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## Comparative Essays

### Pilgrimage as a celebration of *communitas* and an arena

Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi and Günther Schlee

#### On the uniformity of cults

In the course of his field research at the pilgrim centre of Faraqasa, a small town located far from the road network in the Arsi region of Oromia in Ethiopia, Sven Nicolas<sup>1</sup> observed that the place was sacred for Christians and Muslims alike. Both the traditional Christian and the corresponding Muslim practices may well be based on older rites and religious beliefs, with mutual observation and imitation as probable contributing factors. Hence, those who conjure up the popular image of Ethiopia as a stronghold of Christianity in the face of Islam and as the site of religious rivalries will be amazed at the similarity in the pilgrimage practices of the different denominations.

Apart from the interdenominational uniformity of the cults, Nicolas was struck by their nationwide network and coordination. The concept of *ritual* or *institutional feeling* runs through his analysis – similar to its use in architectural discourse or by Perniola (2003) for Catholicism. Those who share this feeling most probably are speaking of an aura or a *genius loci*, and all this may not be far from Turner's concept of *communitas*.

By using the term *ritual feeling* and without automatically suggesting a syncretic melting of dogmas, Nicolas hopes to be able to interpret as an affinity the relationship of different religions in the context of their parallel practices at a site jointly considered sacred. In fact, religious forms that transcend denominational differences exist practically independently of their content. Harmony in practice and a shared *ritual feeling* suffice. No further consensus is required. Different ascriptions of meaning at sacred places are not an obstacle to their peaceful common use:

The essential aspect of ritual feeling is not 'feeling together', nor the dialectic between the you and the us, but the relation with an 'it', with a third term that is reducible neither to the subjectivity of a single nor to that of a community. (Perniola 2003: 324)

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<sup>1</sup> Sven Nicolas is a post-graduate student at the *Graduiertenkolleg* 'Representation-Rhetoric-Knowledge' in Frankfurt (Oder). His supervisors are Werner Schiffauer from the European University Viadrina and Günther Schlee from the MPI for Social Anthropology.

In Nicolas' reading of Perniola's text the following elements form the basis of the ritual feeling inherent in the Faraqasa pilgrimage phenomenon:

- Cultural concepts and ritual practices that indicate similar attitudes on the part of Muslims and Christians to fundamental religious questions irrespective of denomination: these include shared or even universal notions in relation to prophecy, ecstasy, revelation, charisma, and blessing, as well as the expression of common social values such as seniority and the family.
- Substitutive attitudes and ideas: these apply first and foremost to alternative interpretations of cult history, religious cult identity, and the ritual topography of pilgrimage sites, of which there are frequently Christian and Muslim varieties. The emerging spectrum of interpretations is rarely marked by competitiveness but instead coincides with a disinterested ignorance about the respective divergent interpretations.
- Overlapping concepts which combine the first two points: ritual practices and Faraqasa-related narratives are often identical up to a point, from which they branch out into differing variations. An example of this is the universal honouring of local springs as holy waters. Their ritual use as healing water and in sacred ablutions is also identical. However, while Muslims consider all holy water reservoirs which are to be found here to be *zemzem*, akin to the desert source of Prophet Mohammed, Christians associate at least 14 different types of *tsabal* water with angels and saints, which are honoured accordingly.

At the same time numerous attempts have been made by religious competitors to introduce alternative structures in opposition to the existing pilgrimage networks, in other words to recruit followers from Faraqasa. But in the end these movements were also obliged to resort to the established stock of *ritual feeling* in their efforts at legitimation and at discrediting the Other. Attempts at alternative interpretations ultimately came to fit into the pattern of the three points mentioned above, and furthermore to confirm Perniola's opinion of the randomness of content once certain religious forms are adhered to.<sup>2</sup>

With his findings on the far-reaching parallels between Christian and Muslim practices and their nationwide uniformity, Sven Nicolas contributes to an overall picture marked by works such as *Wombs and Alien Spirits* by Janice Boddy, about Sudan north of the Nile, and that of Harald Aspen on spirit mediums and their clients in Christian Amhara, as

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<sup>2</sup> The previous six paragraphs were abridged and edited from an unpublished report by Nicolas to his thesis adviser.

well as studies on spirit cults in the Kenyan region of Oromo (Dahl 1989, Aguilar 1994). Here among the *zar* and *ayaana* cults<sup>3</sup> in a vast territory stretching beyond the confines of nation-states and religious communities we find not only similar figures in the 'spirit pantheon' (or rather pandemonium, since it concerns the spirits in their entirety and not the gods) but also standardised healing careers, involving the elements of crisis, sickness, visiting the spirit healer, contact with the spirit, its appeasement and possible exploitation, and the advance of the sick person to a ruler of spirits and a healer.

The quest for healing by those possessed, which is frequently manifested in the development of a *modus vivendi* with the possessing spirit or spirits, is difficult to separate from the complex of pilgrimage and holy places that makes up the ritual topography of northeastern Africa. People travel from great distances to visit a charismatic healer in a quest for healing: they make a pilgrimage to him or her. Pilgrimage to a holy place is undertaken for the same reason.

For the Christians, traditionalists, and Muslims among the Oromo, pilgrimage and healing are linked to the same degree but in different ways to the generational class system (*gada*) that tends to set the tempo for unrolling cycles of rituals (Schlee 1992, 1998), and even more closely to the *qallu* institution, which was originally a hereditary priesthood and is expressed in a variety of guises and reflexes<sup>4</sup> among the sub-groups of the Oromo dispersed throughout Ethiopia.

The *qallu* and their clientele from afar are the topic of Thomas Osmond's doctoral thesis "Possession, identités et nationalisme oromo: le cas des dignitaires religieux Qaalluu en Éthiopie".<sup>5</sup> Osmond demonstrates that the *qallu* institution was originally a key institution in Oromo societies and in a certain sense almost superior to the *gada* system, since *gada* officials depend on the *qallu*'s blessing, while no dependencies exist the other way around. As a result of the mostly violent incorporation into the Ethiopian empire, the Christianisation of a few Oromo groups, and the Islamisation of others parallel to the continued existence of pre-Christian and pre-Islamic belief systems and social orders in other places, the *qallu* institution was to develop in very different ways in different places. With an in-depth study of the eastern part of Shoa, Osmond explored these processes from Wollega in the North-

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<sup>3</sup> *Zar* and *ayaana* are different emic concepts for spirits. The former is used by speakers of many different languages, the latter by the Oromo. These cults focus on possession and the control of spirits which have come to possess someone.

<sup>4</sup> By 'guises' Schlee means cultural forms which go back to the same models but may not be recognizable at first glance. 'Reflexes' are similarities due to reactions to a model which may be found in combination with important differences. The metaphor is derived from a reflected image, which is the other way round.

<sup>5</sup> The thesis was accepted by the University of Marseille/Aix en Provence with distinction in December 2004. Bruno Marinelli was *directeur de thèse* and Günther Schlee *président du jury* and editor of the combined report of the examination committee.

west of Ethiopia as far as Arsi and Guji<sup>6</sup> in southern Ethiopia to the Boran on both sides of the Kenyan border. He succeeds in relating the common substratum of the *qallu* institution to such disparate phenomena as a charismatic healer – a transvestite who appears to draw some of his fascination from his marginalisation – Muslim leaders, and the bearers of hereditary titles in the machinery of imperial power. Modern possession cults occupy a prominent position in these *qallu* derivatives. Certain elements of their uniformity can be explained by their common origin in the *qallu* institution.

### ***Communitas* versus arena**

The fairly harmonious picture drawn by Nicolas of the peaceful co-existence between Christians and Muslims at the same pilgrimage site, inspired by the same numinosum (Otto 1923), is reflected in various theories. The history of sociology and social anthropology has been characterised from the beginning by attempts to employ a functionalist approach to the study of religion and religious phenomena. With the same casualness with which religion is considered ‘good’<sup>7</sup> for everyday purposes, for sociologists it serves social cohesion, which is simply an academic disguise for the ‘good’. For Durkheim, the progenitor of both disciplines, the object of religious devotion was simply an idealised self-representation of society translated into the transcendental realm.

‘Religion’ can be divided into belief and ritual practice.<sup>8</sup> ‘Belief’ refers to what can be verbalised, i.e., the sum of a religious community’s mystical and historical traditions, including their systematising and rational elaborations in dogma and law. Ritual, on the other hand, is the area that cannot be reduced to words, although they are a contributing factor. It is here that non-verbal actions play a variable but indispensable role. Pilgrimages are an element of ritual practice, which does not exclude the fact that they imply, evoke, and reinforce religious ideas, and interact with them in various ways, but on the contrary includes it.

What has been said about religion in general applies also to its sub-domains of ritual practice and here, in turn, to pilgrimages. The latter are explained from a functionalist perspective as production sites of human cohesion. It was in the works of Victor Turner that the emergence of *communitas* during the pilgrimage and at sacred sites found its classical expression. In her doctoral thesis “Ritual Construction of the

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<sup>6</sup> Shoa, Wollega, and Arsi are former provinces which are now parts of the Oromia region of Ethiopia. Arsi (in its other sense), Guji, and Boran are names of Oromo subgroups.

<sup>7</sup> Only ‘religions’ in the plural is considered occasionally a disintegrative factor, especially in the context of more recent predictions of cultural conflict (‘clash of civilisations’) and previous ‘fundamentalist’ debates.

<sup>8</sup> As a universal category, the term ‘religion’ is controversial. Undisputed, however, is the fact that *belief* and *ritual practice* are found in all human groups in one form or another.

'Community' and the Arena. Multiple Identities of a Mazu Pilgrimage in Taiwan" (Lu 2005), Mei-huan Lu<sup>9</sup> dismantles this perception and asks what other social processes take place in the course of pilgrimage and whether they can be regarded as arenas for controversial debate. Although she may not be the first to do so, she adopts a critical attitude towards a firmly established academic tradition, drawing from several recent works by other authors.

Lu looks into a variety of aspects concerning pilgrimage 'identities'. Territorially bound cults where outsiders were not permitted to hold office have progressed to become a cult sphere unbounded by administrative units, such as particular towns and villages, or marketplaces and their surrounding areas, or even by borders of established temple communities. Those who moved to Taipeh, and many whose origins are no longer of interest, all take part in the pilgrimage. Hence pilgrimage identity varies simultaneously in the minds of the old and the young or at different times along a scale ranging from territorial to open. In other words, its recruiting mode varies from group to group and from network to network. Various pilgrims perceive details of the pilgrimage differently: What exactly steers the palanquin, what takes place in the pilgrimage, at what point does the goddess determine the direction taken by the palanquin containing her image, and where do the carriers give the impression of following divine forces invisibly pulling or pushing the palanquin but in reality pursue their own ideas? The organising committee or village interests in alternative routes are suspected by certain observers to influence the course taken. In a sense each one of them forms their own image of the pilgrimage in their head.

*The palanquin chooses the way through the river instead over the bridge. Here, one can see the domain of 'communitas' in the sense of collective experience, but also of individual salvation.*  
(Photo: M. Lu)



<sup>9</sup> Doctorate at the Faculty of Sociology at Bielefeld University, 2005. The supervisors were Günther Schlee and Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka.

Another aspect of pilgrimage 'identity' is how participants are assembled. Their composition can be seen as an attribute of the pilgrimage, making it a pilgrimage of this or that group. 'Identity' can of course be applied to the individual pilgrim as well. What are the criteria for recruitment, how do pilgrims perceive their cohesion or internal distinctions? The question here is one of identity and could just as easily be defined as one of *property*. (Who belongs to the pilgrimage? To whom does the pilgrimage belong?) The possession of cultural property is the most controversial issue and contributes the most to the character of the pilgrimage as an arena. Who has the right to speak on behalf of the pilgrims? Who has the power to influence the image of the pilgrimage in the media? What has already been said in relation to the shifting of the pilgrimage on a scale from territorial to open or unbounded is also relevant to the question of ownership and degrees of legitimacy. Many who take part today in the former territorial cult (pilgrimage as interaction between territorially bounded temple communities) are neither linked by local origins nor family relatives to those who perceive themselves as the genuine cult community and consequently claim certain privileges.

In her treatment of identity, Lu progresses systematically. She not only deals with identities that are conspicuous but also those that lead her to the conclusion that they are irrelevant or have at least become so. Various ethnicities exist in the coastal area of Taiwan she describes. The native inhabitants were pushed out of this strip of land, which was taken over by the Han. The Han are divided into the subethnicities the Hakka and the Minnanese, who are in turn subdivided into dialect groups. Clans are another major factor. Indeed, interest in patrilineal genealogies and clan origin is now in the throes of a revival. In the context of pilgrimage, however, ethnicity and clan membership seem to play only a minor role. The characteristic dimensions of pilgrim identity lie elsewhere.

Although the pilgrimage is primarily a Minnanese affair, Hakka participants with a good command of Minnanese are rarely conspicuous. Exclusiveness is uncalled-for, at least as far as the majority of ordinary pilgrims is concerned, since a divinity lives from her followers. The proverbial recipe for the success of a temple could be applied to pilgrimage: "Need a god and need people" (Lu 2005: 63). There is a dialectical relation between the power of devotion to a god and the number of his devotees. In the final analysis a god's share of power depends on the devotion he is shown. Those who feel outraged by this may cry out like Goethe's Prometheus:

Ich kenne nichts Erbärmlicheres unter der Sonne als euch Götter  
Mühsam nährt ihr von Opfertagen und Gebetshauch eure Majestät<sup>10</sup>

Unlike Prometheus, Lu does not insult the gods. However, her description of this reciprocity also attributes the majesty of the gods to human devotion. Particularly impressive in this context is the story of how Mazu, originally a human of mediocre status (a childless woman who died in 987 A.D.), was promoted to increasingly high realms of divinity with the award of new titles by earthly authorities (all the way up to 'Empress of Heaven') in recognition of her divine intervention in human fate. The spiritual experience of the power of devotion to Mazu is thus expressed in her progressive apotheosis and, it may be assumed, the resultant expansion of her cult community. Furthermore, intensifying the practice of belief leads more people to personally experience the power of the Mazu cult, thus completing the circle of positive feedback. The production of feelings and the construction of knowledge are key aspects of the pilgrimage. By participating in pilgrimages and conducting intensive interviews with other participants Lu gets very close to the feelings produced by marching on foot to a state of collapse and then finally overcoming this or by crossing a river when the palanquin takes a surprise change of direction.

The portrayal of how the palanquin containing the image of the goddess chooses its route belongs to the sphere of knowledge construction. The barely visible movements of the carriers, determined by requested favours or knowledge of such requests, are of prime importance here. Without obvious coordination<sup>11</sup> decisions are taken and facts accomplished, both of which are in turn subject to a variety of competing interpretations. At this point a social phenomenon, i.e., a phenomenon beyond the individual, is produced, about which knowledge is then socially constructed. This knowledge, however, is inconsistent. Different constructs compete with one another in the arena or simply co-exist in mutual disregard.

Similar to other knowledge constructs, attitudes to and positions on Mazu and Baishatun are subject to social incentives and constraints as well as the constraints of logic and plausibility. The limitations on raising the status of Baishatun as a sacred place are theological in nature. The goal of the pilgrimage beginning in Baishatun is a temple in Beigang, which is a step closer in the line of temple foundations and divi-

<sup>10</sup> "I know nothing more wretched under the sun than you gods / Arduously you feed on offerings and prayer whispers Your Majesty" (G. Schlee's translation).

<sup>11</sup> Referring to the splits in the palanquin carrier group, Lu describes how one carrier accuses the other of telling him to take a specific direction instead of leaving it to the oracle (*palanquin performance*: the repeated running back and forth with the palanquin, from which the direction to be taken is supposed to emerge without the intervention of human volition).

sions to the (ultimately mainland) origin of the Mazu cult. This gives the destined temple a higher status than the temple from which the pilgrimage sets out. If status promotion of Baishatun through religious public relations – desirable as that might be for regional development – was too successful, this hierarchy of holy sites might be levelled and the pilgrimage would be deprived of its destination: a paradox of success. A pilgrimage only makes sense if it is from a lower- to a higher-ranking place in terms of degrees of holiness.

Incentives, i.e., rewards for the victorious, are a precondition for power games in the pilgrimage arena. Some of these lie outside the arena. It is quite obvious that the organising committee cultivates relations with the administrative communities surrounding the pilgrimage and that business and regional development interests influence their decisions. For other actors, however, rewards and incentives are found exclusively within the sphere of the Mazu cult. A short digression to Africa will clarify the difference between inside and outside.

In northern Kenya, Schlee witnessed numerous controversies about the precise timing and performance of ritual practices on a pilgrimage of the Gabra to their sacred places in southern Ethiopia, where they hold their age group promotions at intervals of mostly two or three times 7 years. In one particular case a bitter argument broke out as to which lineage was to bring a milk vessel for the sacrificial offering. The core issue was one of hierarchy (seniority) between two rival lineages. Seniority is furthermore of major importance outside the ritual context of pilgrimage. On the whole this pilgrimage seems a suitable peg for a broader ethnography of the Gabra, since much of what is heightened in these two weeks is relevant to their ordinary lives.

