantly, Lorenzo and others stressed, someone agreeing to accept or participate in *lanac kompenzacija* is considered *pošten* towards one’s clients — a moral value that encapsulates the



characteristics of trustworthiness, honesty, loyalty and being honourable — as participation in such chains contributes to one's reputation as someone who helps others. The pervasiveness of *lanac kompenzacija* has contributed to the emergence of a dense system of favour relationships, and indeed to function well it relies on this density of favour relationships and the widespread acceptance of the practice. Its pervasiveness creates some measure of security in transactions in general, as a businessman knows that, even if a client fails to pay a debt, there are ways of resolving the issue. There are usually more than financial reasons incentivizing the resolution of debts, too, including the desire to continue business with the person in question, but also social reasons because so many businessmen are connected through friends, family and proximity.

I found myself reflecting increasingly on the curious pervasiveness of *lanac kompenzacija* in this business community, as such stories were so often revealed to me in conversations with winemakers and small businessmen about problems they faced and how they were coping with the economic crisis in Europe. In my notebooks, on scraps of paper, on backs of receipts and even on napkins in cafés, the pens in the hands of my informants would draw arrows between these relationships, sums of debts and waiting times, and I would be left with barely legible scrawl to compare against my carefully written notes. I began carrying two pens to interviews, as my informants would so often, in an excited and sometimes somewhat agitated state, suddenly take my pen and notebook from me mid-story to 'clarify' such relationships. I would sit there watching them talk out the chains, drawing arrows back and forth and circling names and numbers in an animated voice, leaving me in awe of the complexity and simultaneous sadness that what we were ultimately discussing was why they were not able to pay for their health insurance, home improvements, winery investments, college for their children or other important life necessities. The questions that captivated me in these conversations were: Why do these businessmen continue to do business with chronic debtors? Should they not simply close the debt and walk away, refuse to go into business with the debtor again and gossip about his bad behaviour in cafés? In this time of restricted liquidity, why would people not be avoiding debt at all costs? I would pose such questions to my informants during their storytelling if I could get a word in edgewise. Their answers made me realize that instead, its regular practice means that debts may actually have social lives of their own. Indeed, *lanac kompenzacija* makes me look at debt differently, to consider its positive qualities. In asking such basic questions, what unfolded was an understanding of how *lanac kompenzacija* shapes relationships in this small business

community.

In problematizing the dynamics of *lanac kompenzacija* in Istria, Sneath's (2012) concept of enactions comes to mind. In Mongolian communities, Sneath (2012: 459) describes how gifts and favours may be given in ways that are not sufficiently defined as transactions, but rather are 'enactions of aspects of persons and roles for which the language of obligation and expectation is more appropriate than the idiom of exchange'. Although *lanac kompenzacija* is a transaction in a more traditional sense, with goods with a monetary value being exchanged in a business context, the notion that the *aspect* of persons and their *roles* also have value, and indeed are centrally important, may serve to elucidate *lanac kompenzacija*'s role in society. Here, the decision — and one's suitability — to take part in a transaction is to a great degree informed by a person's qualities and social position in the social landscape of the local economy. In Danilo's situation, Marko had to be willing to step in to fill this very strange position of both owing a restaurant *and* waiting for payment from an *agraria*. Indeed, had I pressed Danilo at the time, it would have been surprising if he could have named an alternative individual to Marko who could fit into such a niche. In all likelihood, it would have taken multiple other businessmen to link two such seemingly disparate businesses. Thus, rather than engaging in a transaction, agreeing to participate in *lanac kompenzacija* may be characterized as an enaction — of one's social relationships, reputation as *pošten*, knowledge of the business relationships of others in the community, and outstanding obligations and favours towards others already in circulation, not to mention a confirmation that one values one's client to the extent that one is willing to accept a sub-optimal resolution voluntarily.

However, the fact that *lanac kompenzacija* is only initiated due to a long-standing debt suggests that the debtor is *untrustworthy* — and worse, that they are not *pošten*. Thus, asserting that debt may build relationships is paradoxical because debt should motivate the owed party to find a way to resolve the debt and then exit the relationship. Instead, I found that business relationships are long-term, even with debtors. Debts are resolved through *lanac kompenzacija* and relationships continue with the same clients — like Danilo, who was again able to buy goods from Italo's *agraria*. From the perspective of my informants, resolving debts through *lanac kompenzacija* allows for the *continuation* of business relationships within a context of restricted liquidity — it is a facilitator. In the process, *lanac kompenzacija* can create even stronger bonds

between transacting parties because a favour has been done, extending this new obligation to return the favour into the future. Not only that, but this way of friendly reconciliation seems to soften the frustration of the client waiting for payment. That is, in analysing how *lanac kompenzacija* works in society, one finds that debt may contribute to building relationships instead of destroying them.

Another aspect of enactment here is one's local market knowledge. Again reflecting on Danilo's situation, the type of person who would ultimately fit into Marko's position of connecting these two businesses is not intuitive, but rather relies on the market knowledge of the transactors. In a businessman's research to construct a chain, conversations about debt require a deep understanding of the local and regional market — importantly, who does business with whom and how much, and who is on good terms with whom. Thus, market knowledge is a crucial element in resolving one's debt, and knowledge-bearers are important allies. As a result of intense communication about business relationships over space and time, businessmen learn about the other debts of their clients and other people in their community, as well as the reasons for those debts. This reveals how important it is to be on good terms with one's clients: in a case of chronic debt, transactors must be willing to reveal their business connections. In this way, a businessman's market knowledge signals trustworthiness, as it means that many clients have repeatedly entrusted him with valuable information.

### **An economy of trust defined by debts**

The fact that transactors must be willing to discuss other business relationships of theirs honestly with their clients reveals that *lanac kompenzacija* relies upon businessmen being trustworthy. The process of communicating leads to finding the links to make a chain and people offering favours to join it. This fosters trust and faith, which is paradoxical in the context of a conversation about a long overdue debt. Additionally, through interviews it became apparent that businessmen engaging with clients whose reliability is either unknown or known to be tenuous must have a strong level of trust that, *regardless* of their client's ultimate ability to repay, a debt *will* be resolved. However, such trust did not appear to come from the general institutional environment in which they work, in the sense that issues like the economic downturn, the relative newness of the free market of the West and national corruption scandals were often referenced in conversations about a lack of confidence, or trust, in the market in general. Rather,

the businessmen with whom I spoke trust that, in the event of non-payment, debt resolutions are still possible, often explaining such beliefs with the phrases *ćemo se naći* ('We'll figure it out'), or more commonly *snadi se* (similar, but a phrase used to express the ability to make ends meet in a resourceful way), implying that social connections come into play in resolving economic issues. This is precisely because of the pervasiveness of *lanac kompenzacija* and other forms of *kompenzacija*. Although not ideal, as informants would emphasize by reiterating that cash is always preferred, knowing that *kompenzacija* is an (imperfect) option *does* facilitate business transactions. In this way, a practice that one might be quick to characterize as reflecting only deep structural problems — like economic deficiency or continued reliance on informal business practices — may simultaneously be characterized as a stabilizing force. It is through this dichotomy between being reflective of structural problems and potentially creating stability that *lanac kompenzacija* practices shed light on the role of debt in society. Ultimately, *lanac kompenzacija*'s pervasiveness, I suggest, contributes to this economy's strength and resilience. I suggest further that the widespread faith that debts may be resolved through one's reliance on one's community may be conceptualized as an *economy of trust*.<sup>3</sup>

Anthropological research in other contexts has found that in communities reliant upon trust to organize business, the time it takes to cultivate trust between clients at an individual level means that businessmen try to maintain long-term business relationships (see Harriss 2003: 763; Menning 1997: 69). Kirman and Vriend (2000: 51) found through quantitative economic research in the Marseilles fish market, where fishmongers and restaurateurs engage in multiple daily transactions, that 'Both buyers and sellers are better off in loyal trading relationships' when the relationships are assessed over the long-term, in what they term a 'coevolutionary process' (ibid.: 54). A partnership or commitment creates a level of security that can help to weather changing markets (Lorenz 1988: 209). Relatedly, as Harriss (2003: 755) explained, trust is highly personalized in that it develops out of repeated positive interactions that conform to society's norms. In fact, many studies of trust in business suggest that trust and loyalty are reinforced by regularly repeating business transactions (see Kirman and Vriend 2000; Lomnitz and Sheinbaum

---

<sup>3</sup> The term *economy of trust* has been used and conceptualized by other social scientists in different ways, notably anthropologist Cristina Grasseni (2014) in her work on Italian Solidarity Purchase Groups that bring farmers and consumers together into direct-sales relationships to facilitate trust — for consumers, that they know the origin of their food and that their money is supporting local producers, and for farmers, that they have a secure consumer base. Although I use the term differently in describing Istria's local economy, there may be elements of crossover that could be the subject of future research, such as informal aspects of exchange relationships or types of reciprocal obligations embedded in market exchange, to name just two.

2004; Menning 1997). In a study of French industrial relations, Lorenz (1988: 209) argued that although ‘promoting trust is costly... lack of trust is more costly still’ because it creates market volatility, as well as the burden of checking more thoroughly the trustworthiness of potential clients, which ultimately inhibits everyday business. Such research suggests that trust helps to facilitate transactions. Indeed, even in developed economies the importance of trust in business relationships is emphasized by economists because it ‘presupposes decision-making in a situation of risk’ inherent in exchange that the client will exploit an opportunity to break the contract (ibid.: 197). Thus, trust in another person’s honesty is important in facilitating trade in market economies (Dasgupta 1988: 64; see also Williamson 1993).

However, despite the importance of trust in facilitating business relationships, I found that in Istria it is not sufficient on its own. When speaking with Istrian informants about trust at an individual level, a person’s repeated good behaviour, for example, in being *pošten* or being willing to engage in *lanac kompenzacija* in the past, were referenced when speaking about those with whom they were willing to do business. Here, past behaviour is important in building trust. Gambetta (1988: 234) stresses that, ‘Trust is a peculiar belief predicated not on evidence but on the lack of *contrary* evidence’. Indeed, if one interprets this lack of contrary evidence as suggesting looking at past behaviour, then reputation may be partially incorporated into our understanding of trust. Pagden (1988: 129) points out that trust is always ultimately a belief in that one ‘cannot in fact ever be in possession of sufficient information to *know* that they will not act in entirely unforeseen ways. I *trust* them not to do so. What I have will always be a *belief*’. Going further, Offer (1997: 454) characterizes trust as being similar to a gift in that there is a ‘transfer with the expectation, but no certainty, of reciprocity’. I found that this aspect of uncertainty as inherent in trust is reduced in Istria by the reliance upon one’s character being evaluated as *pošten*, adding an aspect of reputation and recognition of past behaviour to what is otherwise a more general feeling. In these ways, it becomes evident the notion that *pošten* may in fact be an enactment — in business relationships generally, but also specifically when *lanac kompenzacija* comes into play. It positions an individual in the local social system as well as historically, allowing businessmen to make informed decisions. Istrians hold a generalized trust in their community being able to resolve long-term debts through *lanac kompenzacija* or other forms of *kompenzacija*, and trust at an individual level is important for engaging in business, being built through reputation.

Over the course of research, I found that businessmen would do background checks on potential business partners by calling friends, making it clear that one's behaviour would always be watched and evaluated. As a researcher and long-term resident in the community, I was likewise relentlessly assessed through this lens, being asked personal questions to gauge my truth-telling, and tested to see whether I would reveal the business details of others or my opinions about other winemakers. My character was constantly under scrutiny, and my good reputation opened many doors as time progressed. My informants considered such reconnaissance normal behaviour in making business decisions, with one young winemaker explaining over pizza at his home that it was a matter of *protecting* oneself in this market. The questions asked over the course of their background checks were not purely about business behaviour, but about the character of the individual, and so much more knowledge about the person was gathered than simply their business relationships. In other words, reputation was an important component in building trust, where the quality of being *pošten* was a factor in deciding whether or not to do business with someone else.

Reputation has been recognized elsewhere as an important backdrop to the enforcement of contracts, particularly in economies characterized by informal business transactions and in contexts where formal contract enforcement is poor (see Gambetta 1994; Greif 1993; Harriss 2003; J. Humphrey and Schmitz 1998; Lyon and Porter 2009; Murphy 2002; Paine 1967; Platteau 1994; White 1994). In Istria, this intermingling of trust and reputation in business relationships reveals how being *pošten* may be considered integral to the functioning of Istria's economy. As the chain of debtors in any *lanac kompenzacija* resolution usually crosses sectors as diverse as construction, agribusiness and tourism, very quickly one may see how the region's economy becomes tied together in a dense network of relationships defined by debts, favours, obligations, trust and *pošten* behaviour.<sup>4</sup>

### **Pushing the limits of trust**

Until now, I have focused on how trust, being *pošten*, debt and *lanac kompenzacija* interact in relations between small businessmen in Istria. Of course, trust and reputation have a dynamic

---

<sup>4</sup> In another paper, it might be helpful to adopt Alena Ledeneva's (1998) concept of *economies of favour* in post-socialism to analyse the importance of personalistic relationships in business, as her research in the Russian business context reveals the dynamics involved in using social networks to obtain scarce public resources (see also Ledeneva 2017 and Henig and Makovsky 2017). Although such an environment may also exist in Istria, the concept of an *economy of trust* is more illustrative of how *lanac kompenzacija* transactions and debt shape business relationships.

influence in many economies, debt is pervasive across Croatia, Istrian businessmen do business with those outside of their immediate community, and *lanac kompenzacija* and other *kompenzacija* debt resolution systems may be found elsewhere. As I investigated the workings of *lanac kompenzacija* among Istrian winemakers, I began to realize that, as the social distance between transactors widens, new issues emerge, particularly with reference to the problem of resolving debt. Winemakers lamented that, although *lanac kompenzacija* is important for facilitating business locally, larger companies have been increasingly engaging in the practice as well. It is not simply a problem that larger sums of money are in question, but that *lanac kompenzacija* is increasingly turned to, almost as a given. That is, some informants referred to *lanac kompenzacija* as a strategy employed by these larger companies to avoid paying their debts with cash. As such stories accumulated in my notebooks, it was difficult not to see from their perspective how this *ad hoc* form of debt resolution could feel predatory when it involved a larger, distant corporation.

It was spring 2013, and I was sitting in the administrative office of a winery helping to translate a website with a winemaker, Marino. His bookkeeper Elena was on the phone and would periodically interject in our conversation with work-related comments and questions. She was busy finalizing paperwork for a *lanac kompenzacija* transaction with their largest buyer, a nation-wide supermarket called Sunsa. Marino had been waiting for Sunsa to pay him for his wine sold in 2012, with receipts totalling 96,000 kuna (or approximately €12,600). Although Marino had called Sunsa's headquarters in Zagreb many times, each time being told he was on the priority list to be paid, Marino had yet to receive a single payment. He was reluctant to continue sending his wine to the supermarket until this debt was resolved, but also did not want to lose his largest client, as it would be difficult to find another supermarket to buy his wine and even more difficult to find multiple smaller buyers to take care of the same volume. It is hard work to get a contract with a large supermarket chain, so it is not something one wants to put in jeopardy. Eventually, Marino proposed to Sunsa's accountant they arrange *lanac kompenzacija*, believing this was the only way he was going to resolve this debt.

After being advised by other bookkeepers she knows about potential avenues to resolve this, using her own knowledge of the industry and through long conversations with various people in Sunsa's accounting office, Elena was able to learn that Sunsa was waiting for the state to pay it 69,000 kuna in bottle recycling *rebates*. This was fortuitous, Elena explained, because Marino

owed the state 66,000 kuna in bottle *taxes*. Thus, in order to avoid paying cash to Sunsa, the state bottle tax office agreed to write off 66,000 kuna of Marino's debt to it in return for Sunsa writing off 66,000 kuna of the state's debt. Sunsa was left owing Marino just 30,000 kuna of the original amount, and its bookkeeper in charge of Marino's account agreed to pay in cash in instalments.

**Figure 1.** *Lanac kompenzacija* with a supermarket (Sunsa)

|              |                     |              |
|--------------|---------------------|--------------|
| Sunsa        | owes 96,000 kuna to | Marino       |
| Marino       | owes 66,000 kuna to | state office |
| State office | owes 69,000 kuna to | Sunsa        |

As Elena later explained, it was still possible that this 30,000 kuna would take time to resolve, and indeed it was possible that Sunsa would only pay one of the multiple instalments, again allow the debt to lapse, and leave Marino to create yet another *lanac kompenzacija* or agree to take goods, for example, in lieu of cash payment.<sup>5</sup> In an exasperated tone, Elena also pointed out that, according to the contract with Sunsa, resolving a debt through *lanac kompenzacija* incurs a three percent charge on the value of the resolved debt. I immediately asked if it depended on who initiated it, as this seemed unfair because Sunsa was the one delaying payment. She got out the documentation and pointed to the line in the contract to show me that, regardless of who initiates it, that it was the client (the winemaker) who would pay.

I began to realize that, given this allocation of costs and liabilities, it indeed felt as if it was in the interest of the debtor to delay payment, as it would allow them to retain more liquidity and use that money for other debts or investments. Moreover, if the debt lasted long enough for their client to become desperate, they could *earn* three percent on the transaction! As I sat back and processed this state of affairs, Elena resumed printing and faxing the statement of clearance to resolve the debt. Later, she turned to her large bookshelf and took out a massive three-inch binder ominously labelled by hand in bold capitals in black ink: '*KOMPENZACIJA*, 2013'. My eyes fixed on the bookshelf to dwell on the number of binders. 'Croats love bureaucracy', I sarcastically told myself in an effort to minimize my own shock, but it was hard not to wonder

---

<sup>5</sup> This is a different form of *kompenzacija*, to be elaborated upon elsewhere.



how much of their total business consisted of these types of debt resolution schemes.<sup>6</sup> Did cash ever materialize in this economy, I fatalistically wondered?

Through conversations with businessmen who had worked in state firms in Yugoslavia, I began to uncover some interesting truths about *lanac kompenzacija*. One such insight was that the system is reminiscent of what was locally called ‘passing the bill’ (in Croatian, *prolaziti račun*) in the Yugoslav era in that it connects firms on an *ad hoc* basis to solve liquidity problems.<sup>7</sup> This is important because it is in part the familiarity with such *kompenzacija* schemes that lends its usage legitimacy in contexts where it may not be entirely legitimate. In *lanac kompenzacija*, however, the goal is to write off as many debts as possible. Everyone who agrees to be part of the transaction wants to decrease or erase their debt. This is not the typical debt off-setting prevalent in early post-socialist transition Russia that is characterized as barter, where goods would change hands until they reached a firm that could use them, or other goods the firm needed circled to return to the original sender (Humphrey 2000: 77). Humphrey (2000: 77-8) details how barter chains worked in early transition Russia in order for businesses to acquire the goods they needed for production without using precious and scarce cash. Although ultimately they may look similar because of the chains created, such chains diverge from *lanac kompenzacija* because the chains were devised before the transactions began. The same is true in the ‘economy of arrears’ described by Ledeneva (2006: 119), where companies were already in debt chains due to the highly vertically integrated nature of the Soviet economy. In the various debt-offsetting practices prevalent in Croatia today, the assumption at the beginning of the transaction was that cash payment would be made, and then, when it is not, businessmen must undertake a *search* to construct a chain, using their social networks and market knowledge. Another obvious but important difference is that Croatia is no longer in a state of turbulent transition. In the early post-socialist period, the impetus for alternative modes of debt resolution and off-setting were the instability of currencies and the unavailability of goods. Today, such

---

<sup>6</sup> I asked some informants to estimate the percentage of business conducted through various forms of *kompenzacija*, but the numbers were wide-ranging between businesses, varied from year to year, and were impossible to verify. Some informants said they refused to ever resolve debts this way, while others asserted large percentages.

<sup>7</sup> *Prolaziti račun* was a system between state firms that the directors would arrange before mandatory financial reporting to create a chain of firms with the profitable firms lending money to others in their area that were loss-making, together creating an informal financial repayment plan that included favours in buying or trading one another’s goods after the reporting period had passed. These inter-firm favours led to a tightly interdependent local economy that cultivated both loyalty and trust between management, as working together in this way helped them to avoid state intervention and saved the jobs of the directors of otherwise economically faltering firms.

issues do not exist. Thus, we must be more critical in asking why *lanac kompenzacija* is employed as a strategy.

Although *lanac kompenzacija* is a widespread phenomenon, and its use by large firms is not specific to supermarkets, as supermarkets tend to buy huge quantities of products at once, the effect of their non-payment is felt strongly by Istrian agri-food producers like winemakers. This is discouraging to these producers, as some informants explained that the reason they had pursued business with Sunsa was because they were weary of the business practices employed by other large national supermarkets that were even more cumbersome. Many Istrian businessmen explained that, at the beginning of the relationship with supermarkets, the client tends to pay on time. It is only as one's reliance on them grows that they begin to delay payments more regularly. When replicated throughout the economy, these large companies are essentially using their vast client base to write off debts, rather than pay debts with cash. Although Sunsa's contracts give it ninety days to pay its bills, practically speaking some Istrian businessmen say they have waited for over a year. Over the years, Sunsa's payment delays have grown longer, despite the company's growth. One winemaker explained that, 'I call, beg, and they say I am on their priority list, and then again I hear nothing for weeks'. Eventually, these clients become desperate and again agree to revised payment terms. Here again, *lanac kompenzacija* becomes yet another way of maintaining one's liquidity. In short, from the perspective of small businessmen, Sunsa has adopted a local *ad hoc* practice and turned it into a strategy to conserve its liquidity. Theoretically, through the circulation of receipts through statements of clearance, Sunsa can cancel its debts without taking cash out of its account, thus reserving this cash for investments.

### **The inevitability of debt and *lanac kompenzacija***

Stories about debt and *lanac kompenzacija* made me increasingly interested in the institutional environment that seemed to be passively encouraging the persistence of these issues. How is it possible that large supermarkets can go so many months without paying their clients? One might anticipate that in a recession businessmen would resort to any means necessary, including legal measures, to collect outstanding debts. Instead, Istrian businessmen often explain that pursuing the resolution of debts through formal bureaucratic processes is the *least* desirable option in terms of both its social and its business repercussions. The circulation of stories — either

authentic or exaggerated — about costly, protracted and unsatisfactory court processes dissuade businessmen from pursuing debt resolution through the courts. One restaurateur explained that a court decision does not guarantee payment of a debt because, if the debtor is truly bankrupt, the court may only block his bank accounts, and the client will have lost time and money on legal fees without necessarily being reimbursed for the debt, giving a lengthy example of his personal experience to illustrate his point. Other informants also asserted that it was possible that during the process of blocking the debtor's accounts, which required the businessman to notarize receipts and file them through a lawyer — who must send a notification of a claim being filed to the debtor — that there is time for the debtor to move money to avoid repayment before the account is actually blocked. The consequences of pursuing debts through legal means also include spoiling relationships with other businesses in one's community — other existing clients, potential clients, or clients of clients. Referring to large clients like Sunsa, one winemaker said, 'You must remember who you are fighting here', in that the feeling was that there was no way a small businessman could win a legal battle against a large, nation-wide corporation, whether or not this is true in practice.

This made me dwell on the power of the stories themselves. I realized through such conversations that first-, second- and third-hand accounts, not to mention basic perceptions about the legal process, were themselves enough to deter the pursuit of debts through formal legal routes. This, I surmised, underlies the seemingly pervasive belief that coming to a cooperative agreement is *always* preferable to cutting ties. The belief that legal measures do not guarantee a just outcome is compounded by the experience of the social and business consequences of pursuing debts through the courts, which creates friction with other related businessmen or people in one's social network. As one winemaker explained in a conversation about debt, this occurs because once legal processes get underway, the debtor's account is blocked such that no one else may be paid and the debtor cannot continue doing business. This has a ripple effect that implicates the businessman pursuing the debt in now influencing other peoples' business dealings. As a result, some informants said that, as a courtesy to their debtor clients, they would inform them of their intent to pursue the blocking of their accounts before actually doing so as a sort of threat in the hope that it would spur payment.<sup>8</sup> Thus, at least during my years of

---

<sup>8</sup> The veracity of such statements could not be confirmed, and indeed, were a businessman to do such a thing as forewarn their debtor client and then actually pursue blocking the account, it would seem all the more likely that the

researching and residing in Istria (2012-2017) in the midst of the protracted economic crisis that was plaguing Europe, there was a great incentive to resolve debts privately.

I was sitting late one evening at a village café with Italo, a young farmer in a village near my own. His family is known in the area for being diligent farmers of a large territory of field crops and for having good, long-term relationships with winemakers who buy the family's grapes in large volumes. His face beet red from months under the sun, Italo explained to me over drinks that it is 'impossible' to escape debtors, and impossible to escape *lanac kompenzacija*. He began to gesture in the air to visualize how all companies are ultimately linked to each other. To his mind, all large businesses have debts and engage at least to some extent in *lanac kompenzacija*. On this basis, he began explaining that some small businesses *must* do business with larger ones due to the simple fact that there is not a great deal of choice in such a small economy, and so, if you do business with these smaller businesses who do business with large companies, you will unavoidably enter into debt relationships, as they are all somehow linked in a 'chain' anyway. This revealed another interesting truth about *lanac kompenzacija*: its pervasiveness locally makes it feel like an *inevitability* of doing business, normalizing its practice and adding to its power in society. Just as *lanac kompenzacija* appears similar in form to 'passing the bill' in socialist Yugoslavia, creating a feeling of familiarity, this feeling of inevitability likewise makes *lanac kompenzacija* feel legitimate in contexts where it objectively may not be so. If, like Italo, most businessmen in Istria were conceptualizing the economy as a closed system containing large firms that use *lanac kompenzacija* to avoid paying cash, I could indeed understand why it would feel like debt and *lanac kompenzacija* were inevitabilities. In listening to such stories — from experiences with Sunsa and various other large companies to visualized schematics of the structure of the economy — I would reflect on the implications for trust. Trust in institutions shaping the economy and legal environment, trust in specific clients and trust in the market all seemed to hinge on perceptions formed from negative first-hand experiences or hearsay about dramatic failures in one of these fields.

However, I also began to realize that these stories of legal problems and feelings of inevitability seemed to encourage — or at least justify — the informalization of business transactions from the outset. In other words, what good is a formal contract if the parties both

---

debtor would have used this intervening period to empty his accounts, as informants asserted would occur. Thus, such statements should be met with a degree of scepticism.

perceive there to be no institutional enforcement mechanism anyway and will have to resort to alternative forms of debt resolution? Indeed, many businessmen in this community engage in semi-formal or informal business practices in some part of their lives, whether it is getting a car fixed by a mechanic, buying or trading for inputs or resolving temporary farm labour salaries through in-kind payments. In such transactions, trust and being *pošten* rise yet further in importance, as there is absolutely no formal fall-back measure to enforce payment.

### **Conclusion: echoes of informality**

Thus, although *lanac kompenzacija* creates an economy of trust based on the enactions of individuals' characteristics of trustworthiness, being *pošten*, market knowledge and social connections, when adopted by companies further afield the same practice challenges Istrians to reconcile their conceptualizations of it as an *ad hoc* necessity locally with the feeling that, when it is used for larger transactions with companies like supermarkets, it is predatory or strategic. The examples above reveal how locally debts resolved through *lanac kompenzacija* create new favour obligations between participants, add to one's reputation as a *pošten* individual and facilitate the continuation of important business relationships. However, when more socially distant actors appear in the matrix of *lanac kompenzacija*, different issues emerge. In Istria's economy of trust, debt has a social life, and *lanac kompenzacija* brings such relationships to light. Its practice additionally highlights the power of the institutions, perceptions and narratives of others in guiding peoples' economic behaviour.

Understanding the complexities of *lanac kompenzacija* now, we can go back briefly to my own introduction to the phenomenon to situate it in a broader context of what it is not, why this is important for our understanding of its persistence in the economy, and how Istrians make sense of it themselves. When I first learned the term *kompenzacija*, and before I could figure out how to spell it, informants would explain it to me by way of referencing *baratto*, which is Italian for *barter*. Although there are many forms of *kompenzacija*, and although I have dealt here with only a specific form of debt off-setting that does not include the transfer of goods in the chain, Istrians conceptually lump all the various forms of *kompenzacija* into this single category of *baratto* and use the word *kompenzacija* to refer to multiple forms of it. This created a great deal of misunderstanding between myself and my informants at the start, as I was unaware of their transitions from explaining one form to another. I began to categorize the examples myself for

clarity so that I could go back and ask more pointed questions of my informants, returning with their scribbles in my notebooks to point out the ambiguities that I only realized after such interviews. However, over time I began to notice that grouping such diverse transactions under the single vague rubric of *baratto* was a problem for them as well, but for more serious reasons.

Barter, at least in its most basic conceptualization, is defined as a *coincidence of wants* between two transactors who come together and negotiate freely over one another's goods. Anthropologists have spent a great deal of time researching barter in various contexts, mostly in the field of informal exchange, to reveal the complexities of such exchange relationships. Some aspects of barter were indeed echoed through conversations about *lanac kompenzacija*. For example, Humphrey (1992:107) problematized the idea that barter is a voluntary, 'ungoverned agreement between individuals'. Cellarius (2000: 75) found in Bulgaria that fairness in negotiations was important for establishing one's *reputation* as *trustworthy*. In northeast Nepal, Humphrey (1992: 107-8) found that barter may engender its own *morality* because of the social rules of fairness and *trust*, where mutual dependence kept parties from cheating (ibid.: 123). Humphrey and Hugh-Jones (1992: 8-9) revealed how such mutual dependence may even lead to the development of barter *networks*. Moreover, Humphrey (2000: 72) found 'debt chains' in Russia that were made up of barter relations, showing how debts may travel distances and last years, and that members of these chains may 'constantly reconstitute [themselves] from the people they know ('partners')' and *create* social relations. Finally, Ferraro (2004: 89) has shown how debt and guilt intermingle, as debts may be imbued with moral obligations.

However, *lanac kompenzacija* is not barter, and nor are the other *kompenzacija* forms I found in the region. In all cases, the transaction agreement was entered into under the assumption that cash would be paid. The revised debt resolution only emerges when the debtor refuses to pay this cash and the creditor must agree to new terms in order to be compensated. That said, many of the same themes elucidated by anthropological research on barter elsewhere are echoed in narratives surrounding *lanac kompenzacija*, including power, trust, mutual dependence, morality, networks, whether voluntary or coerced, social rules, and so on. In these ways I could see why Istrians would make this leap to calling *kompenzacija* *baratto*.

But this is also dangerous. *Lanac kompenzacija* is somewhat involuntary, does not involve the exchange of goods, and the transaction is rooted within the monetary economy. The fact that Istrians conceptualize it as *baratto*, however, obfuscates its actual impetus of usage, *normalizes* it

by associating it with another common practice in villages like the simple trading of vegetables for fruit or labour, and in doing so again feeds into this feeling that it is an acceptable practice, all the while in the context of informants lamenting how *lanac kompenzacija* deprives them of liquidity and costs them time and energy. When speaking with businessmen about a recent *lanac kompenzacija* arrangement and their dissatisfaction with it, they would sometimes incorporate narratives about how it is a common practice and like barter, as if this justified their debtor's behaviour.

Finally, informants would complicate matters by sometimes characterizing this practice as somehow unofficial, leading to discussions about informal business practices in general and how this hurts the economy and increases their own economic precarity. This initially sent me down a research rabbit hole of linking *lanac kompenzacija* to informal business practices, until I realized that the link to informality was simply that other *kompenzacija* practices are more prevalent between neighbours in informal exchanges. However, in *lanac kompenzacija* receipts are involved, and even state institutions like the state tax office. Such obfuscations in informants' own narratives about *lanac kompenzacija* reveal its power in society. Its perceived inevitability indeed makes it inevitable. Its structural similarity with past modes of debt resolutions between state firms makes it familiar. Its conceptual linkage to *baratto* obfuscates the motivations for businesses like Sunsa to use it. The circulation of debt narratives informs people's perceptions about how their economy works, simultaneously denying them agency in changing their local economy by throwing up their hands to this inevitability, to which they also contribute. Although they recognize that it is outside *normal* economic practice in *normal* economies, they normalize it in their own. Thus, unpacking the role of *lanac kompenzacija* in Istria's business community unravels more complicated processes that are underway in this region's transition to a market economy. It reveals how new relationships of obligations and favours arise from debt, how the characteristics of individuals become enactments that have local market value, and how an economy of trust may simultaneously offer a level of security in times of economic flux and contribute to economic insecurity in other ways. It is in this field of ambiguity that Istrians find themselves in the everyday of doing business nearly three decades after the fall of socialism.

## References

- Cellarius, Barbara A. 2000. 'You can buy almost anything with potatoes': an examination of barter during economic crisis in Bulgaria, *Ethnology*, 39(1), 73-92.
- Dasgupta, Partha 1988. Trust as a commodity, in Diego Gambetta (ed.), *Trust: making and breaking cooperative relations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 49-72.
- Ferraro, Emilia 2004. Owing and being in debt: a contribution from the northern Andes of Ecuador, *Social Anthropology*, 12(1), 77-94.
- Gambetta, Diego 1988. Can we trust trust?, in Diego Gambetta (ed.), *Trust: making and breaking cooperative relations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 213-38.
- (1994). Godfather's gossip, *European Journal of Sociology*, 35(2), 199-223.
- Grasseni, Cristina 2014. Seeds of trust: Italy's *Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale* (Solidarity Purchase Groups), *Journal of Political Ecology*, 21(1), 179-92.
- Greif, Avner 1993. Contract enforceability and economic institutions in early trade: the Maghribi traders' coalition, *American Economic Review*, 83(3), 525-48.
- Harriss, John 2003. 'Widening the radius of trust': ethnographic explorations of trust and Indian business, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 9(4), 755-73.
- Henig, David and Nicolette Makovsky (eds.) 2017. *Economies of favour after socialism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Humphrey, Caroline 1992. Fair dealing, just rewards: the ethics of barter in North-East Nepal, in Caroline Humphrey and Stephen Hugh-Jones (eds.), *Barter, exchange, and value: an anthropological approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 107-41.
- 2000. An anthropological view of barter in Russia, in Paul Seabright (ed.), *The vanishing rouble: barter networks and non-monetary transactions in post-Soviet societies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 71-92.
- and Stephen Hugh-Jones 1992. Introduction: barter, exchange and value, in Caroline Humphrey and Stephen Hugh-Jones (eds.), *Barter, exchange and value: an anthropological approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1-20.
- Humphrey, John, and Hubert Schmitz 1998. Trust and inter-firm relations in developing and transition economies, *Journal of Development Studies*, 34(4), 32-61.
- Kirman, Alan P., and Nicolaas J. Vriend 2000. Learning to be loyal. A study of the Marseille fish market, in Domenico Delli Gatti, Mauro Gallegati, and Alan P. Kirman (eds.), *Interaction and market structure: essays on heterogeneity in economics*, Berlin: Springer Verlag, 33-56.



