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## CONSUMING THE NATION

### FOOD AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN CATALONIA

VENETIA JOHANNES<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** In this article, I give an ethnographic account of the lived realities of everyday nationalism by presenting some of the ways in which Catalans in northeast Spain use food to express their national identity. Due to its quotidian, essential nature, food is an ideal tool for studying the experience of nationalism in everyday life. Catalonia, in northeast Spain, provides a useful context in which to study a contemporary nationalist movement, as the recent 2017 political crisis and the independence movement that has burgeoned since 2010 have made questions of national identity a highly relevant topic of everyday discussion in the region. I will first introduce the growing literature on nationalism and food, or ‘gastronationalism’, which is the basis of my research. I also briefly discuss my methodological approach as an ethnographer. Next, I provide a brief introduction to some of the essential sauces and dishes of Catalan cuisine and the national sentiments that these foods represent. Following on from this, I discuss the gastronomic calendar, that is, the practice of associating particular foods with certain days or seasons, a notion that is shared across Catalonia and that creates recognized culinary unity. Finally, I discuss how food has been linked to the current independence movement in the region.

**Keywords:** gastronationalism, Catalonia, Catalan nationalism, Spain, national identity.

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### **Introduction: why use food to study nationalism?**

In this article, I present some of my findings on how Catalans express their national identity through food against a backdrop of increased support for nationalist politics (Mazower 2016; *The Economist* 2017). My research responds to the late anthropologist Josep Llobera's (2004) call for a better understanding of nationalisms through the anthropological study of their 'subjective feelings or sentiments' (Llobera 2004: 188). As he states, 'We cannot make a scientific inventory of the social facts of nationalism, for the simple reason that we lack the basic building blocks: good monographic studies of nations' (ibid.: 184). His challenge fits well the increased interest in studies of everyday nationalism within the social sciences over the last two decades, and he is not alone in recognizing its importance in understanding the enduring appeal of nationalist movements (Billig 1995; Edensor 2002; MacClancy 2007; Skey 2011).

The Catalan political theorist Montserrat Guibernau provides the most useful definition of nationalism for the Catalan case: 'a human group conscious of forming a community, sharing a common culture, attached to a clearly demarcated territory, having a common past and a common project for the future, and claiming the right to rule itself' (Guibernau 2002: 3). Note the final point about self-determination, which does not require a state, and until recent years Catalan secessionism was historically weak (Keating 1996). Catalan nationalism is inextricably bound up with Catalan culture, making it a cultural nationalism (Llobera 2004). Thus Catalan nationalism cannot exist without national identity, that is, expressions of its culture and individual affiliation with a Catalan nation as a collective whole.

One sub-discipline in the area of everyday nationalism that has seen a burgeoning interest in the last decade has been the study of national foods, or what has been called 'gastronationalism', which the sociologist Michaela DeSoucey defines as:

The use of food production, distribution, and consumption to demarcate and sustain the emotive power of national attachment.... It presumes that attacks (symbolic or otherwise) against a nation's food practices are assaults on heritage and culture. (DeSoucey 2010: 433)

There are few cultural objects that are as everyday as food: it is an essential, quotidian element of life. When considering everyday nationalism, food is an ideal medium for appreciating this phenomenon. Food is central to our sense of identity, for expressing in-group affiliation and delineating boundaries, demarcating insiders from outsiders (Fischler 1988; Bell and Valentine 1997; Ohnuki-Tierney 1993). Food helps reveal the 'rich and messy textures of our attempts at self-understanding' (Narayan 1995: 64), as well as having the

ability to carry ‘powerful meanings and structures under the cloak of the mundane and the quotidian’ (Sutton 2001: 3).

Catherine Palmer (1998), inspired by Billig (1995), considers food to be one of three ‘flags’ or cultural objects with which national sentiments are associated in everyday practice (the others are the related concepts of the body and landscape). Jeremy MacClancy, based on his experiences in the Basque country, suggests that ‘turning foodstuffs and dishes into bearers of national identity is a down-to-earth way to make an otherwise abstract ideology more familiar, domestic, even palatable’ (MacClancy 2007: 68). More recently, Atsuko Ichijo and Ronald Ranta have concluded:

Practising and asserting national identity through food means making choices and decisions that provide direct links to, among others, the nation’s perceived or imagined history, social traditions, culture and geography. Through these decisions and choices people get to ‘perform the nation’. (Ichijo and Ranta 2016: 8)

This performative aspect is useful for understanding modern nationalisms, which should be seen as continually evolving, changing processes, rather than as static objects (Raviv 2015). On a practical level, food is also useful for entering informant discourses in national arenas as a more ‘palatable’ subject than controversial issues such as language or politics, which may alienate potential informants, a factor also recognized by Avieli (2018).