The relationship between the loss and gain of status in the course of the pilgrimage and everyday life is fuzzier in the case of the Mazu pilgrim in Taiwan. In order to participate in the pilgrimage many pilgrims take holidays. If this is not feasible they have to give up their jobs in Taipei and look for a new one when they return. Apart from the temporal rivalry that exists between the two spheres, working or normal productive and recreational life seems to have little in common with life on the pilgrimage. Admittedly, those who are ill hope to be cured. What expectations, however, do healthy pilgrims have in relation to their ordinary lives? In most cases, the desired blessing is probably more diffuse – ‘success’, perhaps, or general well-being.

The annual pilgrimage clearly represents a pinnacle in the lives of many who make the journey from the city, similar to an adventure holiday for other people. A sense of achievement and feelings of sheer happiness remain in this sphere. Just as a surfer in the surf community or a glider in a group of gliders can gain recognition and experience a feeling of togetherness without it having an impact on the rest of their lives, the Mazu pilgrims have a social frame of reference within the

pilgrimage community independent of their achievements in life. Athletic aspects of the pilgrimage such as pride in the foot march are reminiscent of leisure sport. With the aid of films and Internet chat sites, everyone can repeat the experience of the pilgrimage community and the physical exercise in the privacy of their home for the rest of the year.

Can we speak here, in analogy to *recreational sex* (sex for the feeling of it that is of no consequence in relation to maintenance or inheritance claims and has little bearing on the rest of life), perhaps of *recreational religion*? Is it religion as a leisure-time activity? In the modern context this seems to be the case, at least where some of the more urbanised participant groups are concerned. The Mazu pilgrimage is a temporary exit from office life in Taipei. From this perspective 'modern' pilgrims distinguish themselves radically from those whose work and leisure cannot be separated in this manner.

### **Who owns the shrine? Rival meanings and authorities at a pilgrimage site in Khorezm (Uzbekistan)**

In the official Soviet reading of Islam, devotion to saints and pilgrimage to shrines was seen as a superstitious, un-Islamic 'survival' and became a specific target of anti-religious polemics. While the state provided the institutions of legalist Islam with an – albeit minor – official framework, the Islam of shrines was banned. The general revival of Islam that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union in Uzbekistan gave new impetus to local pilgrimages. Not only was there a huge increase in the crowds of visitors to the shrines that re-opened, but in today's nation-building process, pilgrimage and the veneration of saints are officially honoured as the cultural heritage of the Uzbek people. Famous Islamic saints, whose domain was once the territory of today's Uzbekistan, are celebrated as national heroes, and their shrines as symbols of national consolidation and identity. This change is visible at the institutional level with the inclusion of at least the larger shrines in the structures of official (i.e., state-regulated) Islam. At the same time, the local Islam of shrines is criticised by Islamic activists of Middle Eastern provenance as an attack on the 'pure teachings' of Islam. The positive attitude of political elites towards local religious traditions is most probably based on the position that contrary to Islamic 'fundamentalism' or Islamism (usually referred to in Uzbekistan as 'Wahhabism'), which are ranked as a danger to the state, local traditions are free of political dynamite. How these diverging secular and religious meanings are reflected at the micro level of a holy shrine will be illustrated in the following with a practical example.

The most important shrine today in the Province of Khorezm in west Uzbekistan houses the symbolic graves of two famous Islamic scholars, Abdulkadir Gilani and Yusuf Hamadani. Hence these shrines are vital

for Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi's<sup>12</sup> research. Gilani<sup>13</sup>, known by his honorary name of Ulli Pir ('Sublime Pir') is the focus of religious devotion among the local population. In a local governmental initiative, the completely dilapidated grave from Soviet times was restored from 1993 to 1994 and extended considerably. During Kehl-Bodrogi's field research in 2004, apart from the magnificent mausoleum constructed over the tombs the premises also included a new mosque, a kitchen area for the preparation of food offerings, recreation rooms for pilgrims, and the office of the chief imam. Furthermore, the complex contained a hotel, a war monument, a location for the local branch of the state 'Centre for Morality and Enlightenment', and a museum. The latter two institutions are richly endowed with state insignia. Apart from images of Islamic saints and teachers from earlier eras, photographs of the president and pictures of the national flag, state emblems, and the constitution complete with explanations abound. Decorating a pilgrimage shrine with national symbols bears witness to the state's intention of having a say in the significance of the site. The fact that the initiative to erect a new shrine complex came from the local government makes it clear that – similar to large shrines in other provinces – Khorezm was to have a place where religious, national, *and* regional identity could be manifested in equal measure.

Pilgrim motives are quite a different matter. The pilgrims come in particular to ask the saints for fulfilment of personal favours, to make or fulfil a vow, and in the hope of pleasing God by visiting the graves. The largest turn-out of visitors to the pilgrimage shrine is on Wednesdays, where according to belief Ulli Pir makes an appearance at the shrine. He listens to the wishes of all who come to him with pure intentions and later pleads with God for their fulfilment. Ulli Pir is attributed in particular with powers of healing the mentally ill (*ruhiiy kasal*). He has a reputation as a 'spirit butcher' and it is said that healers leave it to him to slaughter the evil spirits (*jin*) they exorcise from the sick.

A pilgrimage to shrines in Khorezm is undertaken alone or in the company of neighbours, relatives or colleagues. Pilgrims usually visit the grave upon arrival, which they kiss along with the doors and walls of the shrine in the hope of sharing in the sacred power of the place. After a short conversation with Ulli Pir, they receive a prayer blessing

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<sup>12</sup> Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi is a member of Department II (headed by Chris Hann) and responsible for the project "Saints, Shrines and Pilgrimages. Continuity and Change in Local Religious Traditions in Uzbekistan".

<sup>13</sup> Abdulkadir Gilani (Abdulqadir al Djalani, Jilani) was a theologian of the Hanbali school of law, and died in Baghdad in 1166. The Sufi order Qadiriyya bears his name (The Encyclopaedia of Islam I: 69). He is widely represented in legends and is said to be a frequent spiritual visitor to ecstatic Muslims in a state of trance as well as a medium to God in popular Islam. Anthropologists working on Africa, such as Thomas Osmond or Günther Schlee, come across this figure just as often as researchers on Central Asia.

(*potya*) from one of the numerous sheikhs present at the shrine in exchange for a voluntary donation. Those who bring a sacrificial animal in fulfilment of a vow have it prepared in the kitchen and subsequently eat it with their own group. Tradition has it that a full bowl of food is passed on to the neighbouring group. The extent of the relationship between the individual pilgrim groups, however, exhausts itself with this gesture. Similar to Sallnow's observations at a (Christian) pilgrimage site, there is no evidence here to show that the pilgrims themselves "aspired to a greater degree of interpersonal inclusiveness" (Sallnow 1981: 177). By practicing rituals in and with their group, which is constituted on the basis of existing social relationships, pilgrims remain rooted in the structures of everyday life. A "normative *communitas*" that might counteract this structure, as envisaged by Turner (1974) for the institution of pilgrimage, does not emerge here.

Built after the re-opening of the complex, the mosque located a mere 50 metres from the shrine is rarely visited by pilgrims. The official decision to build a mosque in the immediate vicinity of the shrine can be seen as a symbolic act, whereby the new state distances itself publicly from the Soviet reading of Islam that barred religiousness focused on shrines from 'official' Islam. Handing over responsibility for the state-controlled Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (*Uzbekistan Musulmanlar Idaresi*) indicates that the 'official' interpretation of Islam now includes its 'popular' dimensions. Its theologically well-versed representatives at the shrine (a chief imam, his deputy and several mullahs) ascribe a fundamentally different meaning to the place than pilgrims or local authorities. Their attempts to push their interpretation through leads to tension between the imams on the one hand and the pilgrims, sheikhs, and (secular and religious) authorities on the other.

The meaning of the place for the imams is first and foremost – similar to all sacred graves – that the existence of God can be experienced there with particular intensity: "one is close to God at the shrine". They are also of the opinion that addressing wishes to the saints is an offence against Islam, not unlike their attitude towards most beliefs and practices that determine the behaviour of the pilgrims at the shrine. The imams hold the sheikhs – and Soviet upbringing – responsible for the 'ignorance' of the pilgrims, accusing them of aiding and abetting 'superstitious' practices.

The sheikhs, whose office is hereditary, are the traditional custodians of the shrine and returned there after independence. Today their sole function consists in providing pilgrims with prayer blessings on request outside the shrine. They have no influence on its organisation, since they were obliged to hand over key positions (including administration and regulation of finances, sitting close to the tombs, control of the kitchen, and the slaughter of sacrificial animals) to the representatives of official Islam. If the latter had their say sheikhs would be barred from

even entering the shrine. However, their applications to the authorities to deny sheikhs access to the pilgrimage shrine for making a fool of the people, allegedly holding back donations, and other criminal behaviour, have remained without consequence. The secular authorities were not prepared to intervene at the shrine in favour of a legalist Islamic interpretation, an attitude the local representatives of the religious authorities seem to (or have been forced to) copy. The sheikhs on the other hand show their resistance by reporting imams to the authorities for corruption and an alleged immoral way of life and demanding their transfer.

The struggle for economic and especially symbolic resources is inherent in this controversy, which keeps traditional rivalries between two forms of religious authority alive, the one legitimised by descent, the other by acquired knowledge. It is at the same time a conflict of sovereignty over the interpretation of Islam itself. The imams cannot imagine a true Islamic way of life without observance of religious canonical law. For pilgrims and sheikhs, on the other hand, visits to the holy graves are a more integral part of their being Muslim than prescribed daily prayers or fasting in Ramadan. While the shrines are particularly overrun during the period of Ramadan, most pilgrims see no problem in celebrating food offerings during the day.

### **Some comparisons**

The shrine complex depicted above proves to be a place of intricate relationships between state nationalism and ‘popular’ and ‘official’ religion, and at the same time a space where the interpretation of Islam can be negotiated. The observations made about Ulli Pir, similar to many of those made by Lu (above) on the Mazu pilgrimage in Taiwan, thus support theoretical considerations in anthropology that see the institution of pilgrimage as “an arena for competing religious and secular discourses, for both the official co-optation and the non-official recovery of religious meanings [...]” (Eade and Sallnow 2000: xii).

Contested meanings comprise the domain of life that the pilgrimage primarily concerns. Is it really a matter of religion, is it a form of medicine (for those who primarily seek healing), is it a form of sport (as for those who overcome their physical limitations in walking)? None of these categories (religion, medicine, sport, etc.) being universal, we might encounter, in their stead, emic categories with different ranges of meaning in different cultural settings. And to the extent that is a religious matter, the material discussed here shows that theological differences may go along with shared ritual practices, shared holy sites, and shared ritual feeling.

Variation, however, is also found in ritual practice. The Mazu pilgrimage even has a way to produce ‘events’. No one knows in advance

whether the palanquin with the goddess will take the same route as last year or a different one.<sup>14</sup> Every turn the pilgrimage takes may thus become a topic for public debate. Other pilgrimages have a fixed route: is it important to pass certain stations in a fixed order, by a fixed route, possibly even at fixed times? Competition is only about perfection in the reproduction of what has been done before. "Take the same route as your ancestors, otherwise the path will remain waiting for you!", the Gabra were reminded on their march through the arid lowlands along the Kenyan/Ethiopian border on the way to their age-set promotion sites in 1986. Why do some rituals produce contingencies while others just unroll in a way that (successfully or not) aims at the perfect reproduction of the time before and the one before that one? Is inter-religious competition a factor which favours the production of events?

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## **Christian conversion in a changing world: confronting issues of inequality, modernity, and morality**

Mathijs Pelkmans, Virginie Vaté, and Christiane Falge

### **Introduction**

In this essay we discuss religious conversion in the contemporary world, arguing that the study of conversion not only provides insight into the complex changes of the religious landscape, but also challenges some anthropological ideas concerning the relation between religion, society, and the self. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Eastern Africa, Central Asia, and Siberia, this essay presents three (partly overlapping) aspects of conversion processes: 1) conversion as a strategy for dealing with social inequality; 2) conversion as a search for ‘the modern’; and 3) conversion as a response to ‘immorality’. In comparing the ethnographic cases, we also examine how conversion is tied to global asymmetries and the profound socio-political changes that impacted our field sites in the 1990s and early 2000s.

### **1. Missionaries, capitalists, and colonisers?**

The organisation of a conference on *Religious Conversion after Socialism* at the Max Planck Institute in April 2005 marked a growing interest among anthropologists in the Institute in themes relating to conversion. At present, at least seven researchers in both departments and in the Siberian Studies Centre devote their research (or a significant part of it) to aspects of religious conversion.<sup>1</sup> This interest does not reflect explicit recruitment policies, but rather seems to mirror important changes in the world order. In particular, the growing salience of religion in the contemporary world, in combination with a surge of missionary activity, has challenged the ‘old’ religious status quo (Casanova 1994). It has also defied grand theories concerning the secularisation and disenchantment of the contemporary world. But rather than a return to ‘religious traditions’, the observed changes seem to indicate that only particular (often novel) forms of religion are gaining ground (cf. van der Veer 1996). These novel forms, according to Berger, tend to be “passionate religious movements” (Berger 1999: 2). They are concerned less with tradition and ritual, and more with truth, charisma, and visions of the future. This is particularly true for the religions that are the focus of this essay – Evangelical and Pentecostal forms of Christianity.

The study of conversion is a strategic theme for understanding wider transformations of social and religious life and gaining insight into the

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<sup>1</sup> These researchers include, apart from the authors, Data Dea, Irene Hilgers, Lázló Fosztó, and Boris Nieswand. Information on their projects can be found elsewhere in this report.

ways individuals meaningfully cope with them. It is, of course, no coincidence that societies with high rates of conversion tend to be those in which grand projects of modernisation have run into disarray or have been overtaken by the destabilising effects of global capitalism. In this essay we compare studies of conversion in contexts that experienced significant and disruptive changes over the last decade. The Nuer in Ethiopia, the Kyrgyz, and the Chukchi in Siberia all experienced strong secularising pressures of socialism, which partly destabilised local religious traditions. Moreover, in the postsocialist era each of these regions has faced institutional crises which undermined the socio-economic underpinnings of life. In this context, it is pertinent to briefly sketch how the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a new world (dis)order relate to new missionary waves and people's religious quests.

It appears that the conditions of late-modernity undermine the taken-for-granted certainties by which people lived through most of history and that a purely secular view falls short of providing convincing answers to people's continuing existential problems (cf. Berger 1999: 11-12). The implosion of communism and the victory of neoliberal capitalism as a powerful but surprisingly empty ideology have increased the attractiveness of religious answers to complex problems (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000). Moreover, the disparities produced by capitalist expansion and the uncertainties produced by the disarticulation of labour, capital, and markets have created both the physical and the ideological environment in which Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity thrive. Growing Evangelical missionary activity is in an ambivalent relationship to the dynamics of global capitalism. While following the currents of capitalist expansion and Western influence (in Central Asia, the Middle East) and thriving on the ideology and mechanisms of the 'free market' on the one hand, they are often motivated as well by a critique of the 'corruptions' produced by this capitalist dynamic. In short, the churches that we study balance on (and prosper from) the junction of forces of globalisation and localisation – embedded in wider transnational networks yet vigorously adjusting religious messages to local concerns and translating them into locally contextualised vocabulary.

Whereas the nature of the new missionary waves and the attractions of Evangelical Christianity underscore the complex dialectics of the current global world order, conversion itself challenges anthropological ideas of religion. Anthropologists have come to see religion as tightly embedded in social contexts, as constitutive of social networks and of cultural practices. But if specific religions do enmesh individuals in larger networks, then how is it possible that people shift their religious affiliations? Part of the answer is that precisely because of the social qualities of religion, conversion occurs most frequently in societies that are experiencing rapid change, among people who are poorly embedded in social networks. However, it is also apparent that the most rapidly

growing religious groups are those that challenge the cultural and social embeddedness of religion.

Because of the complicated relations between religion, society, and self, the concept of conversion is itself rather slippery. On the one hand classical definitions of conversion as a “definite crossing of religious frontiers in which an old spiritual home was left for a new one once and for all” (Nock 1933: 7) are too narrowly focused on a (partly mythical) ‘Pauline model’, which sees conversion as an all-embracing personal transformation.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, such definitions imputed stable and absolutist qualities to ‘pre-’ and ‘post-’ religious adherences, which runs contrary to many conversion accounts. As Hefner argues, conversion assumes a variety of forms because it is influenced by a larger interplay of identity politics and morality (Hefner 1993: 4). Inspired by such views, there is a tendency to soften understandings of conversion and to present it as a ‘passage’ rather than a breach (Austin-Broos 2003: 1). However, the idea of conversion as passage seems to re-infuse notions of conversion with an individualist bias that assumes that converts are autonomous actors in an anonymous and pluralistic religious market. Indeed, it foregoes the social implications of the act of conversion. Even if conversion shares heuristic qualities with religious ‘intensification’ and ‘alteration’ (Wohlrab-Sahr 1999: 353), it seems warranted to reserve the term ‘conversion’ for a process by which the primary religious identification of people shifts (cf. Peel 1977: 108). Indeed, we advocate reinstating a part of the classic definition of conversion and seeing conversion as acts involving the crossing of conceptual and/or social religious boundaries or frontiers. The rigidity and porosity of these boundaries depend on many factors. Therefore, the cultural, social, and symbolic content of conversion and its implications will vary between different contexts.