- Ledeneva, Alena V. 1998. *Russia's economy of favors: blat, networking and informal exchange*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2006. *How Russia really works: the informal practices that shaped post-Soviet politics and business*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- 2017. The ambivalence of favour, in David Henig and Nicolette Makovsky (eds.), *Economies of favour after socialism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 21-49.
- Lomnitz, Larissa Alder, and Diana Sheinbaum 2004. Trust, social networks and the informal economy: a comparative analysis, *Review of Sociology*, 10(1), 5-26.
- Lorenz, Edward H. 1988. Neither friends nor strangers: informal networks of subcontracting in French industry, in Diego Gambetta (ed.), *Trust: making and breaking cooperative relations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 194-210.
- Lyon, Fergus, and Gina Porter 2009. Market institutions, trust and norms: exploring moral economies in Nigerian food systems, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 33(5), 903-20.
- Menning, Garret 1997. Trust, entrepreneurship and development in Surat City, India, *Ethnos*, 62(1-2), 59-90.
- Murphy, James T. 2002. Networks, trust, and innovation in Tanzania's manufacturing sector, *World Development*, 30(4), 591-619.
- Offer, Avner 1997. Between the gift and the market: the economy of regard, *Economic History Review*, 50(3), 450-76.
- Pagden, Anthony 1988. The destruction of trust and its economic consequences in the case of eighteenth-century Naples, in Diego Gambetta (ed.), *Trust: making and breaking cooperative relations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 127-41.
- Paine, Robert 1967. What is gossip about? An alternative hypothesis, *Man*, 2(2), 278-85.
- Platteau, Jean-Philippe 1994. Behind the market stage where real societies exist, Part 1: the role of public and private order institutions, *Journal of Development Studies*, 30(3), 533-77.
- Sneath, David 2012. The 'age of the market' and the regime of debt: the role of credit in the transformation of Mongolia, *Social Anthropology*, 20(4), 458-73.
- White, Luise 1994. Between Gluckman and Foucault: historicizing rumour and gossip, *Social Dynamics*, 20(1), 75-92.
- Williamson, Oliver E. 1993. Calculativeness, trust, and economic organization, *Journal of Law and Economics*, 36(1), 453-86.

## CONFRONTING A PEDAGOGY OF ASSIMILATION: THE EVOLUTION OF LARGE-SCALE SCHOOLS FOR TRIBAL CHILDREN IN INDIA

MALVIKA GUPTA AND FELIX PADEL<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** The policy of assimilating, ‘mainstreaming’ or ‘de-tribalizing’ indigenous communities by placing their children in boarding schools has been increasingly discredited and abandoned, most publicly throughout North America and Australia since the 1980s and 1990s. In India, this history and its dangers are little known, with relatively little awareness of how they are being replicated among many of India’s tribal communities. Education-induced assimilationism has evolved more slowly in India, but has now reached a larger scale than in any other country, with many similar manifestations to the ‘stolen generations’ model that has created outrage in Australia, Canada, the USA and elsewhere. This article traces the evolution and dangers of this history and the present situation in India.

### Introduction

‘Assimilation’ encapsulates a policy aim regarding indigenous peoples that has often appeared to many people as reasonable and humane – certainly in contrast to the policy of extermination alongside which it often grew up. It is also connected with nationalist ideologies. Alexis de Tocqueville’s influential study of American democracy argued that ‘the Indian nations of North America are doomed to perish’ in the face of an advancing ‘civilization’ that was inherently democratic and – unlike the example of Spanish imperialism – was managing to annihilate them with ‘respect for the laws of humanity’.<sup>2</sup> De Tocqueville visited America during the presidency of Andrew Jackson, whose anti-Indian policy culminated in the Cherokees’ ‘trail of tears’ expulsion from their homeland, and de Tocqueville’s statement that Indian nations were being allowed to perish ‘without shedding blood’ proved to be far from the truth.

In the words of Richard Henry Pratt, who started the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in 1879 as a humane alternative to the policy of extermination, the policy of effecting assimilation through residential schools was intended to ‘Kill the Indian and Save the Man’. Assimilationism became the policy towards native Americans, Aborigines and other indigenous peoples for over a

---

<sup>1</sup> Malvika Gupta is a doctoral student at the Department of International Development, University of Oxford; Email: [malvika.gupta@geh.ox.ac.uk](mailto:malvika.gupta@geh.ox.ac.uk). Felix Padel is a Research Associate in the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford; Email: [felix.padel@anthro.ox.ac.uk](mailto:felix.padel@anthro.ox.ac.uk). We are grateful to Azim Premji University for a two-year grant (2017-2019) supporting our research project, ‘Examining the Residential School Model of Tribal Education in India: Policy and Practice regarding Cultural Sensitivity’.

<sup>2</sup> *Democracy in America* (Vol. 1, 1835, Ch. 18). Tocqueville’s argument is summarized with quotations in a blog by Jason Pappas in *Liberty and Culture*, June 2008, at <http://libertyandculture.blogspot.co.uk/2008/06/tocqueville-on-american-indians.html>

hundred years, from the mid-nineteenth until the last quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> Gradually, as criticism of residential schools gathered pace throughout North America, Australia and New Zealand – initially because of the evidence of widespread physical and sexual abuse and neglect – assimilationism became discredited as a policy. It came to be felt that the forced assimilation attempted in schools was profoundly misguided, and that there was much of great value in indigenous cultures from which mainstream society could actually learn, with mutual benefit to both sides.

The theory underlying assimilationism could be characterized as one of cultural racism,<sup>4</sup> the idea that some cultures are superior to or more ‘civilized’ than others. Prime ministers of Canada and Australia have issued public apologies for the residential school policy in their respective countries and its abuses. In Canada this included a recognition that the policy involved cultural genocide, and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission has been set up to attempt to make amends (*The Guardian* 2015).

In this article, we summarize the history and present situation of schools for tribal children in India. In the first section, we summarize the colonial-era history, including similarities and differences in comparison with other countries. In the second section, we show how a policy of assimilation underlies present policy in practice, even though it was rejected during the first decades of independence in favour of a policy of ‘integration’. In the final section, we examine a new model of industrial-scale, industry-funded schools, along with their cultural and psychological impacts, and small-scale educational efforts that offer an alternative to the mainstream model, which constitutes, in effect, a pedagogy of assimilation.

### Colonial models

In every region exposed to European colonisation and takeover, from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, Christian missionaries accompanied the colonists, and in most cases, at various periods, set up schools to bring ‘enlightened’ knowledge to native ‘heathens’. From the *reducciones de indios* throughout sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Latin America (Caraman 1976; Hemming 1978) to the ‘stolen generation’ boarding schools of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries that indigenous children were forced into throughout North America and Australasia (Adams 1995; Milloy 1999), policy towards indigenous peoples involved the implementation of a

---

<sup>3</sup> *Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction* (1892), 46–59. Reprinted in Pratt 1973: 260–271. See <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4929/>

<sup>4</sup> Carol C. Mukhopadhyay and Peter Chua, ‘Cultural Racism’, in *Encyclopaedia of Race and Racism* at [www.encyclopaedia.com](http://www.encyclopaedia.com), <https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/cultural-racism#B>

‘civilizing mission’ through schools. In most cases these schools were residential, involving the removal of children from their families for long periods, and also compulsory, as was conversion to Christianity, accompanied by a ban on pupils practising their own religion at school. Common features involved cutting children’s hair short and giving them a new Christian name at their enrolment. Often tribal languages and many other customs were also forbidden, with severe punishments and humiliation for offending children, in a conscious attempt to ‘detribalize’ the population with the aim of transforming their children into ‘agents of change’ in their communities.

As British rule consolidated a composite whole called ‘India’ during the nineteenth century, certain communities came to be classified as ‘tribal’, and regions where such groups predominated became known as tribal areas. In many of these areas, mission schools were set up for tribal children during the same decades as those in North America, Australia and New Zealand, a practice that gathered pace from the mid-nineteenth century, though the power and influence they exerted were different in India, due to scale of the population, as well as the religious context. The first schools for the children of tribal communities were set up by Christian missionaries of the various denominations that were allowed and encouraged to work in India. These schools were usually established with the approval of government administrators, who in effect allowed tribal regions to be parcelled out among the various missions established: for example, among the Konds in Orissa, different areas had Lutherans, Baptists and Roman Catholics, who all established schools by the 1900s (Padel 2010). S.C. Roy’s path-breaking anthropological monograph on the Munda (1912) ends with a chapter extolling the good work, including schools, that missionaries were bringing to the tribals. In India such mission schools did not always insist on conversion to Christianity, though some did, and many of the pupils were orphans, whose lack of an immediate family made them fertile ground for conversion, which gradually gathered pace around such schools. In some areas, such as northeast India, where most people were not Hindu, the greater part of many tribal peoples converted en masse during the early twentieth century.

Awareness of the historical tendency worldwide for mission schools to undermine traditional cultures and promote conversion seems to be why Verrier Elwin (an anthropologist who exerted a unique influence on tribal policy in the first twenty years of independence) published attacks on Roman Catholic schools in Madhya Pradesh in 1944 (Prasad 2003: 94-99; Sundar 2005). This was after he joined the movement to set up ashram schools for tribal children, which were based (or supposed to be based) on Gandhi’s system of ‘Basic Education’. Ashram schools started in

Gujarat from the 1900s, gathered pace during the 1920s and spread soon afterwards to Maharashtra, the Central Provinces and other regions (Joshi 1985).

In North America, from the second half of the nineteenth century, assimilating the natives became established policy, and forcing their children into mission-run boarding schools played a crucial role in this. Gradually the draconian nature of these boarding schools and their underlying policies of assimilation came to be questioned and rejected (Adams 1995; Milloy 1999). In India mission schools did not have such a harsh impact. For a start, children were not ‘stolen’ from their families against the wishes of them both, and schools served only a small proportion of most tribal populations. What is clear, however, is that in many tribal areas mission schools played a major role in the emergence of a new identity and ‘class formation’, in effect creating the nucleus of an ‘educated tribal elite’ (Bara 1997, 2002). This policy was actively encouraged by India’s first Education Commission under F.W. Hunter in 1882, the aim being to create a class of tribal people who could ‘interpret’ the government’s wishes, just as Macaulay’s famous Minute of 1835 had advocated for India in general (Nambissan 2000: 177-8; Veerbhadranaika 2012: 10). This trend, for education to promote class formation among tribal communities, continues today (e.g. Higham and Shah 2013).

As one prominent example of the kind of impact mission schools were having, it is significant that Birsa Munda – India’s best known Adivasi freedom fighter – was mission-educated, having attended a German Lutheran school as a young teenager, for which he had to convert to Christianity in 1886. His movement against British rule emerged out of the ‘Sardar agitation’ (1858-95), which was basically a movement to hold on to traditional tenancy rights at a time of widespread dispossession and exploitation. Several missionaries supported this agitation in the early years, but around 1887 the Lutherans withdrew their support, and many Mundas converted from Lutheran or Anglican Protestantism to Roman Catholicism when the Revd Constant Lievens (among others) supported them. However, Lievens left when he was reprimanded for his support by the Commissioner for Chotanagpur, turning the Sardar agitation more completely anti-European. Some accounts say that Birsa himself, aged 12-15, was expelled from school for criticizing the Lutheran missionaries on the land question and joined the Roman Catholic Church before forming his own syncretic approach to religion (Singh 1983: 34-41; Dhan 2006: 37-40).

There is one area in colonial India where residential schooling seems to have had the same kind of catastrophic impact as in Australia and North America. In the Andaman Islands, the population of Great Andamanese tribes declined drastically: at the time of British settlement in 1858 it was estimated at 5-8,000, divided into ten ‘tribes’, but declined to an estimated 625 in 1901, and is down to about fifty individuals today. Similarly on Little Andaman the Onge have

declined from 2-3,000 at contact to less than a hundred today (Portman 1899; Radcliffe-Brown 1922; Mukerjee 2003; Venkateswar 2004). While hostile encounters killed some, most deaths were caused by diseases brought by settlers and convicts, including influenza, tuberculosis, syphilis and measles (an epidemic of which in 1877 killed a large number). These diseases were understood to have spread through the Andaman Homes, much as residential schools in Canada spread death through disease with an astonishingly high mortality rate. The Andaman Homes were started in 1863, when men implicated in a killing were first incarcerated, in leg irons, with more following as 'hostages'. From the 1860s onwards these Homes, in various guises and locations, served as a collection point for the Great Andamanese, at times under duress, with schooling being offered to most Great Andamanese children. During three months in 1865, all fifteen babies born to Andamanese women in these Homes were still-born or died, a foretaste of the dramatic decline in fertility faced by both the Onge and the Great Andamanese. It is estimated that none of the 150 children born in the Homes survived beyond the age of two. The Andaman Homes were intended to teach children 'good manners, to wear clothes, use a fork and knife, practice cultivation and to learn new trades and handicrafts, along with the English language'.<sup>5</sup> Similar attempts have been made in recent times, including with Jarawa children (*Asia Sentinel* 2010; *Survival International* 2010; Saini 2018), in a context in which the Jarawa were 'pacified' only in about 1996, retaining their language and culture in a situation of fairly chaotic culture contact that has included sexual abuse and prostitution (Mukerjee 2003; Venkateswar 2004; Mukerjee and Giles 2014).

Meanwhile, mission schools that 'educated' tribals in the rest of India did encourage some of them to assimilate into mainstream society as schoolteachers, nurses and gradually in most professions, while those from remoter areas or whose children did not attend school remained 'unassimilated'.

### **The policy of assimilation**

The intention in independent India was to avoid a policy of assimilation. As Indian anthropologists often emphasize, India adopted a middle path of 'integration', avoiding the colonial policy extremes of isolationism and assimilationism (Singh 1982). Yet several of those who were most influential on tribal issues were strongly in favour of assimilation, including the sociologist G.S. Ghurye (1943/1959) and the tribal educationalist A.V. Thakkar, who in 1941 gave a speech on 'The problem of Aborigines in India' at the Gokhale Institute of Economics and

---

<sup>5</sup> From an article by T.N. Pandit ('The tribal and the non-tribal in the Andamans Islands', 1985: 111), quoted in Venkateswaran 2004 p.102.

Politics in Pune, which published Ghurye's book two years later. This speech concludes by arguing that ‘“*assimilation*” is the proper policy, so that tribals can become “part of the civilized communities” in the country, on an equal footing with others’ (Thakkar 1941: 26). A key aspect of assimilation, evident in this speech, involves drawing indigenous children into mainstream, non-tribal languages. Thakkar starts by advocating the use of tribal languages in primary schooling, while younger tribal children are taught the mainstream regional language:

The aboriginal children should be taught through the medium of the provincial language pertaining to their area and in the script of that particular language. Generally all tribals are conversant to some extent with the provincial language, besides their various tribal dialects. Only young children may find it difficult to follow the provincial language, in which case they should be taught the provincial language through the medium of the tribal dialect in the lowest classes. For this purpose the teachers must be conversant with tribal dialects. (ibid.: 15)

This directive is contradicted by an exchange that took place in the Constituent Assembly on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1949, when Jaipal Singh Munda confronted Thakkar on the language issue after asking him whether he knew any tribal languages himself:

I am glad he is honest enough to admit he knows not a single Adibasi language.... I would venture to suggest that if his workers were to learn the language of the people...their work would be more valuable. If, for example, his team who are in southern Bihar and the Chota Nagpur Plateau were to learn Santali, Uraon or Mundari – all of which I speak – they would be treated with less suspicion than they are now. (CAD 5<sup>th</sup> Sept. 1949)

This exchange is revealing, since it shows that Thakkar's ashram schools were generally not using tribal languages, despite his 1941 statement that primary schoolteachers must know them. Since Thakkar did not learn any himself, it is not surprising that few of his teachers did so. The tendency among educationalists to call tribal languages ‘dialects’ is also noteworthy, and persists today, despite linguistic studies that have established the existence of several hundred distinct tribal languages in India, whose present rapid decline seems largely due to this failure to use them in schools (Devy 2004). Also, despite Thakkar acknowledging a need to train tribal teachers, his comment that ‘for some years to come’ it would be necessary to employ ‘people from the plains’ (i.e. non-tribals) shows how the system actually put in place was one where the vast majority of schoolteachers were non-tribals, who did not know tribal languages and were therefore unable to teach in them. It is clear from many sources that this system has basically

persisted ever since, with children in ashram schools often systematically punished for speaking their own languages (Saxena and Mahendroo 1993; Nambissan 1994 and 2000; NCERT 2007).

This disjunction between a policy recommendation for mother-tongue teaching and the reality that schools have hardly ever implemented this recommendation in practice has continued ever since. A prime reason is that recruiting non-tribal teachers in schools for tribal children, whose languages they do not know, has remained the norm from then until now. The Ramamurti Committee report brought out the fact that fewer than ten per cent of teachers in tribal schools were from Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities (1990: 76). Since then, this proportion has increased significantly in some schools, but in most the prejudice that was evident in Thakkar's time, compounded by lower qualifications among STs, has ensured that a majority of teachers are non-tribals. Even when many STs are recruited as para-teachers through a policy of affirmative action or reservation, as in a District Primary Education Programme funded by the World Bank throughout India from the 1990s, they have been poorly trained and under-paid, with minimal job security, and remain at the bottom of the school staff hierarchy (Higham and Shah 2013).

It is clear from his 1941 speech, among many other factors, that Thakkar and his followers did not look on tribal culture as something to be learned from, but as in essence 'backward', which is why he believed that tribal children should assimilate to and learn from the mainstream, using boarding schools to 'mould' them. Shifting cultivation became one symbol of this 'backwardness', with Elwin viewing it in a positive light, as a sophisticated system, not as inherently destructive, while Ghurye and Thakkar followed the Forest Department view that the practice was destructive and 'uneconomic':

The Adivasi is proverbially lazy in addition to being illiterate. Probably that is why he is so much attached or addicted to 'shifting cultivation', which requires much less labour than the more useful plough cultivation. If it is desired to make him a hard-working citizen, it is necessary to tackle the Adivasi child first. Hence the necessity for residential vocational schools, where the child can be moulded into an industrious citizen. Such education must be made absolutely free in most cases. (Thakkar 1941: 16)

The call for assimilation by Thakkar and several others in the Constituent Assembly debate on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1949 is unambiguous:



the more we are able to know of these tribes the better it is for the country as a whole and to assimilate those tribal people as fast as we can in the whole country of the nation as we are now. (CAD 5<sup>th</sup> Sept. 1949)

As Constituent Assembly Member Shri Rohini Kumar Chaudhuri put this in December 1949:

We want to assimilate the tribal people. We were not given that opportunity so far. The tribal people, however much they liked, have not been given the opportunity of assimilation. (Ibid.)

By the time of India's first two major reports on tribal policy (Elwin 1960; Dhebar 1961), its overall policy is clearly stated as one of integration rather than assimilation, requiring an educational approach that integrated tribal culture and language into mainstream knowledge. The Dhebar report is particularly strong on the need to create 'an ambience of tribal culture in the schools' (Dhebar 1961: 225) in order to reverse the continuous drain of tribal children from village to city, without, however, spelling out many details. It also stressed the requirement for textbooks to be produced in at least 'the major tribal languages', while recording quite strong resistance to this idea from some within state governments (ibid.: 226). It also highlighted a need to adapt school timings so as not to conflict with local agricultural activities and festivals (ibid.: 224). It records a rapid increase in the number of tribal schools – 4,000 in the first five-year plan, including 1,000 ashram and *sevashram* schools, and 3,000 more in the next five years – opining that 'as far as possible the idea of a residential school should be encouraged' in view of tribal populations' exceptionally low literacy levels (ibid.: 225). This was despite the obvious fact that boarding schools remove children from the influence of their communities and from their involvement in seasonal work in the fields.

The Kothari Report of 1964 summarized the findings of the first Commission on independent India's overall education policy. From a focus on ensuring 'equality of educational opportunity' in India, it supported the recommendations of the Dhebar Committee for tribal communities, but advocated a rapid increase in the number of boarding schools, hostels and technical colleges for tribal youth. At the same time, it 'redefined' Gandhi's conception of 'productive work' so as to suit tribal youth for jobs in industry, weaning them from backward economic practices:

To the extent possible, such groups have to be assisted in developing more settled ways of living. This calls for a degree of fundamental reorganization in their economy and their way of life ... firstly, development of communications; secondly, transformation of the present system of

shifting cultivation into a developing agricultural economy ... and thirdly, development of a system of education related to the scheme of economic and social development and responsive to the cultural and economic needs of the people. (Kothari 1966: 225-6)

The introduction spells out what the Commission perceived to be the need for ‘a redefinition of [Gandhi’s] educational thinking in terms of a society on the road to industrialization’ (ibid.: 11). This is one area where the Kothari Commission represents a fundamental break with Gandhi’s legacy, especially his concept of ‘productive work’, now redefined from self-employed work-skills under tribal people’s own control towards training them for jobs in the very industries which were starting to displace them from their villages and fields en masse.

Discourse on tribal education is often characterized by complaints that tribal parents withdraw children from school because they are needed at home for agricultural labour. In many ways, it has not been understood that children in tribal communities learn by doing, and that playing alongside their parents and each other transforms play into work, developing skills that are quite different from those learned in schools and technical institutes (e.g. Ramnath 2015: 199-209). It is also rarely noticed that high drop-out rates reflect the general failure to follow another key recommendation of the Elwin and Dhebar Committees, namely to adapt school timings so as to allow children’s participation in seasonal work and festivals with their communities.

Obviously, a fundamental shift occurs when transiting from an agricultural to an industrial economy (Thompson 1964). ST industrial workers and their children tend to turn their backs on agricultural labour (Parry 1999). Yet, in traditional cultures worldwide, children learn by working, and ‘child labour’ in an industrial context and in the western conception is very different from tribal children who grow up working alongside their families (Lancy 2015). Gandhi’s concept of placing work in the sense of traditional skills at the centre of the curriculum was criticised from the standpoint of promoting ‘child labour’, but was well-suited to the aim of integrating tribal with mainstream knowledge, and was in tune with the continuum between work and play that is characteristic of tribal society:

learning among ST children is usually intimately connected to the work process – children learn the names and medicinal uses of plants and trees while accompanying their parents on foraging trips in the forest... When children are away at school, especially when they are sent to residential schools, they lose their connection with this world of labour and their capacity to learn from it.... (NCERT 2007: 25)

The Kothari report, like the Dhebar report, is strong on the need for tribal children to be schooled in their own languages, at least in Standards I and II. The trouble is, as we have seen, that this was not actually taking place; and the ‘integration’ intended to be achieved through ashram schools never happened. For example, despite repeated recommendations to produce textbooks in tribal languages – reduced to those few tribal languages spoken by over 100,000 in the Programme of Action (MHRD 1992: 108) – very few ashram schools have ever used tribal languages in the curriculum, or if so, only as a way of drawing children into school in Standards I and II. Article 350A of India’s Constitution grants the right of every child to receive education in his or her mother tongue, which is one of the three principles of Gandhi’s Basic Education, and it is advocated by experts in learning and indigenous cultures alike (e.g. Mohanty et al. 2009). In other words, in a majority of tribal schools, tribal languages have been sidelined exactly as happened in the overtly assimilationist ‘stolen generation’ schools in North America.

Punishment needs to be understood as a key element in the pedagogy of tribal schools, and one of the first things that most schools teach is discipline. This ranges from timings to standing or sitting in silence, to doing homework, eating food and hygiene – every aspect of life for children in a boarding school is monitored, regimented and routinized. Moreover, for tribal children, the restrictions are again strikingly similar to what happened in the ‘stolen generation’ schools: children’s hair, even girls’ hair, is cut short – the rationale being that it controls lice – clothes tend towards western-style uniforms, tribal ornaments are forbidden, and on enrolment a child’s own name is officially replaced by a Hindu name, just as native American children were given Christian names. Traditional identity is therefore severely undermined from the moment that children enrol. This may apply in many kinds of day schools too, but when children stay in a boarding school – sometimes on a weekly basis, in other cases for months at a time – a major gap is created between themselves and their families and communities. This is precisely similar to the impact that educators setting out to civilize American Indian children aimed for from the later nineteenth century: when their communities were nearby, children often stayed away from schools and were perceived to be reverting to their native languages, cultures and religions. Mission teachers insisted that, in order to achieve assimilation, children had to be completely removed from the influence of their families. A similar attitude is evident, for example, in a Dongria Kondh Development Agency ashram school we visited for Dongria girls (September 2017), in which teachers spoke about changing these girls as an uphill task requiring constant discipline and removal from their villages.

The Ramamurti Report on education makes clear the wide difference between ashram schools for tribal children and Gandhi’s ashram model:

The kind of community life and production work-based education envisaged in the Gandhian model of Ashramshalas are significantly missing in the Government founded Ashram schools run for the benefit of the scheduled tribes. (Ramamurti 1990: 68)

This is one of the first criticisms of ashram schools. From a more recent study, we read:

Most Ashramshalas are poorly run and managed, and their very establishment as ‘low cost hostels’ for Adivasis is one of the reasons. Reports of starvation, ill-treatment and inadequate teaching-learning have been widespread. Periodically, there are cases of children running away from Ashramshalas, of rape and abuse of young girls and death by food poisoning in the hostels and reports of rampant ill health.

Based on their original objectives, most Ashramshalas remain sites for sanskritisation that begins with changing Adivasi names to Hindu names. (Veerbhadranaika et al. 2012: 40-41, 42)

A ‘heavily Sanskritized syllabus’ and a lack of Adivasi input into the management of ashram schools are further evidence of an assimilationist agenda that largely ignores inputs from local cultures and economies. The latest tribal policy report, chaired by Virginius Xaxa, shows how ‘an ashramization of tribal education’ has taken place as part of an overall, undeclared policy of assimilation (Xaxa 2014: 30, 160).

There is much in the history of ashram schools that needs reconstructing. Although their roots pre-dated Gandhi, it was his initiative that promoted them. Two main Gandhian models of ashram schools for tribal children emerged in Gujarat: one under Jugatram Dave at Swaraj Ashram in Vedchhi village, in Valod *taluk* in Surat district, founded in 1923, which inaugurated an ‘Ashram Udyogshala’ (industrial school) in 1929 (Desai 1969); and the other under A.V. Thakkar (Thakkar Bapa, 1869-1951), Laxmidas Shrikant and others, who started the Bhil Seva Mandal at Dahod in 1923 (Jani 2001), which opened its first schools for Bhil children in 1921-23. Altogether it seems that the Bhil Seva Mandal opened five *ashramshalas* between 1921 and 1939 centred around Dahod (in northeast Gujarat), and another thirty from 1953 to 1969, while the Swaraj Ashram set up 25 *ashramshalas* in Surat District between 1928 and the 1950s, when at least the original one was using the local tribal language.<sup>6</sup> Thakkar’s model in particular began to be replicated from the 1920s on, influencing Elwin, who founded the Gond Seva Mandal in 1932 (renamed the Bhumijan Seva Mandal in 1938). Elwin even followed Ghurye for a while in the

---

<sup>6</sup> Recounted to us in December 2017 at Vedchi by Uma Sanghamitra, who went to this school during the 1950s and 1960s.

mid-1940s in referring to tribal religion as a form of Hinduism. 'Elwin boasted that along with Gond Seva Mandal and Arya Dharam Seva Sangh he had been able to close down 25 mission schools in Mandla' (Sundar 2005: 86). The Hindu Mahasabha set up a branch in Mandla in 1945, and E.S. Hyde, Commissioner of Mandla, who corresponded with Elwin, mentioned a threat of arson to the Roman Catholic schools there (which had only started in 1935).

Among other aspects, an increasingly widespread Hindutva orientation is evident in ashram schools, which is also manifested in other organizations. The founding of the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA) in 1952 in effect followed on from Elwin's battle against mission schools (Sundar 2005: 100). The VKA has spawned well over 50,000 RSS-oriented tribal schools, expanding in the 1970s from its original area. The (Akhil Bharatiya) Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram was set up in Jashpur, another area in Madhya Pradesh where mission schools had been influential, by Ramakant Keshav (or Balasaheb) Deshpande, who first started tribal schools in this area to counteract mission schools around 1948. This was before he resigned from the government to found the VKA, with support from the state government and the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), as well as from Thakkar Bapa,<sup>7</sup> the main founder member of another organization promoting tribal education in 1949, the Bharatiya Adimjati Sevak Sangh.<sup>8</sup> Another influential model associated with the RSS is that enshrined in the Saraswati Shishu Mandir schools, which started in 1952 and were formalized in 1977-8 under the Vidya Bharati organization, the educational wing of the RSS. By the early 1990s there were over 5,000 Vidya Bharati schools, growing to over 14,000, with 1.7 million pupils, by 2003.

Under the influence of these elements, a Committee on Christian Missionary Activities was commissioned by the Madhya Pradesh government, chaired by Bhavani Shankar Niyogi (of the Nagpur High Court), whose Report in 1956 led to the severe curtailment of missionary activities in India. What is all too clear, of course, is that many features of the mission school model were taken over by the VKA and other RSS initiatives. For example, the Rajasthan Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad (RVKA), set up in 1978, was running 120 tribal schools and hostels by 2012 (Sahoo 2014). These activities received a boost in the National Policy on Education (MHRD 1986), which emphasized the idea of promoting a 'non-formal' stream of education for poor, especially tribal localities, opening the door to private networks of schools, which included Vidya Bharati. The NPE also established a Navodaya Vidyalaya scheme for talented children in about six hundred remote districts of the country at free or highly subsidised rates in standards VI-XII,

---

<sup>7</sup> 'The legend called Balasaheb Deshpande' by Virag Pachpore [2013], at <http://organiser.org/Encyc/2013/12/23/The-legend-called-Balasaheb-Deshpande.aspx?NB=&lang=4&m1=&m2=&p1=&p2=&p3=&p4=&PageType=N>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.bajss.org>

each school having an intake of about eighty new students per year. Although these were not exclusively tribal schools, they seem to have had a similar effect as mission schools in promoting a tribal ‘elite’. Similar again are English-medium ‘Eklavya Residential Model Schools’ for ‘gifted’ tribal students in districts with a large ST population, which numbered 72 by 2007; and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV) schools, which started in 2004 and now number several hundred for girls from ST and other impoverished backgrounds, where girls are removed from their communities ‘through a rationale of seclusion’ (Balagopalan 2010: 300; Saxena 2012).

*Ekal vidyalayas* (one-teacher day schools, or EVs) were started in Jharkhand in 1986 by an Indian nuclear physicist, Rakesh Popli, and his wife Rama Popli, ‘an expert in child education’.<sup>9</sup> They numbered 1,200 by 1996, after which the idea was promoted in other states, especially after 1999, when it was seen as being responsible for the BJP’s election victory.<sup>10</sup> EV schools are funded through organizations in the USA, such as the Friends of Tribal Society (Vanbandhu Parishad) and the Bharat Lok Shiksha Parishad, joined by the India Development and Relief Fund (IDRF) in 2007.<sup>11</sup> EV schools were estimated to number 23,000 in 2008 and 65,000 in 2018.<sup>12</sup>

Obviously, the Hindutva element in many tribal schools exerts a form of assimilationism, based on the view that tribal culture is, or should be, based on Hinduism, which needs to be taught more systematically. For example, Sanskrit is often promoted, even as tribal languages are actively discouraged. In the acclaimed Mata Rukmini Devi tribal residential school in Dantewada District in Chhattisgarh, which we visited in April 2017, tribal children get up for a daily Sanskrit class at 5 am, and sanskritic prayers take place throughout the day.

Several reports during the last decade have revealed high levels of sexual abuse and poorly explained deaths in tribal residential schools, among a host of related problems reminiscent of those in North America and Australia.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rakesh\\_Popli](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rakesh_Popli)

<sup>10</sup> A majority of the RVKA are *ekal vidyalayas*.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.idrf.org/ekal-vidyalaya/>; <http://www.letindiadevelop.org/thereport/index.shtml>. The latter refers to allegations in 2002-3 that the IDRF had been ‘funding hate’ in Hindutva schools that had an impact on the anti-Muslim attacks in Gujarat in 2002.

<sup>12</sup> The two organizations apparently fund EV schools in different states; FTS in Assam, Orissa, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Karnataka; BLSK in Uttar Pradesh, Uttranchal, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab and Jammu and Kashmir – which leaves the northeastern states, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu unaccounted for. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friends\\_of\\_Tribals\\_Society](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friends_of_Tribals_Society); [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ekal\\_Vidyalaya](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ekal_Vidyalaya); <https://www.ekal.org>; and, on promotion of these schools as an election strategy etc.; also Aarti Dhar’s ‘Making inroads into the tribal belt’, in *The Hindu*, 18 March 2004, at <http://www.thehindu.com/2004/03/18/stories/2004031803181300.htm>

<sup>13</sup> Sexual and other abuses have been widely reported at tribal residential schools and hostels during recent years, e.g. Zeenews 2010; ACHR 2013; *India Today* 2014.

What we have seen so far is a tendency to assimilate tribal children to both a Hindutva nationalist ideology, which has involved the participation of tribal men in anti-minority attacks on minority groups,<sup>14</sup> and an industrial mode of production that contradicts the traditions of ‘Adivasi economics’,<sup>15</sup> as well as egalitarian modes of learning and relating that are characteristic of tribal societies. Day schools affiliated to RSS-linked organizations tend to emphasize a narrow, Hindutva nationalism, while residential schooling has removed thousands of children from tribal communities, alienating them considerably from traditional skills, languages, knowledge and value systems, and replacing them with aspirations to acquire mainstream jobs and identities. Residential schooling has increased steadily since independence, and recent trends induct children into educational institutions that break all records for their size and regimentation. As we have seen, only a small proportion of India’s tribal groups attended missionary schools during the colonial era. The industrial scale and manner of several ‘modern’, 21<sup>st</sup> century schools therefore brings the project of assimilating India’s tribal population to a new level, indoctrinating children into mainstream values and aspirations far removed from those of their own communities.

### **The pedagogy of assimilation in industrial-scale private schools**

The 2005 policy known as the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) advocated a more local and culturally sensitive approach (NCERT 2007), while the Right to Education Act of 2009 required (day) schools to be set up near every hamlet. Yet the opposite trend, currently in the ascendant, is for residential schools to be set up on a larger scale than ever before, being funded to a considerable extent by the very mining companies that are seeking to take over tribal lands for their projects. The largest of these is the Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS), said to be the world’s largest residential school, located in Bhubaneswar, where it schools 27,000 ST children from all of Odisha’s 62 tribal groups, as well as from Assam and other states, offering them ‘free education from KG [kindergarten] to PG [postgraduate studies]’.<sup>16</sup> An extraordinary range of dignitaries have visited the school, invariably greeted by orchestrated clapping from several thousand children sitting or standing in rows:

Approximately 22,500 students, dressed in uniforms of muted pink tops and light-blue pants, sit patiently but expectantly. They have waited for nearly an hour to welcome the latest entourage of

---

<sup>14</sup> Froerer 2007; Sundar 2004 and 2010; Bonar 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Title of Chapter 2 of *Ecology, Economy* (Padel, Dandekar and Unni 2013: 21-46).