### **The Catalan-Spanish relationship**

For the purposes of this article, Catalonia means the Catalan Autonomous Community, a self-governing ‘nationality’ within the Spanish state, as defined in the Catalan Statute of Autonomy,<sup>2</sup> one of several such recognized historic nationalisms (including Galicia and the Basque Country) within the Spanish state’s constitutional arrangements. Catalonia today is home to seven million of Spain’s 47 million people and is one of the country’s wealthiest and most industrialized regions. The region has historically emphasised its separate identity from the rest of Spain, although contemporary Catalanism (Catalan nationalism) has its origins in nineteenth-century romantic nationalism, in common with other European nationalisms. Today this difference is primarily manifested in the Catalan language, which is used alongside Castilian Spanish in the region, and in local support for Catalan culture and

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<sup>2</sup> This is defined in the 1979 and 2006 Statutes of Autonomy as follows: ‘Catalonia, as a nationality, exercises its self-government constituted as an autonomous community in accordance with the Constitution and with this Estatut [sic], which is its basic institutional law’ (Generalitat de Catalunya 2006).

institutions. Calls for independence from Spain became an aspect of Catalan nationalism after 1898, following the independence of Cuba, an event which dented Spanish prestige and Catalan prosperity. Since that time, support for independence has ebbed and flowed, for most of the contemporary democratic era since the end of the anti-Catalan Franco dictatorship (1939–1975) it has been considered a minority position. Even today, supporting independence is not a prerequisite for being ‘Catalan’, nor for considering oneself a member of the Catalan nation.

The region’s political status has been the source of recent controversies, as the regional government (the Generalitat, or Catalan Parliament) has tried to wrest further control of Catalan affairs from the central Spanish government. The current crisis began in 2010 as a result of the Spanish Constitutional Court’s decision to suspend many of the articles in the Generalitat’s 2006 Statute of Autonomy, a document that would have given the regional government greater powers. This decision provoked anger among Catalans, and the escalating tensions that have resulted between the Catalan and Spanish governments has turned support for Catalan independence into a popular sentiment (support for independence has wavered at just under half the population since 2011; Centre d’Estudis d’Opinió, 2018).

The situation reached a critical moment in September 2017. Earlier in the year, the Catalan President at the time, Carles Puigdemont, confirmed that a referendum on Catalan independence would be held on 1 October 2017. When it became clear that the vote would go ahead, the Spanish Civil Guard initiated a series of raids on Catalan government institutions, arresting Catalan politicians and stationing five thousand Civil Guard personnel in Catalan ports. On the day of the vote, attempts to close polling stations forcibly led to civil unrest. 92% voted in favour of independence, though the turnout was only 43%.. As a result of the referendum, the Catalan Parliament declared Catalonia’s independence on 27 October 2017. On the same day, the Spanish Senate invoked Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, which imposed direct rule over the region (unheard of in recent Spanish history). Several Catalan politicians were arrested, while others (including Puigdemont) fled Spain, being detained later in 2018. After almost a year of political wrangling, new regional elections and the ousting of Spain’s former prime minister, Mariano Rajoy, in part as a result of the crisis, calm has been restored. However, at the time of writing animosity remains, despite attempts at dialogue between the prime minister of Spain (Pedro Sánchez) and the President of Catalonia (Quim Torra).

### **Structure of the article**

The article will continue with a brief consideration of the methodological aspects of studying everyday nationalism from an anthropological perspective. This is useful for understanding the insights gained from the data, discussion of which takes up the rest of the article. I next present some of the essential components of Catalan cuisine and the discourse surrounding them in the field. My aim is to demonstrate how the nation is experienced in everyday life through interactions with food, and how different aspects of national identity are expressed and formulated in everyday discussions about elements of Catalan cuisine and popular national dishes.