## **2. The Chukchi of northeastern Russia: coping with inequality**

One recurring theme concerns how patterns of inclusion and exclusion underlie conversion, and, moreover, how new patterns are shaped by processes of conversion. Virginie Vaté’s study of processes of conversion among the Chukchi highlights these themes. Chukotka, the northeasternmost part of Siberia, is a territory one and a half times as large as France (737 700 sq. km.), with 53 600 inhabitants. This population includes 15 320 members of indigenous peoples, of whom 12 620 are Chukchi, a people ‘traditionally’ divided into reindeer herders and sea-mammal hunters. In the beginning of the 1990s, several missionary

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<sup>2</sup> The ‘Pauline model’ of conversion refers to the biblical story of Saul, persecutor of Christians, who on his way to Damascus had a spiritual encounter with Jesus. After this encounter he took on the name Paul and started his missionary work (See Acts 9: 1-19).

congregations came to Chukotka, mostly linked to Protestant denominations: Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, etc. Among them, Pentecostals have visibly been the most successful. Surprisingly, this success occurs despite the fact that, in the 19th century, Chukchi effectively resisted Russian Orthodox missionaries' efforts to convert them to Christianity, and also despite the fact that, in some places, Chukchi still practise some of their shamanic or animist rituals after decades of atheist policy under Soviet rule.

However, Chukchi have had to face the increasing pressure of Russian colonialism. Represented in the ethnographic literature as a warlike people, Chukchi actively resisted Russian expansion during the 17th and 18th centuries. In the 19th century Chukchis only had "a vague sense of belonging to the Russian Empire" (Znamenski 1999). But in the 1930s they became a minority in their own territory. For the Chukchis as well as for other indigenous peoples of Siberia, the advent of Soviet power has meant disempowerment: they have seen their economic activities collectivised and organised through a centralised state structure controlled by newcomers; their ritual practices were forbidden; they have been partly sedentarised; and children raised in residential schools faced isolation from their parents and were prevented from learning their native language and acquiring the technical skills related to the hunting or herding life. Even if Siberian indigenous peoples sometimes succeeded in coping with Sovietisation in a manner that could integrate their way of life, on the whole they were dismissed from the power of making decisions in many areas, including the education of their children. The end of the Soviet regime has not meant a radical change in that situation: the development of capitalism and local political power in the 1990s again excluded the indigenous peoples of Chukotka (Csonka 1998, Gray 2005). As a response to that situation, conversion to Pentecostalism among the Chukchis can be seen as an emancipatory strategy and a tool of empowerment. Indeed, by converting, people make an active choice and by the act of praying, converts feel able to have some influence over their life as indirect agents: God will listen to their prayers and change their life.

Linked to the wish to rebuild self-esteem, the choice of a new religion also aims at improving a collective or individual status. As a reply to exclusion, conversion is based on the religion integrating the values people look for and on offering a more prestigious position. In a context where Chukchis have always been viewed by the dominant ideology as 'primitive' (*pervobytnyi*) in contrast to civilisation (*tsivilizatsiia*) and culture (*kul'tura*), conversion to Pentecostalism means abandoning the devaluated status of pagan (*iazychnik*) without adhering to Russian-imposed values. Indeed, some of the reasons for the rise of Pentecostalism in Chukotka are a) the fact that Pentecostalism is not the state religion and the religion of the Russians; b) the fact that it is inscribed in

the globalised world and gives access to networks outside Russia (the missionaries come from Ukraine or are Americans with Ukrainian origins, belonging to the Slavic International Association of the 'Good Samaritan' Ministries). In that respect, conversion offers an anti-establishment position possibly strengthened by international support. It therefore allows Pentecostalism to fulfil the role of a new indigenous religion, potentially able to deal with indigenous claims.

Whereas conversion may be seen as a strategy of inclusion, it sometimes implies exclusion from the group the converts come from: the community often sees it as a betrayal and the convert's family often reacts in a negative way, rejecting that person, sometimes punishing him or her physically. However, even if the converts are sometimes excluded from their family or placed in a strained situation, they develop a new solidarity network through religion. This type of relation is expressed by a kin terminology: they are 'brothers and sisters in Christ'. Therefore, converts are integrated into a new 'faith-based' community. Concerning the problems faced in the family, the church develops a discourse of encompassment and salvation, expressive of the idea that this exclusion is only temporary and that they must rejoice since they are the ones who have been chosen by God and who will be saved. Furthermore, converts are encouraged to preach within their family and pray for the salvation (that is to say, the conversion) of close friends and family members. This is how Pentecostalism is being spread inside kin networks, from the young to the elders. Initially marginalised, Pentecostalism is now progressively being integrated as a part of the religious environment.

### **3. The Nuer of Ethiopia: becoming modern**

As mentioned in part one, the new world order is characterised by the more visible role of religion as well as by intensified Evangelical missionary activity in which the US plays a pioneering role. Postsocialist regions or countries such as Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, and Siberia are targets of missionaries; the legacy of state-imposed secularism makes them particularly 'needy' in the eyes of missionaries. Despite the local specificities of our ethnographic material, it appears that conversion is often tied to local ideas of 'backwardness' and geared towards a conceptualised 'modern' future. It is important to stress that in this text the term 'modern' does not refer to an objective set of characteristics, but to local people's *imaginations* of what this modern future looks like. These local constructions can be partly understood as efforts to imitate what appeared to have worked in the West or, as Donham has argued, as attempts "to reorder society by applying strategies that have produced wealth, power, or knowledge elsewhere in the world" (1999: xviii). Such tendencies were particularly clear in Christiane Falge's study of

conversion among the Nuer in Ethiopia. Here, one of the ways to reach these goals was to 'break with the past' through Pentecostal conversion. It is important to note that this 'reordering through conversion' was not about a missionary-induced 'mind change' that led to modern transformation, but was instead based on an active decision of converts, who viewed Christianity as a way to catch up with 'modernity'.

To understand these tendencies it is crucial to shed some light on the background of the people and the region. In encounters with missionaries from the 1950s until the 1970s the Nuer started to associate Christianity with modern technology by imagining a mystical bond that connected God (as the owner of technological knowledge) to a praying human. This divine flow of knowledge was supposed to enable Christian converts to build machines similar to those of the white missionaries. However, until the 1980s neither the missionary encounters nor ideas about the divine nature of modern knowledge sparked a significant number of conversions.

This situation changed in the 1980s, when the re-emergence of civil war and the establishment of refugee camps in Ethiopia profoundly destabilised social life. Apart from the negative impact of war, changing political, economic, and ecological conditions led to a deterioration of the cattle economy, monetisation, and the demand for modern commodities in the villages. Long-lasting stays in Ethiopian refugee camps not only awaked a longing for order and stability, but also brought Nuer in closer contact with missionaries. The efficiency of Western medicine and technology as experienced in the camps stimulated that 'being modern' was increasingly imagined along lines of conversion to Christianity and its association with literacy and state integration. The Nuer encounters in urban-like refugee camps and the stereotyping by their new Ethiopian neighbours made them feel 'backward'. For the Nuer, who were largely illiterate in the 1980s and were stigmatised as primitives, conversion to Christianity offered educational facilities as well as the possibility to enter the state via the institutionalisation of an Ethiopian Nuer church.

Nuer perceive Christianity as a 'modern' religion and a means to differentiate themselves from local beliefs by portraying them as a backward religion, associated with a type of ruralism epitomised by cattle, rural food, and nakedness. Christianity played a 'civilising' role for Nuer converts as it connected the latter with the state from which they had been excluded by being associated with 'primitive' religion. Therefore, what the new Christians aimed at was to become part of 'civilised' Ethiopian society as well as to adopt 'Western' lifestyles.

While in the 1980s there were only a few churches in the refugee camps and urban areas, today their number has risen to more than a hundred. The make-up of these church communities is ninety percent Nuer. In the villages conversion rates vary between (a still impressive)

twenty to forty percent of the population. Conversion did not, however, imply a complete break with the past. While only few ritual practices ceased, many others were modified as a means for distinction. In cattle sacrifices, loud invocations were replaced with calm prayers and ritual sacrifice with Christian slaughter, and mortuary practices were modified by facing the corpse toward the West instead of the East. Conversion did not sever kinship ties as Christians continued to participate in kinship-maintaining rituals.

In the post-1991 period, the intense proselytising efforts of US churches undermined patterns of mutual tolerance that had characterised relationships between Christians and non-Christians. This time, the missionaries were Nuer who had migrated to Western countries in the 1980s and 1990s. They returned, sponsored by US churches, with the aim of connecting 'their people' to the world. Conversion offered entrance into a transnational network in which US churches promised modern resources in the form of scholarships, offices in town, and money. The transnational ties of kinship and faith contributed to the popularity of utopian visions in which there is no war or destruction and no shortage of 'modern' facilities, visions which are powerfully condensed in the claim *bako ro mat rey naath* ("we want to become part of the world!") – a claim that is presently being expressed all over the Nuer regions among Nuer converts.

The tolerance of non-Christians is slowly diminishing and more pronounced distinctions between Christians and non-Christians are emerging in various spheres of society. Despite existing religious syncretism and fusion, Nuer society seems to be slowly breaking up into non-Christian and Christian spheres, which are further sub-divided into different Christian groups. Hence, the case of the Nuer in Southwestern Ethiopia shows the same tendency as observed by Dea (2005) in Southern Ethiopia, namely that the current religious movements are characterised by their divisive tendencies between converts and non-converts.

#### **4. Kyrgyz converts to Christianity: confronting immorality**

Whereas conversion may in part be understood as a 'strategy' for coping with inequality and as motivated by a search for the modern, it may also be, in many ways, a critique of society. What Pentecostals and Evangelicals more broadly have in common is that they challenge the 'corrupt' world in which they operate. Thus, in Kyrgyzstan, part of the attraction of Pentecostalist churches was their ban on alcohol and drug consumption and their aim of restoring patriarchal family structures. Moreover, by explaining poverty and illness in terms of a corrupt world under the spell of Satan, they provided very concrete answers to problems related to the social and economic dislocations of Soviet and Muslim space.

In the 1990s Kyrgyzstan had become a centre of missionary activity, perceived by Evangelical missionaries as a stepping-stone to the rest of the Muslim world. As the most 'open' country in the region it attracted numerous missionaries from the US, Europe, and South Korea. Christianity could thrive on its associations with 'the West' and its positive comparison to post-Soviet 'chaos' and economic decline. But although foreign missionary organisations spent a lot of labour and capital, the most successful churches appeared to be those that partly dissociated themselves from Western missionaries and emphasised local organisation, financing, and recruitment, even when in fact they were highly dependent on transnational religious networks. This tendency is clearly reflected in the Pentecostal 'Church of Jesus Christ' (CJC). In addition to its forty-five daughter congregations within Kyrgyzstan, the church has congregations in Germany, the US, and Russia. Moreover, it has elaborate links with international Christian networks such as 'Calvary International'. But at the same time, the church was different from many others in that it was not a 'missionary church' but was instead led by Kyrgyz citizens. This combination of transnational involvement and local organisation allowed the church to adjust flexibly to problems that were important on the local level, while also being able to muster international support when necessary. Moreover, by catering to dominant ideas about Kyrgyz culture and stressing ostensible similarities with 'biblical culture', it was able to foster convincing answers to the social and economic disruption experienced by Kyrgyz citizens.

One clear sign of success is the numbers of converts. The largest Pentecostal church in the country, the 'Church of Jesus Christ' reached the mark of ten thousand members in 2004, of which approximately four thousand were ethnic Kyrgyz. Part of the attraction of the CJC was its advancement of a kind of 'spiritual modernity' that not only offers salvation, but also stresses that prosperity, health, and success can be attained by faithful prayer. The importance of these themes was immediately visible to anyone who passed by the main church building in Bishkek. Five-meter-high pink billboards listed four main themes: service, family, finances, and healing. Each of these captions was then supplemented with Bible texts that showed the importance of these categories and how true faith would help believers to deal with overcoming poverty, sickness, and other problems in worldly life. Overcoming the corruptions of the world was a central element in the services of the Church of Jesus Christ and was a recurring theme in the book series published by the church, as can be seen in titles such as *Shadows of the Past* and *Breaking the Chains of Slavery*. It also filled the church's newspaper *Tvoi Put'* ('Your Way'), in which church members testified about how their faith and the support of other 'believers' had helped them in overcoming addictions, diseases, poverty, and other personal problems.

Equally important to understanding the attractions of the church is the fact that it offers entrance into a tightly organised community life. In Bishkek, the CJC developed into a fully-fledged institution which occupies a huge building (a former theatre) in the centre of Bishkek. It has its own television-studio and a press which publishes a continuing stream of books and brochures written by pastor Kuzin. The church has a cafeteria and provides English, computer, drama, and dance classes to church members. Many members take part in such groups, while all are expected to participate in 'home-church' meetings which gather at least once a week. In these meetings participants discuss their successes in combating addictions and poverty, and testify to how God changes their lives, thus reinforcing the church's ideology in a very intimate setting.

Church brochures proudly claim that their members are of all ages and all national and social backgrounds, but a survey held among 130 members of the Church of Jesus Christ in the provincial capital of Jalal-Abad reveals interesting patterns. Over seventy percent were (recent) migrants to the city. Another striking pattern concerned the civil status of church members. While women in general were over-represented, this was particularly so for divorced, widowed, and remarried women. These patterns may be explained by noting that migrants and divorced women tended to be poorly integrated into the social fabric of the city, and thus more inclined to join a movement that provides close-knit social ties. Moreover, the promises of health and prosperity were especially attractive to those who had to establish their own niche in a post-Soviet urban setting. Seen from the reverse perspective, divorcees and migrants were removed from their original social surroundings and thus less pressured to conform to social (and religious) expectations.

To displaced people, Pentecostal churches with their high-intensity community life and emphasis on morality provide social security as well as a sense of purpose in an insecure world. This was partly confirmed in the stories of converts. They stressed the friendliness and mutual support among believers. Moreover, the church gave them a sense of moral superiority over non-believers. One woman mentioned that "[t]here is a big difference in friendship with believers and with non-believers. Non-believing men just want to get you in bed, and women immediately want to drink alcohol. And with believers, they only encourage you to do the right thing". It is important to note that the advanced codes of moral behaviour were not simply valued for the sake of doing the 'right' thing. Rather, the messages of 'morality' were valued because they were seen as providing solutions to everyday problems. One woman, for example, explained how she had used the church's ideas about patriarchy to flatter her husband's ego and to encourage him to be a more effective bread-winner. Another conveyed an instrumental view of the church's ban on the use of drugs by saying that he started to believe once his prayers were answered and he was relieved of his drug-addiction.

Interestingly, though the insistence on abstinence from alcohol and drugs and the valorisation of patriarchal family relations was the same in churches throughout the country, there were important variations in the perceived causes of immorality as well as in the methods promoted to overcome them. Whereas the senior pastor in Kyrgyzstan's capital Bishkek would regularly invoke the dangers of immorality in the city and talk about the seductions of 'modern' life, the pastor in the much smaller provincial town Jalal-Abad ascribed everyday problems to the 'occult practices' of many Muslims. Moreover, whereas in Bishkek the path to overcoming these problems was conceived through involvement in strict church life, the emphasis in Jalal-Abad was on defeating demonic forces by prayer. In short, although the ideals of a 'moral life' were very similar in both churches and were defended as biblical, the causes of immorality in each setting were seen as different and thus in need of different methods to overcome them. This flexibility of Pentecostalism is perhaps the most important reason why the messages of morality could be seen as effective answers to highly complex problems.

### **The patterns and paradoxes of conversion**

The three ethnographic sketches above loosely followed the subtitle of this essay – confronting inequality, becoming modern, and dealing with immorality. We chose these headings not to draw a contrast between different 'modes of conversion' but rather to illustrate that these aspects are different sides of the same coin. Conversion in the contexts we described was closely connected to socio-economic change and geared towards alleviating or improving one's position. In other words, conversion was decidedly more than a conceptual shift resulting from a personal quest for meaning. It was also grounded in, and directed at, the dislocations and disorientations produced by global capitalism.