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.kiss.ac.in>

international guests—in this case, dignitaries from 23 countries. As word that the guests have arrived spreads, the students' arms shoot up in unison, and they begin to clap out a thunderous, well-rehearsed welcome. (Finnan 2016)

Children as young as six generally reside in this school without a break for ten months of the year, it being located at least a day's journey by bus or train from most of their villages. KISS started in 1993, and within the first few years it was focusing exclusively on ST children. It is promoted by some of India's top policy-makers, including Bibek Debroy, a founder member of Niti Ayog, the apex policy advisory body to the Indian government since 2015 (Debroy 2015). It is funded through its sister institution, KIIT (the Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology), by fundraising abroad and by mining companies, including Nalco, Vedanta and Adani.<sup>17</sup> Its charismatic founder, Achyuta Samanta, was made a Rajya Sabha (upper house of parliament) member in March 2018 by Odisha's ruling party (*Naxatra News*, March 2018).

'Education City' in Dantewada District, Chhattisgarh, is another mega-school for tribal children, funded by the NMDC (National Mineral Development Corporation), whose huge Bailadila iron-ore mine in south Chhattisgarh has dominated industrial life in the region since the 1960s and is presently expanding further (*India Today* 2012; Das 2018). Education City is promoted in the name of saving children from the Maoists and replacing schools trashed or occupied by the security forces or Maoists, like the 'portacabins' and several other residential schools in south Chhattisgarh, including an Adani Vidya Mandir in Surguja District (Save the Children 2013; *India CSR* 2018). Tribal residential schools are also being promoted in other states, such as Tripura, as more convenient and cost-effective than day schools (Jindal 2015).

How should we understand this? Our argument here is that it needs conceptualizing as an extreme form of assimilationism, a means of inducting children as fast as possible into the mainstream. This is partly to generate labour and 'develop' them, but also with a view to undermining tribal movements against displacement and takeovers of land and resources, which have been active and conspicuous in recent years (Padel 2018), by offering free or subsidised education. KISS and Education City in particular evoke the history of 'industrial schools', especially that of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania (1879 to 1918), which gave education to over 10,000 Native American children. Just as 'industrial schools' in North America flourished during the years of rapid industrial expansion based on mining and factories,

---

<sup>17</sup> Vedanta: *Hindu Business Line* 2012; Adani in October 2016: <https://odishalive.tv/news/kiss-inks-mou-with-adani-foundation-for-mayurbhanj-institute/>; and <https://kiss.ac.in/about/collaboration-and-partnerships/> (accessed April 2018).



these industrial-scale schools in India's most mineral-rich states have arisen just as these minerals are being exploited as never before.

These schools are examples of what Judith Walker terms 'extraction education', based on her research in British Columbia (BC), whose government has made LNG (liquefied natural gas) central to the province's economy. The purpose of extractive education is 'to align education with resource extraction industries': 'at the heart of this policy is the idea of education for, through and as extraction' (Walker 2018: 78). A 'Skills for Jobs Blueprint' promoted in BC since 2011 has involved a 'reengineering of education' along neoliberal lines that conforms to what Paolo Freire called a 'banking model of education' oriented towards extraction and destruction, based on relationships of domination and exploitation of the earth, as well as of individuals and their labour (Freire 1970/1993).

The belief in assimilationist education depends on a simple, monolithic idea of development. In the words of Tushar Senapati Kanti,<sup>18</sup>

Education is both an indicator and an instrument of development, and its attainment is a major factor behind the accumulation of human capital. Literacy is a useful indicator of the relative development of a society. It is widely realised that societies with a higher percentage of literates have higher levels of development. (Kanti 2015: 7)

Like most writings on tribal education, the focus here is on literacy rates, with little if any questioning of traditional educational and knowledge systems in what were until recently completely oral traditions, but with instead a 'deficit discourse' emphasizing impoverishment rather than positive features (Aikman et al. 2016). Kanti writes of KISS pupils as 'neglected and deprived tribal children', and Samanta's life work as 'a poor man's journey to opulence...that is not for self-appropriation but for the upliftment of underprivileged tribal populace of Odisha and neighbouring states.' At KISS, children are 'molded [sic] as "*change agents*" of their community', so as 'to emulate adapting to socio-cultural economic sphere, hence contributing to nation building' through a program called "NUA MAN NUA SAPAN" (New Minds, New Dreams)'. This is co-ordinated with various other agencies and programmes – 'Life Skills Education' (LSE) and 'Adolescent Reproductive Sexual Health' (ARSH) with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Odisha government – to make sure that 'the superstitions in the tribal culture relating to health and hygiene are not followed'. Similarly the purpose of an 'English Access Microscholarship Program' from 2009, a flagship program of the US

---

<sup>18</sup> Deputy Director for Projects and Research at KISS in 2018.

Department of State, is to make the study of English easier and accessible to ‘economically deprived indigenous students’, Also, in addition to a ‘UNICEF-KIIT University joint initiative for the Centre for Children Studies (CCS)’, since 2013 the Bernard van Leer Foundation has helped set up an ‘Early Childhood Program’ through ‘mother tongue-based multilingual education’. The multilingual lab at KISS is an ‘early learning centre’ geared towards inducting children into Odia, rather than using tribal languages for teaching and dialogue.

Overall the assimilationist agenda is clear, not just for the sake of ‘nation-building’, but also to promote globalization that accommodates itself to and makes use of US and UN funds and agendas. Embedded in the discourse are the same ethnocentric assumptions that are characteristic of colonial power structures and that perpetuate neocolonial hierarchies of power, knowledge and values (Parpart 1995; Robinson-Pant 2001), especially for indigenous peoples, whose fundamentally different values, beliefs and customs demand a ‘decolonization’ of education and methodologies of research (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). For example, such decolonization has already taken place in New Zealand, where the Maori language and concepts are now promoted in education up to the PhD level and beyond. The KISS discourse, by contrast, characterizes children working alongside their parents as ‘child labour’, while displacement by industrialization, by contrast, provides an opportunity to ‘develop’:

In order to check their vulnerability due to displacement, KISS has enrolled children of the displaced families and the ones supposed to be displaced by various development projects. Tribal youths from the project-affected areas are given vocational and industrial training so that they are absorbed in the industries coming up in their areas and thus get the fruits of development. (ibid.: 12)

The agenda of promoting industrialization in the face of a multitude of tribal movements against industrial projects is obviously implicit, based on a ‘banal nationalism’ (Benei 2011), alongside the pressure on children to internalize the dominant stereotypes of their own cultures as inherently ‘backward’.<sup>19</sup>

The first case study that Kanti presents highlights the ‘poverty’ of a Dongria boy enabled by the US State Department to become the first from his tribe to visit the USA (Kanti 2015: 9). The US-KISS relationship has been strengthened through the writings of the American anthropologist Christine Finnan, who has brought US anthropology students to KISS and argues that, despite obvious similarities with the notorious residential schools for indigenous children in North

---

<sup>19</sup> Chapter 3, ‘Learning to be backward’, in Kumar 1989.

America, KISS empowers children, offering them opportunity and hope:

Unlike now-shuttered Indigenous boarding schools in the West, students are not forced to attend KISS, and they are not stripped of their tribal cultures and languages; rather, parents eagerly seek out space for their children at KISS, and the school exhorts students to be proud of their heritage and to keep their languages and cultures alive. In reality, students inevitably lose some of their native language and cultural fluency through lack of use and exposure, and they are likely to assume that the languages used at KISS—and the beliefs, values, and behaviors needed to thrive there—are superior to those learned in their tribal villages.

As an anthropologist, this bothers me, but I also know that families all over the world make similar trade-offs when they relocate from rural villages to cities or immigrate to new countries in hope of a better life. Like these families, tribal parents understand that their children will be changed—in fact, that is their intent. (Finnan 2016)

Finnan's joint article with others, 'Living in the present while imagining the future', starts by quoting a girl at KISS:

'I am an adult. I know how to give respect to others. I also know how to give love and affection to younger kids. For instance, when the small kids behave in the wrong manner, I ask them not to do so' (*Sunita, 14 years old, Kalinga Institute of Social Science, Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India*).

By most Western measures of adulthood, Sunita would not be considered an adult. She is only 14 years old and a full-time student. However, her conceptualization of the transition from childhood to adulthood upends most temporal distinctions between childhood and adulthood; she does not use age to mark the transition out of childhood, nor does she associate being a student with being a child. Her statement reflects a fluid conceptualization of self that accommodates future roles, responsibilities, and actions within her present self-identification. (Finnan et al. 2016: 1-2)

Arguably, the statement of this fourteen-year-old reflects above all how she has been taught to think and behave, and to pass this on to younger children. A contrast needs to be made with Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of Hope* (Freire 1992/2014), which starts by recognizing the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, meaning the implicit power structures replicated in the interaction and knowledge conveyed in mainstream schooling (Freire 1970/1993). Finnan's emphasis is rather on 'the capacity to aspire':

Although looking to the future may be a human trait, the capacity to aspire must be developed,

and schools, with their future orientation, have the responsibility to build this capacity. Appadurai (2013) holds that we are all born with the capacity to aspire, but that it develops through having access to people whose aspirations have been achieved and through having opportunities to succeed.

We suggest that students use their imagined futures as adults to motivate themselves to meet school expectations. This is especially true at KISS because, with a population of 25,000 students, order and control are essential. KISS students live in an environment in which all systems (dining, academics, hostels, medical, and recreational) have to function smoothly. This requires that everyone, adults and children, assume sets of responsibilities and behaviors that support this smooth functioning. (Finnan et al. 2016: 8-9)

A considerable number of culturally sensitive models of tribal education are available in India, though on a small scale compared to KISS. Examples include the Tribal Academy at Tejgadh in Gujarat,<sup>20</sup> Adharshila in Sheopur District, Madhya Pradesh,<sup>21</sup> Muskaan in Bhopal, which provides education to displaced Adivasi children using the Gondi and Pardhi languages,<sup>22</sup> Imlee Mahua near Kondagaon in Chhattisgarh,<sup>23</sup> and the Mitra school in Rayagada District, Odisha.<sup>24</sup> These draw on local knowledge and the tradition of critical pedagogy. A Maori Kaupapa is an especially significant initiative in this direction, reversing assimilation in New Zealand, to allow a resurgence of indigenous language and traditions.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the main result of the trend towards residential schooling for tribal children in India is alienation from their communities and traditional economy, producing individuals ‘suited neither for the home nor for the fields’:

Not only are the knowledge and/or cognitive abilities that ST children possess ignored – for example, the capacity to compose and sing spontaneously, to think in riddles and metaphors, and their intimate knowledge of their environment – but schooling also actively encourages a sense of inferiority about ST culture. (Balagopalan 2003)

---

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.sahapedia.org/short-video-ativasi-academy-tejgadh>

<sup>21</sup> <http://adharshila.org.in>

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.muskaan.org>

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.imleemahuaa.org>

<sup>24</sup> <https://mitramrsk.wordpress.com/2010/03/17/newsletter2010/>

<sup>25</sup> Tuhiwai Smith 1999/2012; Pihama 2015.

The ‘cultural discontinuity’ between school and home draws attention to the rigidity of school organisation and the emphasis on discipline and punishment in contrast with socialisation practices and the lives of children as reasons for non-attendance....

The school regimen of timing, discipline, and hierarchy is especially alien to tribal children socialised in a world where individuality is respected early on, and where parent–child interactions are relatively egalitarian. (NCERT 2007: 24-5)

This alienation manifests itself in many forms (Froerer 2015). The psychological impacts include so-called ‘boarding school syndrome’ (Schaverien 2015). Among different models of boarding schools worldwide are some that are intended for elites (such as ‘public schools’ in Britain and India) – which is where this syndrome has been attested through psychoanalysis – and others for particularly marginalized groups, from workhouses and orphanages in the West to those for indigenous children under discussion here. One feature reported from many kinds of boarding school is the ubiquity of physical, often sexual, and also various forms of emotional abuse and humiliation. It is interesting that the industrial-scale and industry-funded schools for tribal children being promoted in India today are more geared towards inducting school-leavers as workers in industrial projects than were the industrial schools set up during the nineteenth century. The main argument we have presented here is that these schools express a ‘pedagogy of assimilation’ (Gupta 2016) that has evolved out of, and expanded, models promoted both in colonial times and in India since independence.

## References

- Adams, David Wallace. 1995. *Education for extinction: American Indians and the boarding school experience, 1875-1928*, Lawrence KA: Kansas University Press.
- Aikman, Sheila, Anna Robinson-Pant, Simon McGrath, Catherine M. Jere, Ian Cheffy, Spyros Themelis and Alan Rogers 2016. Challenging deficit discourses in international education and development, *Compare*, 46, 314-34.
- Asia Sentinel* 2010. The threat to the Andamans’ Jarawa Tribe, 5 July, at <https://www.asiasentinel.com/society/the-threat-to-the-andamans-jawara-tribe/>
- Asian Centre for Human Rights (ACHR) 2013. *India’s hell holes: child sexual assault in juvenile justice centres*, Delhi: ACHR. At <http://www.global-sisterhood-network.org/gsn/images/IndiasHellHoles2013.pdf>

- Balogopalan, Sarada 2003. Neither suited for the home nor for the fields: inclusion, formal schooling and the Adivasi child, *IDS Bulletin*, 34/1, 55-62. Sussex, UK: Institute of Development Studies.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2010. Rationalizing seclusion: a preliminary analysis of a residential schooling scheme for poor girls in India, *Feminist Theory* 11/3, 295-308.
- Bara, Joseph 1997. Western education and the rise of new identity: Mundas and Oraons of Chotanagpur, 1839-1939, *Economic and Political Weekly* 32/15, 785-90.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2002. Tribal education, the colonial state and Christian missionaries: Chotanagpur, 1839-1870, in S. Bhattacharya (ed.), *Education and the disprivileged: nineteenth and twentieth century India*, Hyderabad: Orient Longman, pp. 123-52.
- Benei, Veronique 2011. *Schooling passions: nation, history, and language in contemporary Western India*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bonar, Thane 2010. Hanuman's Army: Adivasis and Hindutva in Gujarat. MA thesis, Department of Political Science, University of Victoria, Canada.
- Caraman, Philip 1976. *The lost paradise: the Jesuit republic in South America*, New York: Seabury Press.
- Constituent Assembly Debates (CAD) 9 December 1946-15 January 1950. Delhi: Government of India. At <http://parliamentofindia.nic.in/ls/debates/debates.htm>
- Das, R. Krishna 2018. Dantewada's Education City is kindling dreams for kids affected by Naxalism, *Business Standard*, 23 March, at [http://www.business-standard.com/article/beyond-business/dantewada-s-education-city-is-kindling-dreams-for-kids-affected-by-naxalism-118032301293\\_1.html](http://www.business-standard.com/article/beyond-business/dantewada-s-education-city-is-kindling-dreams-for-kids-affected-by-naxalism-118032301293_1.html)
- Debroy, Bibek 2015. The idea of KISS: a schooling initiative in Bhubaneswar doesn't leave it to the government, seeks to be the change agent, *The Indian Express* 3 September, at <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-idea-of-kiss-2/>
- Desai, I.P. 1969. *The Vedchhi movement (a sociological essay)*, Surat: Centre for Regional Development Studies.
- Devy, G.N. 2004. *Being in Bhasha: People's Linguistic Survey of India, General Introduction*, Delhi: Orient BlackSwan.
- Dhan, A.K. 2006. *Birsa Munda*, in 'Builders of modern India' series. Delhi: Government of India, Publications Division.
- Dhebar, U.N., Chairman 1961. *Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Committee Report, 1960-1961*. Delhi: Government of India. ['Dhebar Commission Report']

- Elwin, Verrier, Chairman 1960. *Report of the Committee on Special Multipurpose Tribal Blocks*. 30 March. Delhi: Government of India. [‘Elwin Committee Report’]. In N.P. Bhanage (ed., 1993), *Tribal Commissions and Committees in India*, Bombay: Himalaya Publishing House, pp. 56-100.
- Finnan, Christine 2016. Residential schooling brings opportunity to India’s poorest, *Sapiens*, 12 October, at <https://www.sapiens.org/culture/india-indigenous-education/>
- Finnan, Christine, Sasmita Sahoo and Rashmi Pramalik 2016. Living in the present while imagining the future: how school and its promises shape conceptions of childhood for indigenous tribal students in India, *Global Studies of Childhood*, 5 October, pp. 1-11.
- Freire, Paolo 1970/1993. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, London: Penguin.
- \_\_\_\_ 1992/2014. *Pedagogy of hope: reliving pedagogy of the oppressed*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Froerer, Peggy 2007. *Religious division and social conflict: the emergence of Hindu nationalism in rural India*, Delhi: Social Science Press.
- \_\_\_\_ 2015. Adivasi young people and the risk of education in rural Chhattisgarh, *South Asian History and Culture*, 6/3, 365-79.
- Ghurye, G.S. 1943. *The aborigines – ‘so-called’ – and their future*, Poona: Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics. [Revised edition, *The Scheduled Tribes*, 1959]
- Guardian, The* 2015. Justin Trudeau pledges reconciliation in Canada after Aboriginal abuse: the forcible separation of some 150,000 children from their families over more than 100 years was an attempt to end the existence of Aboriginals in Canada, a report has concluded, 15 December, at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/justin-trudeau>
- Gupta, Malvika 2016. A critical analysis of policy on tribal education. M.Phil thesis, Department of Education, Delhi University.
- Hemming, John 1978. *Red gold: the conquest of the Brazilian Indians, 1500-1760*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Higham, Rob, and Alpa Shah 2013. Conservative source or contradictory resource? Education and affirmative action in Jharkhand, India, *Compare*, 43/6, 718-39.
- Hindu Business Line*, 29 August 2012. Vedanta funds education of 100 underprivileged tribal children, at <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national/vedanta-funds-education-of-100-underprivileged-tribal-children/article23080857.ece>
- India CSR network*, 28 February 2018. Dr Priti Adani fronts Adani Vidya Mandir at Surguja, Chhattisgarh, to educate the underprivileged, at <http://indiacsr.in/dr-priti-adani-fronts-adani-vidya-mandir-surguja-chhattisgarh-educate-underprivileged/>

- India Today*, 17 July 2012. 'Education City' emerges in Chhattisgarh's Maoist zone, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/news/story/chattisgarh-dantewada-education-city-109956-2012-07-17>
- \_\_\_\_\_. 11 March 2014. Chhattisgarh: tribal school superintendent, husband, held for sexual assault, at <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/dhanora-sexual-assault-case-neeta-naag-vinod-naag-kanya-ashram-tribal-school-superintendent-dhanora-village-chhattisgarh/1/347742.html>
- Jani, Harshvardhan 2001. *Social transformation through Nai Talim Success Story Series, 9. BHIL SEVA MANDAL – DAHOD*, Amdavad: Gujarat Nai Talim Sangh, Gujarat Vidyapith.
- Jindal, Ashutosh 2015. Access to education in tribal areas: rethinking the traditional approach, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 50/41, 24-5.
- Joshi, Vidyut 1985. A century of tribal education in Gujarat, in Ghanshyam Shah, Vidyut Joshi, Tara Patel, S.P. Punalekar and Vinod P. Shah, *Tribal Education in Gujarat*, Surat: Centre for Social Studies, pp. 19-49.
- Kanti, Senapati Tushar 2015. Holistic tribal education: a case study of Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences in Odisha, India, *Research Journal of Language, Literature and Humanities*, 2 (3): 7-13, at <http://www.isca.in/LANGUAGE/Archive/v2/i3/2.ISCA-RJLLH-2015-013.pdf>
- Kothari, D.S., Chairman 1966. *Education and national development: Report of the Education Commission 1964-66*, Delhi: Ministry of Education, Government of India. ['Kothari Commission Report']
- Kumar, Krishna 1989. *The social character of learning*, Delhi: Sage.
- Lancy, David F. 2015. Children as a Reserve Labor Force, *Current Anthropology* 56/4, 545-54.
- Milloy, John S. 1999. *A national crime: the Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879-1986*, Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.
- Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) 1986. *National Policy on Education*, Delhi: MHRD (Department of Education), GoI.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1992. *National Policy on Education 1986: Programme of Action 1992*, Delhi: MHRD, GoI.
- Mohanty, Ajit K., Minati Panda, Robert Phillipson and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (eds.) 2009. *Multilingual education for social justice: globalising the local*, Delhi: Orient BlackSwan.
- Mukerjee, Madhusree 2003. *The land of naked people: encounters with Stone Age islanders*, Orlando, USA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.



- \_\_\_\_\_ and Denis Giles. 2014. Sexual oppression and the Andamanese. Version of a paper presented at a conference on tribal policy in Port Blair, December 2014, available at [https://www.academia.edu/5462112/Sexual\\_Oppression\\_and\\_the\\_Andamanese](https://www.academia.edu/5462112/Sexual_Oppression_and_the_Andamanese)
- Nambissan, Geetha 1994. Language and schooling of tribal children: issues relating to medium of instruction, *Economic and Political Weekly* 29/42, 2747-54.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2000. Identity, exclusion and the education of tribal communities, Chapter 6 in R. Wazir (ed.), *The gender gap in basic education*, Delhi: Sage, pp. 175-224.
- National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), April 2007. *National Curriculum Framework 2005: National Focus Group on Problems of Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Children, Position Paper 3.1*. Delhi: NCERT.
- Naxatra News*, 7 March 2018. Opportunistic politics: Naveen names Soumya, Achyuta & Prashant as RS Nominees, at <http://www.naxatranews.com/naxatra/story.php?story=15440>
- Padel, Felix 2010 [1995]. *Sacrificing people: invasions of a tribal landscape*, Delhi: Orient BlackSwan.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2018 [forthcoming]. 'Flooding us out with money': movements against displacement in central India, Chapter 2 in Savyasaachi (ed.), *Intractable conflicts in contemporary India: narratives and social movements*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, pp. 20-38.
- \_\_\_\_\_, Ajay Dandekar and Jeemol Unni 2013. *Ecology, economy: quest for a socially informed connection*, Delhi: Orient BlackSwan.
- Parpart, J. 1995. Post-modernism, gender and development, in J. Crush (ed.), *Power of development*, London: Routledge.
- Parry, Jonathan 1999. Lords of labour: working and shirking in Bhilai, in J.P. Parry, J. Breman and K. Kapadia (eds.), *The worlds of Indian industrial labour*. Special issue of *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 33/1&2, 107-40.
- Pihama, Leonie and Kim Southey (eds.) 2015. *Kaupapa Rangahau: a reader*, Hamilton, New Zealand: University of Waikato.
- Portman, M.V. 1899. *The history of our relations with the Andamanese*, Calcutta: Government of India Press (2 volumes).
- Prasad, Archana 2003. *Against ecological romanticism: Verrier Elwin and the making of an anti-modern tribal identity*, Delhi: Three Essays Collective.

- Pratt, Richard H. 1973. The advantages of mingling Indians with Whites, *Americanizing the American Indians: writings by the 'Friends of the Indian' 1880–1900*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 260–71.
- Radcliffe-Brown, A.R. 1922. *The Andaman Islanders*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ramamurti, Acharya, Chairman 1990. *Report of the Committee for Review of National Policy on Education, 1986*, Delhi: Government of India. ['Ramamurti Committee Report']
- Ramnath, Madhu 2015. *Woodsmoke and leafcups: autobiographical footnotes to the anthropology of the Durwa*, Delhi: Litmus/HarperCollins.
- Robinson-Pant, Anna 2001. Development as discourse: what relevance to education?, *Compare* 31/3, 311-28.
- Roy, S.C. 1912. *The Mundas and their Country*, Calcutta: Kuntaline Press.
- Sahoo, Sarbeswar 2014. Civil society and democratization: a counter-case from India, *Democratization* 21/3, 480-500.
- Saini, Ajay 2018. The ashram in the Andamans, *The Hindu* 24 March, at <http://www.thehindu.com/society/the-ashram-in-the-andamans/article23333171.ece>
- Save the Children (India) 2013. *Caught in crossfire: children and education in regions affected by civil strife*, at [https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/7864/pdf/caught\\_in\\_crossfire.pdf](https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/7864/pdf/caught_in_crossfire.pdf)
- Saxena, Sadhna 2012. Is equality an outdated concern in education?, *Economic and Political Weekly* 47/49, 61-8.
- \_\_\_\_\_, and Kamal Mahendroo 1993. Politics of language, *Economic and Political Weekly* 28/45, 6 November.
- Schaverien, Joy 2105. *Boarding School Syndrome: the psychological trauma of the privileged child*, London: Routledge.
- Singh, K.S. 1982. Integration of tribal society: integration vs assimilation, *Economic and Political Weekly* 17/33, 21 August, at [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265310906\\_Transformation\\_of\\_Tribal\\_Society\\_Integration\\_vs\\_Assimilation](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265310906_Transformation_of_Tribal_Society_Integration_vs_Assimilation)
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1983. *Birsa Munda and his movement 1874-1901: a study of a millenarian movement in Chotanagpur*, Calcutta: Oxford University Press.
- Sundar, Nandini 2004. 'Teaching to Hate': RSS' Pedagogical Programme, *Economic and Political Weekly* 39/16, 1605-12.

- \_\_\_\_\_. 2005. Between ethnography and fiction: Verrier Elwin and the tribal question in India, in T.B. Subba and Sujit Som (eds.), *Between ethnography and fiction: Verrier Elwin and the tribal question in India*, Delhi: Orient Longman.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2010. Social and political exclusion, religious inclusion: the Adivasi question in education, *Journal of Indian Education* 36/2, 5-24, at [http://www.ncert.nic.in/publication/journals/pdf\\_files/jie/JIE\\_August\\_2010.pdf](http://www.ncert.nic.in/publication/journals/pdf_files/jie/JIE_August_2010.pdf)
- Survival International* 2010. Outrage at call to remove Andaman tribe's children, 1 July, at <https://www.survivalinternational.org/news/6160>
- Thakkar, A.V. 1941. The problem of aborigines in India. Kale Memorial Lecture, Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune.
- Thompson, E.P. 1991 [1964]. Time, work, discipline and industrial capitalism, in E.P. Thompson, *Customs in common*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, pp. 352-403.
- Tuhiwai Smith, Linda 1999/2012. *Decolonizing methodologies: research and indigenous peoples*, London: Zed Books.
- Veerbhadranaika, P., Revathi Sampath Kumaran, Shivali Tukdeo and A.R. Vasavi 2012. 'The Education Question' from the perspective of Adivasis: conditions, policies and studies, Report for UNICEF. Bengaluru: National Institute of Advanced Studies.
- Venkateswar, Sita 2004. *Development and ethnocide: colonial practices in the Andaman Islands*, Copenhagen: International Work Group for Indigenous Peoples.
- Walker, Judith 2018. Creating an LNG ready worker: British Columbia's blueprint for extraction education, *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 16/1, 78-92.
- Xaxa, Virginus, Chairman. 2014. *Report of the High Level Committee on Socio-Economic, Health and Educational Status of Tribal Communities of India*. May. ['Xaxa Committee Report']. Delhi: Government of India.
- Zeenews* 2010. Orissa CM orders probe into sexual abuse of tribal girls, 18 March, at [http://zeenews.india.com/news/odisha/orissa-cm-orders-probe-into-sexual-abuse-of-tribal-girls\\_612376.html](http://zeenews.india.com/news/odisha/orissa-cm-orders-probe-into-sexual-abuse-of-tribal-girls_612376.html)

## NOMADISM AND THE FRONTIERS OF THE STATE

ANITA SHARMA<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Nomadism and the classification of social groups

In my earlier work on the Bakkarwal, a nomadic pastoral group that migrates from the Jammu region into the Kashmir Valley every summer, I examined the particular difficulties they have faced during the ongoing insurgency in Kashmir. In this article, I look at certain questions posed by other writings on nomadism in order to aid a more detailed examination of the term ‘nomadism’ itself. This term, once subjected to comparison, seems difficult to isolate in respect of any inherent features that are specific to it. In fact, writing on the socio-anthropological idea or concept of nomadism often describes the fuzziness of the term and the difficulty in coming up with a distinct category of nomadism because of the possibility that this form of classification might impede profitable analysis of the culture and peoples who practice something like nomadism.

Taking up this dilemma, Dyson-Hudson proposes an analytical model that subsumes the term ‘nomadism’ under the broader classification of ‘pastoralism,’ arguing that pastoralism is an economic mode that involves both a ‘herding model’ and a ‘spatial mobility model’. The question returns, however, if we concern ourselves with the value of nomadism as a term, although exactly why one term or the other of the broader pairing ‘nomadic pastoralism’ needs to be privileged remains unclear in such work (cited in Salzman 1980).

In fact, many scholars suggest that part of the reason that nomads have been written about so much is because of a certain mystique (Khazanov 1984, Asad 1978) and attractiveness of their itinerant way of life for sedentary populations, which seems to draw some of us to those without a fixed address, marking them out as a people who stand out from the sedentary residents of towns and villages locking their homes to visit their temples and coming back again.<sup>2</sup> Another argument that follows from this is that the nomad is disappearing and that the loss of this fabled form of life deserves to be documented (Salzman 1980).<sup>3</sup> However, there seems to be a danger in treating the nomad as a pre-given unit (either as unit of movement or as a people about to ‘go extinct’). As Dyson Hudson comments:

---

<sup>1</sup> Holder of a PhD in Sociology from the Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi. Awarded a Commonwealth scholarship for split-site research at the University of Sussex, 2009-2017.

<sup>2</sup> This could also apply to the history of relations between Roma and settled populations in Europe (cf. fears of ‘children running off with the Gypsies’), though of course most Roma are now settled.

<sup>3</sup> The San in Botswana would presumably be a contemporary case, given the efforts of a non-San government to make them settle down.

...if movement is treated as an absolute quality of particular human groups, rather than being relative and dependent on other factors, then our most profitable questions about spatial mobility are pre-empted, we too easily settle for categories that do not so much explain as explain away the realities of nomadic behaviour. (cited in Salzman 1980)

Indeed, as Spooner (1973) concludes, there are no features of culture or social organization that are universal to all nomads or even that are found exclusively among nomads. The question then arises as to why nomads—peripatetics, hunters-gatherers, foragers, entertainers, acrobats, travelling salesmen and a host of other communities who practice spatial mobility as a somewhat permanent and often ‘traditional’ lifestyle for reasons of sustenance—continue to be a topic of discussion and some academic scrutiny. Is it perhaps that the term ‘nomad’ continues to be relevant because the particularism of constant mobility is used by many peoples as a unique cultural marker, that is, because nomads use mobility to distinguish themselves from others?

Focusing on the factors underlying social, economic and political equality among nomads, Asad (1978) dismisses both nomadic movement and pastoral production as the determining factors with which to classify nomads. He insists on the absence of accumulation (pastoralists can only grow their herds according to the carrying capacity of their pastures) and argues for production mainly for their own consumption as the most important feature of nomads, owing to which ‘there cannot be an essential pastoral nomadic society’. The nature of their social life, in his view, is best determined by looking at the total system and at their historically specific role in larger economic systems, ‘wherein it becomes less important to say that people are nomads than to say they or someone else controls their territory, less important that they are pastoralists than to say who owns the animals and whether the production is for a market or subsistence.’ For Asad, the idea of subsistence also makes possible independence from market-based evaluations of wealth—in fact he seems to point to a particular formula within nomadic-pastoral economies that distinguishes them from other economies: the idea of the forms of ownership of animals and of territory.

We find a particular variation of this formula in the works of anthropologists and historians focused on the Eurasian steppes. Ernest Gellner (cited in Khazanov 1984) noted that the rough formula which became widely accepted among Soviet ethnographers for the social organization of nomads ran as follows: ‘Communal ownership of pasture, private ownership of herds’. He pointed out that the long, persistent and fascinating debate among Soviet ethnographers was over the issue of land tenure among nomads, not the ownership of animals: ‘They contended that land was being monopolized by one class within nomadic society. The private, non-communal ownership of herds was not disputed, even for the past, as far back as the first millennium BC’ (cited in Khazanov 1984). Gellner argues further that this form of liminality between communal and private ownership

means that nomadism cannot be categorized easily as either a subsistence-based or an accumulative form of economy. Moreover, for Gellner the private ownership of herds does not hasten the integration of a nomadic economy into a broader market system (as is the case for Asad), but is also associated with a particular positive value – that is, the institutionalized connection with its immediate ecology, meaning that there is not just an attempt to balance extraction and production linked to that ecology.

## **2. The ending of subsistence and ritual sacrifice**

Nomadic societies are known to possess a culture that is widely diffused and encapsulated in its members, their social stratification being ephemeral and weak, their political formations fragile and elusive. Even if on occasion they grow into something bigger, this leads to no permanent and irreversible structural changes in their society. As Tolybekov notes:

Every illiterate nomadic Kazakh, like all nomads of the world, was in the 15th to the 18th centuries simultaneously a shepherd and a soldier, an orator and a historian, poet and singer. All national wisdom, assembled by the ages, existed only in oral form. (cited in Khazanov 1984)

This variable, with its institutionalized values, itself has many co-ordinates. For example, Berland (2003) notes how peripatetic communities are experts at cultivating a certain secrecy in order to evade the scrutiny of officialdom and to access resources, while Gardner (2003) elaborates on how nomads use mobility to avoid conflict and move on. Mobility also allows for a diversification of practices to be combined alongside herding. These might range from the Raika and Rabari pastoralists in Rajasthan doubling up as blacksmiths to nomads abetting the smuggling of banned products across international boundaries, as seen in the poppy trade in Afghanistan.

There is, however, another peculiar aspect of nomadism that marks it out as singular—its capacity for a certain destructiveness that is part of the process of nomadic production. This is what Gellner (*ibid.*) and Khazanov (*ibid.*) describe as a certain capacity for ‘partibility’ by which they are able to part with things and move on. This initial stimulus to movement seems to be a seed of distinction, which by itself remains unclarified.

At this level of the nomadic function, we in fact see different variables of the institutionalized values that nomads are known to possess across the board: resilience, pliability, partibility, dispersal, evasion (usually emphasized), and also erasure, a certain indiscernibility of their archaeological traces Ratnagar (2004). In fact it is these institutionalized values that seem to distinguish nomadism from a purely subsistence type of economy (as described by Asad, 1978). The maintenance of a subsistence form of life seems to require functions other than the defence of

territory or limitations on the numbers of animals exchanged under market conditions – that is, as I argued in the conclusion to the previous section, it requires a particular positive value associated with ecology.

The following example will elucidate this point. In 2012-13 I conducted doctoral fieldwork in Warwan, Indian Kashmir, among the nomadic Bakkarwal and sedentary Warwanis. The Bakkarwal, like so many non-sedentary populations I encountered through different periods of fieldwork in different parts of the country, seem to have (or at least to have had) a special place in the discourse of sedentary populations. In a sense, the mystique that draws so many writers to write about nomads is also part of the vocabulary that sedentary populations use in their periodic encounters with these people.