In the following section, I will consider an important aspect of Catalan cuisine, the gastronomic calendar, or the association of specific foods with specific days. While the concept itself is not unique to Catalonia and can be found in other regions the world over, in the context of Catalan nationhood it has taken on extra significance as a way of creating a culinary ‘imagined community’, to use Benedict Anderson’s well-known term (1983): Catalans know that on these particular days other Catalans are eating the same foods. Finally, I will describe the role of food in the contemporary independence movement and the impact of the recent political crisis as expressed through everyday interactions with food.

### **Methods**

The findings presented in this paper are based on field research carried out over fifteen months from 2012 to 2013, as well as further short visits since 2013. The most recent visit was in January 2018, the source of more recent findings following the political crisis in autumn 2017. In terms of scope, there are a number of areas that this article cannot cover that are nonetheless relevant to the topic of Catalan gastronationalism. The ethnographic focus of this article is beneficial for the micro-level, that of understanding the gastronational experience at the lived, every-day, individual level, but less suitable for insights into the effects of globalization on Catalan gastronationalism and the related issues of agri-business and the food industry (though the latter is considered briefly in the penultimate section). The topic of gastro-tourism and its relationship with Catalan nationalism is likewise a huge one that cannot be covered here, nor can the role of Catalan tourists as part of national identity (but see Johannes (2018)). Despite the importance of class politics in Catalan social history (Guibernau 2004; McDonogh 1986), I found that class was not a salient element in Catalan gastronationalism at the present day, so it will not be considered here.



As an anthropologist, my primary research methods have been ethnographic. My main research method was the ethnographic interview. Ideally, I carried out several interviews with each informant, as well as interacting with them in everyday settings. The first interview was often semi-structured: I had a list of questions that provided the basis for discussion (gradually altered during fieldwork as my experience grew), but which were not intended to limit the discussion to pre-defined topics. Later interviews were often less formal and more spontaneous, originating out of the context of the meeting – discussions after a meal, or a pause during a cooking session.

I also used image elicitation in the latter half of fieldwork, normally in group interview settings and using images I had collected throughout fieldwork. This choice was inspired by practices I found in the field, as my informants would regularly share images they found interesting and had photographed on their mobile phones, either face to face in social gatherings or via social media. My aim was to probe the meanings and associations with some of the more popular images (i.e. images that were shared regularly). Image elicitation is also beneficial for studying a strongly visual topic like food, or where explanations by the interviewer may fall short or unintentionally lead the interviewee. For instance, certain dishes had regional variations and names, which could be understood in one region but might mean something else in another.

Participant observation was another useful research method. This included eating and cooking with Catalans. For the purposes of studying everyday life and everyday nationalism, this is sometimes a more effective method than the at times artificial context of an interview. Participant observation also included experiencing events with a national or cultural focus, including Catalonia's three national days (St George's Day on 23 April, St John's Eve on 23 June and the Catalan National Day on 11 September), with a special focus on food at these events, pro-independence gatherings, food festivals and the many different kinds of markets to be found in the region. Finally, written materials and other media on Catalan cuisine were another essential source of data. This included cookbooks, newspaper and magazine articles, occasionally blog posts and radio and television shows. This selection of gastronomic literature has created a rich discourse on the subject, which many Catalans use to construct their own ideas about food.

In terms of the data itself (i.e. the discourse on Catalan cuisine and identity), there were two main factors that needed to be present to justify the existence of Catalan cuisine as a manifestation of Catalan identity. First, Catalan informants needed to have a developed and extensive discourse around the notion of 'their' foods, foods to which they have attached

their own identities (or ‘signature foods’, in the words of Mintz 1996). Secondly, there had to be unities in this discourse among informants in order to provide a set of shared symbols and world views (Guibernau 2002). This is not to say that opinions should be identical between informants, and one of the characteristics of cultural nationalisms is certainly their multivocality (MacClancy 2007; Bray 2011). Despite individual nuances, one looks for an overall set of themes and agreed parameters that define what makes Catalan food or Catalan cuisine. This must be clear to the outside observer (i.e. the field researcher) as well as being recognized by Catalans themselves, that is, it must be regarded as both an emic and an etic category.