The example of the Chukchis was perhaps the clearest example of a group caught in webs of power and meaning that had marginalised them both economically and culturally. Seventy years of Sovietisation resulted in local discourses of 'backwardness' which disempowered local religious traditions. At the same time, distinctions between themselves and Russians continued to be important, and Chukchis had resisted the proselytising activities of the Russian Orthodox Church. It was within this context that Evangelical Christian messages proved attractive to many Chukchis. Evangelical Christianity offered solutions to everyday problems and promised connection to 'the world' without becoming Russian. Connections to 'the world' were perhaps even more important in the case of the Nuer. Here, attempts to improve one's position relative to the majority population of Ethiopia were paralleled by the wish to become 'modern'. Christianity offered educational facilities as well as the possibility to enter the state via the institutionalisation of an Ethio-

pian Nuer church. Moreover, church congregations linked refugees to Nuer in the US, thus creating a transnational field connected by flows of people, images, and money. This, in turn, reinforced the images of 'modernity' as catalysts in the process of conversion as it catered to the dream of progress, abundance, and individual success. Such visions of 'modernity' were also present in Kyrgyzstan, although they played a somewhat different role. Here the promises of success and health, which are typical for new Pentecostal movements, proved attractive to marginalised people such as divorced women and rural-urban migrants. But it was in particular the way the messages were adjusted to local concerns that gave the Pentecostal churches their credibility. These adjustments, moreover, often implied a critique of the corruptions associated with the 'modern' capitalist and democratic reforms in the country.

Although on one level conversion could be seen as an emancipatory strategy for those involved, the act of conversion did not necessarily ease relations with the broader society. Indeed, one of the paradoxes of the growing activity of new religious movements is that while they "preach to connect believers across ethnic and national boundaries, they paradoxically divide neighbours and relatives", as Data Dea (2005) argues. In each of the cases new boundaries emerged between converts and non-converts. In the case of the Chukchis, although the act of conversion was fostered by a wish to improve the group's self esteem, it simultaneously turned them into a double (ethnic and religious) 'other'. In Kyrgyzstan the success of Pentecostal churches complicated family relations and resulted in the emergence of a new and complicated religious frontier between Christianity and Islam, the character of which is only now beginning to take shape. Likewise, conversion among the Nuer resulted in a fragmentation of group identity and relations. By analysing dynamics of conversion we provide insight into how new frontiers and boundaries take shape, thus illuminating new configurations of religion, self, and society in contexts that themselves are rapidly changing.

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## **What it takes to be a man: constructions of masculinity**

Joachim Otto Habeck, Fernanda Pirie, Julia Eckert, and Aimar Ventsel

### **Introduction**

Masculinity has unexpectedly emerged as a theme of common interest to four researchers at the Institute. Our projects concern such seemingly disparate topics as post-Soviet property relations and livelihoods, Tibetan conflict resolution, and Hindu nationalist politics, in regions not normally associated with the study of masculinity, manhood, or machismo.<sup>1</sup> The structural elements of the communities we have studied and their political contexts are thus very different. However, in each case a certain type of male identity is constructed which distinguishes its subjects from both women and also other types of men. In the tundras and forests of northern Russia, where the men described by Habeck live, life is physically challenging. 'Real men' have the strength to survive under harsh natural conditions. In a different part of northern Russia, Ventsel describes how young men aspire to being 'tough'. Feuding relations characterise the tribes of nomads on the Tibetan Plateau studied by Pirie. Here men 'have to' get angry in the event of an attack. The political landscape of India is the backdrop to Eckert's study, where an image of virility is adopted as a political strategy by certain Hindu nationalists who despise the 'effeminate' and 'eunuchs' in other political groups. Within these disparate settings each of us has found a certain image of masculinity which is constructed in opposition to the identities of others in society.

The purpose of this essay is to compare and contrast these discursive practices, but also to analyse the behaviour that accompanies them. We generally find that masculine behaviour is the subject of self-conscious display and performance, usually in an attempt to acquire a certain type of social or political capital. Such performance often involves the idea of strength and self-reliance, in particular the use of physical violence as a response to conflict, but this is not always the dominant factor. In fact, very different types of behaviour are described in our four case studies: from physical strength to indolence, competitive displays of skill to the use of sexual imagery, mastery over nature to violence against political competitors. What unites them are a tendency towards social disruption and confrontation, disrespect for the authority and ideologies of the elite, and a simultaneous respect for strong leadership.

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<sup>1</sup> The anthropological literature on these topics has tended to come from Central and South America, the Mediterranean, and Melanesia, although there are also studies from Africa, North America, and Europe (Gutmann 1997, Kimmel et. al. 2005).

In all these cases the disruptive and confrontational nature of such behaviour has to be justified. This is implicitly done by evoking norms of individuality, strength, and pride, but there is also often an express appeal to nature and its mastery, or to the naturalness of emotion. This paper focuses, in particular, on these justifications and ideologies and their links to the elements of performance, defiance, and subversion. Unfortunately, space does not allow us to discuss the many debates that have emerged in the literature on masculinity, gender, and related themes.

In the following sections we offer a brief outline of the phenomena found in each area and the themes that emerge when these are viewed in a comparative perspective.

### **Case studies**

#### *Two examples from northern Russia*

Habeck has carried out research among Komi reindeer herders in the northern part of European Russia, while Ventsel draws on material from a Dolgan community in the Republic of Sakha in northeastern Siberia, where the population engages in both reindeer herding and hunting.

Both groups were subject to Soviet policies of collectivisation from the late 1920s onwards. These policies have led to a gender split with the construction of stationary homes for reindeer-herding families. The majority of women and children were to live, work, and attend school in the settlement for most of the year, while the men – those who were mainly involved in herding and hunting – were supposed to ‘work the land’ in shifts. Only a comparatively small number of women were to work in the tundra or forest in order to manage the mobile households. This division of labour is widely practised today.

Through this process the forest and tundra have gradually turned from a place to be inhabited into a workspace. The herders’ and hunters’ tents, which previously hosted the entire family, have become temporary abodes for employees of the ‘agro-industrial sector’ and the majority of indigenous women no longer want to live in the tundra or forest. There is a much larger percentage of men in the tents, many of whom are unmarried.

#### *Endurance, skill, and competitiveness among young Komi reindeer herders*

Reindeer herding among the Komi is ideally done in teams of six men and two women and there is a clear division of labour: the men are engaged in the actual herding, firewood collection, and sledge construction while the women manage the work in and around the tent. In order to carry out their duties, men travel by reindeer sledge almost every day, whereas women stay close to the tent and do not use sledges except when the whole camp moves to a new site. However, there are

situations in which an older woman requires a young herder to process reindeer skins, help with the cooking, or do other jobs which are considered to be women's work. Older people also think it is appropriate that an apprentice herdsman should obtain some practice in such activities. The young herdsman sees himself in an awkward position, however, because the others mock him for what they perceive as unworthy tasks for a 'real' herdsman. A 'real' herdsman should not stay in the tent during the day but should be out there in the landscape, working with his axe or tending the animals.

While locals previously spoke about reindeer herders being 'unable to find a wife', there is now increasing talk about them being 'unwilling to find a wife'. Habeck interprets this as an indication of the tundra and forest becoming spaces of withdrawal from the mainstream social order. In the absence of policemen, managers, and wives the herders feel less subject to control and more able to make their own decisions. They experience the tundra or forest as spaces of relative freedom. Being out in the tundra and forest permits them to employ their manual skills and to display their mastery of a natural environment in which others would perish.

Young herdsmen assert their capacity for endurance through physical strength, while the older men rely more on their knowledge. What unites both is the importance of skills. It is primarily the teenagers whose patterns of behaviour display a particular type of competitive masculinity. Physical strength is manifest in a nimble attitude to work and in aggressive behaviour, both of which demonstrate that one is capable of living in the tundra and able to rely on one's own strength. Individual herders' actions are evaluated by others in terms of the success with which they handle difficult situations. Inventiveness, flexibility, and quick reactions are important. Certain objects symbolise the young reindeer herders' work ethos and manhood: the sledge (with reindeer in front), the lasso, and the axe. All three point to the relevance of bodily skills and they are always called for when the young men pose for the ethnographer's photographs. Young herdsmen lay their arms around the shoulders of their fellow herdsmen but they also pose by fighting with one another.

The staged performance of manhood thus combines elements of both solidarity and competition. Wrestling and fighting could be seen as ritualised ways of expressing aggression against other members of the team, but they are also ways of establishing a hierarchy amongst them, as they also do in reindeer sledge races. Individuality is dependent on know-how but needs to be asserted in direct competition with others. There are quite clear requirements for *what* a reindeer herder has to do in his daily tasks, but his display of superiority comes to the fore in *how* he handles them. The claim of physical superiority often goes hand in hand with ridiculing the defeated person: towards the end of a wres-

ting fight the winner rubs the opponent's face with snow; the herder who is better in wood-chopping mocks the herder who is less skilled and calls him a 'weakling'. Although the men (and women) living together under one canvas are dependent on cooperation and solidarity in order to survive in the tundra, mastery over the place and animals and authority over other people are thus competitively acquired by individual actors. It is those who succeed who become the respected leaders.

Both men and women use swear words with sexual connotations, but it is the young men who use them most frequently and elaborately. Young herders insult and ridicule each other by referring to taboo sexual practices, notably incest and homosexuality, and by casting doubt on the other's sexual potency.

Certain transitions related to age and generation have a significant impact on male behaviour. Young men are usually conscripted into the army at the age of 17 for up to two years,<sup>2</sup> where the requirements of physical endurance and direct competition are even harder than in the reindeer herders' camp. Many men behave in a particularly disruptive and self-destructive manner in the period after their army service and this is probably the stage at which disruptive behaviour is most tolerated by other members of the community. This changes, however, with the founding of a family. Marriage and fatherhood seem to instil a feeling of accountability; the display of self-centredness gives way to the assumption of responsibility for others. If men continue to engage in disruptive behaviour, heavy drinking, or physical violence, then other members of their families and community will regard them as problematic and try to avoid them.

The qualities of endurance, mastery of the natural environment, physical strength, and competition are, therefore, dominant among the young herders in the reindeer camps. For those who are weaker or less experienced, shyer or less self-assertive, there are two options. The first is to do the work of a (normally female) tent-keeper, but there are very few such cases and these men cannot count on a respectful attitude from the others in the tent. The second option is to leave the reindeer-herding business altogether and stay in the village or go to town. It is the 'cultured' sphere of the village that is regarded as providing an amenable environment in which the 'weaker sex' can survive and which constitutes the counter-space to the forest and tundra, the workplace of herders and hunters.

The idea of living a 'cultured' life in the town has long been present in Russian society, associated with Western concepts of enlightenment and civilisation. In Soviet times the idea of 'culturedness' (*kul'turnost'*)

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<sup>2</sup> Since the late 1990s, men from among certain indigenous peoples in the Russian Federation have been permitted to circumvent army service by working as reindeer herders. However, the fact that one has served in the army is an important attribute of masculinity, so not many opt out.

was introduced to stabilise society after a period of change, and this concept obtained normative power as part of the civilising mission of the Communist Party. Urban centres became 'cultured' spaces, associated with literacy and bodily hygiene (Habeck, forthcoming). Those who cannot persist in the tundra and need to withdraw to the 'cultured' sphere could be conceived of as tundra drop-outs.

To look at it another way, however, the choice to live in the tundra or forest could be described as a withdrawal from the mainstream, which allows men the possibility of living in relative freedom and exercising their autonomy. For some men, the tundra provides an existential niche because they have no other place to go (cf. Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001). However, there are individuals who are doubly skilled, able to succeed in both environments, displaying competitively masculine behaviour out in the tundra and being more restrained when back in the village. The 'cultured' space of the village thus represents a discursive opposite to the tundra and forest, whereby these opposites do not exclude but complement and constitute each other. People in the village who are not involved in reindeer herding talk about 'real' herdsman with a mixture of disgust and admiration. The toughness and ability to master the harsh natural environment are often described as innate qualities of those who live there – it is 'in their genes', as many observers say.

#### *'Tough kids' in a Dolgan village*

During his field research in a Dolgan village, much remoter from centres of power than the Komi villages, Ventsel found that physical violence plays an important role in the structures and maintenance of social order. Again, it is mainly young men, referred to as the 'kids' (*patsany*), who most frequently engage in physical violence.

Children are confronted with physical violence at an early age and come to accept it as an essential part of the male role. Initially, they come to understand how violence is negotiated and morally evaluated from the discussions of their parents. Later, they attend the disco, where men frequently get involved in fights, usually in connection with alcohol consumption. It is evident for young boys that the use of physical strength in situations of conflict is an important aspect of manhood. Soon they start consuming cigarettes and alcohol and themselves displaying a readiness to fight. The display of an athletic body and a mixture of disrespect towards and objectification of women are also traits of manhood. Having many sexual partners is a matter of prestige among young men, while a young woman who has many sexual partners is criticised by the whole community. Young men are condescending towards girls: they invite them to parties and buy them alcohol, but throw them out when they wish. Swear words with sexual meanings are used as insults, yet the suggestion of homosexuality is extreme and usually leads to a fight.

The idea behind much of this behaviour is that a man needs to be 'tough' and able to defend his reputation within the community. This is demonstrated in physical endurance and bodily strength, but also in the ideas of reliability, honesty, solidarity, and skill. As in the Komi case there is considerable competition in the establishment of reputation and respect in the community. Weak men and those who are seen as unable to cater to their own needs and those of others in the community earn no respect. They are likely to be shunned by other men and also by women.

Moreover, as in the Komi case, this attitude is typical for a certain stage in life. Once these young men have sufficiently shown their masculinity and secured their position in the local hierarchy by means of aggressive behaviour, they no longer need to assert it and with marriage and fatherhood they take on responsibilities, become 'solid' and reliable (cf. Anderson 2004). They also take on the role of controlling the excesses of the young and maintaining order in the community in the absence of an effective state.

With the retreat of the state from peripheral regions in the 1990s, informal modes of governance have become increasingly important in many remote communities. The police are no longer taken seriously in the settlement. People prefer to settle their conflicts directly. Physical violence is regarded as a legitimate and necessary response to insults. Revenge may result in counter-revenge and violence may gradually escalate. While certain levels and reasons for such violence are accepted in the community, there are limits. In such situations, the adults (usually married men) take action to restrain and discipline the young men who have transgressed the acceptable limits of violence. "We people over the age of thirty keep the order here in the village. We make sure that the kids don't do anything evil." As in the case of young Komi reindeer herders, the behaviour of these 'kids' is seen as unavoidable, because innate, yet also as a potential danger which calls for containment strategies. A coordinated effort by the older men constitutes such a means of containment, but former prisoners are also prominent in this. They enjoy a certain respect as 'outlaws' who have defied the government and its officials.

In a way similar to that of the Komi Republic, there is a decrease in the perception of 'culturedness' as one moves from the central parts of the Republic of Sakha to the remote Dolgan village. People in the centre consider the remote village and its inhabitants as particularly 'wild' and 'dangerous', and these qualities are often said to be naturally inherent in this ethnic group. Some villagers actually adopt this imagery and speak about themselves as being 'wild'. They thus suggest that it is their natural emotions that make them somehow superior and entitled to show a lack of respect to others.

*Those who have to get angry: the nomads of Amdo*

The performance of masculinity in Amdo takes place in the context of the segmentary tribal structures of the nomads' groups and their practices of feuding. These ethnically Tibetan pastoralists herd yaks, sheep, and horses on the grasslands of the northeastern Tibetan plateau. Their tribes, consisting of up to several thousand people, are themselves divided into villages or encampments of around 40 tents, and relations between them are characterised by patterns of violence and feuding, mediated by high-status individuals.

The nomads talk frequently and readily about both actual and potential violence. When they suffer an attack the norms of revenge demand immediate and violent retribution. Men say that they 'have to' get angry if a member of their family has been killed, and when there is conflict between two villages or tribes all the men must combine to take revenge on the other.<sup>3</sup> The wealth of nomadic pastoralists is highly mobile and difficult to guard and the display of the potential and readiness to take violent revenge is, in such circumstances, a logical form of defence. The threat of revenge is always expressed as an individual obligation, however: 'I am going to go and fight him', 'I want to fight the police because they injured my cousin'.<sup>4</sup>

This emphasis on the personal nature of retaliation is matched by displays of individuality and insouciance in the domestic sphere. The young men spend much time on their appearance and cleanliness, unlike the women, who are expected to wash discreetly and minimally. They seek out the newest fabrics for their traditional coats and eye-catching ready-made clothes to wear underneath. They pull their red sashes low round their hips and sweep back their lengthening hair. They outdo the women with their heavy coral jewellery and the furs used by both to trim their winter garments. Out on the grasslands they display prowess in horsemanship and speed ostentatiously on their motor-bikes. Outside the tent there is considerable sexual banter. There is an element of competition here, but the men are also constantly testing the limits of social propriety and there is a subtle defiance of sartorial standards, which the headmen try to maintain. Within the tent there is also a strong emphasis on individual inclinations. Amongst family and friends a male visitor will ostentatiously appropriate the best place by the fire without regard for others. The male side of the stove is characterised by ease and relaxation as men lie around on carpets, play-

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<sup>3</sup> The social structures and practices of feuding and mediation among the Amdo nomads are described at greater length in Pirie (2005). The Chinese occupation of 1958 was followed by a period of collectivisation, but reforms in the early 1980s allowed the nomads substantially to regroup into their previous tribes.