For the Warwanis, the annual journey of the Bakkarwal to Warwan was something to look forward to, an occasion even to rejoice: '*Unse is sunsaan jaghan main raunak aati thi*' ('They brought radiance to this isolated gloomy land'), as a Warwani woman once said to me. For the Warwanis, the arrival of the Bakkarwal in their cold forbidding valley would herald the coming of good weather and sunny blue skies, and their migration back again would signal the end of summer, and the beginning of the rain and snow and a kind of hibernation. As the ice would melt and the first few blades of grass would sprout, groups of children would lie in restless anticipation, waiting to spot the first trail of sheep and goats trickling down the steep mountain slopes, ringing with the familiar whistle and stride of the tall robust Bakkarwal – their summer friends who returned to Warwan year after year after year. The first sightings were met with much joy: Warwani children would run along with the herd together with Bakkarwal children, kicking up even more dust along the trail, whistling and shouting, as the elders would come out of their homes and smile. Both groups described how in the past the occasion would be met by killing and eating a goat from among the Bakkarwal's herd. In fact from their accounts it would seem that to a great extent the killing of goats in the past was related to ritual occasions and functions.

However, this kind of ritualistic relationship between the Bakkarwal and Warwanis seemingly began to shift very significantly during this time, which was one of insurgency in Kashmir, as Warwan was a kind of wild untamed frontier space used by the militants to hide away, given that the Indian army has only come to Warwan quite recently. In many ways, it may be said that the process of the state's encroachment on Warwan was a reaction to the advent of the insurgency, as ignoring Warwan was no longer possible, in spite of its small population and modest impact on vote-bank politics. The impact of the insurgency was such that this otherwise 'minor' region eventually came under the gaze of the state and has gradually started to be connected to the 'outside world'. The Warwanis are aware of this misrecognition. They have suffered long hard years of,

first, living under fear of the insurgency, and then experiencing the heavy hand of the army, as well as mainstream Kashmiri politics. To counter this, they are gradually inching towards a hard-fought recognition of their needs by negotiating with the state in ways the latter can scarcely ignore, connected with the militancy. The Warwanis have found the trigger, and this time the state is standing in rapt attention. As an elite Warwani woman from Inshan said: 'Militancy came, then the army came, and then came development. It is only because of militancy that the state looked towards us. This much we have understood now.'

In an unfortunate turn of events, the very erosion of the Bakkarwal's modes of movement highlights the irreducibility of forms of mobility to the sustenance of their form of life. Depending on the migratory route employed<sup>4</sup> migration may take up to two months, during which time they camp at various sites and altitudes en route to the final pasture – thus it is important to understand that the migratory corridor is as important for their livelihood as the final pasture. Factors such as cold weather require them to stop and wait for the right window of opportunity before gradually moving camp.

With the increasing establishment of roads and residential areas, the Bakkarwal are now being pushed into migrating through dangerous and congested tunnels and roads with heavy traffic and nervous tension, because of which the Bakkarwal incur heavy losses each year. The navigation through bottlenecks such as the Jawahar Tunnel that connects Jammu to Kashmir ends up in a large number of accidents for the Bakkarwal, resulting not only in the deaths of their animals, but also in the loss of the lives and limbs of some nomads. On top of this they have to tolerate abuse from both the traffic police and the forest authorities, who, like settled people generally, are increasingly viewing their migration as an indulgence. The fencing off of forest land on the one hand and the growing number of settled populations on the other is squeezing the Bakkarwal from both sides. Moreover, new high-altitude roads are often constructed on the migratory corridors and routes established by the Bakkarwal, who are then unable to claim their traditional rights to these passages.

Such problems of mobility seem to circumscribe the difficulties in seeing nomadism as reducible to a functional corollary of pastoralism. In fact the precise problem I encounter in describing nomadic institutionalized values (i.e. partibility, evasion, erasure etc.) purely in terms of subsistence – whether this is thought of purely as an economic function or within the mode of a particular ritualistic economy – is that such descriptions fail to account entirely for the particular role these values play in moments of political crisis.

---

<sup>4</sup> There is already a considerable literature that describes the complexity of the arrangement of nomadic-pastoral routes, which itself remains a subject for future research.



Furthermore, as described above, the general depletion of the Bakkarwal's relations with sedentary peoples along their migration routes has further exacerbated this situation. This has led members of the community, particularly those who have emerged as leaders in the last few decades, to look for measures to secure their forms of livelihood while simultaneously highlighting a range of institutionalized values that are necessary to describe nomads outside the understanding of them as a community based on a subsistence economy.

### **3. State law and the nomadic community**

In the last few decades the Bakkarwal community has seen a degree of political mobilization, with attempts to secure their rights within the state, particularly through the voices of a small number of young and educated leaders. Among the possible reforms they have considered is the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA). Since its successful tabling and passage, the FRA has seen a variety of political applications across states in India. and has in many cases been successful in securing the livelihoods of those who are reliant on the forests. This is particularly the case in light of the eviction of traditional 'forest-dwellers' when their forms of livelihood are classified as 'encroachments' on forest land marked out as reserved or forest sanctuaries. The access of a community to the benefits accruing from this act is mediated by two possible categories of inclusion within it: 'Scheduled Tribe' and 'Other Forest Dweller'.<sup>5</sup>

Inclusion under the category of 'Scheduled Tribe' allows the community a certain degree of autonomy over the process of deciding what acts might constitute 'encroachments' on forest land and what might be seen as maintaining or 'preserving' the balance of ecology in the forest. This autonomy is itself based on guarantees afforded by the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, Article 244, Part X, on 'autonomous areas or tribal areas'. Inclusion under the 'Other Forest Dweller' category, on the other hand, requires the setting up of a *gram sabha* under the following conditions defined within the act:

'Gram Sabha' means a village assembly which shall consist of all adult members of a village and in case of States having no Panchayats, Padas, Tolas and other traditional village institutions and elected village committees, with full and unrestricted participation of women. (Forest Rights Act, 2006)

---

<sup>5</sup> Forest Rights Act, 2006, <https://tribal.nic.in/FRA/data/FRARulesBook.pdf>. Accessed 25th April 2017.

The term ‘nomadic’ appears five times within the Act, always as a description of a mode of economy or subsistence specific to the group. For example, the second section of the Act, which discusses the kinds of forest-based livelihood activities it is looking to secure, places nomadic activities among:

other community rights of uses or entitlements such as fish and other products of water bodies, grazing (both settled or transhumant) and traditional seasonal resource access of nomadic or pastoralist communities. (Forest Rights Act, 2006)<sup>6</sup>

Discussion of the possibility of ensuring greater autonomy for Bakkarwal by means of this Act was particularly visible this year in the nationally reported interviews of Bakkarwal and Gujjar leaders following what has been largely described in the media as ‘The Kathua Rape Case’.<sup>7</sup> While the details of the case have been reported in the news internationally and are easily accessible, certain aspects of it have generally escaped public scrutiny. Most significant here is the refusal of the village – to which the accused in the case belonged – to allow the girl’s family to use the burial ground, outside which they were camping, to perform the final rites for the victim. This was a further grotesque reminder of the fact that the ritualistic relationship that nomads shared with settled villagers has almost ceased to exist, much like the burial ground, where the burial of the little girl was denied to the Bakkarwal. She now lies buried on a hill in the forest a few miles away.

Following the case, and following the refusal of any possibility of political representation, several of the young and educated from the community have taken to attempting to find ways to secure the Bakkarwal their rights. This incident has also served as a means for the Gujjars, another group of nomads, and the Bakkarwal to voice their discontent over the treatment of nomadic peoples by the settled populations of Jammu and Kashmir. The FRA has been suggested on many occasions as one such route. However, the difficulties faced by the community have largely concerned how the Act should be interpreted and how the community should best be represented. Inclusion under the category of ‘Other Forest Dweller’ creates the risk that the Bakkarwal might be represented by members of villages with whom their relations might have been eroded to a greater or a lesser degree. Even assuming that the *gram sabha* will itself be constituted entirely from within

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> For example: ‘Kathua rape case: a past full of conflict and discrimination in Jammu and Kashmir led to the horrific crime’, Sameer Yair, *Indian Express*, April 15, 2018. See <https://www.firstpost.com/india/kathua-rape-case-a-past-full-of-conflict-and-discrimination-in-jammu-and-kashmir-led-to-this-horrific-crime-4429665.html>, accessed 15 April 2018.

the community, the Act provides that any arbitration necessitated by an issue remaining unresolved by the *gram sabha*<sup>8</sup> will pass to the higher administration at the district and state levels.

On the other hand, the community is also recognized under the constitution as a Scheduled Tribe (ST), thus making it possible for it to access the Act under this category as well. However, while this may allow a greater degree of autonomy in possible arbitrations, for the community the ST category has no specific provision securing the routes the Bakkarwal have to take to reach even their final pastures, even though they are defined as the community's resources under this Act.

In fact it would seem that the security of the Bakkarwal economy is rendered quite difficult because the function of mobility that is inherent in the tribe is not protected.<sup>9</sup> This also leads us to a recurrent contradiction in writing about nomads, which often argues for the preservation of nomadic forms of subsistence by increasing the freedom granted by the state to allow them to continue to practice their traditional ways of life. However, in line with Gellner (ibid.), I argue that the preservation of nomadism's ritualistic functions fails to account entirely for the kinds of values a variable like nomadism draws from its surrounding ecology. The legal measures that might be envisaged as allowing some form of stability to return to the lives of Kashmir's nomads would require a far more elaborate consideration of how legislation on common resources is organized. Nonetheless the example described in this section shows that, for the Bakkarwal, mobility is a necessary condition for the perpetuation of their form of existence.

#### **4. The 'avoidance of the state' thesis**

The relationship between a peripatetic lifestyle and nomads' propensity to avoid the state is well documented. If we look at the work of Scott (2009), we find that mobility as a working productive variable happens precisely at moments of political crisis. Usually what enables this mobility is the possibilities afforded by a particularly difficult ecological zone that, in the broadest sense, can be and has been described in various scholarly writings as a frontier.

The case of the Rajputs in Rajasthan who shrugged off their nomadic past and resorted to the creation of a mythical lineage as a substitute identity in order to gain strategic state power and esteem is instructive here. In her work on the relationship between nomadism and state formation in Rajasthan (2016), Tanuja Kothiyal argues that the emergence of the Rajput state requires a myth

---

<sup>8</sup> While literature on the problems of the working of *gram sabhas* constituted by the FRA is still in the process of emerging, Vivek Vyas's paper, on the 'State Implementation of Forest Rights in Rajasthan', written for a project studying 'The Operationalisation of the FRA', provides considerable insights into the matter. See [https://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/bitstream/handle/10535/4270/Rajasthan\\_Status\\_Paper.pdf?sequence=1](https://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/bitstream/handle/10535/4270/Rajasthan_Status_Paper.pdf?sequence=1), accessed 20 April 2018.

<sup>9</sup> For more details on the complexities of nomadic route organization, see Chakravarty 1996.

that enables their relations with a more dispersed and mobile form of society to be downplayed. However, within the deeper regions of the Thar Desert there existed ambulatory populations that did not place a high political value on the idea of descent from a common ancestor, nor did they view this ancestry as a marker of their political distinction. It remains to be asked, following such insight, whether this function of mobility in relation to a state or the avoidance of the state's formations is still maintained within the frontier once the state forms strategies to approach the frontier, or when the frontier appears within its vision.

In fact, during the whole period of the insurgency in Kashmir, the movement of the Bakkarwal was drawn directly into opposition to the state and into ways of avoiding, as much as possible, both the state and the militant groups that often occupied areas that intersected with nomadic routes, that is, areas that were difficult for the state's forces to access.

We might see valuable inflections of this relationship between the state and the nomads in the fact that, from the very beginning, the Bakkarwal, like other nomadic-type populations, were also viewed by the state for their ability to access resources found only in difficult and remote terrain. Ratnagar (2017) has pointed to the ancient relations with nomads in what is today the Afghan region, which revolved around the nomads' almost exclusive ability to access the lapis lazuli quarries at very high altitudes. This in turn was because these quarries do not necessitate a very long detour from a route to some of the best summer grazing in Afghanistan.

Similarly the Bakkarwal were seen as useful to the state because of their access to certain medicinal herbs, high altitude routes and, in the past few decades, their acting as guides and spies for the army. Increasingly today the Bakkarwal find use and value in using their horses to take pilgrims to mountain shrines such as Vaishno Devi and Amarnath. In this sense, and following their apparent initial migration in the mid-nineteenth century to Kashmir from Swat and Kohistan in Pakistan, the Bakkarwal gained status and currency within the independent state in India, often due to the nature of their relations with it. Although I cannot go into details here, one might point out how this relationship was also extended during the period of militancy in Kashmir, which continued to allow the Bakkarwal access to their traditional pastures, past military checkpoints.

It is important to note here that the Bakkarwal continued their migrations up and down the Pir Panjals and Himalayas in spite of the daunting odds imposed by the intensive insurgency of the 1990s and early 2000s, not for no good reason, but most significantly because pastoralism continued to offer them the highest returns to labour. This ability to switch between forms of production and types of division of labour (male-female) allowed them to 'find routes' through this difficult period.

And yet the basic contradiction I faced in fieldwork was the fact that the increasing encroachment of the state had also necessitated certain basic forms of identification and representation that the Bakkarwal have adopted as their own, despite their continued avoidance of the state. Increasingly for the Bakkarwal, political power needs to be wielded through forms of representation within democracy. The most significant marker of this is their inclusion within state education schemes. Institutionalized values notwithstanding, among the Bakkarwal, who were classified as a Scheduled Tribe in 1991, as among a growing number of pastoralists across the world, such as the Changpa in Ladakh and the Raika in Rajasthan, as well as the Evenki and Yakut in Siberia, it is perhaps when they are provided with education – that is, for the sake of the futures of their children – that they seem to begin to sedentarize in large numbers.

Like other nomadic groups, in the face of state programs such as ‘mobile schools’ (a teacher reaches the valley of the final pastures of a group of Bakkarwal from his winter school area and is assigned a tent and a mat to run a school in the summer migration areas of the group), the Bakkarwal find themselves typecast in an essentializing discourse in which their way of life is deemed no longer suitable to the contemporary requirements of a rapidly modernizing state. Indeed, they increasingly compare themselves unfavourably to the Warwanis, with whom their relationship and status have altogether been transformed in recent decades, when every summer the Warwanis would welcome the Bakkarwal with their stories from the outside world, their vitality, craft, food and pageantry.

## **5. The frontiers beyond the state**

The notions of both a subsistence economy and avoidance of the state in particular frontier zones thus seem insufficient to determine the institutionalized values accruing to nomadic ways of life, though these may be a necessary condition for the definition of the ‘nomadic-pastoralism’ mentioned earlier. The question of why education is able to produce this peculiar stagnation is itself unclear and calls for further investigation. Although I do not have the space to substantiate this point fully in the Bakkarwal case, I would add that education has also had particular effects on the way they see their political status.

The question of the introduction of state formation into a frontier zone is a particularly curious one. In the case of the Bakkarwal, their relationship to territory has been strangely inverted. Rather than losing their traditional pasture land directly due to the interventions of the state, it seems that they are being pushed increasingly into a diminishing frontier zone. And what seems to be contested at this moment is precisely not their ability to forego a surplus, nor entirely their ability to avoid the state.

In the case of Warwan, the period of the insurgency has also been coterminous with a loss of status for the Bakkarwal, both in terms of their relations with those around them (an example of which is the interaction of the Bakkarwal with the forest guards on their summer route, as opposed to the military checkpoint) and at the level of the influence of their representation in the state. Regarding the latter, we can cite the capacity of nomads to secure certain specific resources for the state and their role as peripatetics, such as in extracting medicinal herbs or facilitating pilgrimage and tourism. The insurgency is now becoming a growing threat to the population, as well as a threat to the state.

What seems important to describe here is the fact that certain aspects of nomadism – or of what we have described previously as encompassing nomadic institutionalized values such as partibility and evasion – seem to be employed by these groups specifically both to retain an ability to avoid the state and to pose a threat to it. It would seem (at least speculatively, although this is a point I would like to elaborate on elsewhere) that what we have described as a frontier – that is, either as a zone that produces an economy of subsistence and ritual sacrifice, or as one that permits the way of life of a mobile population and allows it to avoid the forms of state-based sedentarization – also allows a threat to be posed to the state at particular spatio-temporal moments because of the very nature of this type of mobility. This is not to argue simply that the insurgency is taking the place of the Bakkarwal as a threat to the state, but rather that, while a description of the value of the nomad as a concept or idea does often require a particular mode of economy or a particular relation to mobility, these prove insufficient to assert the existence of the nomad as an idea.

Consider again the example of education. Increasingly, members of ‘militant groups’ in Kashmir are young people who have often had technical training or have served a long period within the Indian education system. The process of education, far from impeding the growth of militancy in the valley, seemed to provide it with new modes of political action (although I am not attempting to make any moral judgement here about the political value of that action). The militant seems better able to integrate the modes of specialization imposed by education and to take up these new economies. In a sense he is able to incorporate into himself, as with many conventional nomadic groups, all the functions performed by any member of the group (Khazanov 1984).

How is it, then, that certain institutional values of nomadism reappear in the case of militancy, despite the fact that these groups are not necessarily nomadic in terms of their economy if we are to define nomadism as lying within the ambit of a pastoral economy? Which is not to say that comparisons with the economies of so-called militant groups and the economies of pastoralists in other parts of the world when faced with modern state intervention do not deserve attention (thieving, Thugees, guerrilla fighters etc.). That is, in certain ways militant groups in Kashmir seem

to embody a form of nomadic polity that persists in spite of the absence of a pastoralist economy. On the other side of the coin, we find nomadic groups like the Bakkarwal who are enduring considerable difficulties in their attempts to sustain their pastoral economy because its mobile aspect has been interrupted.

We might ask, finally, in the light of these indications of the possible sedentarization of a nomadic form of life, how these specific institutionalized values continue to appear at all within the same ecological zone. In most cases of this sort, this ability to produce such specific institutionalized values also seems related to their appearance in specific locations (although I think we might broaden the term 'location' from meaning simply 'place'). We see particular zones where the relationship to ecology as a mode of subsistence or sustenance is persistently resisted in favour of continuing contestation over the status afforded by a form of territory or an ecology. In particular, these zones are ones that the state usually describes as wasteland—deserts and mountains, scrub and vast unconquerable plains, in which we tend to ascribe a certain value to the peoples living in them. These places also seem to produce in people a relationship with their ecology by which their 'land' is valued as more than merely sustaining them by being productive of their political identity.

We might say, following writers like Uberoi and Khazanov, but also following the theories of nomadism in the work of ibn Khaldoun that both Gellner and Khazanov rely on so heavily, that there are particular frontier zones that enable such values (Uberoi 1978, Khazanov 1984). This would suggest that each frontier zone produces its own kind of nomadic variable: for example, Uberoi's frontier seems entirely different from ibn Khaldoun's, and this is entirely different from that of the Eurasian steppes, which, furthermore, is unlike the circulation of movements found in the Thar Desert in Rajasthan. This would mean not only that nomadism is distinct as a mode of production or as an economy in itself, but also that each type of frontier makes possible the emergence of tactical formations of its own that are peculiar to nomadism's institutionalized values.

The question that remains, given the difficult political scenario in which the Bakkarwal find themselves, is what tactics a nomadic community might employ in such circumstances if it is to retain its traditional modes of livelihood and also its essential forms of existence, and also whether a legal preservation of such modes and forms is even possible. 'The gathering of fallen wood and the theft of wood' might indeed be 'essentially different things' (Marx 1842), but how is 'the gathering of fallen wood' to be protected as a right, without it being marked by the incriminating vision of the state and the 'classes privileged by it'?

## References

- Asad, Talal 1978. Equality in nomadic systems? *Critique of Anthropology* 3, 57-65.
- Berland, J.C. 2003. Servicing the ordinary folk: peripatetic peoples and their niche in southwest Asia, in A. Rao and M. Casimir (eds.), *Nomadism in South Asia*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Chakravarty, K.M. 1996. Claiming the Alps: The Himalayan Commons in Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. Paper Presented at 'The Mountain Commons and Sustainability' in the Sixth Annual Conference of the International Association for the Study of Common Property on 'Voices from the commons' in Berkeley, California, A. June 5-8, 1996.
- Gardner, P. 2003. Bicultural oscillation as a long-term adaptation to cultural frontiers: cases and questions,' in A. Rao and M. Casimir (eds.), *Nomadism in South Asia*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Khazanov, Anatoly M. 1984. *The nomad and the outside world*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kothiyal, T. 2016. *Nomadic narrative: a history of mobility and identity in the Great Indian Desert*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Marx, K. 1842. Debates on the laws of the theft of wood, *Rheinische Zeitung*.
- Ratnagar, S. 2004. *The other Indians: essays on pastoralists and prehistoric tribal people*, New Delhi: Three Essays Press.
- 2017. Nomads and the trade between ancient civilizations, paper presented at Indraprastha College, Delhi University, 8 September 2017.
- Salzman, P.C. 1980. Is Nomadism a useful concept?, *Nomadic Peoples* 6, 1-7.
- Scott, James C. 2009. *The art of not being governed*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Spooner, B, 1973. *The cultural ecology of pastoral nomads*, Addison-Wesley Modules in Anthropology (see <https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/21801040?q&versionId=26232015>).
- Uberoi, J.P.S. 1978. The structural concept of the Asian frontier, in D. Chattopadhyay (ed.), *History and society: essays in honour of Professor Nilanjan Ray*, Calcutta: K. P Bagchi, pp. 67-76.



## ANCESTORS ON HIGH: MUSINGS ON AN EAST CHINA CASE<sup>1</sup>

GÖRAN AIJMER

### **Abstract**

The focus of this article is on the conventions of ancestor worship in the province of Jiangsu, directing light on certain ethnographic data that do not accord with the general, synthesized sociological picture established for southern China. Exploring Myron L. Cohen's 1990 field data, together with what is known from elsewhere in the province, the tentative discussion in this article concerns the nature of ancestry and the construction of social continuity in a local society with its roots in rice-farming. Here ancestor worship as a cultural grammar takes the form of a pragmatic variation, the search for blessings (continuity) being strongly contrasted with the avoidance of implied malevolence (discontinuity). It is further suggested that ancestry and divinity are interacting iconic forces in the stream of social life.

**Key words:** East China, ancestry, cult of the dead, construction of continuity, iconic expression

### **Introduction**

The social landscape of Jiangsu Province in the east of China shows a great deal of variation, despite the fact that its ecological foundation is everywhere rather similar. Wherever you go in the area there is water. Indeed, this is a watery country crossed by canals and studded by lakes and marshlands, its main crop being wet rice in irrigated fields. In the dryer winter some cotton and crops of wheat are also grown. Furthermore, it is an area of spectacular urbanization, very many regions today having been drawn into urban economic activities. In this article I wish to attend to some of the more traditional aspects of local Jiangsu society, looking for clues to an understanding of the traditionalist factors that have kept southern Chinese society together in a more or less recognizably unified way for very long spans of time. What I will argue in what follows may not be very conclusive, and this article is written in an experimental and tentative mood. The study of the phenomenon of ancestry in China is, generally speaking, a moot point. The specific topic of ancestry, chosen here

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor Emeritus and former Chair of Social Anthropology at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, and currently associated with the University's Gothenburg Research Institute. In writing this article, I have benefitted from helpful comments by Myron L. Cohen and Robert Parkin, for which I express my gratitude. However, any remaining shortcomings in the text are mine alone.

for its display of constant local variation in actual appearance within a frame of discursive orthodoxy, is a somewhat elusive field of enquiry, yet such studies of social symbolism may well be useful in thinking more broadly about these crucial processes of social conservation. We may learn about the systemic nature of the mechanisms of tradition through a study of their social articulation.

In this article, I will concentrate on certain aspects of what is assumed to be the Confucian scaffolding of Chinese society, in the south as in the north, namely the system of ancestor worship, which connects the past tense of social life with forecast futures. In doing so, however, I will seek to go beyond literate elite practices and their interface with state ideology. What I shall deal with is thus not the usual sinological suppositions regarding elite social engineering (e.g. Rowe 1998), but rather demotic, existential symbolism. My focus here is thus on a cultural idiom of a discursive character that draws heavily on an iconic flow of non-linguistic expressiveness. The main topos of this imagery is death. The symbological characterization of the notion of ancestry sees it as a form of cultural grammar that organizes the past in order to regulate social life in the construction of times to come. If we can understand something of how this system of the compression of time into a model of Janus-faced continuity has worked through the ages, in terms of relevant robust figures of thought and insistent clusters of iconic templates, we may be in a somewhat better position to understand the wider dynamics of southern Chinese society.<sup>2</sup>

The phenomenon of death is a focal point in all known human societies, and both figures of thought and impulses of iconic symbolism surround the topos of human physical discontinuity, everywhere and at all times throughout history, as far as one can tell. The development of death-related imagery may in essence be a truly trans-human phenomenon, and all known peoples throughout time seem to have celebrated death in some way or another. It is another question, though, to what extent societies have constructed a continuous long-term interest in distantly related individuals long since dead, whom we may call ancestors. When we talk about ancestors and cults of ancestors in a general way, we mostly mean something like the dead, despite their

---

<sup>2</sup> I have earlier discussed variations in the morphology and cultural semantics of ancestor cults with regard to some areas in southern China and have done so by way of a symbological analysis. The present article is thus part of a somewhat wider concern with ancestry as a conservative social factor and a supporting idiomatic symbolic construct in 'traditional' society. See Aijmer 2016a, 2016b, 2016c. Others relevant works will follow.

death and physical disappearance, having continuous involvement in social life and being regarded somehow as continuously contributing to human affairs. Even so, in the many cases when the dead are included in society in this fashion, which seems to be frequent, we will discover such differences among the discursive conceptions and iconic templates found among the world's populations that it will be hard to see the social conquest of death as a unified process of human evolution. There is little to suggest that ancestor cults form part of a lineal mental development by definition.

China is nonetheless a special case, as we are fortunate to have access to a social history of some four thousand years. This span of time exhibits a very forceful continuous tradition that stabilizes cultural semantics and thus counteracts the constant flow of change in the world. The exploration of Chinese ancestry and ancestral cults is therefore not only of interest to the 'expert', it also opens up perspectives for an improved understanding of conservative factors in social development. It has recently been suggested in a Spencerian mood that the millennia-long conduct of ancestor worship in China should be seen as an example of a universal evolutionary process (Coe and Begley 2016), but, as already mentioned, there is reason for caution against such arguments. However, I cannot engage in a debate on these matters within the space of this article. In setting out here to discuss some forms of Chinese ancestor worship, I am merely conducting a limited and experimental exercise to suggest how we may read ethnographic sources to produce an accountable and meaningful common context.

When death strikes in southern China, this provokes reactions with much local variation in conventions — arrays of possible social arrangements. One line of research, suggested here, would be to examine whether these variants could be brought together to interact in a wider perspective revealing a common grammar of ancestor worship, a grammar that, under the influence of varying local conditions, would generate transformations in ethnographic appearance. When we know how localized Chinese systems work, we can use this insight for further comparative endeavours —regionally, area-wise, and possibly even universally.

The starting point for the present exercise is a splendid fieldwork report on the organization of social life in eastern Jiangsu Province produced by Myron L. Cohen, based on his experiences in the village of Shenjiashang. This investigation was carried out in 1990 *in situ* in the lower Yangzi region and was designed to throw fresh light on the formation of lineages in eastern China. However, any study of kinship

organization in this country would also, of necessity, touch on the phenomenon of ancestor worship. Here I wish to recycle these field data to make them speak with somewhat different voices within a framework of symbological understanding. Anthropology is, after all, a cumulative enterprise. Although my investigations are being conducted at a distance from the actual field, with the aid of Cohen's data, I will attempt to explore the notions of ancestry in this local sphere of Jiangsu cultural symbolism.<sup>3</sup>

The village of Shenjiashang is situated not too far from the megalopolis of Shanghai (for further details, see Cohen 2005: 195-7).<sup>4</sup> Prior to the communist era the village was a farming community, largely dependent on crops of rice and winter wheat. Today the great majority of its residents are involved in urban occupations for a living, but their local community is still steeped in the moulds provided by its former farming life. Much of Shenjiashang's present-day ritual and social life represents a 'revival' of former Republican and late Imperial ideas and practices, its reconstruction of traditional symbolism being in no way either complete or unproblematic. The forms that have reappeared after long periods of the state's suppression of political radicalism may not be intact or continuous, and the accompanying figures of thought not entirely authentic; some may even have been newly invented in attempts to recreate tradition.

The Shenjiashang ethnography shows some particular features which, taken, together motivate the present enquiry and discussion. For purposes of comparison and contrast, I will also introduce brief notes regarding other Jiangsu localities, mainly from Fei Xiaotong's pre-war study of the village of Kaixiangong.<sup>5</sup>

### **Kinship organization in Shenjiashang**

Agnatically structured kinship clusters dominated the village scene in Shenjiashang, but these communities were not corporate lineages in the classic sense once

---

<sup>3</sup> My own field experience of Jiangsu is limited to explorative travels in the 1990s.

<sup>4</sup> References to the main source by Myron L. Cohen, 'Lineage Organization in East China', will from now on indicate page number(s) only. Today the village of Shengjiashan forms part of the Shanghai municipality.

<sup>5</sup> Studies of larger urban agglomerations of people, like Soochow, have been neglected here. Urbanism entails a set of different presuppositions influencing cultural systems.

formulated by Meyer Fortes (1953).<sup>6</sup> Corporate holdings were nowhere in evidence in the settlement. We learn, for instance, that landholdings did not provide any corporate support for lineage organization (p. 197). This lack of corporate communities was similar to the looser structures that also once characterized the village of Fengjiao (Fukutake 1967: 87) near the city of Soochow, as well as the village of Kaixiangong near Lake Tai (Fei 1962: 57). It should be remembered that large tracts of the Jiangsu countryside were devastated during the Taiping rebellion in the mid-nineteenth century and that this destruction certainly affected social conditions throughout the periods that followed. Whatever the reasons, it seems that, in many country villages in Jiangsu, corporate ideology was generally weak, even though powerful land-owning lineages existed here and there in the area (Hu 1948: 35-6, 165-6, 168-9, 181). There are at present no real clues as to how to understand these variations in social morphology in a more general way.

### **The absence of ancestral halls in Shenjiashang**

As elsewhere in China, the people of Shenjiashang revered their forebears. One prominent but negative feature of local ancestor worship in this village was that the agnatic clusters of kin in the village did not see themselves as units in the sense of wider corporate ancestor worship. We learn that, in addition to the absence of corporate property, there were no separate ancestral halls or agnatically defined cemeteries, nor were there any rituals of collective ancestor worship organized above the family level, that is, ‘in order to dramatize lineage solidarity’ (p. 200).

If we move further south in Jiangsu province, we find other examples similar to the case of Shenjiashang. Thus, in the village of Kaixiangong in the 1930s, there were no ancestral halls, only domestic shrines (Fei 1962: 84, 105), while in the village of Fengjiao in the 1940s, near Soochow, the dominant agnatic kin clusters also had no corporate ancestral halls (Fukutake 1967: 87).

We must be cautious, however. There does not seem to have been a common or widespread pattern in the Jiangnan plains when it comes to the construction and distribution of ancestral halls (known as *shen ci*): some settlements had them, others did not. We learn, for instance, that country people around the city of Soochow had

---

<sup>6</sup> Cohen calls these agnatic clusters ‘lineages’, apparently following a strongly rooted convention in sinological anthropology. This is a matter of definition and so of little importance here.

such houses of worship (Lou 1989: 3; *Gu jin* 1888: VI, *Fengsu* 8a), even though it is not clear whether they were always separate buildings in corporate ownership, or somehow integrated into various types of domestic residence. In some contrast, it is also reported that a large, urban-based agnatic kin cluster with the family name of Zhu, residents from the township of Hu Cao, near Shenjiashang, had no ancestral hall (p. 212).

### **Domestic ancestral shrines in Shenjiashang**

The focus of local ancestor worship in Shenjiashang was on the tablets (*shenzupai*) that were kept in special shrines in village residences. The shape of the ancestor tablet favoured in Shenjiashang is not described, but probably they were made of a single piece of wood and were rectangular in shape. These tablets were kept in place throughout the year. A tablet was dedicated exclusively to one particular individual, not to a husband and wife together, nor to a larger group of individually identified agnates (p. 200). Inscribed on the right-hand side of the tablet and facing it was the ancestor's year of birth. On the left was the year of death, and in the middle, the ancestor's name. Because the collected tablets kept in a residence were periodically pruned and some removed from the shrine, a tablet dedicated to the unnamed earlier ancestors, those who had been removed, would also be present (p. 200). In contrast, in Kaixiangong there were no such collective tablets, an ancestor once removed being an ancestor lost (Fei 1962: 75-9).

We do not know how a new tablet was introduced to the domestic ancestral shrine following a death. In Kaixiangong this happened in the sequence of mortuary rituals that followed the death and involved a special little pavilion, donated, interestingly, by a son-in-law from a different kin cluster (*ibid.*: 76).

In Shenjiashang, the tablets were kept in the main room or 'guest room' (*ketang*) of a residential compound, which might be the dwelling of one family, though in the case of a family division the compound might continue to be shared by several families headed by brothers, or even by third-generation agnates. Division resulted in the building of new stoves by each of the new family units and the distribution of residential quarters and other rooms among them. The *ketang* itself remained shared property and was now known as the *zongketang* (common guest room) (p. 200). We have no information on other functions of this family hall, for example, whether meals were taken there, how women were related to it traditionally, or whether it was

used as a central social arena in cases of death and mourning. These questions suggest themselves through a comparison with the Kaixiangong ethnography, from which we learn that men ate in the hall, while women took their meals in the kitchen, that women were not allowed to sleep in the hall and that, in cases of death, meals were prepared in the hall (Fei 1962: 76-7, 121). We may suspect that in Shenjiashang too the domestic hall, with its permanent presence of ancestral tablets, would have been endowed with a certain amount of sanctity.

We have no account of the part, if any, played by the Stove God in this village as the kitchen's counterpart to the ancestors located in the domestic shrine, as was the case in Kaixiangong. A lack of data means we must leave such intricacies aside here (but see Aijmer 2005b).

In this eastern part of Jiangsu Province, but perhaps also commonly in the wider area of Jiangnan, the tablets were placed on a special platform, something that seems specific to this region. Although it was called a *jiatang* (family hall), it was in fact a small platform placed high up on the wall facing the main door to the guest room and attached to a roof beam (*liang*). A ladder was needed to reach it. If a *jiatang* was kept in a shared *ketang*, it might similarly be referred to as a *zongjiatang* (pp. 200-1). A similar arrangement is mentioned in the city of Soochow (p. 202), but the general body of information on this city does not provide further indications of the existence of high-up platforms for the ancestral tablets (Aijmer 2005a).