I also aimed to acquire as wide a variety of informants as possible (following MacClancy 2007). The only criterion was that they considered themselves ‘Catalans’, though this ranged from informants who saw themselves as members of a unjustly repressed ‘nation’ that deserved independence to others who self-identified as Spaniards living in the Catalan ‘region’. However, even in the case of the latter, they still view the term ‘nation’ in a merely symbolic sense in the same way that Catalonia is recognized in the Spanish constitution. Nonetheless in practice most of the views expressed in this article are those of the former kind of informant, that is, those who consider themselves either as more Catalan than Spanish, or as only Catalan.

Categorizing and coding the data collected here presents a complex problem for an anthropologist. Indeed, anthropologists have been wary in recent years of reducing social experiences to artificial categories that have little meaning for informants. By contrast, the sociologists Jon E. Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idriss (2008) have divided practices of nationhood into four basic areas: ‘talking about the nation’ (nation as discursive construct), ‘choosing the nation’ (the ways nationhood is implicated in everyday decisions), ‘performing the nation’ (ritual enactments) and ‘consuming the nation’ (expressing the nation through everyday practices of consumption). While there might be disagreements within anthropology about the usefulness of such categories, they resonate with many of the findings here, in particular the first area, that of bringing the nation into being not only by talking *about* it, but also by using it as a tool in discourse. I therefore refer to Fox and Miller-Idriss’s categories in this article, while also discussing some of the limitations of its use in the conclusion.

### **The beginner's guide to Catalan cuisine**

Whenever I began any discussion about Catalan cuisine during fieldwork, there were four things that almost always appeared first: the *sofregit*, the *picada*, the *allioli* and the *romesco*. These are sauces that are the foundations of Catalan cuisine, firstly because of their claims to distinctiveness, and secondly because of their essential role in 'flavouring' a dish so as to make it Catalan, both literally and figuratively. I discuss the first two in detail here. The *sofregit* is the starting point of any dish, made up in its most basic form of onion, garlic, parsley and tomato. The *picada* is a grainy paste of herbs, spices and ground nuts with some liquid, added at the end of a meal. One of my informants, the editor of a Catalan food magazine, described Catalan cuisine as 'something that starts with a *sofregit* and ends with a *picada*, and in between, things happen!'.

The *sofregit* and *picada* are often considered representative of Catalan cuisine's long history. Early forms of the *sofregit* (without tomato) and *picada* can be found in medieval cookbooks, such as the *Llibre de Sent Sovi* of 1324 and the *Llibre de Coch* of 1520. These books are important national objects and sources of pride, demonstrating the existence of a recognized Catalan cuisine during the Middle Ages, lionized as Catalonia's golden age, when the region was the centre of the Catalan-Aragonese Empire (1137–1469). The existence of foods with historical roots allows Catalans 'to partake each day of a national past' (Barthes 1961: 37).

Using foodstuffs originating in the Americas, like chocolate, is not perceived as contradicting this sense of continuity. For instance, during a cooking session with Jaume, a food writer, he explained how the *picada* would give the dish of *conill amb xocolata* (rabbit in chocolate sauce) a medieval character from its grainy texture. The presence of the chocolate was instead cited as an example of recent developments and of the adaptability and openness of Catalan cuisine.

Everyday discussions around historic sauces like the *sofregit* and *picada* demonstrate a historicism that frequently pervades discussions of Catalan cuisine. For many informants, their interpretation of contemporary cuisine is implicitly linked to the Catalan past. A 'looking back with relish' (Llobera 2004: 21) to past glories has been central to the development of Catalan nationalism since the nineteenth century, as historical claims to difference and a separate history have provided the basis for contemporary Catalan thought in the modern era.

In November 2013, the food magazine *Cuina* created a campaign to decide which was the ‘best Catalan dish’ as part of the celebrations of its 150<sup>th</sup> issue. Calling on all readers, the magazine saw contributors post their answers on Twitter and Facebook. Three years later, in October 2016, the magazine launched a larger competition, this time called ‘The Catalans’ Favourite Dish’, linked to Catalonia being European Region of Gastronomy that year. In both competitions, the top four dishes were identical: *escudella i carn d’olla* (a meat and vegetable stew), *pa amb tomàquet* (bread rubbed with tomato), *canelons* (cannelloni) and *fricandó* (a veal and mushroom dish). The two events engendered much debate in the popular media, reflecting popular subjects of discussion about the particular characteristics of Catalan cuisine, what makes it distinctive and the meaning of specific dishes in Catalan culinary culture. These debates revealed popular attitudes about Catalan identity in general.