<sup>4</sup> Both Ekvall (1964: 1124-25, 1968: 76-77) and Hermanns (1949: 231-32; 1959: 302), drawing on their experiences from before the Chinese occupation, also emphasised the autonomy and individuality of the Amdo nomads and the individual and immediate nature of the response to violence.

ing cards while the women cater to their needs. The appearance of responsibility and industry is minimised: the public face of the male nomad is self-centred, careless, and indolent.

There is, thus, an ostensible disrespect for the economic needs of the tent which, for the most part, fall on the women's shoulders. There are clear divisions between men's and women's work. Men say that they 'can do anything' but, in practice, they disdain most tasks other than the herding. It is beneath their dignity to do 'women's work'. Fighting and anger are also male prerogatives. Women who fight are even said to cause spiritual pollution and similar ideas disbar them from most religious activities.<sup>5</sup> The men walk a fine line between acceptable and unacceptable disregard for the norms, however. Laziness and vanity in the tent are normally tolerated but an exasperated father, brother, or even mother will chide the man who has let the yaks stray too far.

Outright violence is only justified as revenge. In the event of an attack a man 'has to' get angry. Violence is simultaneously an obligation and the result of individual emotion. It is also a matter of performance. When one man, normally critical of hot-tempered individuals, saw his cousin being beaten by the police he declared that he would immediately go and fight "those fucking Chinese police". Of course he did not actually do so. The police are simply too powerful to engage with. However, it is normal for a man to threaten revenge and have to be restrained in such cases. Violence is, thus, normatively controlled, but there remain grey areas, notably pasture encroachments, where a violent response is not obligatory, but hot-headed individuals can quickly escalate a feud. Certain men are known to have fiery tempers and to be liable to lash out at the slightest provocation. Men are expected to test and threaten to breach the boundaries of acceptable violence in such situations.

When violence does break out headmen and mediators normally intervene to impose restraint and persuade angry nomads to accept compensation. It is they, and not the police, who have the authority to settle feuds in the nomads' eyes. This is always difficult, however, and good mediators have to be skilled orators. One pasture dispute, which has intermittently continued since the 1950s, erupted again recently in battles, during which 18 men were killed. This prompted the intervention of the most senior Buddhist lamas in Amdo, but even they failed to bring the parties together for mediation. One angry leader, it is said, actually threatened to shoot them. A similar attitude is graphically described by Robert Ekvall (1964: 1147) from before the Chinese occupation. At a settlement meeting one man disdainfully poured out the re-

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<sup>5</sup> In a telling comment on the 'war-weariness' that overcomes nomads after a protracted period of conflict, Ekvall (1964: 1135) refers to their longing for time to pursue pleasure, trading, and religious activities. Basic economic subsistence was, clearly, being taken care of by the women in the meantime.

mainder of his tea on the ground, got up “with contemptuous slowness and, without deigning a single backward glance”, walked away. Ekvall’s Tibetan companion commented, “with a snort of mingled admiration and disgust”, that he was “like an old yak, stubborn and unwilling”. There is, thus, an expectation that individual men will display reluctance, or even refusal, to bow to the authority of their leaders, including the most respected lamas.

The nomads of Amdo are, for the most part, devout Buddhists and spend considerable resources supporting their local monasteries. Yet when discussing practices of violence and feuding, none express any contradiction between the norms of revenge and the Buddhist condemnation of anger and violence. Indeed, the lamas promote settlements according to their principles of compensation, rather than by appealing to religious principles. The contradiction between these ideologies has, to some extent, been resolved by developments within the religion itself. As Buddhism evolved on the Tibetan plateau it incorporated elements from the ‘folk’ or ‘local’ religions, whose practices are focused on the local deities. In Amdo each tribe venerates a fearsome local deity, who can grant protection and bestow strength and good fortune on the living. It is the lamas, reincarnations of eminent Buddhist figures, who are the most effective intermediaries between people and these spirits. Their status gives them a power to subjugate such dangerous spirits and turn them into protectors of Buddhism, just as they can tame the undisciplined thoughts and emotions of their students. It is as the embodiment of this power to subjugate, rather than as promoters of peace and compassion, that the lamas are able to overcome the nomads’ norms of violent retribution.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Maratha warriors: the Shivsena*

In the urban setting of Mumbai the call to be a ‘real man’ is part of representative strategies of the members of the Shivsena, a Hindu-nationalist regional party. The Shivsena initially engaged in social work and cultural programmes and carried out violent agitations against migrants to the city, communist and socialist unions, and religious minorities. The party rose to power in the 1980s when it jumped on the accelerating bandwagon of Hindu-nationalism. It was able to attract followers from the working class as well as from lower castes that had hitherto been alienated by the Brahminism of the Sangh Parivar<sup>7</sup> organisa-

<sup>6</sup> The story of the mythical king Gesar, a war-like figure who rose to power through trials of strength and whose armies engaged in fierce battles with the enemies of the religion, is also prominent in the region.

<sup>7</sup> The Sangh Parivar is the ‘family’ of Hindu-nationalist organisations consisting of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS – national volunteers corps) and its affiliated organisations such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP – National Peoples Party), the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP – World Hindu Council) and many others.

tions. These had long been the reserve of urban middle class upper castes. The Shivsena's anti-elitist posture and the accessibility of its local branches played a vital role when electoral compulsion made it necessary to expand the constituency.

Its founder and uncontested leader, Bal Thackeray, espouses an ideology of friend and foe and calls his *sainik* (lit.: soldiers) to the defence of the nation. A specific idea of 'virility' is central to this ideology: the *maratha mard*, the virile Maharashtrian, is projected as the authentic Indian. The concept refers to the Maratha warrior tradition, the legacy of Shivaji, the 17<sup>th</sup> century warrior king who successfully fought the Moghul armies. It plays on the persisting Victorian image of the roughness of the urban poor and it cultivates an air of youthfulness and of the 'angry young man' of Bollywood.<sup>8</sup> This *maratha mard* is defined by physical strength, by courage against the enemies of the nation and the readiness to fight. The discourse of nationalism here is thoroughly sexualised. Thackeray calls his men to fight, "lest they be eunuchs. I am not a eunuch [*hijra*]. I am proud to be an Indian. I am proud to be a Hindu."<sup>9</sup> Swear words and sexual innuendo abound in the public speeches of the movement's leaders. There have been agitations in the nude and the display of physical prowess is also cultivated in martial arts activities.

The theme of the true man being defined by physical strength is paramount within the Hindu-nationalist discourse. The 'metaphorical femininity' (Inden 1990: 96), which is part of the orientalist construction of spiritual India as the 'other' of the 'rational' West, turns into the incapacity of the tolerant Hindu to defend himself and his nation, women, and country against those who are portrayed as being utterly different. The Muslims, whose religion is allegedly aggressive, hegemonic, and intolerant, are seen as supremely virile: aggressive, sexually potent,<sup>10</sup> and violent. The call to become like Muslims aims to throw off the 'congenital defect' of all Hindus by proving one's courage and virility. This 'recuperation of masculinity' (Hansen 1996) propagates violence in opposition to orientalist constructions of the passive East, but at the same time reproduces them in order to justify violence as defence.

For the Shivsena, virility is achieved through spontaneous violent action. Agitations range from the destruction of cricket fields where the Pakistani team is to play and of cinemas showing films disliked by the Shivsena, to attacks on artists, journalists, or politicians who oppose the party, to the orchestration of riots and pogroms against minorities. Although in its worst attacks the Shivsena has used lethal weapons, it

<sup>8</sup> Bollywood – the name for Mumbai as the centre of Hindi film production.

<sup>9</sup> Bal Thackeray at a rally, 16.4.1999.

<sup>10</sup> The Hindu-nationalist stereotype of the Muslim points at the Muslim 'custom' of polygamy and the resulting innumerable children that will one day make Hindus into 'a minority in their own country'.

mostly relies on the strength of its fists: there is a very physical aspect to this violence.<sup>11</sup> Its means are fists, crowbars, or cricket bats. It is direct confrontation that is cultivated: "Hey, if you have courage then come out. Why do you shoot your arrows from behind your women's skirts? Here are Shivsena mards who believe in a confrontation face to face."<sup>12</sup> *Sainiks* usually confront opponents who are weaker (in numbers) but are made out to be symbols of an existential threat. Thus, they can be sure of victory and still claim to fight the paramount enemy of the people.

The party has frequently justified its violent agitations as 'natural emotional reaction'.<sup>13</sup> "I can't control my men if injustice is done to them", said one Shivsena leader when riots broke out in Aurangabad.<sup>14</sup> This portrayal of violence as the impetuous outbreak of emotion characterises the *sainik* as direct people without intellectual sublimation of feeling. Emotions cannot lie. Since hatred is an emotion and violence is the expression of this emotion, violence is honest. At the same time, this is also a strategy for avoiding responsibility; the act committed in the heat of passion is not culpable. The evasion of consequences is then frequently stylised as clever or cunning. The contradictory ideas of strategic cunning and honest emotionality are thus made out to be simultaneous characteristics of the common people.

In accordance with the valorisation of violence and virility, Gandhians, pacifists, and those inspired by any ethos of non-violence are denigrated as 'effeminate', meek, and weak. Theirs is a 'nationalism of eunuchs',<sup>15</sup> if they are not altogether anti-national. Their government is impotent.<sup>16</sup> While non-violence is thus often presented as an idea of the decadent and alienated elite, 'the people' for the Shivsena are inherently violent because they have not been "emasculated by western ideas of secularism and other utopias".<sup>17</sup> They are, through their violence, more authentically Indian. The Shivsena thus draws on the popular idea of the simple people being the true inheritors of Indian culture and merges this idea of authenticity with urban legends of the unruly poor. Lingering Victorian ideas associate violence with backwardness, the lack of education, the crowds. Members of the middle classes frequently observe that "that sort of thing [riots] happens in the slums".<sup>18</sup> There is also an idea that the poor lack self-control and the capacity collectively

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<sup>11</sup> The organisation's purely economic activities rely on technologically more advanced weapons.

<sup>12</sup> From a speech of Bal Thackeray, 19.8.1989, cited in Hansen (1996: 165).

<sup>13</sup> Saamna, daily newspaper, 20.1.1998.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Purandare (1999, 320).

<sup>15</sup> Saamna, daily newspaper, 29.4.1998.

<sup>16</sup> Saamna, daily newspaper, 2.12.1992.

<sup>17</sup> Saamna, daily newspaper, 7.12.1997.

<sup>18</sup> Interviews in Delhi and Mumbai in 1997. Since the middle classes are often involved in communal rioting this is a distorted (self-) perception.

to contain themselves. Self-control is part of the founding myth of independent India: Gandhi's self-control, his non-violence, his asceticism, his self-reliance were the weapons in the struggle for independence. The Shivsena turns this discourse around: it is lack of self-control, uninhibited emotion, and violence that are the expression of authenticity and patriotism. The message is that the Shivsena elevates the culture of the 'masses' to the legitimate insignia of political power, and in the course of this it de-legitimises the conventional insignia of the elite.

### **Display and performance**

All our case studies involve the self-conscious display of characteristics associated with a certain form of masculinity. These usually involve an assertion of youth and sexuality, but they also often have a combative element. In the Russian North the demonstration of strength through fighting, drinking, and swearing are all aimed at establishing the superiority of the individual over his peers. The individual also pits himself against nature, deploying the skill and strength to survive in a harsh natural environment. In Amdo the expression of anger and the willingness to fight are aimed at other groups as a deterrent to attacks. The image of youth and irresponsibility add a further element, suggesting that such violence might be uncontrolled. Similarly, the Shivsena deliberately cultivates an image of roughness and youthful anger among its members as part of its political campaigns against minorities.

In some of the case studies we find the individual at the centre of the picture, his status, pride, inclinations, and interests valorised above those of the wider group. However, there is often a tension between such individualism and the norms of solidarity, loyalty, and group action. The Komi herders compete for individual status but pose for photographs, arms across each other's shoulders. The Amdo nomads express anger and the norms of revenge in individual terms, but combine to avenge the wrongs done to their cousins, encampment, or tribe. Within the Shivsena group solidarity and absolute obedience to the leader are the highest ideals, while individual career and economic competition is covertly pursued. It is the 'family' of the movement and its father, Bal Thackeray, that are publicly exalted.

### **Disrespect, authority, and leadership**

In all these cases the display of masculinity sets a certain group of men against others in society, either women, other (weaker or more restrained) men, or those in authority. This can amount to the positive denigration of women or their work and all those who do not comply with the norms of masculinity established within these groups. In Amdo and the Russian North, for example, it is the women who pick up

the pieces when the men have been drinking and who shoulder responsibility for a large proportion of the productive work. Women's work is characterised as unworthy of the men. Among the Komi herders there is also an associated disparagement of 'softies', those who usually find their niches in the contained and cultivated space of the village, and in the Dolgan village the derision of the 'weak' is explicit. Similarly in India, as Eckert describes, the language of the Shivsena deliberately sets up an image of the 'effeminate', tolerant Hindu. Theirs is a "nationalism of eunuchs". Here, by contrast, women who are part of the Shivsena share these ideas. There is a patriarchal division of labour and roles but women's work is not denigrated. Rather, it is idealised as the carrier of national tradition.

To an extent, such disrespectful behaviour is anticipated and expected. In the Russian North it is the young who are expected to be violent and drunken, while those who have become responsible elders contain and limit the effects of their wildness. In Amdo leaders and mediators undertake the onerous task of persuading those bent on revenge to accept compromise. On the other hand, much of this behaviour also tests the social norms, pushing against the boundaries of what is acceptable and defying those in authority. In the Russian North, young Dolgans engage in the fights which they know the elders will have to restrain. In Amdo hot-tempered nomads can escalate a feud and angry individuals are expected to resist the pressure imposed by others to compromise a feud. The rule-breaking of the Shivsena is a deliberate attempt to change political norms and shift the boundaries of the legitimate. Indeed, such tactics have had a certain success as these activities have come to be tacitly accepted by the police, the political establishment, and even the courts.

Disrespect is, therefore, displayed towards the 'feminine' sections of society, while a challenge is posed towards those in positions of authority. Such activities also test the quality of leadership, however. In the Dolgan village, those who have defied the state and spent time in prison have a special position: they are regarded as strong men who can control the excesses of the youth. The Komi fight to demonstrate superior strength amongst their peers, which earns them not just respect but also a position of leadership. The oratorical skills of the most prominent mediators in Amdo are referred to with awe, while the most senior lamas have cosmological powers which earn them the respect of the proudest fighter. The Shivsena warriors display contempt for the law and social norms of Indian democracy. What they call for is a strong leader who would remedy the weaknesses of democratic procedures.

## Justifications and ideologies

In all three cases violent and disruptive masculine behaviour is valorised through references to 'nature' and the 'natural' character of the emotions. Among the Komi, the young reindeer herders describe themselves as 'real men' because they can survive in and master a harsh natural environment. This is what requires their strength and skill. This ideology is even shared by those in the towns, who claim that the talent of being a herdsman is "in the genes". The Dolgan kids need to be kept at bay, otherwise their 'naturally' boisterous character would cause havoc. Among the Amdo nomads it is the emotion of anger that underlies the justified use of violence. "If we meet a member of the thief's family we will have to get angry and fight him." Violence is obligatory, but also inevitable. Similarly, the Shivsena *sainiks* valorise their violence by reference to emotion. Their virility is natural, authentic, and honest, the uninhibited expression of emotion, in contrast to the emasculated weakness of the decadent elite.<sup>19</sup>

Disruptive and disrespectful behaviour is also justified, in all three cases, by reference to certain elite ideologies, which are turned on their heads. Habeck, for example, describes the ideology of 'culturedness' promoted by the Soviet regime. The Komi herders turn this around by setting up the opposite values of mastery over a realm that the state, with its civilising agenda, has not managed to conquer. It is their ability to exist outside the realm of the state's 'culturedness' that makes them proud to call themselves 'real men'. Similarly, Ventsel illustrates how young Dolgans reverse the negative connotation of 'wildness' to oppose the state's ideology of 'culturedness'. Pirie finds a structural contradiction between the norms of nomad violence and the religious ideal of peace and compassion. However, the Buddhist moral condemnation of anger is countered by the idea of subjugation, a power attributed to the highest religious practitioners. The anger and violence of the nomads is thus tamed, but not ideologically undermined, by the superior powers of their senior lamas.