Families would worship their ancestors independently. Apart from worshipping at New Year (p. 196) we have no specified times for these ritual acts, but in Kaixiangong a dead person's days of birth and death were observed, and they were commemorated by the women of the house (Fei 1962: 76-7). In Shenjiashang, if several closely related families shared a 'guest room' and its tablets, each on its own prepared a separate offering of food, wine and ritual paper money. In some cases, it is reported, each family would even use a separate offering table. Most families, however, simply appear to have taken turns. Ancestor worship was strictly lineal: it never emphasized the collateral ties among contemporary agnatically related families, but rather made explicit the obligations of each family unit to its own predecessor ancestors (p. 201). This kitchen-based separation of families, which ordered the conduct of ancestor worship, corresponds to what has been reported from Kaixiangong, but with the important difference that in the latter village the assembly of tablets was also worshipped collectively five times each year, on the occasion of

the great calendric festivals (Fei 1962: 76-7). With respect to the practice of the independent worship of ascending lines of ancestors, Shenjiashang seems to have gone far in its ritual fragmentation.

This lineality in structuring the assembly of ancestors was also reflected in the disposition of tablets when a new residential compound with its own *ketang* and *jiatang* was finally built, usually after the passage of three or more generations. A person could transfer the tablets of his direct lineal ancestors to the new *jiatang*, provided they were not also the ancestors of those still living in the old compound. Thus, in the event that a man had left behind patrilineal uncles but no brothers or patrilineal nephews, he could transfer his parents' tablets, but not those of his grandparents. In the far more likely circumstance that there were also brothers or nephews, all the tablets would have to be left in place. Under such conditions the usual procedure was to make new tablets for the parents and patrilineal grandparents and a new general tablet for all the ascending ancestors. The disposition of tablets when a new *jiatang* was set up highlights the fact that collateral patrilineal ties did not figure at all in domestic ancestor worship. In the case of a family worshipping at a *jiatang* that had been shared for several generations, there might be tablets for dead people who were not their lineal ancestors.<sup>7</sup> This simply reflected the fact that the dead, like the living, might have to share a *jiatang*. We learn that the worshipping of tablets certainly expressed consciousness of descent, but it did not lend ritual justification to latent, wider agnatic spans among the living (p. 201).

One interesting point in this ethnography is that, though rarely, one and the same dead person could be worshipped through two different tablets. Freedman claims that this doubling never occurred in southeastern China (Freedman 1958: 82), though since then it has been reported from a village in the New Territories of Hong Kong (Baker 1968: 63-4). Something similar is suggested in the ethnography from Anqing in Anhui Province (Shryock 1931: 37, 42). It is hard to see a common denominator between these cases of double tablets, which all seem epiphenomenal.

---

<sup>7</sup> In a broader perspective, we know that ancestral shrines could contain the representations even of persons that were neither agnatically nor directly affinally related. There are places in southern China, like central Hunan, where domestic shrines show an array of dead persons of mixed origins, not necessarily of a common agnatic stock, but, for instance, members of the mother's father's lineage (Arrault 2010: 50-79). A mixture of lineage surnames at a single shrine has also been reported from a Taiwan village (Harrell 1982: 117-28).



The exclusive line of ancestry points to an underlying analysis of forebears in terms of ascent. Collaterals were, as we have seen, not of ritual interest. Perhaps earlier there had been some festivals which recognized unity ritually in the sense of inclusive descent. However, in such cases where there are two sorts of ancestor worship – one staged in corporate halls and the other in private residences – these two versions indicate two different but parallel cultural modalities, each with its own presuppositions that are independent of whatever determines the other. If there is a hall version, there is likely to be a strong and purist emphasis on descent and agnatic incorporation, as well as on the exclusion of in-married women from acts of worship. In southern China this sphere of ancestry would generally be connected with both lineage proliferation and the cultivation of rice, though the latter is more usually focused on the graves. In the iconic order, this ancestry favours an ideal agnatic endogamy that cannot be achieved in practice. Women who marry into such a lineage complex are slowly turned symbolically into sisters by their eating ancestrally endowed agnatic rice.

This cultural sphere contrasts with the domestic realm, which recognized the importance of affinity and bilateral influences on the children born of foreign women. The two spheres of creation must be kept apart in the iconic order. In the domestic sphere, which generally only allowed a limited span of time for the post-mortem presence of the dead, the notion of ascent will dominate and thus give rise to a single agnatic line. Temporality will blur the composite character of the generative process. The domestic modality is more inclusive when it comes to treating wives as worshippers, and the stove-orientated female sphere constitutes a complementary symbolic counterpart in the construction of human proliferation. Thus, in southern China, the generative capacity of the dead as they appeared in the purist corporate ancestral hall is focused on uncontaminated agnatic proliferation and the growth of rice. The generative capacity of ancestors venerated in domestic shrines is connected with the need for continuity in the social perspective of a particular house or set of houses.

In cases where there are only domestic shrines, as in Shenjiashang, or, in contrast, where there are only collective halls, we should expect the emergence of local transformations of the complementarity of two basic generative principles.<sup>8</sup>

### **The removal of tablets and memorialism**

In Shenjiashang the focus on individual lineality was temporally restricted, for in those *jiatang* where the number of tablets continued to increase down the generations, the older ones were periodically removed and burnt after about five generations; some villagers reported that they were disposed to doing this after ‘three or more generations’ or ‘when the *jiatang* filled up’. It seems likely that a *jiatang* would contain few or no tablets of ancestors who had not been personally known to any of their living descendants. In entering oblivion, they would fade away as individuals and be socially remembered only in the abstract, as components in the unending chain of continuous links of successful reproduction represented by the nebulously collective tablet dedicated to all earlier ancestors (pp. 201-2).

In this respect we find a difference from Kaixiangong, where, likewise, there were no ancestral halls, but nor were there any collective and undefined tablets to absorb an increasing crowd of abstract, anonymous dead. The Shenjiashang collective tablet — still within the domestic sphere — allowed the deceased to continue to exist forever, while people in Kaixiangong erased their dead into complete ancestral oblivion (Aijmer 2016a).

### **The burning of tablets**

The burning of an ancestral tablet to end an individual’s existence is described by Cohen as if it was that person’s last rite of passage, carried out according to socially recognized procedures. The ceremony of tablet burning took place on the day of Qingming in the spring and was held in the *ketang* under the supervision of a Daoist ‘priest’ who would ‘chant scriptures’ (*nian jing*). Qingming is a day and a solar calendar period generally devoted to the care of the ancestral graves. Thus, through juxtaposition, this burning ritual is connected with the dead in the underworld. The

---

<sup>8</sup> One ethnographic case where the lineage hall modality was locally dominant was described for a Chongshan village in Guangdong Province, a place without domestic ancestral shrines from which women were excluded, and men even slept in the ancestral hall (Spencer and Barrett 1948).

burning of a tablet represented, according to Cohen, the complete transfer of the ancestor to that domain, perhaps to await anonymous reincarnation there. However, in contradiction to this, the dead also remained in the collective, anonymous tablet in some way. We do not know what happened to the individual tablet's ashes after it had been burned (p. 202).

### **Genealogy**

In some cases in Shenjiashang and the surrounding region, the removal of ancestors through the burning of tablets went hand in hand with the preservation of their names in written genealogies (*jiapu*). One informant told Cohen that 'the names of the ancestors, and all the other information on the tablets, would have been written into the *jiapu* before the tablets would be burnt.' Cohen analyses the two ritual practices as representing a distinction between an 'ancestor' or an 'ancestral soul' still present among the living, and an 'ancestor' as symbolizing and validating their ties of patrilineal kinship for the living. In this area of China, genealogies served as justificatory historical records and may, at least in some cases, have figured as objects in actual ancestor worship or other rituals (p. 202).

One of Cohen's informants remembered how, as a child in Soochow, he fetched a genealogy from the platform where the tablets were kept; the genealogy was ordinarily placed there, for it was worshipped together with the tablets surrounding it. As a book or a set of books, the genealogy, in Cohen's understanding, was worshipped as representing agnatic links of descent through the generations that went into making the living members of the lineal cluster a collectivity in religious terms. The cluster, though not a corporation, nor even a congregation periodically coming together for worship, at least maintained a record of shared ancestry. In contrast, then, tablets were worshipped as representing particular individual ancestors. Regarding the genealogy, the suggestion is that, in Durkheimian fashion, the cluster worshipped itself in terms of a (textual) representation. What can be said here is that, after his or her tablet had been burned, the dead person continued in existence as (1) a collective anonymous iconic tablet, (2) within a textual discourse entailing an agglomeration of names, iconically indicating a lineage template, and (3) in an underground realistic existence in a grave, to which were possibly added the ashes of the burnt tablet. Through burning, something of the tablet's essence joined its corresponding physical remains in the grave. Perhaps this imagery was achieved by the ashes of the tablet

being physically added to the grave — the choice of time for the burning the tablet seems to indicate this. This, of course, would have relied on the upkeep of the individual graves being sufficient to allow this to happen.

Apparently record-keeping varied among the lineal agnatic kin clusters. Some of the more numerous ones had a *jiapu*, while others did not keep them, or had lost what they once had (pp. 202-3). The lack in some kin clusters of genealogies corresponds to what was reported by Fukutake (1967: 87), namely that, in the village of Fengjiao in the 1940s, kinship constellations did not keep genealogical records or *tsupu*.

In Shenjiashang the inclusive *jiapu*, when it existed, was invariably passed down to the eldest son such that in an agnatic cluster there might be only one such text. The *jiapu* was open to all deceased cluster members and was thus a genealogical record of the *whole* cluster as a collectivity. Its compilation is seen as evidence of continuing solidarity (p. 203). It thus seems that, in cases where the genealogy was actually worshipped, the kin cluster being worshipped was all embracing, containing all collateral lines. Again, the comparison with Kaixiangong offers some differences. Genealogies in the latter village were kept in a foreign temple located elsewhere. These records were strictly ascending and lineal in character, the names being erased from the register after five generations (Fei 1962: 84). The ancestors therefore disappeared completely.<sup>9</sup> In Shenjiashang the anonymous collective tablet saw to it that the line could be thought of as existing through history since the days of some founding father.

## Graves

Cohen's field report does not contain any description of graves, but they are mentioned (p. 202) in the context of the Qingming celebrations in the spring, apparently following what is a widespread convention in China. We must understand, then, that there was some worship at the graves at this time and that the physical remains of a dead person were also ritually important. However, there were no collective graveyards (p. 202), nor do we know where graves were situated in the landscape.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> They may instead have become changed in character, being absorbed into another kind of existence — but that is a different story. See Aijmer 2016b.

<sup>10</sup> Today disposal of the dead is by cremation; Myron Cohen, personal communication.

Perhaps the siting of graves in an earlier period had been similar to the convention in Kaixiangong, where the graves were actually small, house-like structures situated on the dykes of the rice fields and among the mulberry trees. Here the recognition and upkeep of the graves were a matter of concern only for five generations, the same period that applied to tablets and genealogy entries. After this period, what remained was taken away by some charitable organization to be reburied anonymously and unceremoniously elsewhere. There was no ownership of graves, but the circle of immediately descended siblings were jointly responsible for keeping them in order (Fei 1962: 75-6, Plate V, facing p. 108). The dead of Kaixiangong were not destined to be remembered and revered for all eternity. How this compares with traditional conventions in Shenjiashang we cannot say. However, if graves were also just temporary arrangement, as in Kaixiangong, what was said above about the transfer from tablet to grave becomes problematic.

In his wartime study of a Jiangsu village, Fukutake notes that at that time there were occasional clusters of graveyards among the paddy fields, but he also reports that these were for nearby Soochow's wealthy residents. Still, some of them may have belonged to the village. Graveyards are mentioned in another context as well, but for whom they were intended is not said (Fukutake 1967: 81, 83).

### **Temples and shrines**

In Shenjiashang there were neither village temples nor village festivals, just one small village shrine, with a resident god whose image was also quite small. One version of the story attached to this shrine was that the villagers originally wanted to build it higher, to the height reached by a rocket they had set off, but the rocket failed and did not go up very far; accordingly they made the shrine very low. Therefore the god (*pusa*) was unhappy and acted like a ghost (*gui*); if it were to attach (*fu*) itself to you, you were doomed (p. 206). Cohen thinks that the god's anger may have been a reflection of the villagers' own dissatisfaction with the standing of their community within the region (p. 206).

There was also a temple in the region's market town. This temple had a 'temple sphere' (*miaojie*), which encompassed all the villages involved in the area, and sponsorship of the accompanying temple fair rotated among the settlements on an annual basis (p. 206). These celebrations did not seem to have involved an ancestral presence and, in contrast to Kaixiangong, the town temple was not where the

genealogy of any agnatic line cluster was kept. If, for a different reason, we again compare the Shenjiashang ethnography with the information we have from Kaixiangong, we find that the latter village had no less than two temples, which were both connected symbolically with the cultivation of rice (Fei 1962: 20-1, 103-4). Conversely, at that time Shenjiashang had only a small shrine housing a diminutive godling of evil character, demon-like and unfriendly towards men. Kaixiangong people also patronized temples in nearby places. The exegesis provided by the Shenjiashang demotic discourse is in a sense of a rather typical anecdotal and superficial kind. Cohen's understanding relies on notions of relative prestige in the area. We could try a third way of thinking about this shrine, and also of its possible connection, if any, with other forms of worship. It must be confessed that there is precious little to go on, the ethnography being neither very transparent, nor rich in information.

It is hard to see why a village would at all entertain a shrine in its midst with a deity who was positively dangerous, unless we think of the god as representing some abstract principle or consequence of a structural dichotomy, the opposite term of which is connected with the bringing of blessings.

## Discussion

Let us dwell on the categories of iconic thought that seem to have been prevalent in Shenjiashang in respect of the expressiveness of ancestral worship in the village. Domestic ancestral tablets (individual and collective) were *yang* in character, being manifestations of the cosmic male principle that penetrates the world and stands in an antonymous relationship with the female *yin* principle. The two principles change the terms of their mutual interdependence, but they are always inversely proportional. The local circumstantial evidence for this proposition is that the tablets were kept on a shelf or platform high up on the wall just beneath the ceiling. As *yang* entails direction upwards, the very unusual placement of the tablets high up on a wall is a strong indication of the iconic message that tablets belong to the upward sphere of heaven and maleness. This rare, and in the broader perspective perhaps unique situational marker must have come about as a stress of contrast, a distinction that must have been related to the *yin* sphere of social life. Something endowed with antagonistic force has provoked this arrangement.

The shelf of ancestral tablets partly contained individual tablets, some representing agnatic men, others the wives of these same men. Probably, agnatic spinsters were not to be found on the platform in death. We have no explicit data on this, but unmarried women without children should have been rare in life and special arrangements made for them in death. There was, however, another tablet on the shelf that represented an anonymous body of dead agnatic forebears and their wives, implying a line of ascent leading indefinitely back in time. Let us recall the differences between these two sets of representations of death.

The collective tablet absorbed those dead who had lost their individual tablet status after some five generations of personally received reverence. At some point in time they became irrelevant to their former worshippers, and so were done away with by being burnt, which again contrasts with burial. Cremation was not generally practised in traditional China; only Buddhist monks favoured this sort of disposal. Burning produces ashes, but we do not know how, or if, these were collected and handled in some special way. Fire is in itself a *yang* phenomenon; earth, a prerequisite for burial, is a manifestation of *yin*. The time chosen for tablet burning was Qingming, a date and a period closely associated with the graves, the repair of the graves and the dead in the graves. The Qingming visits to the dead in their graves and the picnics held there were connected with the sowing of rice in the seedbeds, offerings to graves and the sowing of rice grain in the earth being two parallel aspects of the propulsion of fertility in the *yin* sphere (e.g. Aijmer 1979). Based on this correlation in time, Cohen suggests that the dead of the individual tablets in the burning ceremony are brought to join their physical remains in the graves. However, on that same occasion the identical dead enter the anonymous collective tablet to share in the sphere of that object with the earlier deceased of the agnatic line of the cluster. The burning would then indicate a split, a repetition of what was prompted by the actual physical death of that person.<sup>11</sup> The presence of a Daoist officiant reading texts for the event indicates that this moment was a secondary funeral.

Above I outlined a scheme for the better understanding of the two cultural modalities that surround ancestral worship. One was associated with the domestic sphere and women's contribution to reproduction, the other with the ancestral hall, in

---

<sup>11</sup> In orthodox theory, a man's *hun* 'soul' becomes a *shen* and enters the tablet, while his *po* 'soul' becomes a *guei* and goes into the grave to join the physical remains.

which the purist version of exclusive agnatic kinship was the force that gave rise to corporate lineages and propelled the cultivation of rice. The latter version also incorporated the graves and their inhabitants in the ground, active in the process of the growth of rice. In terms of social discourse, the dead were residents of their tablets – they were always there. In terms of iconic imagery, the dead resided elsewhere and were but temporary visitors on special occasions, like New Year. On being invited at the autumnal Chongyang festival, when people climbed hills (*yang* direction upwards) for commensality with the dead, the forebears returned to their former homes in life at the coming New Year. On the corresponding visit to the graves in the spring, the deceased of the kinship cluster were invited to make a return visit to their living progeny at the Duanwu, or Dragon Boat Festival, to help with the transplantation of rice. This is an outline scheme based on the mid-Yangzi ethnography available; with a more varying social scene, the ancestral catastasis is sometimes more complex, though this need not bother us here (but see Aijmer 1968; 1979, 1991, 2003). Let us use this cultural synthesis as a prototypical model for our further discussion.

If we assume that the rice peasants of Shenjiashang were eager to have good crops to build and nourish their futures, as well as being anxious to construct social continuity by way of children, we should expect that both of these cultural modalities, each in its own way handling continuity, would have been present in explicit symbolism on the village scene. But then, there were no ancestral halls there to promote agnatic purity of descent, and so we must expect some modifications to appear in the Shenjiashang symbolic universe. In a sense, the ancestral hall had moved into the domestic sphere in that, at the time for their destruction, the early individual tablets were not copied on to new tablets and then transferred to a special house of worship. Rather, their spiritual inhabitants were relocated to a collective, generalized tablet, absorbing all the dead of the agnatic line that had originally set up the shrine within that residential compound. This collective tablet was a continuation of the domestic ‘bilateral’ way of conceiving continuity. On the other hand, the text of the early tablet was copied into a written genealogy kept by the eldest member of the eldest branch of the cluster. This genealogy would then contain all the relevant information relating to the union of the wider agnatic group, including all its collateral lines. The genealogy was kept on the shelf that also served as the keeper’s domestic ancestral shrine, where it was worshipped as a sacred object. So, here we find a case where the conventional ancestral hall exhibiting the tablets of a total of agnatic



collaterals brought together by common descent from a first founder of the constellation and their wives had been transformed into a text. In this discursive transformation, it still kept its status as an all-embracing integrated icon worthy of worship. Here the tablets belonging to the ‘ancestral hall’ template had become a book, and the residential home of the structurally senior person (the eldest member of the eldest branch) keeping that book had itself become a ‘thought-of’ ancestral hall.

A collective tablet implying anonymous membership of a line of ascent, and a genealogy implying individual membership in a set of concurrent lines of descent, were both kept on the same ancestral shelf otherwise devoted to individual tablets of the recently deceased. In addition, this shelf was high above the ground, close to the ceiling, and had to be reached by a ladder. All three manifestations of the dead were thus classified as belonging to the *yang* sphere of the cosmos, but in contrast to what? Why was this a necessity here, while it does not seem to have been so in other social contexts in southern China? Is there anything in the ethnography that suggests this contrast? What was unambiguously classified as *yin*?

The first tentative answer to this question would be: the graves. We have little information regarding them. They were visited at the time of the Qingming celebrations, as was the case in most other communities in southern China. There were no collective cemeteries, which seems to imply that graves were placed individually in the terrain. What was the conventional shape is not known. However, what could be assumed is that, in their individuality, the graves were a structural parallel to the set of first ancestral tablets, one for each individual deceased person. But then the tablets were kept together in one place, while the graves were not. Nor do we know whether the graves were kept for eternity, or whether the responsibility for their upkeep faded away after some five generations of descendants or so, as in the village of Kaixiangong. As there were no graveyards, it is likely that the Qingming celebrations were individual in character, relatives visiting the graves of the forebears of their own lines as far as they could still be remembered. There may well have been a parallel here to the fate of the individual tablets in that they were abandoned after perhaps five generations, as in Kaixiangong. Even if this was not ritually marked, it may have been that old graves were forgotten, the memory of their inhabitants fading away and the now irrelevant graves falling into decay. In contrast to the fate of the temporary individual tablets, there was no collective memorial or cenotaph to absorb

the abandoned individual dead in their graves into some sort of anonymous union and keep them there for all eternity. Or was there?

I said above that it is hard to see why a village would entertain a shrine in their midst with a deity who was positively dangerous, unless we think of the god as representing some abstract principle or consequence of a structural dichotomy, with the opposite term representing the bringing of blessings. In Kaixiangong, the dead in their graves were removed once they had become irrelevant, being taken to some other place by a charitable organization. Their ancestral tablets were similarly removed after about the same period of time, without being replaced. Instead, an agnatically structured genealogy became instrumental in giving the dead inside a foreign temple the status of a divinity. They seem to have been drawn up into one of two local gods, both being beneficial to the production of rice (see Aijmer 2016a). In Kaixiangong we find a cultural strategy in which the dead were transformed from being benign ancestors into becoming efficacious gods.

For Shenjiashang we have little to go on. Even so, and in consonance with the cultural strategy of Kaixiangong, we may tentatively posit that the dead were somehow transformed from a state of ancestry into a state of divinity. However, there is a difference between the two villages. In Kaixiangong the inhabitants of both the tablets and the tombs were transported by way of a written genealogy to a foreign temple for conversion. After this event, the dead definitely vanished as tablet ancestors, tomb ancestors and entries in the genealogy, now being part and parcel of a benign god in a village temple. In Shenjiashang the early tablet ancestors entered another tablet, where they remained for ever, their names and dates being inscribed into a collaterally encompassing genealogy (of a similar structure to a basic thought-of ancestral hall), which itself was an object of worship, but the graves remained problematic. Should they be abandoned or forgotten, their inhabitants, like those in Kaixiangong, sought a remedy in the sphere of divinity. But then, it was only the *yin* aspect of the dead — his or her physical remains and their accompanying *gui* ‘soul’ — that were of concern, so that god who absorbed them became a demonic figure. He was continuously worshipped as containing the *yin* ancestors, but no good was expected of him. We do not know anything about the ritual mechanisms, if any, that brought about this operation of transfer; in more recent history it may have remained only an iconic template.

What remains obscure, though, is in what way and, if at all, this demonic godling was related to the cultivation of rice. If we see the Shenjiashang case as a product of the prototypical cultural grammar, we should expect a link, but there is nothing to indicate this.

If this line of reasoning is reasonably accurate, we may now begin to understand why it was essential to put the ancestors' tablets on a shelf near the ceiling to demonstrate that they really were separated, even protected, from the negative influences of the transformed collective and now local (rather than kinship-orientated) dead in the godling's apparition. The *yang* had to be manifested as clearly separated from the *yin* emissions. This small shrine deity aspired to ancestral greatness, but his ambitions had been suppressed by rocket divination, architecture and sheer physical size. It was in his power to take possession of people. He was unsatisfied, which reflected his divine body being composed of unsatisfied and abandoned village grave ancestors.

It is possible, even likely and characteristic, that many villages in the Jiangnan area have similar arrangements for their dead, collecting their tablets on a shelf high up under the ceiling. It is, of course, not necessarily the case that they all have a demonic godling in a diminutive temple at hand to take care of the lost souls from abandoned graves. What I suggest is that, should the ancestors be residents of a highly placed platform, then we should look for what has produced this sort of ancestral protectionism. There may be many varying factors involved in this, but in all likelihood, graves will always be important. There is bound to be something in the conventions surrounding graves and burials that is opposed to but also matches the ancestral shelves. The comparison between Kaixiangong and Shenjiashang is revealing in this respect.

### **Ancestry and divinity**

My understanding of the Shenjiashang case of ancestor worship is, of course, not of the same nature as a positivist conclusion in terms of a realist ontology. It can still serve as an explanation of the ethnographic data available, as long as there are no other and better explorations at hand dealing with the corpus of ethnography I have discussed in this article. Of course, emerging new data may change the argument.

The result of this discussion also has a bearing on one of the major classifications that have been employed so often in the work of anthropologists, sociologists and

sinologists analysing Chinese society (e.g. Feuchtwang 1992: 41; Schipper 1993: 38; Wang 1974: 192; Wolf 1974: 7). This is the basic and clearly articulated discrepancy between the categories of ancestry and divinity as symbolic classes in cultural expression. What we can sense through our discussion above is that this distinction in demotic cultural symbolism is not absolute but could be iconically negotiated. Ancestors and deities form part of a greater cultural meta-system that offers not only confrontations of categories, but also interfaces and transfers of objects between the spheres of the very same categories. What we see, I think, in the Shenjiashang ethnography is how intertwined these categories may be in local systems of symbolism. We might even suggest that they are to a degree integrated. The same applies to other local societies examined in some detail and in a similar perspective — the Cantonese boat population, the fruit farmers of ‘Phoenix Village’ in northern Guangdong, the rice farmers of Kaixiangong in Jiangsu. Through various ritual mechanisms, the dead are transported from one sphere of post-existence into another domain of being, thus losing all traces of their humanity and become part of something evasive and utterly different, but also lasting in eternity. Divinity reached into ancestry, and ancestors disappeared into nebulous divinity. This is an interface we must explore further as we try to understand the anatomy of Chinese traditions.

## References

- Aijmer, Göran 1968. A Structural Approach to Chinese Ancestor Worship. *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land en Volkenkunde* 124, 91-98.
- 1979. Ancestors in the Spring: The *Qingming* Festival in Central China. *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 19: 59-82.
- 1991. Chongyang and the Ceremonial Calendar in Central China. In Hugh R. Baker and Stephan Feuchtwang (eds.), *An Old State in New Settings: Studies in the Social Anthropology of China in Memory of Maurice Freedman*, Oxford: JASO, pp. 178-96.
- 2003. *New Year Celebrations in Central China in Late Imperial Times*. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press.
- 2005a. A Family Reunion: The Anthropology of Life, Death and New Year in Soochow. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland* 15(2), 199-218.

- 2005b. Women, Kitchen and Belonging in Eastern China: Idioms of Continuity in Kaixiangong. *Sociologus* 55(1), 39-59.
- 2016a. Writ in Water: Ancestry among the Cantonese Boat Populations. *Journal of the the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 56, 67-91.
- 2016b. Erasing the Dead in Kaixiangong: Ancestry and Cultural Transforms in Southern China. *Cambridge Journal of China Studies* 10(2), 38-52.
- 2016c. The Enigmatic Ancestors of Yen-liao: On Cultural Grammar in Southern China. *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 15(2), 237-256.
- Arrault, Alain 2010. La société locale vue à travers la statuaire domestique du Hunan. *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 19, 47-132.
- Baker, Hugh D.R. 1968. *A Chinese Lineage Village: Sheung Shui*. London: Frank Cass & Co.
- Coe, Kathryn, and Ryan O. Begley 2016. Ancestor Worship and the Longevity of Chinese Civilization. *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* 3(1), 3-24.
- Cohen, Myron L. 2005. Lineage Organization in East China. In *Kinship, Contract, Community, and State: Anthropological Perspectives on China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 195-219.
- Fei Hsiao-tung 1962 [1939]. *Peasant Life in China*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Feuchtwang, Stephan 1992. *The Imperial Metaphor: Popular Religion in China*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Fortes, Meyer 1953. The Structure of Unilineal Descent Groups. *American Anthropologist* 55(1), 17-41.
- Freedman, Maurice 1958. *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China*. London: The Athlone Press.
- Fukutake, Tadashi 1967. Village Life in Central China. In *Asian Rural Society: China, India, Japan*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, pp. 79-92.
- Gu jin tu shi ji cheng* 1888 [1722], 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Compiled by Chen Menglei and Jiang Tingxi. Shanghai: Major Brothers.
- Harrell, Stevan 1982. *Ploughshare Village: Culture and Context in Taiwan*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Hu Hsien-chin 1948. *The Common Descent Group in China and its Functions*. New York: Viking Fund Publications.

- Lou Zikuang 1989 [1935]. *Xin nian feng su zhi*. Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe.
- Rowe, William T. 1998. Ancestral Rites and Political Authority in Late Imperial China: Chen Hongmou in Jiangxi. *Modern China* 24(4), 378-407.
- Schipper, Kristofer 1993. *The Taoist Body*. Transl. Karen C. Duval. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Shryock, John 1931. *The Temples of Anking and their Cults: A Study of Modern Chinese Religion*. Paris: Librairie orientaliste Paul Geuthner.
- Spencer, Robert F., and S.A. Barrett 1948. Notes on a Bachelor House in the South China Area. *American Anthropologist* 50(3), 463-78.
- Wang Sung-hsing 1974. Taiwanese Architecture and the Supernatural. In Arthur P. Wolf (ed.), *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 131-82.
- Wolf, Arthur P. 1974. Introduction. In Arthur P. Wolf (ed.), *Religion and Riutual in Chinese Society*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 1-18.

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### NEW PERSPECTIVES ON SECULAR RITUAL

EMILIA GROUPP<sup>1</sup>

**Jeltje Gordon-Lennox (ed.),** *Emerging ritual in secular societies: a transdisciplinary conversation*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017.

**Jeltje Gordon-Lennox,** *Crafting secular ritual*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2016.

As a subject of anthropological concern, ritual emerged from the study of religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Bell 1997, Warburg 2016). It was not until 1977, when Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff published their seminal edited volume, that anthropologists directly engaged with the idea of ‘secular’ ritual, and their book set the agenda for further anthropological inquiry. In particular, Moore and Myerhoff questioned whether theories of ritual, originally devised to explain religious or spiritual ceremonies, could be useful in understanding secular ritual. They asserted that, because of its association with religion, ritual has too often been approached as a subcategory of religion instead of as a category of social action in and of itself. Yet, they argue that secular ritual can be just as significant to social life as religious ritual undoubtedly is and that as a category it deserves consideration. The momentum generated by their volume garnered some attention from anthropologists in the 1970s and 1980s, though, after the initial surge of interest, secular ritual has received comparatively very little attention in the anthropological literature since.

One explanation for the seeming paucity of work on distinctly secular ritual is the fact that scholars have found it difficult, if not impossible, to locate any theoretical differences in anthropological approaches to ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ rituals respectively (Warburg 2016, Asad 2003). Yet at the same time, ethnographic studies of religious rituals overwhelmingly outnumber those of rituals deemed secular or non-religious, and the question remains whether or not ritual should be approached as a ‘neutral’ social action that cannot be placed into either a ‘religious’ or ‘secular’ category, only being interpreted as religious or secular by participants, and whether there is any value in distinguishing between the two. More recently,

---

<sup>1</sup> Student for the MPhil in Social Anthropology, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford, 51 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6PE, and St. Cross College, 61 St. Giles, Oxford OX1 3LZ. E-mail: emilia.groupp@stx.ox.ac.uk

anthropologists have employed the term ‘secular ritual’ to discuss state practices and political events. Yael Navaro-Yashin, who relies on the term in order to discuss state-sponsored rituals in Turkey, writes that its purpose ‘was to employ the anthropological tools for the study of “ritual” in studies of modern secular politics’ (2002: 188), thus proposing a place for secular ritual in contemporary anthropological discourse.

Even though, as Joanna Wojtkowiak points out in her contribution to *Emerging ritual in secular societies*, ‘the labels, “religious,” “spiritual” or “secular” are complex and not mutually exclusive’ (160), the perception that ritual is closely associated with religion ultimately necessitated the editor of the compilation, Jeltje Gordon-Lennox, marking out a distinct category of secular ritual. Furthermore, in both volumes Gordon-Lennox argues that the term ‘secular’ has often been approached as the opposite of ‘religion’, yet, following Talal Asad (2003) and Mary Douglas (in Bell 1997), she also maintains that, while the secular does not oppose the sacred, for her purposes it is a better term for addressing the complexities of new and changing ritual practices that are not aligned with any single religious tradition.

Thus, for most of the authors reviewed here, ‘secular ritual’ refers primarily to those rituals that are conducted with an explicit moderation of religion, the combination of one or more religions, or the lack of any religious institutional authority. In this vein ‘secular’ does not refer to the absence of religion, but rather to the focus on a combination of personalized symbols, language and gestures that add to the ceremony’s emotional effects and its significance to the participants. A ‘secular’ ritual could include several religious traditions, such as the multi-cultural weddings discussed by Andrés Allemand Smaller in Chapter 6. However, it could also include no mention of ritual at all. In Chapter 10, Joanna Wojtkowiak discusses some individuals who were not permitted to participate in rituals by religious institutions, such as gays and lesbians, and who developed alternative ceremonies for themselves from the 1980s and 1990s which were explicitly distanced from established religious traditions.

Though the two books reviewed here essentially do not engage with the current anthropological debates regarding the value of the term ‘secular’ or the problems involved in defining a ‘secular society’ (see Starrett 2010), these contributions offer new and emerging perspectives and fresh approaches to the study of ritual. The first, *Emerging Ritual in Secular Societies*, is a compilation of contributions from psychologists, psychoanalysts, neurologists, anthropologists, professional officiants who create and perform rituals, artists and journalists.



The second is a concise guide to creating and experiencing secular rituals for individuals and communities.

The contributors to *Emerging ritual in secular societies* continue the momentum towards a renewed interest in thinking about secular ritual as a subject of serious academic concern. The volume features fifteen concise chapters, each offering a different perspective on secular ritual. The book is divided into four parts. Part one is focused on the origins and universal aspects of ritual, conceived fairly broadly. The contributors in Part two concentrate on the healing and transformative potential of ritual and the impact it can have on both individuals and communities. The authors in Part three discuss and reflect on private and intimate rituals, while in Part four they explore rituals undertaken in public places.

Ellen Dissanayake, a scholar who adopts an evolutionary and biological perspective on art and ritual, opens the volume with her contribution, 'The art of ritual and the ritual of art'. She suggests that art largely resembles 'ritual' in the sense that it necessarily involves the 'making special' of various ordinary materials and experiences. Ritual, in this sense, 'is characterized not only by repeatability or conventionality but by unusual behavior that sets it off from the ordinary or everyday' (29). She considers the universality of ritual and goes so far as to argue that ritual is an inherent biological human need.

Matthieu Smyth, an anthropologist, approaches ritual from a functionalist perspective in Chapter 2 in his 'Human rituals and ethology: a scholar's journey'. He argues that rites have a stabilizing role in society, since they have the effect of regulating emotions and thus contribute to social cohesion (43). Like Dissanayake in Chapter 1, Smyth argues that ritual can be approached as having a biological function. In this vein, he asserts that the debate regarding the distinction between religious and secular ritual is moot, since it is a universal and inherent aspect of the human experience, a 'timeless' human activity, and cannot be defined as either secular or religious.

Robert Scaer, a neurologist and psychologist, focuses on the effects of ritual on trauma in his contribution, 'The neurophysiology of ritual and trauma: cultural implications'. While ritual can have many purposes, he explores its ability to induce a state of physical and psychological healing, specifically, ritual that involves somatic techniques. He further argues that the communal nature of ritual has therapeutic effects which promote healing and can allow individuals to attain a sense of empowerment.

Jeltje Gordon-Lennox, a psychoanalyst and the editor of the volume, opens Part two with her own contributions in Chapters 4 and 5. In the former, 'The rhyme and reason of ritualmaking', she discusses how rituals enable individuals to make sense of their social

worlds, as well as their potential to enhance social bonds, particularly since ‘globalization and individualization, the “free market” and relentless competition have destroyed our sense of belonging to civilized, supportive groups’ (72).

Like Scaer in Chapter 3, she considers whether ritual, as a universal social action, can be defined as either religious or necessarily secular. Rather, she argues that scholars should approach ritual as a ‘culturally strategic way of acting in the world’ (72), a concept proposed by Bell (2009). On the other hand, she writes that rituals that are not done properly or are inadequate cause damage and can produce alienation and withdrawal from social life. In Chapter 5, ‘Case study: a Nordic rite of passage comes of age’, written in collaboration with Lene Mürer, Marie Louise Peterson and Bjarni Jonsson, she considers Nordic coming-of-age ceremonies (or confirmations) and asks why young people in Nordic countries are increasingly choosing secular (or humanist) ceremonies over religious ones.

In Chapter 6, ‘Multicultural wedding ceremonies’, journalist Andrés Allemand Smaller discusses the difficulties in trying to plan multi-cultural wedding ceremonies. Reflecting Smyth’s sentiment, Smaller argues that wedding ceremonies do not have to fit into either a ‘secular’ or a ‘religious’ category, but rather that ‘secular’ weddings can combine a unique mixture of traditions that renders them meaningful to the participants. He finishes his discussion of multicultural weddings with ten guidelines for creating a successful marriage celebration.

Christine Behrend, a wedding and funeral officiant, offers a detailed and intimate look at a funeral she planned for a violinist in Chapter 7, ‘Case study: a funeral ceremony for a violinist’. First she discusses how objects can be powerful additions to funeral ceremonies and can relate more about the individual’s life than words or actions can. She makes a distinction between the physical object as an extension of the individual and the immaterial sensorial effects, like music. Behrend then describes the funeral devised for the violinist, showing how the sensorial and physical aspects of the ceremony allowed a profound ritual, which, although without any overt religious references, was particularly evocative for the violinist’s friends and family.

In Chapter 8, ‘Case study: a memorial and a wedding rolled into one humanist ceremony’, Isabel Russo, the Head of Ceremonies of the British Humanist Association (BHA), addresses the growing number of officiants who are trained by the BHA to lead and plan non-religious ceremonies in Europe. Humanist ceremonies began in the late nineteenth century in England and have been becoming more popular, and more standardized, particularly since the 1980s. Russo discusses some of the challenges involved in staging

secular rituals and describes an unusual request from a BHA member who wanted to combine a wedding and a funeral. Finally, she emphasizes the healing aspects of humanist ceremonies for non-religious people, showing how ritual may enable individuals to articulate their complex experiences, which they might not otherwise be able to accomplish in a religious ceremony.

Part three opens with Michael Picucci's contribution, 'Ritual as resource: health and transformation in the twenty-first century', in which he argues that ritual should not be seen as entirely associated with religion or military procedures, but rather as a resource for healing and transformation. Picucci, a psychologist and psychoanalyst, calls ritual a 'human technology' (140) and asserts that, by becoming fluent in the use of this technology, individuals and communities can access a powerful therapeutic tool for reconciliation and social cohesion. He defines ritual as much more than simply physical actions, emphasizing that it requires a level of conscious involvement that includes intention and visualization. In fact, he writes that a ritual may not involve any physical action at all and that individuals can learn to use ritual as a resource for private development, similar to meditative exercises.

In Chapter 10, 'Sensing the dead: the role of embodiment, the senses and material objects in the ritualization of mourning', Joanna Wojtkowiak, a cultural psychologist, considers how 'post-secular' and increasingly pluralistic societies in the West experience grief and how new theories of grieving emphasize the significance of maintaining a symbolic relationship with the deceased instead of 'moving on' (158). She also reflects on the material dimension of mourning, describing how mourning the dead may involve the deceased's possessions, including their remains. Finally, she considers the sensorial dimensions of mourning, arguing that comprehending the embodied experience as a critical aspect of ritual is crucial to understanding its impact on emotion and social life.

Lindy Mechefske, a freelance writer, reflects on how rituals play a significant role in how individuals experience food in Chapter 11 in her 'Ritual and food'. Given the centrality of food to our existence, it is hardly surprising that sharing food with others or even eating alone has given rise to rituals in almost every culture that are focused entirely on the preparation, consumption and disposal of food. She considers both religious and secular rituals that are centered on food, as well as some of the new rituals surrounding food in the West, such as the common practice of photographing food and posting it on social media sites before eating it. She also takes a look at how synthetic foods might change the way eating is ritualized.

Irene Stengs, a cultural anthropologist, opens Part four with her 'Commemorative ritual and the power of place' on the growing interest in commemorating violent deaths, with a

focus on European responses. She explores how some violent deaths are experienced as public events and how public memorials are increasingly sought to commemorate individuals who died in car accidents, train wrecks or bombings. She conducted an ethnographic study of Dutch public mourning rituals, emphasizing the importance of place in the 'new public mourning' culture (188), as well as the difficulties involved in creating a space where both the public and the victim's friends and families can mourn.

Gianpiero Vincenzo, a sociologist, considers the emergence of a consumer society in Chapter 13, showing how consumerist life-styles are giving rise to new rituals based on consumption in his contribution, 'New ritual society: consumerist revolution and the rediscovery of ritual'. He argues that shopping malls and supermarkets are replacing religious spaces as places where public rituals have typically been enacted and experienced. In this vein, his concise argument is aimed at understanding symbolic consumption in public places and how such studies can contribute to more responsible and conscientious human development.

In Chapter 14, "'Ritual and contemporary art', Jacqueline Millner, a scholar who focuses on art and public spaces, argues that a significant site of secular ritual is contemporary art. Artists who create contemporary pieces create a public space that is meant to engage and transform individuals, and they use the same 'materials', so to speak, as ritual-making. That is, contemporary art projects involve 'people, participation, and place', the three primary elements of ritual (217). Millner asserts that art can have profound transformative and healing effects on individuals and communities, and she reflects on how several contemporary artists actively attempt to use ritual methods to and seize and transform a space in order to transform individuals through ritualistic experiences.

In the final chapter, 'Interview with ritual artist Ida van der Lee', Christine Behrend, a secular ceremonial celebrant, discusses her interview with Dutch ritual artist Ida van der Lee, who creates rituals in public spaces which emphasize commemorating or bringing into focus events or people who have been forgotten. Lee designs rituals for organizations, companies, communities and individuals, and has created ceremonies for demolition projects, treating spaces and old buildings as if they were meaningful members of the community. As she discusses some of the completed rituals she has worked on and her current projects, she laments how rituals have lost their salience in an increasingly secular society, believing that art in particular has significant latent potential to bring ritual back to the forefront of public life.

While each chapter is both engaging and relevant to anthropological interest in ritual, the contributors tend to focus only on ritual as an entirely positive, consensual experience and, with the exception of Smyth's chapter, do not include any discussion of rituals that might not result in cohesion and fulfillment. Smyth, however, only points to non-Western 'bad' rituals that cause harm (according to Western societies), arguing that 'good' ritual is a latent force that could be used to bind societies together in positive social cohesion (51). In other words, the authors collectively maintain that 'social cohesion' is the purpose, or *correct* purpose, of ritual. The overemphasis on 'social cohesion' and 'social control' necessarily evokes Marilyn Strathern's work, *Discovering social control* (1985), in which she cautions anthropologists to consider their assumptions concerning social norms of order and disorder.

Further, while these works broadly share a similar subject of academic concern, they are narrow in the sense that they focus on a few specific affluent Western communities (all of the case studies were based on ethnographic studies conducted in Norway, Switzerland, Denmark or the Netherlands). In this respect the title is slightly misleading, and this is one of the pitfalls of the book. The compilation is not concerned with 'emerging ritual in secular societies' but rather with emerging secular ritual in northern European communities.

Finally, the chapters are almost too concise, and many of the contributors are not able to develop their points fully. In particular, some concepts are not fully expanded or defined, such as 'post-secular societies' (158) or 'human technology' (140). Although slightly superficial, *Emerging ritual in secular societies* is nonetheless an excellent introduction to recent thought on secular ritual throughout the social and medical sciences.

In her complementary volume, *Crafting secular ritual* (2017), Gordon-Lennox builds on her previous work on creating secular ritual for marriages (2008) and funerals (2011) and expands on the the creative process of ritual-making. She offers a practical guide for individuals who wish to craft their own secular rituals, with helpful checklists and guidelines included in every chapter.

The book is divided into three parts aimed at 'making sense of ritual and making ritual that makes sense' (31). In the first two chapters, Gordon-Lennox provides a succinct introduction to the emerging field of ritology (27) and the purpose and meaning of ritual as a specific type of social action. She borrows Dissanayake's term (2017) to describe ritual as the act of 'making special' certain things, places or persons as a way to articulate communal or individual concerns (24). Ritual can also be approached as a culturally distinct way of addressing crucial emotional, spiritual and social experiences with language, physical action and symbols that are not typically employed in the same way during everyday life. Gordon-

Lennox approaches ritual as a basic human need, even a 'biologically endowed need' (23). She describes the many positive affects of ritual, from its therapeutic effects, its potential to encourage social cohesion and increased social engagement, the potential to ease transitions and feel safe, and finally the potential humanizing effects of rituals.

Gordon-Lennox argues that the primary reason people tend to be dissatisfied with institutional ceremonies is because they feel alienated by strange symbols or language and are deprived of the benefits of an authentic ritual. Thus, she argues that individuals and communities can plan and carry out ceremonies on their own in order to access the social and personal benefits of ritual. The second section includes guidelines for crafting authentic rituals and advice on using materials, music and objects in rituals.

She describes the basic concepts and planning of rituals in Chapters 3 and 4. Her six rules for designing rituals form the acronym 'CRAFT': create, respect, aesthetics, form and truth. She asserts that what sets contemporary ritual-making apart from previously established rituals is the creation of meaning and interpretation by the participants themselves, whereas established rituals have set meanings. The creative process involves the planning phase (Chapter 5), the creating phase (Chapter 6) and the realizing phase (Chapter 7). Chapter 5 includes a questionnaire in order to help readers determine their 'ritual identity', that is, the traditions, symbols and sounds that are most familiar and meaningful. Primarily, the exercise helps the reader to understand where they sit on the secular/religious spectrum, from having an institutional affiliation with an established religion, to being humanist, to being unaffiliated, to traditional or cultural beliefs that do not fall into the category of 'religion'. She includes a key to the questionnaire on p. 90. In Chapter 6, she walks the reader through the creating phase, including the importance of listing core values, mapping out the ceremony, selecting the right music or sounds, selecting the right format for the ceremony and thinking about meaningful gestures to include. In Chapter 7, the realizing phase, she includes a guide to the day of the ceremony from start to finish.

The third and final section offers guidelines and suggestions for creating specific rituals, including birth (Chapter 6), coming of age (Chapter 7), marriage (Chapter 8), growing old (Chapter 9), death and mourning (Chapter 10) and finally ritualizing in public spaces (Chapter 11), including graduation ceremonies and public protests. In sum, Gordon-Lennox created the guide in order to help individuals find ways to "make the ordinary *extra-ordinary*" (163, author's emphasis). The guide is clearly laid out, with several visual aids throughout to help the reader follow the concepts Gordon-Lennox employs to discuss ritual and the processes involved in planning one. Though its pitfalls are similar to those in *Emerging ritual*

*in secular societies*, namely that some terms and ideas are not fully discussed, such as her term ‘ultra-modern’ society (163), this work provides a succinct introduction to the basic concepts of ritual and offers ideas and tips as to how the reader can craft one for themselves. It is relevant to anyone interested in either experiencing or studying ritual-making.

In the last five years, there has been a resurgence of interest in the idea of distinctively secular ritual from scholars working in the social sciences (see Ayot 2015; Missonnier 2014; Rohmaniyah and Woodward 2012; Baldacchino 2014). *Crafting secular ritual* and *Emerging ritual in secular societies* contribute to the growing compendium of studies which seek to address ritual that cannot be classified as religious. While the debate on whether or not the term ‘secular’ is useful at all in academic discourse is ongoing, it is clear that the relationship between individuals and religious institutions, like that between individuals and the nation state, has undergone substantial changes over the past several decades in all regions of the world and that the term ‘secular’ has become a useful idiom in thinking and writing about these changes. Though not without their problems, these two books have laid the groundwork for further explorations of secular ritual as a topic that may be worthy of serious consideration by anthropologists.

## REFERENCES

- Asad, T. 2003. *Formations of the secular: Christianity, Islam, modernity (cultural memory in the present)*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Ayot, W. 2015. *Re-enchanting the forest: meaningful ritual in a secular world*. Bristol: Vala Publishing.
- Baldacchino, Jean-Paul 2014. Contextualizing the secular public sphere: religious ritual, festa and migrant identity in Malta and Australia. *Ethnicities*, 14(1), 113–135.
- Bell, C. 1997. *Ritual: perspectives and dimensions*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 2009. *Ritual theory, ritual practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Gordon-Lennox, J. 2011. *Funérailles cérémonies sur mesure*, Genève: Editions Labor et Fides.
- 2008. *Mariages: cérémonies sur mesure*, Genève: Editions Labor et Fides.
- Inayah Rohmaniyah and Mark Woodward 2012. Wahhabism, identity and secular ritual: graduation at an Indonesian high school, *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 50(1), 119–145.

- Missonnier, S., 2014. Les stèles virtuelles sur internet: un rituel de deuil séculier? *Revue de médecine périnatale*, 6(2), 103–109.
- Moore, S., and B. Myerhoff 1977. *Secular ritual*, Assen: Van Gorcum.
- Navaro-Yashin, Y. 2002. *Faces of the state: secularism and public life in Turkey*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Starrett, G. 2010. The varieties of secular experience, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 52(3), 626-651.
- Strathern, Marilyn. 1985. Discovering ‘social control’, *Journal of Law and Society*, 12(2): 111-134.
- Warburg, M. 2016. Secular rituals, in Marilyn Strathern and Andrew Strathern (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Anthropology*, Burlington: Ashgate Publishing.



## BOOK REVIEWS

**CONSTANCE CLASSEN**, *The museum of the senses: experiencing art and collections*, London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic 2017, 171 pp. Hardback \$26.95. ISBN 978-1-4742-5243-0.

Rich in stories about people's sensory experiences in the art world, Classen's work bridges the fields of sensory studies and art history with a brand new perspective. The book is organized diachronically into six chapters. The first chapter starts with cases of people's sensory engagement with holy and royal relics from earlier history. In this chapter, kissing the skull of a saint is a way to empower individuals, and the touch on a special medallion handled by royals is a medium for supernatural healing. Kissing as a sense of touch, licking as a sense of taste and other idolatry practices illustrate an enchanted world in medieval times. The second chapter focuses on Renaissance paintings and sculptures and on the sensory illusions that lead art viewers to touch the objects on display. The third chapter, with less aesthetic discussion but more thrilling facts, discusses historical cases of nineteenth-century European obsessions with Egyptian mummies from the emotional experiences of pity and fear to bodily attempts to unwrap, touch, smell and taste the mummies, and even to reuse them as fuel, fertilizer, fine paper and paint. The fourth and fifth chapters focus on the rise and fall of an art-collecting family in England, the Arundels. The assembling and dispersal of their pictures, marbles and jewels are accompanied by symbolic aromas of the family perfume, which shows an intense influence of the sense of smell. The last chapter focuses on the modern age and illustrates the transformation of museums from an art empire that restricts any bodily sensation beyond sight to a multi-sensory playground. The changes of hierarchy in different senses have been noted, showing how the sense of seeing shares some of its priorities with the other senses.

Distinct from anthropological perspectives on sensory experience, which generally approach the problem from the perspective of either the phenomenology of perception or symbolic anthropology, Classen disentangles the relationship between art objects and their viewers with more of a historical style. Historical facts are treated as neutral in this book. Some cases are even situated outside the context of museums, for example, in the original field of art objects (mummies in the Egypt desert in nineteenth century) or in the houses of artists and private collectors (the Arundel Collection).

This is not to say, however, that the book does not engage with contemporary debates on sensory experience in anthropological discussions. Indeed, Classen's work provides many

raw materials to illustrate the complexity of the problem and push the discourse even further. For instance, the act of kissing religious relics as a healing ritual in the medieval period introduced in the first chapter can be rethought by anthropologists of religion. Also, Classen sees the West's obsession with unwrapping and reusing the mummies as 'a parallel interest in exploring and colonizing Eastern lands and peoples' (6) in the nineteenth century, complementing some anthropological discussion of colonial legacies. Gender ideologies are also given impressive emphasis, as in her comparison between the portraits of the Earl and Countess of Arundel. Individual reactions to art objects, such as breathing and muscular movements, can be found in detailed and splendid descriptions, which can be seen as cases supporting anthropological explorations of the body and embodiment.

In conclusion, Classen's book assembles and arranges historical and contemporary facts about sensory experience in the art world, many of which have the potential to be considered in contemporary anthropological discussions.

Reviewed by YUXIN PENG

MPhil student in Medical Anthropology, Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford, 64 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6PN. E-mail: yuxin.peng@anthro.ox.ac.uk

**TSYPYLMA DARIEVA, FLORIAN MUELFRIED and KEVIN TUIE** (eds.), *Sacred Places, Emerging Spaces: Religious Pluralism in the Post-Soviet Caucasus*, New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books 2018, 235 pp. ISBN 978-1-7853-3782-6.

The authors in this collection of articles discuss sacred shrines, that is, sites of popular worship in the great variety found in the Caucasus borderlands between Europe and Asia. Anthropological studies in the field provide the case work for arriving at a rich variety of interpretations and suggesting different approaches. The whole issue is discussed in the context of major ongoing debates on the topics of what gives shrines their holiness and their social significance in a region that is characterized by changing political situations under different political regimes.

The nine chapters dissect both conflicts and a degree of cohabitation between community-based shrines – what the authors call 'folk' beliefs, or a 'non-institutional set of beliefs and practices' (N. Tserediani, K. Tuite and P. Bakhrashvili, pp. 48-49) – and state and non-state religions, as well as contestations over hegemony among the variety of religious institutions and those of the state. The editors' introduction points out that processes

of secularization that are often seen as originating in Soviet society in fact predate that period and that the current ‘de-secularizing’ trend is more complex than simply an attempt to revert to the pre-Soviet state of affairs. The current position is sometimes taken as a triangle of antagonisms among worshippers at saints’ shrines, churches and the state in Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Abkhazia and into the southern fringe of the Russian Federation. The reader will find that the ground covered includes a considerable number of different cultural, ethnic and/or religious groups and different layerings of variations of Pagan (a term accepted in Abkhazia, where it carries no pejorative flavour), Islamic, Christian, Judaic and other beliefs, mostly centred on perceived contacts with saints sited at the local shrines where they are buried and often on sites of or adjacent to churches and mosques. Four of the states that cover the Caucasus are associated more or less with one of the three Abrahamic religions, the exceptions being ‘the indigenised “paganisms” of Abkhazia, Ossetia and [in Georgia, the zone of] Pshay-Khevsureti’ (Introduction, p. 8).

The freshness of new research emanates from these writings, as the editors find: ‘The veneration of saints and pilgrimages may undermine or support political authority and national grand narratives, and even emerge from the state [...], in contrast with the Western view on Eurasia, which identifies the notion of “being Muslim” in the Soviet Union as being an oppositional one to the secular state’. Interestingly, T. Darieva finds that, in the Soviet period, ‘the [Communist] Party’s policy towards religion was far from uniform throughout the twentieth century. [...] Anti-religious campaigns were not linear processes; in reality they were accompanied by religious revivals and the adaptation of the sacred to the secular world’ (p. 41). Darieva concludes from her study of a shrine in Azerbaijan that ‘religion and secularism...should be viewed’ as “overlapping social and political fields” (p. 41).

Shrines can be shared or not shared by people who regard themselves as Muslim, Christian or Pagan, while facing attempts at incorporation or rejection by clerics of the Muslim or Christian churches. In Georgia there is a conflict between the Orthodox Christian Church and the state over recognition as the bearers of the Georgian national spirit, and this collection of articles includes a study of a government-built complex of church, synagogue and mosque buildings without religious practices, as the state asserts its primacy in representing a unified Georgian people – what Silvio Serrano calls ‘Sharing the Not-Sacred: Rabati and Displays of Multiculturalism’ (Chapter 9). Hege Toje writes of ‘privatisation and marketisation’ (p. 142) influencing the management and proprietorial claims to sacred shrines and church sites since the demise of the Soviet Union, with its dominant socialized property ownership: ‘The transformation of ritual space and sacred sites has links to processes of

economic transformation, the expansion of new economic niches and [the] professionalisation of services' (p. 143).

In a similar vein, Hamlet Melkumyan writes of today's social structuring of hierarchical castes or classes around the shrines of the Yezidis of today's Armenia, whose 'syncretistic religion [has] linkages to Islam (Sufism), Zoroastrianism, Iranian cults, Christianity and Judaism' (p. 178). Melkumyan contrasts this process with the transformations of Soviet times, which went in a different direction 'as a result of the ideology of social equality' (p. 193).

There are a number of other interesting subjects discussed in the contributions to this broadly based volume that usefully point to some fields of research around sacred places which could well do with further examination. Among them is the significance of shrines giving voice to the laity, whereas Church religions strive to control initiatives through their clerics. The influence of states and changing economic backgrounds goes beyond the often-encountered Soviet-versus-non-Soviet politically stereotypical paradigm that is now coming to be recognized as a simplification. Igor Kuznetsov's contribution is tantalizing for its introduction to what is by many standards the 'peculiar' place occupied by the Pagan Abkhaz of the northwestern part of the Caucasus. Students following up on almost everything touched on in this interesting volume might do well to direct their gaze more to its perceived exception to many 'rules'. Abkhazia's complex belief system is reflected in the Pagan shrines being accorded pride of place, as *primus inter pares*, in the state's constitution, which is defined as a 'unitary state' where it is illegal to argue that any one belief system is superior to others, including atheism. At a different level there remains a possible field for fruitful research into the relationship of the 'powers' that are accorded to saints and spirits, as opposed to the sites of the shrines themselves.

Reviewed by MICHAEL COSTELLO

Honorary Research Associate, School of Anthropology and Conservation, University of Kent. Email: [mc761@kent.ac.uk](mailto:mc761@kent.ac.uk)

**FREDRIK HAGEN** and **K. S. B. RYHOLT**, *The antiquities trade in Egypt 1880-1930: the H.O. Lange Papers*, Copenhagen: Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab 2016, 335 pp. ISBN 978-8-7730-4400-1; ISSN 1904-5506.

This volume is an in-depth study of the Egyptian antiquities trade during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fredrik Hagan and Kim Ryholt focus on the papers of Hans O. Lange (1863-1943), an Egyptologist who taught at the University of Copenhagen and served as the Chief Librarian of the Royal Library. Lange took two trips to Egypt, one in 1899-1900 and another in 1929-1930, to acquire antiquities for Danish museums, and his travel journals and letters offer a first-hand account of the antiquities trade during this period.

Hagan and Ryholt seek to understand how antiquities were acquired by Western museums, what types of antiquities institutions in Europe were looking to secure at the time, and how the trade in and acquisition of certain antiquities influenced the Egyptological research agenda. Their work offers an admirably thorough analysis of the antiquities trade, going far beyond the study of Lange's archival material by drawing on multiple outside sources, including substantial photographic evidence and the first-hand accounts of others who were active in the antiquities trade at the time. Their expansive scholarship is ultimately a historical ethnography, one that sheds light on the broader social and political contexts in which Egyptology and the trade in antiquities were embedded.

Chapters 1 and 2 outline the scope of the study and the sources the authors have relied on, which primarily includes correspondence between Lange and Egyptian antiquities dealers, museums and other Egyptologists, as well as travel diaries written by Lange and his wife Jonna. The authors also rely on photographs that the Langes took during their two trips to Egypt, as well as a substantial number of photographs from outside the collection of those people and places that were central to the trade. Lange's notebooks in particular are a vast source of information, as he meticulously recorded descriptions and prices of various antiquities, his personal dealings with local and foreign dealers, his pursuit of a personal antiquities collection and his purchases for European museums.

Chapter 3, the largest section of the book, primarily focuses on the social and institutional complexities of the antiquities trade. Hagan and Ryholt offer a detailed look at the practices of the trade, the methods of buying and selling and the implicit and explicit norms shared by those in the community of buyers, sellers and producers (those who excavated, looted, forged or found antiquities). The individuals who dealt in antiquities included high-ranking government officials, consular agents, tourists, professional Egyptian and foreign dealers, missionaries, archaeologists, Egyptian archaeological workers and farmers, who often

discovered objects of interest while turning over the soil in their fields. The Egyptian state and the Egyptian Antiquities Service also played a significant role in the antiquities trade, and the Sale Room of the Egyptian Museum sold surplus antiquities to the public into the 1960s.

Buying antiquities was a complex social transaction depending largely on the people involved, the timing, the market and the items themselves. Where the object had been discovered, where it had been since, who had previously handled it and how far a dealer had had to travel to obtain it were all factors that were considered when determining the value of an antiquity. The social context of the sale was so important that some dealers would travel to Europe to buy antiquities in order to bring them back to Egypt and sell them in Cairo for a substantially higher fee. In this vein, the authors emphasized the cultural biographies of Egyptian artefacts, showing how those biographies were, and still are, interpreted differently by various individuals.

Fake antiquities were as much a part of the market as were genuine ones. The demand for antiquities reached such a height during the first part of the twentieth century that fakes were even being produced in England and Italy and shipped to Egypt for sale to Europeans. At the height of the antiquities trade, adroit forgers were producing such high-quality artefacts that even seasoned Egyptologists like Lange found it difficult to determine the authenticity of some of those that were offered to him. The authors also include a discussion of antiquities laws and a useful summary of Egyptian legislation enacted over the years to regulate the sale of antiquities (128).

Chapter 4 covers Lange's interest in and acquisition of papyri, in which he took a particular personal interest, and his efforts resulted in the two collections currently in Copenhagen, the Papyrus Carlsberg Collection and the Papyrus Hauniensis Collection. Even though he was only able to acquire a few pieces during his first trip to Egypt, he continued collecting through his contacts in Egypt before and after his second trip in 1929-1930. The section includes a detailed account of how papyri collections are formed, as well as the efforts of other Egyptologists at the time to establish collections of written texts from Egypt.

In the final chapter, the authors provide an extensive compendium of 256 primarily Egyptian, but also foreign, antiquities dealers. Hagan and Ryholt write that, 'the history of Egyptology is much more than the history of Egyptologists, but it is relatively rare to find the diverse "supporting cast" (workmen, photographers, financiers, etc.) treated at any depth in the Egyptological literature' (183). In this vein, their aim was to make visible the Egyptians who were as much a part of Egyptology and the antiquities trade as their Western counterparts. Each entry is accompanied by a short biography, including the years in which

they were known to be active and photographs of the dealers when available. Incredibly, the authors have also included family trees of some Egyptian families who were well established dealers in Cairo at the time (189, 266).

The appendix also contains valuable information, including detailed explanations of the 1912 antiquities law (278), licenses issued by the Egyptian Antiquities Service (284), antiquities dealers mentioned in the Baedeker guides (travel literature) (285), the organization and salaries of the Antiquities Service in 1908 (288) and further background information on Lange and the antiquities trade.

In *The Antiquities Trade in Egypt*, Hagan and Ryholt argue that Egyptology as a discipline was not isolated from other social networks involved in the movement of Egyptian antiquities. Acknowledging these concomitant networks not only allows us to question the site of the production of archaeological knowledge, it also offers a broader understanding of Egyptology. In particular, their study illuminates how the field of Egyptology was informed by the antiquities trade and how Egyptian antiquities in Western institutions ultimately got there. They have far exceeded their goals for the study, and their work represents a considerable contribution to the study of the antiquities trade in Egypt, a field still in its infancy. This volume is highly relevant for anyone interested in Egyptology, archaeology, the antiquities trade, historical ethnography, museum studies, archaeological archival studies, the history of Egypt and the anthropology of the Middle East.

Reviewed by EMILIA GROUPP

Candidate for the MPhil in Social Anthropology, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford OX2 6PE, and St. Cross College, 61 St. Giles, Oxford OX1 3LZ. E-mail: emilia.groupp@anthro.ox.ac.uk

**PETER HARRIES-JONES**, *Upside-down gods: Gregory Bateson's world of difference*, New York: Fordham University Press 2016; xi, 279 pp. ISBN 978-0-8232-7035-4.

Gregory Bateson has been hailed as one of the leading thinkers of the twentieth century. Outside the fields of anthropology and cybernetics, he might also be considered one of its best kept secrets. Bateson's forays into problems as diverse as Balinese body culture, evolution and symmetry in nature, information theory, schizophrenia and dolphin communication do not lend themselves to easy summation, which might account for his relative obscurity. Nevertheless, Peter Harries-Jones manages to show not only the coherence

of Bateson's thought as it developed across the formative decades of the twentieth century, but also his remarkable foresight and lasting influence in the twenty first century. In *Upside down gods*, he draws on published work, conference transcripts, letters and notebooks to trace the development of a singular and challenging career which greatly inspired famous contemporaries such as Gilles Deleuze and Allen Ginsberg.

This intellectual biography is centred around Bateson's continuous engagement with concepts of information as he developed and applied these to problems in anthropology, cybernetics, psychology, biology and ecology, often while playing a formative role in these fields. Throughout, information materializes in ritual, growth and pattern as the animating principle of the living world. Bateson became a leading figure in the Macy Conferences on cybernetics from 1946 to 1960 and engaged in discussions with pioneers such as Norbert Wiener and Warren McCulloch while seeking to introduce cybernetic principles to the social and life sciences. As Harries-Jones makes clear, this was no simple task: definitions of cybernetics rested on abstract scientific generalizations related to the laws of thermodynamics, and while there are analogous concepts of information in physics and biology, disciplinary and epistemological contradictions abound. In a mechanical system, energy will eventually move from an ordered to a homogenous state as information gives way to entropy (think of ice cubes melting in a glass of water), whereas living systems are able to resist the flow of entropy and maintain structure in great abundance. To Bateson, information theory had to be turned upside down so that the emergence and maintenance of pattern in all its social and ecological variety became the key problem for research. In his hands, cybernetics became a productive interface between social, biological, synthetic and ecological systems. He developed a holistic framework that emphasised a deeply interconnected world of meaning and inspired the emerging ecological imaginary of the 1960s and 1970s. At stake was nothing less than life itself, as Bateson sought to save nature, science and society from an instrumental logic that had showed its horrifying hand during the Second World War.

The coupled emergence of cybernetics and ecological thought was the focus of Harries-Jones's (1991) earlier book on Bateson, and here the task he sets himself is more far-reaching as he seeks to link Bateson's post-war theoretical contribution to his pre-war ethnographic work. Bateson's career as a fieldworker got off to the worst possible start with a perplexing but drawn-out period among the Baining of New Britain. The Baining were secretive and resented his intrusion. They refused to discuss genealogies or religion with him and tricked him into leaving their village on days of significant ceremonies and rituals. Nothing much



came of this experience besides considerable frustration, but Bateson relocated to study the Iatmul of New Guinea and later produced his key anthropological work *Naven* based on the Iatmul ritual of the same name (Bateson 1958). It was also in New Guinea that Bateson met and fell in love with Margaret Mead, the two subsequently marrying and embarked on collaborative fieldwork in Bali. This period is notable for its experimental engagement with the epistemology of anthropology. In *Naven*, Bateson challenged contemporary orthodoxy by writing about his own role as a participant observer, developing a ground-breaking argument about how the observer-informant relationship enters into academic accounts of culture (the impact of an observer on a system became a key concern for second-order cybernetics as this was developed by Margaret Mead, Heinz von Foerster and others in the late 1960s).

Peter Harries-Jones details Bateson's struggle to find a place from which to discuss culture and its expression in day-to-day interaction through hopeful and combative letters to A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, Bronisław Malinowski and Frederik Bartlett. His work in New Guinea and Bali made him deeply interested in how social patterns evolve and are maintained in both everyday and ritual practice and how, through feedback or feed-forward, social dynamics might either be kept in check or run out of control. Harries-Jones argues that the theory of 'schismogenesis,' developed on the back of fieldwork in New Guinea and Bali, became crucial for notions of feedback and control in the early cybernetics movement, with particular relevance for critiques of game theory and Cold War nuclear strategy. Bateson developed this theoretical framework further through experimental practice in the treatment of schizophrenia after he relocated to Palo Alto in California in the 1950s. Positing that schizophrenia could not be understood in isolation but had to be viewed within the second-order context of interactions between patients and their families, he helped pioneer the use of family therapy in its treatment.

Bateson's early fieldwork and experimental work in psychology are perhaps less well known than his later ecological thought, but through Harries-Jones's discussion a fuller picture emerges of how Bateson came to theorize context and information – understood as order and pattern – as key to understanding the social and living world. As Bateson himself pointed out, a focus on organism plus environment inverts the great chain of being handed down to us from Aristotle. If we take seriously the notion that living systems, including humans, fundamentally change under ecological interdependencies, the idea that the human mind is perched at the top of a ladder with successive rungs of intelligence falling away to the animal, plant and mineral kingdoms below becomes hard to maintain. Instrumental hierarchy gives way to a flattening epistemology as what had previously been the explanation, the mind

at the top, now becomes what has to be explained (and be so on an equal footing with everything else). This inversion should chime well with current discussions in anthropology and beyond as the Anthropocene becomes the new ecological imaginary we all have to come to terms with.

## REFERENCES

- Bateson, G. 1958. *Naven, a survey of the problems suggested by a composite picture of the culture of a New Guinea tribe drawn from three points of view*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Harries-Jones, P. 1991. *A Recursive Vision: Ecological Understanding and Gregory Bateson*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Reviewed by KÅRE STOKHOLM POULSGAARD

DPhil student, Institute for Science Innovation and Society, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford, 64 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6PN. E-mail: kare.poulsgaard@sjc.ox.ac.uk

**IAN HEYWOOD (ed.)** *Sensory arts and design*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, 258 pp. Hardback £85. ISBN 978-1-4742-8019-8.