It is in the Indian political sphere that the rejection of the elite ideologies of pacifism and democracy is at its clearest. Here, as Eckert has described, Gandhian ideals of non-violence are portrayed as weakness and democratic debate and compromise as a 'sell-out' of Hindu interests. The Orientalist image of the effeminate Hindu is transformed into an image of a decadent and alienated elite and the violence of 'the mob' is elevated to the level of an authentic expression of patriotism.

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<sup>19</sup> In all these examples it is men who are equated, positively, with nature. This contrasts sharply with the degrading association of women, nature, and emotion found widely in other societies (cf. Ortner 1974; Strathern 1980).

The strongest discursive element underlying all four cases is, however, the idea, both implicit and explicit, that life is about confrontation and those who cannot fight and compete are inferior.

The constructions of masculinity that we have described in this essay all involve an element of opposition – to women, to authority, and to other groups in society. The violent, competitive, disrespectful behaviour and attitudes of the (predominantly young) men are often a matter of performance and display. They might be expected and even valorised by others; they might be answering the needs of survival in a harsh environment or of the defence of mobile property; and the wider society may have established methods of containing and limiting, or utilising them. Nevertheless, those who engage in such behaviour denigrate, despise, and defy others, even if they rely on their work or mediation skills to support the social whole.<sup>20</sup> Ideals which support harmony, cohesion, and equality in society are disregarded and turned around. A real man must be tough, strong, and combative.

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## **An anthropology of morality**

Johan Rasanayagam and Monica Heintz

Anthropologists frequently make reference to the moral aspects of the institutions, groups, or societies they study. However, while the economy, religion, politics, etc. have been constituted as subfields within anthropology (even if it is understood that these are not in the end clearly delimited domains), it is much less common to talk about the anthropology of morality. This essay is an attempt to contribute to the relatively small body of literature which aims to establish such a field through a comparative examination of two ethnographic sketches, one taken from Uzbekistan and the other from Romania. It does not set out to give a definitive answer to the question of what morality is, nor to draw exclusive boundaries around a field of morality. Such an exercise would be as futile in the case of morality as it has proved to be for the fields of politics, kinship, religion, and the economy. At the same time, however, if we want to develop analytical tools for the study of morality, we need to explore what is distinctive about it when approached from an anthropological standpoint. We will set out the framework within which we mean to deal with this through a brief discussion of the ideas of some of the authors who have recently taken up the issue of morality as a field of study within anthropology.

### **Framing the study of morality**

More than forty years ago Abraham Edel, a philosopher working together with his wife, an anthropologist, proposed a concept of morality which he suggested could be studied cross-culturally. This would involve:

...selected rules enjoining or forbidding (e.g. a set of commandments), character-traits cultivated or avoided (virtues and vices), patterns of goals and means (ideals and instrumental values); a bounding concept of the moral community and a set of qualifications for a responsible person; a more or less distinctive selection of linguistic terms and rules for moral discourse; some patterns of systematisation; some selected modes of justification; some selection from the range of human feelings which in complex ways is tied into the regulative procedures; and, involved in all of these, some specific existential perspective or view of man, his equipment, his place in nature, the human condition and predicament. (Edel 1962: 69)

This definition assumes that a coherent and comprehensive moral system exists in every society, and focuses on how it is institutionalised, encoded, and enforced. What must be added to this definition is a rec-

ognition that multiple moralities exist within any given society, as well as an emphasis on the dynamic relation between larger systems and actual practice. The effects of power relations in constituting and regulating moral ideals and practices must also be acknowledged. Actual behaviour and practice is influenced by larger values but these values are in turn influenced by practice. An anthropology of morality must ask who defines and enforces what is right and wrong and explore how different moral rules are applied to different categories of people (Howell 1997).

Rather than locating an anthropology of morality in the comparative study of moral systems, James Laidlaw places the anthropology of ethics, as he terms it, in the sphere of reflection by individuals as they strive to make of themselves a certain kind of person (Laidlaw 2002). He draws upon Kant's concept of moral reasoning as the free act of a rational agent, and Foucault's 'technologies of the self'. Human nature is not fixed, but rather individuals continually modify themselves through choice and action. However, this freedom is historically produced as practices of self-formation are derived from models which are "proposed, suggested, imposed upon [the individual] by his culture, his society, and his social group" (Foucault 1994: 34). Here the link between larger systems of values and practice is located in the creation of subjectivities. Relations of power are present in the determination of the choices available, the models within which people develop their sense of moral selfhood, and in shaping the freedom which people are able to exercise.

Central to this is the issue of agency. Following Foucault, Laidlaw rejects a concept of agency located in the free desires of the individual that are ultimately outside or independent of relations of power. Instead the ability to exercise 'free' choice is produced within regimes of social and epistemic power.<sup>1</sup> Howell goes further in problematising free choice in connection with the moral. She questions the idea that moral codes or values must always involve reflexive choices and individual self-awareness. Rather, she supports a shift from the content of morality to a comparative study of forms of moral reasoning. Degrees of reflexivity and the availability of alternative evaluations vary across and within societies and we must ask what kind of reasoning a person or group engages in when justifying or condemning acts and decisions (Howell 1997: 14-15).

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<sup>1</sup> Saba Mahmood has developed this idea through an ethnography of women's piety movements in Cairo; Mahmood describes how through bodily practices, spiritual exercises, and the cultivation of modes of conduct women create 'pious selves'. She offers an alternative view of agency which does not originate in the 'authentic' and 'free' internal dispositions of the subject, but argues that desires and aptitudes are themselves produced through disciplined practices (Mahmood 2005).

A concept which sidesteps the issue of agency and freedom is that of ethical sensibilities. For Talal Asad, this arises from the *habitus* (as developed by Mauss (1979 [1935])). The *habitus* is “an embodied capacity that is more than physical ability in that it also includes cultivated sensibilities and passions, an orchestration of the senses” (Asad 2003: 95). Thus, moral acts are not always the responsible acts of free agents answerable to God, society, or conscience. They can also be produced within, or may be felt to be in contravention of, ethical sensibilities which are particular to a society or group. These sensibilities are not something ‘timeless’ or ‘natural’, but must be actively reproduced through disciplined practice and are continually revised as they adjust to changing material conditions (Hirschkind 2001).

To recognise that multiple moralities exist in any society and that these are locally produced is not to surrender to a moral relativism which precludes cross-cultural comparison. What can be compared, and what we attempt to describe in this essay, are the ways models for moral action are produced, the processes of moral reasoning by which actions are justified or condemned with reference to these models, and the degree to which people are able to interact creatively with them. What makes this activity ‘moral’ is that it refers to ideas of right and wrong and ideals of what constitutes a virtuous life which appeal to ‘truths’ beyond the immediate interests of the individual. These might be founded on religious truths, political ideologies, ideas reified as the timeless and essential ‘culture’ particular to the group, and so on. Comparison of this sort can only be carried out on the basis of fine-grained ethnographic study.<sup>2</sup> Both of the contexts we explore in this essay have experienced recent and dramatic transformations after the collapse of socialism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. These two cases suggest that the field of morality is always in a dynamic state of negotiation and flux as people relate to wider societal norms in the context of everyday practical action.

### **Moral models in Uzbekistan**

The case study from Uzbekistan takes up the link between societal models and practical action. Ideas about what constitutes correct or desirable behaviour and norms of what ‘ought to be done’ are to a large extent adopted from models found in society. However, these models

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<sup>2</sup> Recent monographs such as Joel Robbins’s study of Urapmin ‘sinners’ in Papua New Guinea (2004) or Helle Rydstrom’s study of the moral education of girls in Northern Vietnam (2003) show the insights that empirically based research could bring to the conceptualisation of field research on morality. See also Michael Lambek’s work on morality (1996; 2000; 2002).

are not merely imposed on passive subjects, but can be actively adopted and reworked as sincerely held value commitments.

Abdumajid-aka is in his late 50s. He is a lecturer in mathematics at the University of Samarkand and director of a secondary school. In 2003 he was elected as the chairman, or *oqsoqol* (literally meaning 'white beard'), of his *mahalla* committee (a *mahalla* is a residential unit in a city or village). Abdumajid-aka is what you might call a social activist. He is widely travelled, having visited Iceland and Israel for academic conferences and courses, and a few years ago he visited the United States on a project promoting the creation of civil society sponsored by the US government. On his return, he founded an association of heads of *mahalla* committees with the aim of protecting their members and increasing awareness of their legal rights and status. This is something unprecedented in Uzbekistan, and not a little dangerous given the authoritarian nature of the regime. In the course of this work he has more than once come into direct conflict with local government officials, including the vice mayor and the city public prosecutor, in protecting members of his organisation from their extra-legal interventions.

Abdumajid-aka has developed his own highly individual conception of God, religion, and the ideal form of society through his particular life experiences. These include his upbringing within a Muslim home, his Soviet socialist education, work experience, foreign travel, and so on. A cultural model which is particularly relevant to him is the communitarian ideal of the *mahalla*. The *mahalla* is perceived and operationalised by different actors in society in diverse ways. The regime uses the ideal of the *mahalla* as a way to legitimise authoritarian rule under the guise of communitarian values. Local government officials use the administrative structures of the *mahalla* as an extension of their own personal authority, forcing *mahalla* leaders to collect payments for utilities such as gas and electricity, to collect taxes, and even to aid in the fulfilment of production targets set by central government ministries. For some residents, the *mahalla* is an oppressive institution of social control where people's actions are constantly the subject of gossip, judgement, and even intervention by the *mahalla* leadership and neighbours.

Abdumajid-aka translates the ideals and practice of social solidarity and equality within the *mahalla* into the context of the modern nation-state as a genuine basis for democracy. In doing so he plays upon the regime's legitimating discourse. He reverses the president's slogan "from a strong state to a strong society" which is used to justify the need for firm executive control. Instead, Abdumajid-aka takes seriously the regime's own propaganda to argue that a strong state depends on a truly democratic *mahalla*. In day-to-day interaction he encounters local government officials who have very different ideas of this institution and in these struggles and negotiations with these officials Abdumajid-aka is attempting to realise his own vision of the ideal society.

Islam is another model which Abdumajid-aka draws upon. He professes himself to be a believing Muslim. He performs the daily prayers as much as his work commitments allow and he is well respected by the local Islamic leadership, the imam of the local mosque and leader of the city Islamic administration, who is also a member of his *mahalla* committee. However, he has developed a personal interpretation of God and religion derived from his experience of illness and healing, dream encounters with what he interprets as divine agency, books he has studied, and perhaps also his intellectualist approach. He sees God as a kind of universal consciousness, of which each individual's consciousness is a small part. He understands levels of consciousness as constituting a scale, with humans attaining a certain level of development. Animals occupy a lower position on this scale than humans, and between humans and God there are angels and other beings. These beliefs combine with his Marxist education in forming Abdumajid-aka's view of an ideal society. He claims to still believe that one day people will attain what he calls a communist society, where people receive according to their needs and give according to their ability, but does not think it could have been achieved within the former Soviet socialist system. He also dismisses the current regime's ideology as unconvincing and not reflective of people's lived experience. The ideal society might be arrived at through religious education and upbringing.

Abdumajid-aka is able to use the *mahalla* and Islam in this way because they are conventionally accepted modes of action and experience. For example, dream encounters and experiences of healing, which in some societies might be interpreted as the playing-out of an individual's inner psychological issues or as exotic or irrational belief, are intelligible for many people in Uzbekistan as the intervention of divine agency. At the same time intelligibility is not only cultural. 'Cultural' models are shaped within existing relations of power.

An example of this is the institution of the *mahalla* itself. Despite the claims of regime discourses that the *mahalla* is an ancient institution and carrier of Uzbek cultural values, the form the *mahalla* takes today is very different from how it might have existed at any time in the past. During the Soviet period, and particularly since independence in 1991, the institution of the *mahalla* has been standardised as a residential unit with a leadership and a set of personnel with defined duties. It has been imposed in areas where it had never had any history before, such as urban multi-story residential districts, and variations in local forms of social organisation have been regularised through the now official structures. Moreover the relationship of the *oqsoqol* both with state authorities and with residents is to a large extent shaped by duties and practical power bestowed by the state. For example, the official *mahalla* committee is responsible for the distribution of state-funded poverty relief and child benefits, it issues documents and certificates which everyone

has need for at one time or another, and the state judicial system often refers domestic disputes and other cases which judges consider to be of minor importance back to the *mahalla*. Thus, although the *mahalla* might be a 'cultural model', the way it can be operationalised within Abdumajid-aka's ideas about what constitutes 'the good' is shaped by relations of power, within which state actors play a prominent role.

Were Abdumajid-aka to exceed the bounds of expression considered politically acceptable by the regime, he would be forced into the position of political opposition activist with all the dangers and restrictions on personal freedoms and forms of expression that this would entail. Were he to express his ideas on religion more publicly and attempt to persuade others of his view, as some in Samarkand have done who have founded what might be called 'New Age' movements in Western Europe, he would be shunned by practicing Muslims and would not hold the respected and prominent position he does at the moment. Abdumajid-aka engages creatively with the cultural models of the *mahalla* and Islam, but personal freedom is not unbounded. The way he is able to use these models, and the limits of his public action, are to a large extent shaped by relations of power.

### **Moral deliberations and moral justifications in Romanian organisations**

The case study from Romania deals with the way in which individuals negotiate their allegiance to different moral models in a time of change (through moral deliberation) and with the construction of justifications for the deviance of practice from these models.

The moral models upon which Romanian urbanites draw are also diverse and sometimes conflict with each other, but the dynamics between these models have radically different consequences than in the above case of Abdumajid-aka. What characterises the post-1989 period in Romania is the rapid change in economic and political structures as well as in values. In the sphere of work, for instance, the new values that accompany liberal policies enjoy legitimacy because of their association with Europe. The employees are thus faced with competing sets of values: the socialist morality with its emphasis on equality and the satisfaction of needs, and the liberal values of competition, efficiency, and meritocracy. The new set of liberal values is rhetorically asserted to be superior, because of its link to economically successful societies. The old set of socialist values is closer to actual practices, however, and thus can be more easily invoked in order to explain them (it has set a 'tradition' of justifications and explanations with respect to these values). To further complicate the landscape of moral frameworks, the Christian morality which has, in its Eastern Christian (Orthodox) version, no concrete discourse related to the sphere of work, shadows individual

action, as both an 'old' and a 'new' framework.<sup>3</sup> The weight and influence of these moral models on individual action is being thoroughly negotiated, the novelty of the encounter meaning that no synthesis or even equilibrium between these models has been reached.

If the context of social change means that several moral models are simultaneously at work in the society, the existence of a socialist past and the appeal of 'Europe' are responsible for the strength with which people believe in the power of these models. Indeed, one of the main disappointments with the socialist system was the duplicity existing between socialist values and actual practices (reflected in the work of social scientists in the classic distinction between 'socialism' and 'actually existing socialism'). After 1989, the year in which socialism was rejected, it was hoped that the new social order would not be duplicitous. Therefore there was a strong discourse inciting people to actually believe in the new values and to 'really' behave morally with respect to them, because the very act of rejecting socialism meant for them that new democratic values had to be adopted;<sup>4</sup> and because this was a precondition for 'becoming European'. This led to a high moral imperative, which was publicly praised as one of the newly acquired freedoms. The post-1989 governments, mass media, and intellectuals put pressure on ordinary citizens to become 'new men' and to 'get rid of the old habits'<sup>5</sup> if they wanted to 'get into Europe'.

Apart from the strong and conflicting moral models that characterise Romanian cosmology today, practices also enter into play and shape moral values. The moral justifications given by individuals, in which they explicitly or implicitly relate to moral models in order to justify their actions, show that deviant actions are more mildly judged if they are recurrent or if the existence of conflicting moral models prevents the elaboration of concrete guidelines. As a result of the negotiation between values and practices, the 'high standard of moral values' is diminished and reshaped to accommodate practices that would have been otherwise considered as 'deviant' or 'immoral'.

Traian, a young employee in his mid 20s working in a humanitarian non-governmental organisation, tried to justify his lack of involvement

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<sup>3</sup> The official suppression of religion during the socialist period did not lead to an eradication of religious values, and thus we might refer to the Christian Orthodox morality as being an 'old' set of values. The religious renewal that took place after 1989 generated a new understanding of Orthodoxy in urban areas. Thus a 'new' Christian Orthodox morality of mixed Christian inspiration is being created.

<sup>4</sup> The public discourse in Romania emphasises the fact that Romanians did not want socialism, that the Soviets imposed it on them. Socialist values were not 'chosen', but forced on them.