*Sensory arts and design* is an anthology of critical perspectives on the senses in art and design. This collection covers a huge range of art and design mediums and disciplines, from traditional artistic mediums such as music and drawing to areas such as gastronomic art, which may be less familiar to the reader. The authors approach ‘arts’ and ‘design’ as broad categories, with less obvious topics, such as night-time walking or the design of material and virtual objects on ‘the internet of things’, also addressed in the volume. In addition to covering a wide range of mediums, the collection also encompasses all five of our senses, as well as extending the concept to include others, such as a sense of direction, which we might not normally consider being within the same gamut. The senses are examined both in isolation and as part of multisensory experience. This anthology will be of interest to scholars, practitioners and appreciators of arts and design, as well as to anthropologists who are interested in sensory experience (a key area in medical anthropology, for example). A key theme and recurrent argument throughout the anthology is its challenge to ‘ocularcentrism’, that is, to the dominance of the visual as the ‘truest’ sense. If, like the contributors to this volume, you have ever felt that Western culture values vision too highly at the expense of

other senses or multisensorial approaches, then you will certainly find this anthology thought-provoking and enlightening.

The book is divided into three parts. With contributions so wide-ranging, the thirteen chapters in this volume have been gathered together only loosely under three broad headings, though there are some common themes throughout. In order to do justice to an anthology with such a broad scope, I will first summarize each of these three sections before briefly discussing some of the book's key themes.

Part one is entitled 'Sensory arts and design, new technologies and the urban environment', and consists of four contributions on novel techniques in using sensory experience to explore and appreciate our urban environment (rather than on arts and design in the formal definition of the term). The novel techniques discussed are essentially non-visual means of exploration. Nick Dunne's chapter on night-walking, based around the author's own experiences of this activity, elucidates new ways of approaching and understanding our built environment when the cover of darkness forces us to rely on more than just the visual. He also explores how, in the age of the 'digital panopticon' (p. 34), the night-time carries a sense of the 'here and now' (as opposed to the 'tenuous and distant' life of the daytime, with its layer of data and digital devices) (p. 35), and is perhaps one of the reasons why Dunne sees night-walking as 'a subtle act of resistance' (p. 44). Jacobs and Huck's chapter on sensory augmentation discusses the possibility of whether new sensory information can be embodied, using the example of a device that gives the wearer magnetoreception (i.e. providing new directional information). Although the experiment produced no concrete conclusions, the technique employed (in this case wearing a magnetoreception device) had the effect of making the wearer more mindful and aware of their surroundings, much like Dunne's night-walking, as well as showing how devices can bring information which might otherwise be 'invisible' to the forefront of individual minds. The chapters by O'Keefe and by Tseklevs and Darby explore the process of designing a non-visual experience of a landscape. O'Keefe describes creating a soundscape of Dublin's Smithfield Square, although her research and installation were focused on memory. Her description of the artistic process – as opposed to a focus on the artwork itself – mainly poses questions and provides descriptions. Without actually having visited O'Keefe's installation, however, it is difficult to grasp exactly how she answered the questions she poses ('how can one narrate a soundscape memory, in what way can a gallery space represent the social shaping of community sounds, and how can a work of art reflect the loss of what is already an ephemeral experience?' (p. 96)). Tseklevs and Darby explore the installation of a xylophone in a park as part of a

‘playful health trail’ designed to promote healthy ageing. Importantly, this is a medical intervention without any outer appearance of such, and their discussion focuses on how to design objects to elicit this playfulness in adults.

The second section, ‘The range of sensory arts and design: extensions, realizations and capacities’, most explicitly challenges traditional notions of the hierarchy of the senses (although this challenge is one of the book’s key themes, and is present throughout). Caro Verbeek explores this in relation to olfaction and Futurism, most interestingly in relation to the intersection between olfactory memory and other senses. Mark Clintberg’s chapter on gastronomic art obviously focuses on taste, most thought-provokingly in discussing how the hierarchy of the senses reinforces the power dynamics and social stratification of the gallery, and how gallery interactions that are non-visually orientated or multisensorial in nature can democratize the gallery space, or in some cases just give the illusion of democratizing it. Joy Monice Malnar’s chapter on the Chicago Architecture Biennial discusses how ‘rational’, cerebral (i.e. visual) approaches to a shoreline kiosk competition fail to engage with the character of the lakefront (e.g. the climatology) and thus how people interact with the spaces as a result of the failure, or rather the lack of desire, to create multisensorial environments. Alan Marsden and Richard Leadbetter’s chapter continues to undermine the hierarchy of the senses, this time approaching the problem from the opposite direction and exploring how one artistic medium (music) involves more senses than just the obvious one. I was most interested in the discussion on music’s ability to transport people – and thus how it is employed as a ‘technology of the self’ – and how, for many people, the place they are transported to is multisensory rather than just a visual memory. All in all, this second section is the most exciting, thought-provoking, challenging and coherently grouped section of the book.

The third section, entitled ‘Vision, touch and technologies of sense’, is based on vision, both in terms of further weakening its position at the top of the sense hierarchy (for example, as not the only or even primary sense associated with painting and drawing) and in undertaking a consideration of the unseen. In relation to the first of these, Harland and Donnelly’s chapter on art spectatorship and Casey and Davies’ chapter on ‘Encounters with the unseen’ both describe ways in which painting is able to capture the non-visual. For Harland and Donnelly these are the ‘haptic’ qualities, such as the surface of an object, that painters such as Velazquez and Manet are able to capture, while Casey and Davies give the example of the way in which the deaf painter Johannes Thopas is able to visualize silence. Elsewhere in the volume, it is argued that trying to render the other senses visually only further cements the dominance of sight. However, Harland and Donnelly argue the opposite,

namely that capturing tactility in the visual ‘seems to evoke sensations that we may take for granted in most usual situations’.

Heywood’s chapter on Impressionism deals with the same topic, except in a situation where it fails. While an impression doesn’t have to be visual, it is visual in the case of Impressionist painting. Heywood argues that the subsequent backlash and debate about the act of an artist’s seeing ‘render[s] highly questionable any sweeping statement about the predominance of a simple, unitary ideology of the visual, an optical mainstream’ (p. 228). This statement strongly contradicts the primary recurrent theme in the book, in which Western ocularcentrism is frequently cited, and is thus quite jarring in standing in sole opposition. Paul Coulton’s and Pip Dickens’ chapters offer a slightly different approach to the broad topic of the book. Coulton discusses how we design objects in a world where the virtual/real divide no longer exists precisely, and the internet is increasingly a place in which we ‘live’, while Dickens offers an exploration of the artist’s studio itself.

As should be evident by now, the chapters are wide-ranging and varied. Some feel like a tentative first step into a newly carved-out space, whereas others offer a more in-depth analysis with a stronger theoretical basis and more confident conclusions. It is thus difficult to find many connecting ideas or themes, though this is probably a credit to the volume’s ambitiously wide approach to the topic rather than a detriment. There is, however, one dominant connecting theme in the challenge to Western ocularcentrism and the hierarchy of the senses in favour of a more multisensory approach, and linked to this is a recurrent theme of mindfulness. Although it is not always explicitly mentioned (and is never discussed in terms of formal mindfulness practice or training), there are several suggestions for how decreasing our reliance on the visual and foregrounding other senses can increase our awareness and attention – our sense of being ‘present’, to borrow a term from mindfulness practice. There is a sense of the ability of multisensory approaches to make us actively attentive to arts and design, as well as to our own personal explorations of our environments.

Reviewed by RACHEL HALL

MSc student in Medical Anthropology, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford, 64 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6PN. E-mail: rachel.hall@anthro.ox.ac.uk

**ANDREW IRVING**, *The art of life and death: radical aesthetics and ethnographic practice*, Chicago: Hau Books 2017, 245 pp. Paperback £26.50. ISBN 978-0-9973-6751-5.

*The art of life and death* studies the impact of HIV/AIDS on individuals in New York over a twenty-year period, with a particular focus on gay men. Employing a variety of ethnographic methods, the aim of this book is to show how different people have learned how to live a meaningful existence in the pre- and post-antiretroviral eras while negotiating life with a terminal illness. Irving achieves this and captures the reader's attention by sharing stories and offering insights into the lives of HIV-positive individuals in New York. His attention to the smallest details and his often humorous commentary on his findings, coupled with frequent references to popular culture, artists, songs and authors, makes this book thoroughly engaging.

Irving is perhaps best known for his 'walking fieldwork' ethnographic method, which involves accompanying people as they carry out their daily routines while they narrate aloud their thoughts and emotions throughout the experience. In Chapter 2, he shows just how effective this method can be in fieldwork as a window into another person's thoughts and experiences in the lived moment. Albert, an HIV-positive male artist, shares how, even with the ability of antiretroviral drugs to enable one to reach an average life expectancy, he is constantly reminded of his HIV status by the drugs he has to take every morning. Through Albert's monologue, we learn how his perspective as an artist plays a role in his view of the world and hence how he perceives his diagnosis. For example, he chooses to wear a red-striped T-shirt because it is symbolic of the infectious blood that he perceives runs through his veins. Irving observes that Albert addresses various audiences throughout his narration, including his past self, his future self and the Virgin Mary. These and many more rich insights are gained through this peculiar form of methodology.

A second method Irving uses throughout the book is to depict the artwork of HIV-positive artists. Irving shows how the construction of the art is as important as the final product. For Rebecca Guberman-Bloom, who was infected at just seventeen-years old, the use of her own blood in her artwork is cathartic, as, once external to the body, this infectious blood is soon rendered harmless, as HIV cannot live long outside the body. By being able actually to view her blood, Rebecca was able to come to terms with her condition and accept it. For Bill Cullum, any painting he painted started from the centre of the canvas, and he tried to fit in as much as possible due to his belief that his condition would not allow him to live long and therefore he could not waste time on preparatory work. This method gave William's

work a somewhat chaotic appearance, while also conveying a morbid intensity, depicting his fear and fascination with death. By including these works of art, Irving shares insights into the artists' experiences that go beyond the written word.

As HIV/AIDS is one of the greatest pandemics facing our world today and one that has been dealt with so poorly, particularly by ostracizing and stigmatizing those with the infection (hence leading to people preferring not to get tested and spreading the infection unknowingly), *The art of life and death*, by providing insight into the lives of people with HIV, is of the utmost importance. Irving draws attention to one example of such stigma by sharing the story of Bill, an HIV-positive gay man, who was lured into a sting operation when his friend, who was working with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), offered him money to be involved in a drug deal. Hoping the money would help him get out of the city and cut his own drug habit (a result of his depression from having HIV), Bill agreed but was apprehended by the DEA. Bill's arrest coincided with a campaign targeted at gay men which included hundreds of posters of the gay men found to be dealing drugs posted around their neighbourhoods with their names and phrases such as 'over seven years for selling crystal meth, was it worth it?'. There was public outrage from the gay community in response to this DEA campaign because, as a 2004 *Newsday* publication described it, the operation, rather than preventing drug deals, would only heighten homophobic attitudes in the community by means of these posters. This, coupled with the widespread public health messages claiming that gay men were the primary culprits for spreading HIV, was stigmatizing gay men in New York. By giving a voice to the marginalized, *The art of life and death* can provide important information to health-care policy-makers in order to better tackle the issue of HIV in LGTB communities.

Overall, this book is a very worthwhile introduction to any medical anthropologist because it includes detailed ethnographic descriptions, a variety of ethnographic methods and a range of key anthropological themes, including a focus on embodied experiences, social injustice and how individuals deal with death. The narrative style of the book makes it easy to read and relate to. This is a great feat given the complex and troubling themes discussed, which lead one to question their very perception of life itself.

Reviewed by JOSEPHINE ELLIOTT

MSc student in Medical Anthropology, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford. Address: 64 Banbury Road, Oxford, OX2 6PN. Email: [josephine.elliott@anthro.ox.ac.uk](mailto:josephine.elliott@anthro.ox.ac.uk)

**DAVID LE BRETON**, *Sensing the world: an anthropology of the senses* (translated from the French by Carmen Ruschiesky, with a preface by David Howes). London etc., Bloomsbury 2017. ISBN 978-1-4742-4602-6.

At the very start of this book, David Le Breton writes, ‘before thought there is feeling’ (1), since one experiences the world first and foremost as embodied. His work is a culmination of almost two decades (1990-2006) of reading, observing, reflecting and translating a wide range of daily sensory experiences gathered from both historical and ethnographic sources.

Carmen Ruschiesky’s English translation of this work from the original French follows Le Breton’s lead in travelling the difficult path of studying sense and sense-making. Le Breton and Ruschiesky are both aware that, even when confronted with similar surroundings, the senses are perceived through symbolic systems. Words grant recognition to perceptions, though not all sensory experiences are reducible to words. Sensory perception escapes language when one has to describe ‘the taste of a liquor, the pleasure of a caress and an odour or a painful sensation’ (13). Thus, there is both speculation and symbolism in looking for sensory meaning.

Le Breton’s work moves beyond the dualism involved in studying the techniques of the disciplined body as in the case of Foucault, in which there is an inclination to treat the body as an object and/or approach the ‘lived body’ phenomenologically. For Le Breton, one overcomes the dualism of existence and perception by studying the body-as-lived, which is unknowable in any absolute sense. In a sense, as David Howes notes in his preface (ix), Le Breton’s methodological approach is based on ‘sensology’, which emerges in relation to knowledge about ‘sensories’. That is, one senses the world first of all, and not all senses are socially developed. To engage with Le Breton’s writing is to make a sensorial and affective journey of the five senses of sight, sound, touch, smell and taste.

Le Breton carefully outlines the different approaches to studying the senses. He dedicates five out of the seven chapters to the five senses severally and traces the history, spirituality, vocabulary, sociality and limits of each sense. For Le Breton, sensations are perceptive and give rise to knowledge. In his chapter ‘From seeing to knowing: sight, the projective sense’, he acknowledges the knowability or the omniscience of the visual world, which unfolds for the viewer with indifferent ease. One believes in what one sees, and the knowledge it generates has its own historical and cultural context. For instance, taking the example of Hinduism, he refers to *darshan*, the process of the devotee being granted ‘sacred sight’ of the deity. Thus, often one sees what one wants to see, with little precision being given to an



‘objective’ reality. However, the gaze is far-reaching and objective in the way that it explores even what is out of reach of the other senses, like touch. In exploring, sight seldom acts innocently, for it lays claim to what it sees and is ‘nothing unless the subject is more or less used to using their eyes’ (45). Blindness, then, is not only perceived as the inability to see but also as a deprivation of the ability to ‘understand, weigh, compare and discriminate’ (33). As Le Breton notes, sight is more fixed than sound, which can be transient.

In his chapter ‘Listening to the world: hearing, the sense of understanding’, Le Breton explores the temporality of sound, which is contrasted with the *entendu* or the ‘ability to be understood’. The *entendu* makes sounds more lasting if one immerses oneself in the sonic sensibilities. According to Le Breton, however, sound lacks the malleability of touch and sight. Seldom does one have control over what one hears, which makes hearing a ‘defenceless process’: even when the listener does not wish to hear, the sound does not escape his or her ears but penetrates against the listener’s will (63). ‘Noise’ is as captivating as any other sound and, with technological progress, it infiltrates our lives with its constant presence. However, what constitutes ‘noise’ varies, and Le Breton, citing R. Murray Schafer (1994), notes that Jamaicans had no objection to the sound of machinery, unlike people from Switzerland, New Zealand and Canada (76). Anthropologists like Rodney Needham (Needham 1967) have referred to the sounds that create ritual transactions and that transport the mood to manifestations of the celebrated event or ceremony. Music, such as Sufi music, for instance, has the power to create moments of trance that are again dependent on personal divinity and the spiritual hold of that music on the listener, the meaning and emotions that the listener comes to associate with it. In other words, it is a ‘learned’ behaviour (86). In some instances, one sound might be used to block out other sounds, as when one uses earphones to listen to music. Similarly, there are also instances when silence can be a sign of anxiety that heightens other sensory experiences. For some people silence brings calm, while others feel exposed by the absence of familiar sounds that the mind is accustomed to. Silence could evoke a sense of emptiness, for among the Tuaregs of Kel Ferwan near the Nigerian city of Agadez, ‘conversations at certain hours is a weapon against the peril of silence’ (80).

In his chapter ‘Skin deep: touch, the sense of contact’, Le Breton argues that touch, though often ignored as a ‘secondary sense’ by philosophers, is the most important of all the senses, its deprivation leading to the absence of love and fulfilment. He writes, ‘to lose the sense of touch is to be robbed of any possibility of autonomous action’ (97). There are innumerable metaphors and vocabularies that use skin as a site of understanding, meaning that touch is also semantic: we ‘extend a helping hand’, ‘hit it off’, feel ‘touched by a story

that moves us', and sometimes offend people by 'rubbing them the wrong way' (119). However, even in the absence of language, touch has value, for it conveys emotions and helps individuals connect with others. As Le Breton says, 'the blending of bodies that makes touch the essential sense of sexuality is an attempt to temporarily overcome separation by engaging the others in shared pleasure' (120). Skin is known to be the most personal of all organs, as unsolicited touching can be considered an intrusion on the skin which translates into an intrusion of one's privacy. For Le Breton, skin has the power of care and healing, and for the child it starts as a mark of affection and love. On the other hand, unlike the other senses, the skin creates boundaries, restricts touch, arouses feelings of disgust, violence and discomfort, and defines intimate spaces.

In his chapter on 'Scents of smell and other: smell, the sense of transition', Le Breton argues that smell is the least documented sense because it is difficult to articulate. Sometimes, odour is dependent on body metabolism and varies based on the time of day and the health of the body. Odour that feels good, like the smell of the perfume and incense sticks, inspires trust, sanctity, spirituality and erotic pleasure. Nobody is indifferent to odour, a 'faint air that envelopes objects' (135). It lingers in the air but has no precise place, yet it mingles with our imagination, thus endowing it with meaning. Thus, sensual and moral knowledge is associated with odour. For instance, in American culture, personal body odour, such as the smell of sweat, bad breath, urine, etc., is a sign of low cultural status, hence one deodorizes to suppress smell; among the French it is a sign of interiority, and the phrase 'I don't smell him' indicates mistrust. Recent efforts towards cleanliness, according to Le Breton, symbolize the 'moral hygiene' that is expected from citizens through disposing garbage, maintaining gardens, teaching children habits of cleanliness, etc.

Odour is also important because it 'gives vitality to taste' (180). In his chapter on 'Savouring the world: from taste in food to the taste of life', Le Breton stresses that taste is perceived through the cultural prism and thus generates most evocative notions of ethnocentric biases. Eating is a sensory experience wherein the mouth acts as a frontier between the interior and the exterior (196). Food has cultural identity, its presentation being as important as its taste, while the company of others also adds value to eating it. Flavours are preferred over blandness, though blandness has a special meaning in some cultures as reflecting harmony; the religious texts such as the Bible and Quran ~~faiths~~ define god's virtue as sweet, and hunger and satiety are feelings that are socially actualized. Sexual pleasure and eating are also closely related: thus, 'committing the act of flesh entails, symbolically, having

to consume the flesh of an illicit partner' (227). Thus, the sensory act of eating is morally charged.

The most common metaphor that goes with taste is that 'we are what we eat,' giving rise to ideas of disgust. Disgust is what exists beyond the thinkable, threatening identity and creating limits to perception. Thus most societies detest cannibalistic practices as morally disgusting. The sentiments of disgust act as boundaries separating the self from the other. There is an intuitive reaction even before one has tasted something. As Le Breton says, 'the sharing of meals is aesthetic and moral before dietary' (249). Therefore, 'moral disgust is in effect a visceral reaction' (254).

I suggest that what marks the depth of Le Breton's writing is his ability to venture into the risky terrains of everyday presence, as well as the absence of common senses that make sensory experiences a matter of fact. His genius lies in his ability to consider silence, hunger and darkness as seriously as noise, satiety and sight. His methodology is also fresh in the sense that it rests on empirical knowledge of sense-creation, the ontology of the fleeting sounds and the fixation of vision. The book is a passionate work on the anthropology of senses, with an intelligible style of writing capable of reaching out to academic and non-academic readers alike.

## REFERENCES

- Needham, Rodney 1967. Percussion and transition, *Man* n.s. 2/4, 604-14.
- Schafer, R.M. 1994. *The soundscape: our sonic environment and the tuning of the world*, Rochester NY: Destiny Books.

Reviewed by SAUMYA PANDEY

MSc student in Social Anthropology, Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford, 64 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6PN.

E-mail: [saumya.pandey@sant.ox.ac.uk](mailto:saumya.pandey@sant.ox.ac.uk)

**CAROL A. MORTLAND**, *Grace after genocide: Cambodians in the United States*, Oxford and New York: Berghahn 2017, 300 pp. Hardback \$120. ISBN 978-1-78533-470-2.

Cultural memory after traumatic events is full of contradiction and selective amnesia, with a litany of different individuals reporting on factual occurrences and identifying where their experiences may intersect. Cultural memory within a refugee diaspora must also be

reconciled with pressures from a host country to abide by alien economic, political and social obligations. Speaking from my academic experience with Latin American cultural memory, collective trauma and migrant resettlement processes often obfuscate the capacity of a collective consciousness to render a single, universal story about a collective trauma. To my mind, reading Mortland's *Grace after genocide* provides us with the closest account of post-traumatic cultural memory's tangible consequences for a diaspora. By tangible consequences, I mean the frustration that stems from lacking the capacity to express unjust treatment convincingly. In other words, Mortland is able to demonstrate for the reader how cultural memory that is at odds with prejudice and factual representation is itself a daily ordeal that resettled refugees must survive (259).

A social anthropologist, Mortland's contribution to Southeast Asian studies and anthropology as a field is a significant piece of academic literature in many respects. The comprehensiveness of her work is astounding, drawn from conversations and observations in temples, schools, volunteer associations, homes and workplaces (2). Her thirteen-chapter anthology reads almost like a multi-sited ethnography, broken up thematically to illustrate progressive and overlapping experiences before, during and after Cambodian migrant networks created a diaspora. And, as a proper methodological precaution, she often charts her role in these ethnographic encounters in the first person by way of an introduction, a role that is characterized by the 'intentional or unintentional wounds that haunt human relationships' (5). Recalling how her own personal stake influences the stories of those she interviewed means grappling with a decolonized understanding of cultural memory and diaspora.

Aside from decolonization, these thematic chapters are all united around a common theme and her main argument: the story of Cambodian refugees is one of resilience and survival. Her compiled testimony from three and a half decades worth of semi-structured interviews and ethnographic work demonstrate that innocuous behaviour such as silence, dependence or an inconspicuous demeanour is actually a technique meant to preserve Khmer identity and withstand the pressure to assimilate totally (94). These results flout misconceptions about the Cambodian experience. *Grace after genocide* should not cause consternation. Amicability under the Khmer Republic and resettlement are strategies. The desire to resist assimilation was not always virtuous. Khmer familial dynamics often incorporated a man's responsibility to control his wives and children. Misogyny and abusive punishments meted out to wives and children ('traditional Khmer constraints') are sometimes seen as excessive among refugee households. Mortland reports that most Khmer are still shocked at the American 'over-reaction' to domestic violence (121). Again, her decolonized

methodology plays a key role in filtering out judgements rooted in a moralized cultural relativism. That does not mean that she is willing to overlook fabrications or exaggerations.

Academics cannot go so far as to say that cultural memory is subjective, a point that Mortland's work with Cambodian memory and diaspora makes markedly clear. She makes a point in one of her chapters of excoriating a memoir à la *The Killing Fields* that played fast and loose with the facts of what actually happened under the Khmer Rouge. To her, 'these stories about the reality that occurred are painful gifts to those fortunate enough to have escaped such suffering' (81). Mortland's captivating portrait is also a painful gift. Charting Cambodian life through a brutal Khmer Republic, heavily guarded Thai refugee camps and 'sink or swim' resettlement programmes in the United States, she manages to describe these human relationships in the diaspora with broad strokes and incisive detail. Having read her work, I have a stronger understanding of the Cambodian experience and of decolonized ethnography as a methodology.

Reviewed by VICENTE LOZANO LOVELACE

M.Sc. student in Migration Studies, Oxford Department of International Development, Queen Elizabeth House, 3 Mansfield Road, Oxford, Oxfordshire, UK OX1 3TB. E-mail: vicente.lovelace@kellogg.ox.ac.uk

**ANNAMARIA MORTESCU-MAYES** and **MARCUS BANKS** (eds.) *Visual Histories of South Asia*, New Delhi: Primus Books 2018, 314 pp. USD 71.95, Euro 55, Rs. 1495. ISBN 978-9-3865-5244-0.

The status of visual materials in the social sciences in South Asian countries may seem bewildering at times. In particular, budding academics and young researchers are often faced with the question of what to do with such materials and how scholarly they are. In mainstream disciplines such as sociology and social anthropology, the obligatory question concerning them is, 'What is sociological (anthropological) about them'? Nevertheless, one can reference a growing number of academic works that have ventured into the study of the visual arts, media and culture of South Asia, predominantly in India. For instance, Christopher Pinney, Tapati Guha-Thakurta and Karin Zitzewitz have made explicit contributions in the areas of the history of art, photographs and visual culture. There is extensive work on modern technologies, visual media and the emergence of a new visual regime in India by scholars like Purnima Mankekar, Arvind Rajagopal and William Mazzarella. Yet researchers who adopt visual research methods and deal with this subject

matter have to make extra efforts to convince their peers and find a place within the mainstream disciplinary framework. Hence, one is forced to ask whether disciplines like social anthropology in South Asia are visually challenged? To back up this provocative question, one might explore the fear as well as the discomfort in dealing with visual materials, a fear partly derived from the inherent techno-magical ambiguity of visual materials and the complexities of the camera that have been analysed by Christopher Pinney in his book *Photography and Anthropology* (2011) and by John Tagg in *The Disciplinary Frame* (2009). This localized fear might have developed from the persistent lack of cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary practices, but on the other hand there might be some references justifying disciplinary concerns regarding the visually overburdened culture of the region. By not denying the facts and practices of undertaking visual research in different disciplinary domains, one can ask to what extent visual studies are theoretically grounded and methodologically informed. To take the question further, while it might be possible to consider some thought-provoking and critical works on visual culture and performance, these same works might be considered ‘soft research’ (soft sociology or anthropology) in the social sciences scholarship of South Asia. Thus, starting out from the thesis that South Asian sociology and social anthropology are suffering from visual blindness, the volume *Visual Histories of South Asia* co-edited by Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes and Marcus Banks offers a way forward to overcoming this intellectual challenge.

The editors’ aim is to break the frozen boundaries in the social sciences in dealing with the visual. The volume reiterates the need to refresh the theoretical and methodological underpinnings on which sociologists and anthropologists rely in studying visual culture and practice in South Asia. The other key promise the volume makes is to explore history through visual elements, thus providing access to existing and possible future frameworks of visual research in the quest for historical knowledge. To mark history’s timeline and key themes, visual documentation in the colonial period remains significant, but soon the visual appearance of pre-colonial and mythical elements becomes prominent, as underlined by the various layers of exploration in the book. Motrescu-Mayes and Banks offer a visual dimension to Indian history and underscore the importance of visual research in comprehending its contemporary socio-cultural and politico-religious aspects. They thus contribute to the attempt to turn text-based scholarship in the direction of visual research.

In his foreword to the volume, Christopher Pinney cautions against falling into the trap of dichotomizing text and image, or the *seeing* and *un-seeing*. Taking his concern into account, it is imperative to realize that disciplinary domains in South Asian scholarship suffer from a

blindness such that the question of seeing and un-seeing appears irrelevant. Elsewhere Pinney (2011) discusses the tension between photography and anthropology and elaborates on the historical trajectories of photography's centrality to that discipline. From the colonial period to contemporary anthropological practices, the ambiguity over the use of visual materials continues in respect of its contextual dimensions. For South Asian sociology and social anthropology, therefore, the task is to overcome visually challenged scholarship, instead of harping on the question of seeing or un-seeing.

In his own chapter in the volume, entitled 'An Archaeology of Visual Practice', Marcus Banks explicitly refers to the challenge that western academia is still faced with to justify the social impact of visual research. He underlines the growing pressure on visual scholarship in the contemporary 'funding regime' and 'audit culture', which is discouraging and alarming for those wishing to conduct in-depth social research. Moreover, he invites young scholars to think about 'slow research' as a way of acquiring greater insights, particularly in investigations involving visual materials.

The other chapters, not just that by Banks, incorporate a fair number of illustrations, not only to extend the texts, but also invoke some systematic explorations. For instance, Denis Vidal presents illustrations of Indian tribal paintings and popular works of art to unravel the complex dynamics of elitist exhibitionism, cultural commercialization and artistic ethnocentrism. Similarly Josefine Baark analyses the iconographic expressions of the Maratha Durbar Hall at the Thanjavur Palace Complex in south India in order to understand the visual economy of Indo-Danish diplomacy. The visual narratives help in unfolding European influence on the politico-economic structure of colonial India upon the arrival of the Danish East India Company in 1620. Imma Ramos's photographs, taken as part of her doctoral research on the Kamakkhya temple in Assam, provide an excellent overview of the visual politics of menstruation, birth and devotion. In her chapter, she shows how the images help explain the layers of meanings of these historically significant sculptures. In respect of the growing discussion about image production and colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent, the aspect of representation has always been challenged. However, Thomas Simpson takes a provocative path in this volume, suggesting that the representational images produced and presented by colonial administrators were not univocal, but rather fragmented, hence offering a multiplicity of meanings. According to Simpson, the attempt can be associated with the foundational visual ethnographic practice of colonial anthropologists in South Asia.

The colonial history of India allows one to explore three crucial aspects of the socio-cultural development, social status, gender dynamics and construction of the mass of the

population. The volume provides an impetus to researchers to begin a systematic visual journey exploring these vital domains. Thus Teresa Segura-Garcia's chapter 'Picturing Indian Kingship', Xavier Guegan's attempt to understand Indian masculinity through photographs and Adrian Peter Ruprecht's analysis of the visual languages taught to the Indian masses by the Red Cross Society are all of value to the creative researcher. Another set of scholarly engagements with visual culture and performative politics is presented in the chapters on sports and politically provocative cartoons by Souvik Naha, framing Simla and the politics of iconography by Siddharth Pandey, on the visual appearance and representation of international delegates by Aaron Bryant, and on the use of new media in the contexts of religious politics and explicit nationalism by Ronie Parciack.

Extending beyond India, co-editor Annamaria Mortescu-Mayes examines the ancient roots and routes and possible local-to-local dialogues in South Asia by discussing early photographs of Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) to explore the perpetual nature of antiquity. She offers some possible perspectives for using archived visual materials and visual research methodologies in interpretative research.

This volume can be considered a landmark whereby visual researchers can declare their rejection of their disciplinary godfathers for the sake of making dynamic progress and thriving in the production of critical scholarly initiatives. The fact that the editors of this volume promise to contribute to the wider context of South Asian visual and historical scholarship, which covers rich thematic and conceptual grounds, permits sociologists and social anthropologists in the South Asian academic sphere to take a step towards overcoming the fear of and discontent regarding visual research. However, this volume also whets the scholarly appetite to delve further into a wave of comprehensive visual cultures that not only share historical commonalities with colonial India, but also explicitly demonstrate the latter's peculiarities. In contemporary South Asia, a wide-angle lens is needed to capture nationalist distinctiveness and everyday visual practices across borders.

## REFERENCES

- Pinney, Christopher 2011. *Photography and anthropology*, London: Reaktion Books.  
Tagg, John 2009. *The disciplinary frame: photographic truths and the capture of meaning*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Reviewed by RATAN KUMAR ROY

Doctoral candidate, Department of Sociology, South Asian University, Akbar Bhawan, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi, 110021 India. Email: royratan.sanjib@gmail.com



**ALEX RHYS-TAYLOR**, 2017. *Food and multiculture: a sensory ethnography of East London*, London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 176 pp. £84.99. ISBN: 978-1-4725-8116-7.

*Food and Multiculture* may be somewhat vague as a title for this book, as it sounds rather dry and clinical. The title misleads the reader as to the contents of what they are about embark on, namely a visceral journey through a selection of London's eateries, one that plunges the reader into a combination of vivid descriptions and theoretical analysis that outlines a sensory-rich version of the city that, though familiar, has been relegated to the background of daily life, as Rhys-Taylor suggests. The author uses this work to bring the 'sensoria' back to the fore in order to illustrate the many mechanisms that underplay something as frequently overlooked as a takeaway meal.

The author's chapter on 'Halal katsu wraps' is one such example. Rhys-Taylor examines this 'hybrid dish' of a bread-crumbed chicken sandwich with curry sauce, often eaten hurriedly by white-collar workers from the nearby financial district—who Rhys-Taylor amalgamates into a generic 'carbophobe' called 'Charlie'—and traces the historical pathways that lead to its creation and the emotive reasoning as to why it is being sold at a particular stall in a London market.

Utilizing taste and smell as research tools and catalysts of discovery to tie together the rich theoretical and analytical backdrop with which the book is written, Rhys-Taylor organizes the work into eight sections. Each section uses a food item as a starting point for discussion, beginning with chili to explore ethnicity and issues of integration and appropriation; halal chicken katsu wraps to better understand the interplay of historical trajectories and the exchange and dialogue involved in a cross-cultural community with a multi-layered identity; the 'moral panic' that can be generated by sensationalized media, as shown with the horse meat scandal; and how fried chicken, and most importantly its smell, is deeply associated with race and class, and conversely how the dish can form a basis for a community in the margins. Chapter six follows the sad life-cycle of the quintessentially English jellied eel, showing how memory is deeply intertwined with food, while the last two chapters offer Rhys-Taylor reflections on those who came before, in which he 'digests' them. The author also includes a short note on methodology, his personal relationship with food and some of the issues he faced in conducting his research (such as persevering in acquiring a taste for jellied eels, which is to be commended).

The interdisciplinary cocktail used to explore how urban life is lived through food, by utilizing vignettes of ethnography to propel each chapter, gives the reader a well-rounded introduction to the world of 'sensoria and sensibilities' that has been marginalized in many examples of urban studies. The use of food as a prism through which one can understand the intersectionality of ethnicity, race, class, politics and economics allows the reader to see how a simple daily and ritualized practice and/or experience is heavily laden with meaning, politics and history. The contemporary heterogeneity of food culture in London speaks volumes about the people who partake in it, whether they are producers, cooks, hungry office-workers or teenagers on a budget.

The study eloquently relays what the subjects themselves seem to articulate subconsciously. As Rhys-Taylor argues, 'it is at the level of the non-discursive, or the sensuous, that we get a taste of the broader range of processes that are shaping the culture of contemporary cities' (39). This is further illustrated in the poignant story of Raheem, an Iraqi migrant, who enjoys the jellied eels 'Tubby Isaacs' has to offer, but with the shadow of the memory of seafood dishes that are inextricably linked to a place that is fixed in the realms of nostalgia, no longer attainable, but capable of being conjured up by a mouthful of jellied eels from a street vendor in London. This element of nostalgia and memory is further illustrated by John's story of his split life between Italy and England and his strong affinity with a place that is so removed from him. John's old age prevents him from travelling to Italy, but the food culture he acquired through his late wife's family continues to maintain his 'powerful' bond with the Amalfi coast. Stories like these add flavour, as it were, to Rhys-Taylor's argument, illustrating the nuances of food culture and how people identify with it.

The 'fly-on-the-wall' method of collecting ethnographic data was fruitful, as well as necessary, as one unpleasant encounter involving a giant snail suggests (142). It leads to illustrative and occasionally amusing interactions, such as the one in 'Heat of the moment', when the author happens to stumble upon an argument that ends rather comically in the disgruntled party chewing on a very hot chili in defiance, thereby causing themselves a great deal of discomfort. The book would have been enriched still further had additional ethnographic examples been used and if more of a voice had been given to those who were observed and depicted. As the author has spent years working on this book, there must have been more encounters which have remained undisclosed to the reader. Overall, however, Rhys-Taylor reminds the reader that, even in a bustling and congested city such as London, the brief pause given to food and its consumption is laden with memory, meaning and ritual.

Food forms the backbone of our days, and the food choices we make say a great deal about us as individuals and as members of a community. After all, we are what we eat.

Reviewed by SUHAILA AL BEHANDY

MPhil student, Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford, 64 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6PN. E-mail: suhaila.albehandy@anthro.ox.ac.uk

**ARND SCHNEIDER** (ed.), *Alternative art and anthropology: global encounters*, London: Bloomsbury Academic 2017, 239 pp. Hardback £19.99. ISBN 978-1-4742-3124-4.

In *Alternative art and anthropology: global encounters*, Arnd Schneider initiates a dialogue between artists, scholars and curators to map the growing relationships between these two hybrid fields. Contributors from a wide range of specializations and geographies explain their individual and collaborative artistic work in their own words. The reader is invited to reflect on the global exchange between contemporary arts and anthropology as a conceptual tool to understand both artistic production and the anthropology of art, which needs to be complemented by a renewed emphasis on alterity beyond simple binaries of ‘self’ versus the ‘other’ to generate its full epistemological and practical potential (21). Moving away from the hitherto central Euro-American conversation, Schneider links a variety of perspectives from countries including Japan, the Philippines, China, Bhutan, Indonesia, Nigeria, Mexico, Chile, Mexico and Ecuador, as well as transnational communities such as the Filipino diaspora in Chicago. Overall, the book is very enjoyable to read and presents a range of new conceptual and practical perspectives.

Anthropology is certainly the main academic discipline occupied with the discussion and understanding of otherness, using fieldwork as its main method. However, drawing on the recent revival of ontology initiated by anthropologists such as Philippe Descola, the author maintains that ‘fundamental differences of knowledge acquisition and representation are proposed between Western modes and certain other forms of thought’ (2). He touches upon the ongoing shift in art, observing that other ontologies have also entered contemporary art and that artists are now engaging ‘directly with alterity and epistemes different from the West’s’ (2). Thus, Schneider draws our attention to the crossover, both conceptual and methodological, of anthropology and contemporary arts using ethnography as the main approach. He invites the reader to think about the interchanges between art and anthropology

no longer as a simple exchange between the two, but in a reconfigured shape (17). Schneider presents 'translation', or the possibility of communication, as a means to go beyond alterity. In this sense, anthropology and art can both be understood as translation tools attempting to communicate alterity without losing their distinctiveness. Noting that the 'ignorance of other traditions of thought and theorizing continues to support the hegemony of central, metropolitan notions' (11), he seeks to redress imbalances in the global discourse about art and anthropology. Thus, questioning the notion of 'contemporary', he convincingly shows that this concept is historically and culturally contingent and consists of 'multiple partners and disciplinary traditions or temporalities, multidirectional and across different parts of the globe', whose traditions and notions of art and anthropology are different on the global scale (17). Hence, in creating a platform for transnational exchanges that are no longer restricted to the West, the book brings other traditions of contemporary art and anthropology to the centre of the debate.

The conceptual and theoretical framework is reflected on throughout the book. The seventeen chapters are divided into a range of essays, almost all written on collaborative works exploring the interconnections between anthropology and art. They are followed by interviews with the editor and discussions by the contributors who explore these ideas in greater depth. The plurality of views and the alternation between the essays and conversations prove to be very fruitful in providing a comprehensive understanding of the multiplicity of approaches and practices in art and anthropology. A number of photographs add valuable visual material to support the contributors' descriptions. The book's conversational language facilitates the accessibility of the complex abstract ideas. Furthermore, the questions the editor asks mobilizes the readers' imagination, inviting them to reflect on possible answers.

Across the first eight essays, contributors range from established to younger artists, curators and scholars, including Shinichi Nakazawa (Japan), Tomoko Niwa and Tadashi Yanai (Japan), Lili Fang (China), Adeline Ooi and Mella Jaarsma (Indonesia) and X. Andrade (Ecuador). For example, in Chapter 2, Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, the curator of African art at the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, presents four young African-born artists who 'engage with contemporary personal and public memory tied to place as well as collective history' (29). They demonstrate reflexive experiments and fieldwork processes in their practices, as they negotiate complex and fragmented worlds. Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi argues that 'the ethnographic turn in contemporary art is not restricted to certain contexts or geographies' (29). As an illustration of this statement, in the following chapters,

artists use a diverse range of media, including photography, sound, performance and workshops, and they explain the challenges encountered in the ethnographic field. They constitute insightful examples of the way creativity is key in navigating through different conceptual fields in their attempts to translate alterity.

The final essays focus on wider collaborative projects. In Chapter 11, Almira Astudillo Gilles explains her work in organizing two collaborative paintings by Filipino artists based in the Philippines and by Filipino Americans from Chicago. By digging into the practicalities of the collaboration that produced two murals for the Erehwon Center for the Arts in Quezon City and the Fields Museum in Chicago, she expands on the crucial negotiation – which is not without its challenges and tensions – between contributors who conceive their identity in completely different ways but who need to come to terms with one another in order to produce the collaborative work. The artwork is thus a process rather than a final object. Chapter 13 echoes Chapter 11 in being an essay on the collaboration between artists and curators from Switzerland and Bhutan. In 2010, FOA-FLUX, Zurich, and the Choki Traditional Art School, Thimphu, initiated an exchange project to explore the processes at educational sites dedicated to contemporary European and Bhutanese Buddhist art traditions (163). The collaborators, Annemarie Bucher and Dominique Lämmli, based in Switzerland, and Sonam Choki, based in Bhutan, reflect on the central reason behind the exchange, which is: ‘how to consolidate and transform tradition without destroying its agency’ (168). An interesting outcome of the encounter between Bhutanese and Swiss artists and teachers is the observation of their distinct notions of art and teaching concepts. Individual artistic authorship and research, as well as critical reflection on aesthetic norms, were prevalent among Swiss students. By contrast, the approach of the Bhutanese students focused on their traditional paintings and the oral tradition comprising skills and techniques handed down for generations (172).

The final chapter prominently illustrates the idea of multidirectional dialogues in the work of the artists of ‘Conversación de Campo’ (Field Conversation), a collaborative network of four Chilean artists and anthropologists working in Chile, Mexico, Germany, the Netherlands and Britain. Their fundamental method is conversational, which they define as a ‘horizontal exchange of subjectivities’. Their aim is to reach a cross-disciplinary and global audience, using art and ethnography as tools to create meaning and reflect upon it, not as ends in themselves (217).

With its substantial theoretical framework and rich range of empirical examples, this book is a key text for students, academics and practitioners in areas such as anthropology,

visual anthropology, the anthropology of art, museum and curatorial studies, cultural studies and art history.

Reviewed by NINA KHAMSY

MSc student in Social Anthropology, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford,  
64 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6PN E-mail: nina.khamsy@gtc.ox.ac.uk

**LUCIEN SCUBLA**, *Giving life, giving death: psychoanalysis, anthropology, philosophy* (Studies in Violence, Mimesis and Culture, translated from the French by M.B. DeBevoise). East Lansing (Michigan): Michigan State University Press 2016; x, 367 pp. ISBN 978-1-6118-6208-9.

In his endorsement on the book's cover, Michel Deguy describes Scubla's writing using the words 'combat', 'tournament', 'polemical bravery' and 'force'. This description of this uncompromising, sharp and radical book could not be more to the point. Imagine the fight of the century: one man enters an arena filled with giants, ready to fight them all, and, after a merciless battle, he remains the last man standing.

Lucien Scubla's weapons, which he aims to use to turn modern Western thought on its head, are the biological and cultural realities of maternity, namely the fact that women alone can bring children into this world. Armed with this evidence, Scubla extends an intriguing invitation to his readers. He challenges diverse scientific disciplines and schools of thought, including, but not limited to, philosophy, anthropology, psychoanalysis and feminism in his attempt to counter relativism and radically re-think the foundations of classic theories of human organization and social and gender relations.

Firm in his belief in the existence of universal schemas that "govern all natural and cultural phenomena" (p. 135) and that develop "spontaneously in all societies, in accordance with the same principles, without therefore being uniform and immutable" (p. 135), Scubla asks: What if all grand theories of social science and humanities had something in common, namely that they wrongly dismissed the ways in which attachment, desire, kin and social organization are governed by women's power to give birth and produce offspring and by the masculine envy of that ability?

Scubla demonstrates that, while aiming to describe the drivers of human relationships, psychoanalytic theories based on the Oedipus complex reduced women to sexual objects much like studies of kinship and alliance reduced women to objects of exchange between

male-dominated kin groups. He shows the influence of maternity in shaping social relations, kinship and ritual and emphasises that, notwithstanding its near total omission from Lévi-Strauss' kinship atom, filiation, and particularly the relationship between mother and son, is the foundation of kinship and that women are the bearers of continuity between generations.

*Giving life, giving death* challenges readers to venture beyond contemporary western thought, which the author frames as "at once individualist and egalitarian, enamored of diversity and hostile to distinctions" (p. 157) and which supposedly "exhibits weaknesses and inconsistencies that popular ethnology and its bogus relativism have made still more disabling" (p. 157). Rather, academics should aim at integrating and unifying the sciences and acknowledge that "[b]ehind the proclaimed supremacy of the male over the female, one cannot help but perceive, when all is said and done, an implicit recognition of the superiority of the feminine gift of life over the masculine gift of death" (p. 149).

In aiming to deconstruct academic tropes, contradict grand theories and create a new way of looking at universal phenomena, Scubla, much like Freud in *Totem and taboo*, scrutinizes a broad variety of academic schools and disciplines, engaging with academics such as d'Anglure, Aristotle, Barry, Compté, Devreux, Dumont, Freud, Gauchet, Godelier, Girard, Héritier, Héran, Hocart, Jones, Lacan, Lévi-Strauss, Malinowski, Maranda and Maranda, Moisseff, Reik, Róheim, Schreber and Testart. In his wide-ranging study, he includes numerous ethnographies of village structure, marriage, kinship and social organization, ritual, especially initiation rituals, and labour organization of from diverse parts of the world. In his investigation, he draws, inter alia, on the Dogon of Mali, the Omaha of Nebraska and the Baruya of Papua New Guinea. Scubla analyses Bororo village structures, Australian totemic rites, couvade practices and cooking processes among the Sara of Chad, alongside tales like the Brother Grimms' Hänsel and Gretel, religious understandings and clinical studies.

The author is extremely diligent in his reviews of others' contributions. Searching for the chink in their armour, he analyses, probes and tests them until, sometimes in half sentences and minuscule details, he finds the gap in the argument that allows him to give the kiss of death to the theory, render its incompleteness visible, expose its weaknesses and contradictions and leave its pieces exposed, pieces that can then be sorted for their validity and re-arranged. His multi-disciplinary approach and his aim to make a valid contribution not only for psychoanalysis, anthropology or philosophy, but for all sciences is fascinating.

Scubla calls on academics to remember undeniable natural differences as the bases of kinship theory in order not to be stuck between "confessing to utter powerlessness and defending an arbitrary inequality" (p. 164). Simultaneously he remarks that scholars should

remember that “culture is not external to nature (...) it is a modality of it” (p. 209) and that “humans are by nature cultural beings” (209).

Scubla criticizes feminist thinkers for disregarding the cultural and biological fact of maternity and remarks that a passion for equality should not lead to a denial of real differences (p. 116). He also criticizes feminists for neglecting due diligence when drawing up their arguments and states: “One thinks of feminists who conflate two religions, each of which has its own special character, when they ascribe to the Judeo-Christian tradition a will to enslave women, forgetting that in the Gospels all female figures are positive, and seeming not to notice that it is, after all, in the Christian lands that feminism first appeared and developed” (p. 163).

Drawing on Marika Moisseff’s work, he remarks that there is a hierarchy between sexes and generations that has its foundation in the asymmetry instituted by maternity and in the consequences of masculine envy aiming to correct this natural inequality.

One of his main concerns is to demonstrate the various ways in which rituals consolidate violence and the sacred and how the male giving of death through ritual, hunting and war and the female giving of life through childbirth are interpreted and negotiated in religion, ritual and practices in various societies. Scubla demonstrates how rituals such as initiation into male societies or the practice of *couvade* are ways to negotiate male envy of the female ability to bring children into the world and their desire to dispossess women of this unique power (p. 88). Initiation rites into male sodalities, alongside ritual killings, therefore mimic a woman’s ability to give birth. Here, “the fiction of being born from the man is a nullification of birth from the woman” (Reik, [1919] 1931, p. 146, n.I. in Scubla, p. 176) and an attempt “to obtain from the initiation ritual a capacity for giving life equal to or greater than the one that nature has conferred upon women” (p. 176). *Couvade* practices try to mediate the tendency of fathers to see the newborn as a “stranger” and “intruder” and to restrain the impulse to “kill and devour” the newborn (p. 167).

Scubla bases many of his ideas on the work of Alain Testart, the only contribution he does not dismiss. After a thorough review, he remarks: “Everything considered, the validity of Testart’s law seem to me firmly established. It is one of those rare laws, in due and proper form – indeed perhaps the only such law – in which anthropology can take pride” (p. 134).

Testart’s law holds that the sexual division of labour is not based on nature, but on a trans-historical ideology, a social construction, involving the symbolism of blood and the taboo against mixing “menstrual blood and the blood of the hunt (or that of the sacrifice), that is, the blood *involuntarily* shed by women and the blood *deliberately* shed by men” (p. 132 original



emphases), a taboo found in very different societies. Testart suggests that “killing, for a man, is the equivalent of giving birth for a woman” (p. 177) and that women are generally excluded from professions that require the shedding of blood (hunting, surgery, the army etc.) and from using weapons that draw blood, at least during their menstrual period. To Scubla this law has been undervalued in the academic community because, “far from being an arbitrary interpretation, the principle of keeping different kinds of blood separate has served as the basis for the sexual division of tasks in the human species as a whole” (p. 140).

Scubla’s work is radical and unforgiving in its criticism. It offers a thorough, but not exhaustive review of other works (Scubla neglects, among others, bodies of literature on feminism, as well as current studies of masculinities and femininities), sheds light on their perceived shortcomings and makes a valid enough proposal, but its weakness lies in fighting a one-man battle aimed at uniting the sciences by ripping apart the cornerstones on which many schools of thought are based while dismissing those works it could have benefitted from.

What is the scene that unavoidably follows combat? What is left after the carnage of a battlefield once the adrenaline and sounds of colliding bodies and clashing weapons subside? What comes to mind is the silence, maybe the wind, the lifeless bodies on the ground, a whole world at an apparent standstill. In the dust that settles, those who were victorious struggle to stand on trembling legs, struck down by exhaustion and overwhelmed at the shifting sands of an uncertain future.

I was shocked and intrigued by Subla’s book, and it left me wondering whether the fine line between being critical and destructive should not be erased, precisely because, if one is the last person standing, all that is left is a fundamentally different outlook, but with nobody to learn from or converse with.

Reviewed by LUISA SCHNEIDER

Doctoral candidate, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford. Contact: [luisa.schneider@spc.ox.ac.uk](mailto:luisa.schneider@spc.ox.ac.uk); St. Peter’s College, New Inn Hall Street, OX1 2DL, Oxford.

**NIKOLAI SSORIN-CHAIKOV**, *Two Lenins: a brief anthropology of time*, Chicago: Hau Books, 2017. 150 pp. Hardback £19.00. ISBN 978-0-9973-6753-9.

The concept of time in anthropology is a topic that has often been discussed on the side-lines but seldom analysed centre-stage. Scholars such as Laura Bear have pushed the boundaries of the study of time in works such as *Doubt, conflict, mediation: the anthropology of modern time* (2014a) and *Capital and time: uncertainty and qualitative measures of inequality*

(2014b), but time was either still a secondary consideration or was lumped together with economics, materiality or globalization. This is not the case with Ssorin-Chaikov's *Two Lenins*, which approaches time not as a conduit for analysing other anthropological subjects, but as an entity worth studying in and of itself. Ssorin-Chaikov argues that 'time – in [an] anthropological perspective – is a culturally specific construct that combines ways of structuring daily activities with broader meanings about the past, present, and future' (3). Furthermore, he argues throughout his book that *time* is not a single entity. There are numerous different types and rhythms of time – including gift time, narrative time, chronological time, etc. – which coexist, running sometimes in continuity, sometimes in conflict with one another.

To make this argument, he contrasts the stories of two Lenins, one an Evenki hunter nicknamed *Lenin* because of certain similarities to the late Soviet politician, the other the latter himself. The author looks at chronological time through the development of modernity among the Evenki. Here, what modernity brings is both a giving and a taking of time. Modernity has given Evenki hunters the opportunity, the time, to expand their skill set and create businesses for those who choose to take this step, such as Lenin. This as modernity is a giving of time, so is it a taking of time. Before modernity, Soviet helicopters would come and transport the children from the Evenki nomadic sites to school each year, a journey which only took two hours. After modernity, the helicopters stopped coming, and the journey was lengthened into a several-day hike through the snow-laden forests.

Time, both as a narrative and as a gift, is seen in the story of the late Soviet politician Lenin, who allowed Armand Hammer, an American businessman, to bypass the usual bureaucratic red tape to set up trade which allowed Hammer to access resources from the Russian mines and allowed famine-ridden Russian villages to access much needed wheat. This is both gift time and narrative time because of the problems Ssorin-Chaikov encountered while researching the story. Ssorin-Chaikov's primary source is Hammer's own account of what happened, as well as newspaper articles, Lenin's diary and visits to the Lenin Museum in Moscow. Time as narrative, then, is an issue because Hammer has control of his side of the story and therefore can potentially manipulate the results.

Ssorin-Chaikov addresses this issue and explains his reasoning for relying heavily on Hammer's account of the story. Despite first appearances, it does not detract from the overall point Ssorin-Chaikov is trying to make, as it serves the purpose of problematizing our notion of time while also showing the multiplicity of time itself.

Throughout the book, the algebraic concepts of X and Y are used in an attempt to explain different types of temporality, which Ssorin-Chaikov explains as following one or more of three equations, either (1)  $X = Y$ , (2) X is Y, or (3)  $X \neq Y$ . In the first, different temporalities equal each other and therefore are cross-compatible ( $X = Y$  [and vice versa]); in the second, one temporality either is or becomes the other in such a way that the process cannot be reversed (X is Y [but Y is not X]); in the third, the two temporalities are completely incompatible with each other ( $X \neq Y$  [and vice versa]). Ssorin-Chaikov argues throughout the book that different temporalities can at different times embody each of these three equations (and potentially others too). A tangible example of the  $X \neq Y$  case can be seen with Soviet time and Modern time, which are incompatible with each other, thereby forcing Russia after the October Revolution to switch from the Julian Calendar to the Gregorian Calendar in order to align with Modernity, and thus eliminating the two-week time difference between Russia and those who followed Global Standard Time.

In this book, Ssorin-Chaikov attempts to look at time as a fluid and situational idea. Pulling concepts from those such as Fabian, Lefebvre and Briggs, he constructs a notion of time not as an entity in itself, but as a multiplicity of entities. Not only can time be gift time, capitalist time, Modern time, etc., but each of these can form multiple times in and of themselves. There can be multiple Modern times, and gift time can depend on whether Mauss's or Hobbes's concept of the gift is followed – something which Ssorin-Chaikov investigates.

Although occasionally Ssorin-Chaikov can be criticized for spending too much time – pun intended – on seemingly obscure aspects of time or straining himself to find different temporalities, what he accomplishes in the span of this short book deserves applause. It becomes clear in later pages that the study does not exceed what is necessary to create an anthropology of what so many of us take for granted: time itself.

## REFERENCES

- Bear, L. (2014a) *Doubt, conflict, mediation: the anthropology of modern time*. Chichester: Wiley.
- Bear, L. (2014b) Capital and time: uncertainty and qualitative measures of inequality. *British Journal of Sociology* Vol 65 (4), 639-649.

Reviewed by JOSHUA POTTER

MSc student in Social Anthropology, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford,  
64 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6PN. E-mail: Joshua.Potter@stcatz.ox.ac.uk

**PAUL-FRANÇOIS TREMLETT, LIAM SUTHERLAND and GRAHAM HARVEY** (eds.), *Edward Burnett Tylor, religion and culture*, London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017; viii, 219 pp. ISBN 978-1-3500-0341-5.

This volume is a collection of ten papers which revisit the theories of religion and culture of Sir Edward Burnett Tylor. Tylor's idea of religious evolution or animism, which suggests that religion evolved from a rudimentary belief in spiritual beings animating the world, has faced severe criticism since it was published. This collection aims to re-assess Tylor and his work, exactly one hundred years after he passed away, to highlight the importance of both to the contemporary study of religion.

The book is divided into two parts, each containing five papers. Part 1 engages with debates about Tylor's theory, while Part 2 explores new ways in which his work might be approached. Most of the papers focus on Tylor's 1871 two-volume work, *Primitive culture: researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, art and custom*. Two papers reference *Anahuac*, Tylor's eloquent 1861 travelogue about his observations regarding religion and practice in Mexico. The papers in both parts intersect with each other, focusing on Tylor's definition of religion and his ideas on animism, spiritualism, survival and myth. The papers all share the similar goal of emphasizing the relevance of Tylor's work to the contemporary study of religion, either by suggesting new approaches based on critiques of his theory, or by focusing on the contribution of his original work. Three common themes run throughout the collection. The first is that the merits of Tylor's work, such as his pioneering ethnographic methods in studying culture and religion, have been overlooked. The authors argue that this is because most of the previous attention given to his work has been directed towards his highly criticized evolutionary framework. Secondly, it is argued that Tylor's evolutionary theory and thought on the psychic unity of humankind have affinities with the present-day cognitive approach to religion. Thirdly, myth and other spiritual practices or beliefs are not survivals, as Tylor suggested. Instead of departing from the evolutionary, non-utilitarian, situational or narrative perspective, the authors contend that these practices should be seen as the result of oscillations along a continuum between changing forms of culture.

The collection uses Tylor's theory to demonstrate theoretical points and to suggest new perspectives and approaches to the study of religion. Although the arguments of the ten papers focus on the theory of one of the founders of anthropology, the book's aim is clearly to target those who study religion rather than those who study anthropology. Nevertheless, the book provides some exceptional anthropological insights. For example, James L. Cox challenges Tylor's predetermined ideas about the origins of religion and suggests that the agency of religious practitioners should be taken into account when studying religion. Graham Harvey references Hallowell's (1960) work and advocates a fresh approach to understanding animism and fetishism as an alternative to the rather 'static' notions put forward by Tylor. Following Hallowell, Harvey argues for an ontological understanding of the possibly dynamic relationship between humans and the material when studying

religion. Harvey's reference to Hallowell's ontological perspective is perhaps surprising because it indicates that anthropologists were already becoming aware of the alternative ontological perspective to understanding culture nearly sixty years ago; it is therefore not simply a contemporary discovery.

Throughout this collection of papers, the contributions of those who have had a great influence on anthropology are frequently quoted and compared with each other, including James George Frazer, Émile Durkheim, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Rodney Needham, Clifford Geertz and Bruno Latour. This helps to familiarize the reader with theories of religion, belief, myth and modernity by some of the key thinkers in anthropology. Overall, one does not need to know Tylor's theory very well before reading the book, as his theories and ideas are outlined in detail throughout. These elaborations provide more than a basic understanding of Tylor's work. On this basis, the book can therefore be recommended to anthropology audiences, especially those who are new to the discipline.

As an anthropology student at the University of Oxford, I fully appreciate the editors stating at the beginning of the book that, 'although acknowledged as a founding figure, Tylor's position in the anthropological canon is an odd one, severely circumscribed, [and] rarely acknowledged' (2). Tylor devoted much of his time to the University. He was its first reader in anthropology at Oxford, and then the discipline's first professor there. However, probably because of his evolutionary approach to culture, he rarely comes at the top of the reading list in the contemporary School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography in Oxford. The present collection's efforts to move beyond his evolutionary framework and highlight the relevance of his work to contemporary studies, both within and outside the discipline of social anthropology, should therefore be appreciated.

## REFERENCE

Hallowell, A. I. 1960. Ojibwa ontology, behavior and world view, in Stanley Diamond (ed.), *Culture in history: papers in honor of Paul Radin*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 19-52.

Reviewed by LAI HUNG YU

MPhil candidate in social anthropology, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford, 51 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6PE. E-mail: [lai.yu@anthro.ox.ac.uk](mailto:lai.yu@anthro.ox.ac.uk)

**ROY WAGNER**, *The invention of culture*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016, 208 pp. ISBN 978-0-2264-2331-9.

Roy Wagner broke new ground when he first published *The invention of culture* in 1975. At its core, the book advances the argument that 'culture' does not exist as an objective 'thing', but that people constantly create, or 'invent', culture by manipulating existing symbols to

create new meanings in order to make sense of their social worlds. Wagner further argues that anthropologists have reified the idea of culture through their attempts to study it, and he takes issue with the tendency to approach culture as an objective reality that can be evaluated, quantified and represented in writing as a seamless system or structure. Wagner does not, however, aim to define the term 'culture', but instead argues that any single definition could only ever be one interpretation among many. In this vein, he aims to expose the role anthropology has played in the objectification of culture and to further underscore that the discipline has deprived our understanding of the creative processes underlying its creation.

In order to demonstrate the ways in which 'culture' has been defined as an object of study by anthropologists and its subsequent reification in anthropological writing, he begins by interrogating the uses and implicit meanings of the term in Western academia in an attempt to bring to light the inherent assumptions behind its employment within the social sciences. He argues that preconceptions of culture in the West have, in part, influenced how anthropologists approach it and that, 'when an anthropologist studies another culture, he "invents" it by generalizing his impressions, experiences, and other evidences as if they were produced by some external "thing"' (26). Wagner thus contends that 'culture' is invented by anthropologists as a 'prop' to aid them in their study of social phenomena (8).

Moving on, he argues that culture is constructed from symbolic expressions, which similarly do not have innate meanings, but must be understood in context. Further, any symbol can, theoretically, be interpreted differently by individuals in the same social milieu, the meaning of which can only be understood in the particular context in which they are employed. He contends that within a society symbols are constantly mobilized and acted upon, and his argument rests heavily on the distinction between his notions of 'invention' and 'convention'. To Wagner, invention 'changes things, and convention resolves those changes into a recognizable world' (53). In other words, conventional symbols organize social worlds into systems that are shared by groups of people. Yet, any of these symbols can be given new associations or meanings, and thus are invented by individuals, which ultimately alter the conventional corpus of symbols and their previous connotations.

He uses advertising strategies in the United States as a case study to describe these processes in action, since, 'as an interpretive medium, advertising is constantly remaking the meaning and experience of life for its audience, and constantly objectifying its products through the meanings and experiences it creates' (64). Wagner looks at the way in which advertising agents take certain common (or conventional) symbols and create novel meanings by emphasizing new relationships between symbols not previously associated, such as

notions of masculinity and racing cars, thus reinterpreting them and inventing meanings which, over time, will either become conventional or will be forgotten.

In the same way, individuals use their knowledge of well-known (conventional) symbols to make new connections (inventions) which then inform the conventional. What anthropologists might recognize as continuity can be explained by the continued presence of certain conventional symbols, but their meanings may not always stay the same, and this is one pitfall of anthropological approaches that Wagner takes issue with. Instead of imagining 'culture' as a single collection of symbols which have static meanings, he emphasizes that it is the constant tension between convention (what existed before) and invention (what comes into existence) that defines the creative processes underlying the creation of culture. Thus, his analysis rests on the dialectic between invention and convention, creativity and control, meaning and context, and the greater portion of the book is focused on the constant interchange between the individual and the social, the particular and the universal.

The idea of invention, however, does not refer to something that is fictitious or accidental, but to a phenomenon that 'must be taken very seriously, so that it is no invention at all, but *reality*' (71, emphasis in original). In this sense, he implores us to focus less on the fact that culture is invented, and rather to question *how* and *why*. He attempts to explain how culture is made and enacted by individuals, who are in turn influenced by larger forces within a society. In this sense, culture is not a determining force, nor are people autonomous actors who exist outside of conventional meanings. Finally, this same process of using conventional symbols to generate new meanings is the same process that anthropologists use to 'invent' culture through written representations.

The greatest drawback of the *Invention of culture* is perhaps the lack of clarification of the terms Wagner uses to support his arguments, which he acknowledges himself as the book's 'hazards of jargon' (xxvii). In particular, a clear theme that connects all the chapters is the concept of control. Wagner seeks to identify who controls culture and how individuals control change. For example, he argues that one of the primary reasons anthropologists invent culture is to 'control' their culture shock when they first arrive in the field (6). It is not always clear, however, exactly what Wagner is referring to when he uses the term 'control', and he does not offer any discussion of the term as he employs it, nor does he address its potentially multiple meanings.

Although Wagner's work is problematic at times, even controversial (particularly his assumption that all anthropologists are male), it has contributed significantly to ongoing debates concerning culture within the discipline of anthropology. His greatest contribution is

perhaps the idea that culture *cannot* be clearly defined. At the same time, he offers a new approach to understanding culture as a creative process. In many ways, Wagner's work was ahead of its time, not only foregrounding the critical debates concerning the representation of culture in writing in the 1980s and 1990s, but also setting the stage for some of the concerns that were later raised with regard to perceptions of personhood (78-80) and the ontological turn within anthropology (133-135). These questions are constantly revisited by anthropologists today, and thus his work remains relevant not only for looking back on how current anthropological thought has developed, but also for how we might continue this line of questioning in the future.

Reviewed by EMILIA GROUPP

MPhil student in Social Anthropology, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology,  
School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford, 64 Banbury Road, Oxford OX2 6PN.  
Email: emilia.groupp@anthro.ox.ac.uk



## FILM REVIEW

**OLIVIER JOURDAIN** (director), *Sacred Water*, Nameless Productions 2017.

*Sacred Water*, a film directed by Olivier Jourdain, examines female sexuality in Rwanda, particularly focusing on the coveted and mysterious ‘water’ that is sometimes released during female ejaculation and the role this has on traditional culture in this country. The film presents a fascinating perspective on sexuality, the female body and gender roles in Rwanda. The central personality of *Sacred Water* is Vestine, a woman who talks on a radio show and promotes dialogue surrounding this topic over the radio, in rural villages and in schools. Her exuberant screen presence gives the film a light-hearted atmosphere that renders more accessible what, in other situations, might be regarded as material difficult to present to a wide audience.

An important aspect of this film is how it promotes dialogue about the female body and sexuality. It celebrates the production of water as a way for women to experience pleasure and enjoyment from their bodies. This has important implications when examined in light of issues of sex and gender. Simone de Beauvoir is credited with developing the idea that one is not born a woman but becomes one (Butler 1986). This was taken further by other philosophers and anthropologists like Butler (ibid.), who emphasized that biology does not equal destiny, and Moore (1999), who described the role of performance in the generation of both identity and gender. *Sacred Water* incorporates these ideas by suggesting that the production of water contributes to a person becoming a woman. It is a part of their identity, something that young girls aspire to by incorporating traditional practices into their lives, such as lengthening their labia, in order to increase the amount of water they can produce. This reflects how body modification can be regarded as a type of performance that contributes to gender identity (Moore ibid.). Thus, this film is an interesting representation of how gender and biology can intersect and influence one another. With regard to gender roles, this film both pushes the boundaries of traditional gender norms and reinforces others. Despite its overall focus on the female body, much of the discussion of the production of water focuses on how it gives pleasure to men. In interviews during the movie, it is described how being able to elicit this form of orgasm is thought of as a way of expressing one’s masculinity and sexual prowess. Women discuss the importance of producing water, not just for their own pleasure, but for the pleasure of their husband or partner. Yet, on the other hand, it encourages men to take an active role in ensuring that a women orgasms and

produces water, thus putting the responsibility for a woman's pleasure in their own hands. Portraying these different perspectives is a strength of Jordain's film, for it emphasizes the complexity of sexuality, especially as these topics come to be more talked about, rather than regarded as taboo subjects.

The focus on the female orgasm can be examined in stark contrast to the more usual topics relating to women and sexuality in Africa, such as female genital mutilation. Bringing to the forefront a different sexual perspective is vital to understanding the heterogeneity that exists throughout the vast continent of Africa. However, the film may also run the risk of over-sexualizing its subjects, emphasizing physicality in a way that has the potential to add to existing stereotypes regarding the body of the African woman. This is perhaps especially apparent during scenes where there is an emphasis on sound and movement, scenes that feature traditional dancers and the movements of people's mouths as they create rhythmic noises which make it impossible not to focus on the physical element of the subjects. This is combined with images of running water in the native Rwandan landscape that integrate the environment with the culture while also drawing attention to the base biological function being discussed. However, being aware of the stereotypes that might be strengthened by this film does not detract from its value but instead emphasizes the need for more dialogue and discussion about female sexuality and the woman's body in society.

In *Sacred Water*, Olivier Jourdain has taken a complex and deeply personal topic and made it accessible. He has opened the door to discussion about what being a woman, and what being a man, entails in Rwandan society. It represents a fascinating foray into sexuality, showing in particular how traditional customs and beliefs are affected by twenty-first century views and ideals.

## REFERENCES

- Butler, J. 1986. Sex and gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, *Yale French Studies*, 72, 35-49.
- Moore, H.L. 1999. Whatever happened to men and women? Gender and other crises in anthropology, in H.L. Moore (ed.), *Anthropological theory today*, Oxford: Polity Press, 151-171.

Reviewed by CHARLOTTE RASTAS

Student in the MSc in Medical Anthropology, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford. Email: [charlotte.rastas@gtc.ox.ac.uk](mailto:charlotte.rastas@gtc.ox.ac.uk)