<sup>5</sup> Expressions used by the Prime Minister Mugur Isarescu in his public speech when launching the "Economic Strategy for Romania on Medium Term (2000-2004/5)", a major document when seen in light of the negotiations with the European Union.

in the organisation in front of his more dedicated colleagues. He expressed his conviction that work in a humanitarian organisation requires self-sacrifice: extra hours of work and a certain 'calling'. But he had taken the job of public relations coordinator here because he needed money and needed to be in the capital in order to prepare for the entry exams for the Academy of Theatre and Film to become a film director, a profession for which he had a 'calling'. While respecting his working hours, Traian let his mind wander into the realm of Shakespeare and made numerous mistakes when writing his more down-to-earth correspondence with partner institutions, thus affecting the NGO's activity and reputation. Traian was aware that none of the moral models that he invoked in order to justify his absentmindedness would absolve him from fault. Nonetheless he pointed out to his colleagues that he was working steadily, eight hours per day, under difficult conditions (during the summer it was 40 degrees Celsius with no air conditioning in the office), which would satisfy the socialist work ethic. He invoked also the fact that his whole life was dedicated to work, because after his eight hours in the NGO he continued working until late at night for his entry exams – which would satisfy the requirements of even the most extreme variants of the Protestant work ethic. Finally, he pointed out that he was deeply compassionate towards the beneficiaries of the NGO activities (HIV-infected children), a fact that was visible in his interaction with them and their parents.

None of Traian's justifications were lies and he probably embraced all the values he invoked, but none of these justifications actually excused him for not doing his job properly. According to all the moral models he himself referred to, he was guilty and his actions did not fit his stated values. His justifications were constructed for the purpose of appearing less deviant in front of his colleagues. As an excuse strategy, he also invoked the poor performance and work involvement of the state employees from the institutions with which he had contacts, the even more significant mistakes they were making in their relations with him, their lack of immediate response to letters, and so on. These statements, together with arguments linked to the lack of clear norms from the NGO management, were meant to diminish the importance of his deviant behaviour by lowering the work values that his actions had to fit. He was negotiating, both with his conscience and with his colleagues, the necessary level of involvement in a humanitarian organisation, and he was doing this by proposing lower standards.

This behaviour is current today among many service sector employees in Bucharest, who are aware of the fact that their performance does not match their values and the others' values, but 'cannot help it'. Despite attempts to bring values closer to practices, most employees still remain 'in between', knowing what 'ought' to be done and doing what they can do, in the difficult social conditions generated by rapid change.

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## Conclusion

The two cases we have presented, though derived from different social contexts, both show the dynamic nature of the processes by which models for moral action are incorporated within personal life projects. Depending upon their particular position within society and their own life trajectories, individuals have access to differing models. Agency is located in the choice available when confronted with multiple models, in the way they are combined and adapted. At the same time the form these models take and the way they can be operationalised are to a large extent shaped by relations of power. When people come into contact with new models for a virtuous life, they do not come 'cold', as it were. The way new models are perceived are influenced by what Asad (2003) has called "ethical sensibilities". Abdumajid-aka adopts the ideal of democracy from his experience of foreign travel, his education, from his involvement in the projects of American NGOs, and from the discourses of the regime itself. However, this is interpreted within the framework of his existing ideas, or 'sensibilities', of a 'good life', which are shaped within his experience of the *mahalla*, his Muslim upbringing, and his education and life under Soviet communism. Traian adopts his work values from the discourses of the NGO managements, media discourses on the 'Western' work ethic, and the work performance he witnesses around him. The contradictions existing between these models, as well as between these moral models and his needs, desires, and practices, leave him overwhelmed and ultimately torn apart.

As a final comment, a focus on morality offers potential for engagement with the already extensive literature within anthropology dealing with selfhood and subjectivities. Laidlaw (2002) points us in this direction with his anthropology of ethics which is founded on processes of moral reasoning and self-formation. For both Abdumajid-aka and Traian, their self-representations as a good Muslim, good community leader, and good worker are formed with reference to their value commitments. These are not 'mere' justifications or ideologies, but acquire their persuasiveness and force by reference to greater 'truths'. That these truths are historically produced, as is the freedom which they exercise when they engage with them, does not negate the fact that they are creatively adopted as sincerely held value commitments within their particular life projects.

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## **Rituals, forms of behaviour, and solidarity among hunters' groups in West Africa and South Siberia**

Youssouf Diallo and István Sántha

### **Introduction**

Hunters occupy an important place in the social and cultural life of many societies and they continue to play a crucial role in both West Africa and South Siberia. As a group, members of a hunting congregation have a particular ideology, share the same beliefs, and defend common values. As individuals, they have social and ritual (magic or divination) functions. This essay concerns social interactions and forms of internal solidarity among West African and Siberian hunters, linking these to anthropological discussions on group cohesion.<sup>1</sup>

### **Theoretical comments**

The study of groups, understood as collectivities of individuals engaged in interactions and bounded by definite criteria of membership, is not a new project per se. Group unity and behaviour have been analysed and explained from many different points of view. Early attempts to explore the process of group formation and the variety of social groups, called variously 'communities', 'societies', 'associations', 'guilds', or 'leagues', were made by sociologists such as Durkheim, Tönnies, Weber, and their followers. The sociology of Tönnies, which analyses the modality of groups and distinguishes between community and society as the two basic forms of human grouping, is probably one of the most systematic accounts that has taken place in sociology. Yet most theoretical discussions about groups deal with the opposition between the individual and the group. While making classifications of the most important groups and analysing the relationships between their members, other sociologists have considered the size aspect. Besides power, hierarchy, conflict, competition, cohesion, and solidarity, the size factor has also become an important issue in theories about groups (Simmel 1999, Weber 1978).

The study of these topics is of interest to other disciplines, too. Similar questions about group behaviour and solidarity have been explored by social psychologists and anthropologists, the latter dealing mainly, though not exclusively, with non-European societies. Groups may be formed voluntarily or on the basis of genealogical or affinal ties. The groups that social anthropologists have been most concerned with have tended to be age-classes, the clan, the tribe, the ethnic group, or the village community. However, these groups, based on criteria of common

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<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to Joachim Otto Habeck for his comments on an earlier version.

descent or locality, are not the only modes of group formation. Plurality of membership is a characteristic of human beings (McIver 1948). In addition to being a member of a primary social unit, a person generally belongs to a variety of other groups, each of them characterised by a 'spirit' (Vierkandt 1928) or a consciousness which constitutes its individuality and specificity. From this perspective, what is important is that a person is a social actor who plays different roles in different contexts (Nadel 1970).

For a fruitful approach to any kind of human grouping one must not only look into the social criteria for membership and analyse the interactions in which actors are engaged, but also explore the relationship between the size factor and identity discourses. Indeed, the switch from one discourse to another has implications for group size. There are circumstances in which members of a group clearly put a premium on small size, while in others, the larger a group, the better it is considered to be. This was the premise behind the workshop on *The Size Factor in Identity Politics* organised by Günther Schlee at the MPI for Social Anthropology in May 2004. The general discussion and the concluding remarks of that workshop stressed the need to continue the discussions on forms of solidarity and group size. By presenting examples from West Africa and South Siberia, we seek to contribute to this debate on social interactions and group cohesion. However, we are aware that group theories are very complex and it is not our intention to reduce this complexity to a mere discussion of social interaction. A comprehensive analysis of the size factor and its significance for the case studies presented is beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>2</sup> However, this essay is a first attempt to discuss our ethnographic material in this theoretical framework.

### **The individual and the group**

The idea that communities arise out of the will of their members constitutes the general principle of group theory (Tönnies 2001, McIver 1917). Sociologists who have studied the relations between individuals and group unity describe cohesion as arising not only from the sharing of common values and space, but also out of a consensus on ends and purposes. According to them, people are united because they are alike; they want the same things and follow the same interests. However, this explanation of groups by reference to the will of their members has further implications for collective action. If it is true that the pursuit of common interests brings individuals together and creates the conditions for group unity as well as a basis of cooperation between its members, it

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<sup>2</sup> As McIver (1917: ix) rightly observed, "social relations can never be adequately stated in quantitative terms or understood as expressions of quantitative laws".

remains true that the pursuit of the same interests may also provoke competition or conflict.

This brief account of group unity and behaviour takes us to a crucial theoretical and methodological debate about the relationship, or rather the opposition, between the individual and the group. Anthropologists such as Nadel have tried to overcome such an opposition by using the concept of role (Nadel 1970). He has rightly argued that groups and relationships exist through individuals. When we want to describe groups we observe individuals (Nadel 1955). On the other hand, the antinomy of the individual and the group (or the society), which was one of the central topics in Durkheim's work, remains the core problematic of many sociological studies.<sup>3</sup> While some authors give priority, as Durkheim did, to the unity or the whole (i.e. the group) in the study of social interactions, others consider the unit (i.e. the individual) as the starting point of their analysis. According to the second perspective, known as methodological individualism, individuals represent the supreme reality, because the group as such is not visible. What is interesting about this point of view is the way the question of the group is approached. Respect, authority, conflict, and cooperation are defined as basic principles of individual interaction, from which it is possible to shift to a theory of the group since the same dispositions can be observed within a group and contribute to explaining its behaviour and cohesion.

This approach, founded on the analysis of interaction between individuals and groups, provides the inspiration for our study of hunters in West Africa and South Siberia. The description by Youssouf Diallo, using his material on West African hunters as an example of the voluntary association<sup>4</sup> of individuals, seeks to contribute to the discussion of group cohesion. The account by István Sántha illustrates the reality of another experience of hunting activities in South Siberia and substantiates the view that connects hunting with specific forms of cultural and social life, namely that of the Buryats and the Evenki/Tungus of the Baikal Region.

### **Hunters in South Siberia and West Africa**

We start with some brief ethnic and ecological background before focusing on the belief systems and ritual observances of the hunters. Let us consider first the Baikal region of South Siberia, where István Sántha

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<sup>3</sup> Vierkandt (1928) makes a distinction between matters of the group (*Gruppenangelegenheiten*), for example preparations for war and its conduct, and private matters (*persönliche Angelegenheiten*) such as subsistence.

<sup>4</sup> According to McIver (1917: 42), "a voluntary association is an association of likes, of members who have a common interest uniting them as an association".

did his field research on Buryat-Evenki (or Tungus) interethnic relations.

The Western Buryats speak Buryat, the northernmost language of the Mongol language family, while the Evenki people are speakers of one of the eastern dialects of the Evenki language, which belongs to the northern languages of the Manchu-Tungus language family. 'Tungus' was the generic name that the Evenki groups living to the west of Lake Baikal, near the western Buryats, used to designate themselves, and was subsequently appropriated by the Soviet regime after the October Revolution (1917). In a general sense, 'Tungus' as an ethnonym was replaced with 'Evenki' by Soviet officials in the late 1920s. In the local setting, however, 'Tungus' continue to be referred to as one subgroup of the Evenki.

This identification relates to ecological factors and modes of subsistence. In certain regions, the Evenki draw a distinction, according to their place of origin, between the subgroups originating from the steppe and those coming from the taiga. This distinction also relates to modes of subsistence, between 'horse breeders', also called Tungus, and 'reindeer herders' to the east of Lake Baikal, who are known as 'Orochens'. Up to the mid-1960s the two groups of Evenki were distinguished according to their livelihood.<sup>5</sup>

Besides this group diversity, the Baikal region is also an economically and ecologically diverse zone. The Buryats live in two different ecological zones, namely the taiga (boreal forest zone) and the steppe, and their neighbours the Evenki/Tungus only in the taiga. The western Buryats, close to the taiga, have the possibility of hunting in winter; but this ecological zone also offers them an alternative steppe economy based on pastoralism. While hunting only takes place in the taiga, hunters also spend time in the village. Although the village or steppe-taiga distinction is an important characteristic for both Buryat and Evenki/Tungus hunters, there is no clear-cut spatial division when it comes to rituals. There is a common perception of a transitional territory between the taiga and the steppe, recognised as such by both groups. However, the Buryats and the Tungus have opposite values and interests reflecting different perceptions of this territory. While for the Tungus the taiga is a familiar place, it remains a dangerous one for the Buryats living there. It is the task of the Tungus shaman to perform rituals for the benefit of the Buryat. The intervention of Buryat ancestors – whose intention is to protect the hunters from danger – plays a role in their hunting activities. The hunters, coming from the village, which is the sphere of their social life, go to the taiga and pray on the road. In the village most sacrifices are offered to the ancestors. In the

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<sup>5</sup> After 1917, 'Evenki' became a generic term to include the Orochons and the groups who call themselves Tungus and Evenki.

taiga, where there are fewer sacred places, sacrifices are made to the spirits.

Despite changing political attitudes to hunting in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, hunting has had an important position in the livelihoods of the two groups of Evenki. The Orochens kept reindeer as transport animals for the hunt while the Tungus hunters used horses. On the western side of Lake Baikal, in the taiga, both Evenki groups (those formerly with and without reindeer) nowadays hunt partly with horses and partly on foot. Before the October Revolution, hunting was a way of life for the Tungus and a supplementary activity for the taiga Buryats. While it still remains a seasonal activity for the latter, as a result of the communist regime hunting has become the main form of livelihood for the Evenki. Today, it is a way of life for the Evenki and one of the main activities for the taiga Buryats. In brief, for the groups established in the transition zone between the taiga and the steppe, hunting is a major economic activity and hunters have special social and ritual activities. Both of them have a shamanist tradition and there are complex linkages between shamans and hunters, as will be explained later.

We turn now to the West African savannah, a region also marked by cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, where ethnicity, locality, and occupation, as well as religion, play a role in defining and shaping individual and collective identities. Voluntary associations are also an essential recruiting principle and a factor of integration in local political units.

The West African 'traditional hunters', called *donsos* or *dozos* in the Dyula language,<sup>6</sup> are an example of this.<sup>7</sup> These hunters form long-standing associations (*ton*) of men who carry shotguns. They dress in traditional uniform, wearing *gris-gris* (i.e. talisman) and accessories such as a fly whisk, a hunting knife, and a whistle (*donso fle*), which is used as an instrument of communication in the bush. They also have healing skills and they are feared by people who consider a good hunter ultimately to be a sorcerer (*suba* in Dyula). Indeed, it is believed that traditional hunters possess mystical powers which they employ in the bush and which can harm people they compete against or come into conflict with.

West African hunters' associations (*donso ton*) have a collegial character which cuts across ethnic differences. Members of different ethnic

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<sup>6</sup> The Dyula were long-distance traders in the West African savannah, where many people have adopted their language, which belongs to the Mande group.

<sup>7</sup> The systematic use of the adjective 'traditional' in the literature on West African hunters intends to show that these groups constitute an ancient institution going back to pre-colonial times. The first appearance of hunting congregations in the West African savannah is concomitant with the emergence of pre-colonial state formations or empires (Ghana, Mali) or even before (Cissé and Kamissoko 2000).

groups might be members of the same hunting cult. Small groups of traditional hunters, whose exact number is not known, live today in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Côte d'Ivoire or further to the west in Sierra Leone, where they are known as *Kamajors*. In general, an association is made up primarily of hunters living in the same village or in a group of related villages. It has a master of rituals who is a kind of *primus inter pares*. The masters' assembly is composed of elders, who assume ritual functions and are responsible for the implementation of rituals. The interactions between members of hunting societies take place in ordinary everyday social life, but also in special contexts such as burials or funerals.

### **Recruitment**

The study of how new members are recruited is an important key to the understanding of group analysis. It is through recruitment that groups form and renew themselves (Nadel 1955). However, material interests and advantages often induce groups to establish certain conditions for participation or to apply strategies by which they can restrict membership or increase it. Closure and openness to outsiders are two of these alternative strategies. The politics of inclusion-exclusion enables groups to control their numbers and protect a monopolistic position (Weber 1978).

Unlike secret societies and initiation societies, in which membership is automatic and compulsory, hunting societies are 'open' and flexible institutions. Participation in such a group is voluntary. In West Africa to be a hunter is a matter of individual choice and recruitment works by way of co-optation, not descent (Cissé 1994; Traoré 2000). The fact that a man is a member of a hunting society does not mean that his sons will also be hunters. The conditions for adherence to membership of a hunters' association include the ritual observance of common values which require the moral and intellectual probity of group members. Such values include sobriety, moderation in sexual matters, respectfulness, courage, cooperation, and solidarity with the group. The conduct proper to being a good hunter is so formulated as to limit membership and to promote the autonomy and cohesion of the group. A hunter should always be pure in all his activities, but also in his relations with other people.

The West African hunters assent to an egalitarian ethic. There is no social or ethnic distinction among them, that is to say, ethnicity and rank are not criteria of distinction. Candidates are recruited on the basis of the acquisition of a certain knowledge. A person who wishes to stand as a candidate for membership in the group should first offer a chicken to a master regarded as the mentor, who then offers it as a sacrifice to the divinities and the mythical ancestors of the hunters. After he has

answered “yes” to different questions related to the group moral and the way of life of hunters, the candidate receives a ritual purification. Given this agreement between the candidate and the representative of the association, it can be said that the membership in the group is achieved by contract. This contract clearly determines the rights and obligations of each party. The distribution of spoils and mutual assistance for the transportation of a killed animal are examples of these rights and obligations. The older a hunter is, the greater his knowledge of the mystical world, divination, and hunting techniques is believed to be. During the initiation, the neophyte follows his tutor in the bush, where he learns hunting techniques (individual or collective game hunting), including how to shoot a gun, how to identify and follow animals’ footsteps, where to hide and how to succeed in a confrontation with a dangerous animal. The neophyte also learns divination techniques and the use of medicinal plants. Finally, the young hunter sews a hunting coat, which he wears during rituals and meetings.

Among the Siberian hunters, too, descent is not the most important criterion of recruitment. Hunters have their own customary institution and system of norms, which is reflected in their behaviour. But some elements of their norms are difficult to discern in terms of group behaviour. To be a hunter is a decision taken at an individual level. Initiation does not involve a collective ceremony, but an individual accomplishment, after which a young man becomes an adult. This achievement involves a ‘ritual’ depending not on age, but rather on the first good luck in hunting and the value of sharing. The first killing of a bear is a meaningful social event in a young man’s life and a form of initiation for becoming a good hunter of bears. It is also a sign of future authority. On this occasion the entire village is invited to share the cooked meat of the head of the bear.

### **Ritual performance**

From what has been said about the individual aspects of recruitment, it becomes clear that the attributes of a good hunter, which in some cases are acquired, are also connected with individual destiny and the development of a strong personality. This is possible to express only through ritual performance.

As we already mentioned both of them have a shamanist tradition (while the Western Buryats have practiced secretly but continuously during the Soviet period, the last Tungus shamans died in the end of the seventies at the West of the lake Baikal). Here, the link between shamanism and hunting is obvious, since the descendant of a good hunter may be a shaman. The main process for becoming a ‘good’ hunter is the display of magical power, which confers authority and

prestige. There are 'good' hunters of both bears and elks, but this qualification does not mean that the others are bad hunters, they are simply 'pure' hunters, without religious qualification. 'Good' hunters enjoy authority in their community. In the past, their mode of behaviour, their clothes, food, and other objects signified their power. The Buryats distinguish between individual and collective hunting and it is the shaman who is the leader of the collective hunt (*zegete aba*) (Baldaev 1961: 174; Baldaev 1970: 16; Khangalov 1958-60; Vladimirtsov 1934: 25, 74).

The Buryats (in the steppe) have a patrilineal system and the Tungus (in the taiga) have both patrilineal and matrilineal descent systems. Members of some Buryat patrilineages (*iyyele* in Buryat) do not eat the meat of certain animals. The Buryats living in the taiga are in an intermediate position, as the Tungus' influence on them is more noticeable and stronger in terms of the kinship system. It is not only the patrilineal system that determines whether one becomes a hunter and the destiny of good hunters. The role played by the maternal grandfather is also important in legitimising both hunter and shaman status. In some taiga Buryat villages there is no recognised shaman. According to popular belief, a person who is a good hunter has the ability to become a shaman, but not only because of his hunting activities. He is also entitled (*utkha*) to become a shaman, for example, if his maternal grandfather was a shaman and a good hunter. Thus we cannot exclude the possibility of inheritance on the maternal line. Furthermore, the Tungus' descent system is so noticeable among the Buryats that hunters are ideologically 'tungusised' individuals among the Buryats.

For both groups, amulets are among the most important hunting objects. Among the Tungus, *kutu* means 'luck' in hunting and it is an amulet, too, which is supposed to bring luck to an individual in hunting. On the other hand, the symbol of *ongons*<sup>8</sup> (spiritual masters embodied in wooden figures) still exists among the Buryats, but there are very few regions today (for example in the taiga Buryat village) where one can still observe these figures and the practice of burning them after the death of their owner. There is a special *ongon*, *holongo ongon*, in the property of every hunter among the Western Buryats. This *ongon* and the connected rituals have a direct link to *olzoo*, which specifically means luck in hunting in the Buryat language. Each Buryat man with his own family sacrifices *togonoi* (alcohol distilled from cows' milk) to his own *holongo ongon* at the beginning of the hunting season (after October 14th) in order to have luck in hunting. After the death of its owner, the *holongo ongon* is burnt by his descendants. The property, usage, and symbolic meaning of amulets among the Tungus and Buryat hunters illustrates the importance of individual attributes and the religious dimen-

<sup>8</sup> *Ongons* are amulets and represent different spiritual masters.

sion of hunting, whereas the social ties (and the hunter's role in group cohesion) come to the fore only occasionally.

From what has been said about systems of belief and ritual observance, it also appears that there are a variety of special terms connected with hunters and their activities in Southern Siberia and West Africa. In the Buryat language, *utkha*<sup>9</sup>, for example, is the historical 'root' of hunters' associations and also has significance in the wider social context (for example, for the *albin suglaan*, which constitutes an imaginary secret society of the ancestors). In recent times, the institution has been strengthened by the practice of common and popular shaman associations in the region. It is sanctioned by the society on the basis of common *utkha* with hunters. There is a conventional idea of different specialists endowed with *utkha* among the Western Buryats. The male shaman (*böö*), the female shaman (*od'igon*), the clan leader (*noyon*), the smith (*darkhan*), and the hunter (*agnuulshan*) are among the most respected leaders in Buryat society (Baldaev 1970).

Although *utkha* and *olzoo* refer to different things, they are similar. *Utkha* refers to a personal link to the ancestors. In addition to luck in hunting, *olzoo* refers to a connection to the spirits and the time spent in the taiga. The relations between the hunter and the spiritual master of the taiga or the wild animals through the killed animal are the basis of *olzoo*, a concept also connected with a successful reincarnation of the killed animal. *Olzoo* is dangerous because of the reincarnation of these wild animals, which represents the revenge of the spiritual master for killing his wild animal. Indeed, South Siberian hunters conceive of the spiritual master of a killed animal as a vengeful force. It is for the extension of the *olzoo* that the Buryats keep in touch with the spirits. Hunters' sons occupy an interesting role in this system of representation. Before going to the taiga, a hunter usually has a ritualised conversation with his son about luck, which takes the form of a divination. He asks his son about probable (good) luck in hunting and interprets the probability of luck from the answer given by the son. The latter always gives the permission to kill animals not only because of the necessity for the family to get something to eat, but also because such a divination is a careful practice to guard against the possible revenge of the spiritual master. To protect themselves against the revenge of the spiritual master of the killed animal, the hunters first cut away the left paw of a killed squirrel and a sable and throw them into the forest to the spiritual master of wild animals. The practice of burying a bear is another such practice (hunters put certain parts of the body back into the den),

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<sup>9</sup> *Utkha* is, on one hand, the inheritance of some 'attributions' and 'power' that an individual has received from the ancestors; on the other hand, it is connected with professional status. In the latter sense, it signifies the 'right' of the respective individual to become a specialist in the profession.

after which they can obtain the favour of the spiritual master of the bears.

West African hunters have a similar conception of a kind of vital energy associated with animals, considered to be a product of the soul and existing beyond time and space. This vital energy (*nyama* in Dyula), which is more or less dangerous to people, is found in human beings as well. However, the *nyama* of animals varies in accordance with their power, their resistance to death, the form of their body, and the fright they give people. A lion, for example, gives us a terrible fright when he appears, simply because he has a powerful *nyama*.

It is believed that the most dangerous part of an animal is its tail. When a hunter shoots an animal, before it dies its vital energy flows towards the tail. Therefore, it is important to know how to cut off the tail off a killed animal. To circumvent the *nyama*, the hunter must first recite magic formulas and whisk away the vital energy of the animal before cutting off its tail.

The ideas of punishment and revenge are characteristic of human-animal confrontations. Hunters believe that no attack on the life of animals can remain unpunished, because the *nyama* is a vengeful force. When a hunter kills a wild animal, the restless *nyama* of that animal will follow him, and finally strike him or a member of his family in some way. A hunter is thus a potential risk for his family and village community. He can bring bad luck to members of his family. To West African hunters, the misfortunes of a fellow are the teleological evidence of the intervention of the vengeful *nyama* of a killed animal. The exorcism of *nyama* is done with the aid of amulets, invocations, fly whisks, and a ritual bath, which hunters must regularly take.

Rights, obligations, and internal solidarity are expressed through behaviour. Interactions among the hunters in the taiga do not depend on their ethnic origins. In the taiga the life of hunters is characterised by equality, not by the social norms and values relevant in the village (such as so-called steppe patriarchy). A killed animal is the property of the lucky hunter (*olzootoi*), not the common property of the community. However, with regard to intra-group solidarity, sharing is a socially valued action. A good hunter operates outside society, but at the same time he has to take care of his social networks in order to preserve his integration in village life. The fur remains the individual property of the hunter, but the sharing of the meat takes an incremental form in the village. The hunter first shares part of the meat with the hunters with whom he spent the previous night in the taiga, and who have participated in the success of the hunting (and in transporting the meat to the hunting cabin). Then, kinsmen, neighbours, and elderly women of the village get their share. On this occasion, the meat is offered in a metal

bucket and, in return, the hunter receives the bucket with little presents (sweets and sugar) for his children. The giving back of an empty bucket is a sign of disrespect towards the hunter and his son (his family). The hunters need to share not only the meat and stories of the hunt, but also their luck. Thus, sharing the meat is equated with the sharing of good luck.

### **The political and military significance of hunting groups**

With regard to West African hunters in particular, a crucial point for consideration is the growth of informal organisations for the maintenance of security and the entanglement of traditional hunters in violent conflicts. Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone are the most recent cases in point.

West African hunters are today a force to be reckoned with, because their importance in the regional context has increased following the progressive breakdown of internal order in many countries. *Kamajors* hunters were involved in the recent Sierra Leonean civil war. In Côte d'Ivoire, too, after the outbreak of the civil war in 1999, the northern rebellion quickly mobilised the *dozos*, who subsequently took an active part in the armed conflict. *Dozo* identity is tied to the northern region of Côte d'Ivoire, where the hunters' associations carry out their rituals and hunting activities on a seasonal basis. Most of the Ivorian traditional hunters are from the Senufo, Dyula, and Malinke northern ethnic groups.<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to determine their exact number, though some estimates indicate a total of forty thousand traditional hunters. Also, the number of *dozos* fighters mobilised by the current rebellion is not known exactly. International Crisis Group (ICG), an independent NGO, estimated their number at one thousand fighters from *dozos* organisations, including at least five hundred from Mali (ICG, 2003).

Hunters' associations, according to their own traditions, require a degree of autonomy from the modern state. However, they have become a matter of national interest and an instrument of political manipulation. In response to the progressive collapse of the state, the level of military action undertaken by small groups of hunters is increasing at the expense of control by the state structures. The political north-south divide is at the heart of the current Ivorian conflict and there is a disputed claim concerning manipulation. Southern politicians accused northern leaders of manipulating the *dozos* hunters as paramilitary forces playing into their hands. However, the participation of hunters in public matters, which predates the conflict, is linked to the loss of confidence in

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<sup>10</sup> The Senufo and the Dyula are culturally related, but anthropologists distinguish between them as belonging to two linguistically and ethnically different groups. The Senufo are a *Gur*-speaking people.

the state in establishing and maintaining security in the northern region. Before joining the current rebellion, the hunters first undertook the role of a supplementary police force for several years. Their mobilisation began in the 1990s when the northern region became increasingly lawless. The administrative officer in Korhogo (the district's capital) appealed to the hunters for assistance and gave them the assignment of combating rural banditry.

In the same period, the state's absence from rural areas also affected farmer-herder relations. Local farmers organised a system for protecting fields from damage caused by cattle. They mobilised small groups of hunters to police the fields, to prevent nomadic pastoralists from using grazing land located within the confines of village territories, and to expel those coming from neighbouring countries (Mali and Burkina Faso). Their policing role, including the settlement of disputes, and their abuse of power led to violence and administrative officials eventually complained about the fact that the hunters were acting as a substitute for the local administration.

Despite concerns about violence and human rights' abuses inflicted on villagers living in areas under their control, the period leading up to 1999-2000 did not result in the quartering of *dozos* forces. After the military coup of December 1999, they were given instructions to control the roads. As a result, the *dozos* forces became more aggressive, extending their activities beyond the northern region of Côte d'Ivoire. This emerging role was a threat to state security. The then minister of interior of the military junta warned the *dozos* against any interference in public affairs, claiming that order and security fell strictly within the authority of the police. Nevertheless, the activities of the *dozos* and their abuse of power continued throughout the country and led to increasing violence. The situation became worse in 2000, when the *dozos* accidentally killed a student in Abidjan. The student association protested against the fact that the government allowed the traditional hunters to maintain order in the country.

It would be an exaggeration to say that all *dozos* hunters are willing to side with the rebellion against the state. It is a matter of investigation to what extent the members of *dozos* associations willing to preserve the autonomy of the group will decline in numbers. What is interesting for our purpose is the political and military significance of some of these associations and their entanglement in the current political crisis in Côte d'Ivoire. The growth of informal organisations for the maintenance of security in the country, or elsewhere where the use of violence has ceased to be a state monopoly, challenges the Weberian view which makes the maintenance of law and order a major criterion for a political organisation, especially that of the state.

## Conclusion

Comparison of social institutions is a useful method for understanding groups, communities, and people's behaviour in relation to one another. In this essay the ideas, beliefs, and moral values of hunters, the field of politics, the recruitment of members, and ritual performance have been the topics selected for comparison. Social interactions or relationships and group cohesion are the theories involved in our interpretation of hunters' behaviour and the ways in which they behave towards others in their society.

Hunting societies, as understood in West Africa, that is to say, voluntary and congregational groups, do not exist as such in the Siberian context. In both contexts, however, a hunter is a person who behaves in a way consistent with his status, which involves proper conduct and good relations with his fellow hunters. In the case of the Buryat and Evenki hunters, despite the high status that hunters enjoy within their communities, the talent of a hunter, his luck, and his way of connecting with the spiritual masters are seen as individual attributes and the hunt happens outside the bounds of the village and its social norms. It would be wrong to assume that Buryat and Evenki hunters are 'individualists' free of loyalties and obligations. Rather, they appear to be engaged in negotiations with the spiritual masters of the forest and the animals more than with other hunters. Social cohesion is thus much stronger among the hunters of West Africa and it is acknowledged and expressed as such by the hunters through their very engagement in hunting societies.

Nevertheless, both contexts are similar in that being a hunter or a member of the group involves not only a particular ideology, but also specific forms of behaviour through which rights, obligations, and internal solidarity are expressed. Yet again, the difference is to be found in the degree to which these ideologies and solidarities are shared, the extent to which they are obligatory, and who they are directed at.

In discussing the social and ritual activities of hunters it has been necessary to identify the main categories shaping their ideas, beliefs, and ways of life. Certain preliminary parallels might be drawn between the West African concept *nyama*, that is, the vital energy of a being, and the Buryat/Evenki concept of spiritual masters, who decide on the hunter's entitlement to take an animal in accordance with his *olzoo*. However, a West African hunter will try to avoid confrontation and cut off dialogue with the *nyama* of the animal he kills since it can only result in revenge, whereas the Siberian hunter will try to maintain a positive, or at least peaceful, connection with the master of the forest and the spiritual owners of the animals in order to be granted the animal.

Finally, in the field of politics, concerning the involvement in violent conflicts and military action, the difference between West African and Siberian hunters can be explained most convincingly by their divergent histories and the (dis-)integrative processes of the states wherein they live. There is a long military tradition amongst Buryat and Tungus people, for example, who were soldiers in the Manchu Empire, in the squads of the Transbaikal Cossacks, and soldiers in the Second World War (Evenki hunters had a particular reputation among the Soviet troops as snipers). Here again, it is a matter of investigation to what extent the number of these people willing to preserve this military reputation tends to increase or to diminish. However, the examples mentioned in this essay speak of the participation in conflicts fought by the state, or on behalf of it. The Ivorian *dozos*, on the other hand, take to violent action as they witness the progressive collapse of the state. The battles occur at different levels: local (though partly transnational) versus transregional or even international. In Siberia, there are small-scale conflicts for the control of territory, between local and outside hunters on the one hand and, on the other hand, between reindeer herders and hunters. Although the battles do not occur at the state level, they illustrate different levels of affiliation, social inclusion, and exclusion, which take us back to the question of group size. With regard to the size aspect, we have described hunters' behaviour qualitatively (for example their ideas about luck and misfortune and the criteria of membership) rather than supporting the discussion with quantitative evidence. This is not to say that the size factor is irrelevant, however. Under the given circumstances for *dozos* hunters the question of group size and of distributing the spoils appears to be much more acute than for Siberian hunters. Even though many Buryat and Evenki hunters have been witnessing the 'retreat of the state' during the 1990s, the effects of this process are hardly commensurable with those in Côte d'Ivoire. In the Siberian case, the retreat of the state has reinvigorated subsistence strategies and rather induced hunters to spend more time in the forest, away from the sphere of influence of state authorities. On the contrary, the *dozos* hunters were called to take over control in important political matters in order to compensate for the retreat of the state.

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