Here I discuss two of these dishes in detail, the *escudella* and the *pa amb tomàquet*. *Escudella i carn d’olla* is a hot pot of various ingredients, a selection of meats, a bone, sausage, meatballs (*pilota*), vegetables, rice, *fideus* (tiny pasta sticks) and/or large pasta pieces (*galletes*). Cookbook writers often refer to the Catalan’s love of *escudella*, sometimes treating it as the national dish. It is worth pointing out, however, that *escudella* is not unique to Catalonia, as similar stews can be found in many European food cultures that have their origins in subsistence cuisine. It can be made with whatever ingredients are available and is a dish that creates historical connectedness to the past (like the *sofregit* and the *picada*). However, the *escudella* also provides an interesting example of the mental gymnastics Catalans engage in to justify it as unique and as different from similar dishes in neighbouring culinary cultures.

First, when it comes to claiming historical continuity, contemporary Catalans characterize the *escudella* not just as a rural dish, but also as one that was associated with the region’s industrialization in the nineteenth century. It was a dish that could be left to cook by itself for hours, enabling women to work in industry during the day. The dish is therefore connected with Catalonia’s social history, in this case the industrial past that contributed much to the development of early Catalanism, as well as its contemporary identity and national pride. Like many Catalan dishes, it is also spread throughout all social classes, the only difference being that the ingredients differ depending on income.

Secondly, its ingredients also contribute to its perceived distinctiveness, for example, the use of certain pasta shapes (*galletes*) and of vegetable varieties grown in Catalonia, such as the Bufet potato. This variety is believed to have its origins in the French Institut de Beauvais variety, but it is grown in several counties in Catalonia, thus establishing it as a ‘Catalan’

food by virtue of its place of cultivation. This is not to imply that food must be grown in Catalonia to produce Catalan cuisine. While there is a preference for food grown in Catalonia, most Catalans know that to demand this consistently for Catalan cuisine would be physically impossible. Indeed, certain essential elements of Catalan cuisine, such as salted cod, have never come from the region itself. Catalans also recognize that the quality of certain foods might be better when grown outside Catalonia (this is especially the case in the restaurant industry). This makes the act of cooking food important, since this process turns ingredients from anywhere into national dishes and products.

Thirdly, *escudella*'s place in culinary culture is also perceived as distinctive to Catalonia. It is strongly associated with Christmas, what is eaten on this day, according to the gastronomic calendar, being consumed as two separate courses: the soup first, followed by the meat and vegetables as a main meal. Thus its manner of consumption is different from similar dishes in neighbouring cuisines. Catalans have managed to develop a strong familiarity with *escudella*, making it a typical 'signature food' (Mintz 1996) that has been converted from a subsistence food into a special dish associated with festive reunions (this is not unusual in other contexts; see Wilk 1999; Goody 1982; Fajans 2012; Ayora-Diaz 2012). The dish also has strong associations with the family because it is over the *escudella i carn d'olla* that yearly Christmas meetings will take place. One of the important roles of such reunions is as events where national identity is discussed and debated.

Finally here, the *escudella* is a culinary manifestation of an ideal aspect of the Catalan character, namely *seny*. A word that is difficult to translate, it suggests a sensible, rational, down-to-earth attitude, a business-like and hard-working approach to life (Hargreaves 2000). *Seny* is also encapsulated in the ideal of thriftiness, an attitude expressed in the popular saying, 'We make use of everything'. *Seny*, like its opposite *rauxa*, are fundamental aspects of the Catalan character in everyday discourse. *Seny* is an emic concept, used by Catalans as an ideal standard of behaviour deployed at appropriate moments. Foods that have their origins in subsistence cuisine provide the most frequent opportunities for Catalans to encounter *seny* and thriftiness in everyday life.

The food that typifies *seny* most is *pa amb tomàquet*. This is made by rubbing a ripe tomato into a slice of bread, ideally using hard bread that is a few days old, allowing the juices to soften the bread. Salt, oil and occasionally garlic can also be added. It is commonly the base for sandwiches and is combined with cold meats and sausages. Most informants claimed to eat it every day, or at least every other day, either as a snack or a light meal. Of all the signature dishes identified by Catalans, *pa amb tomàquet* is probably the most regularly

eaten. It is a common side dish or starter at festive events. To fully underline its symbolic importance, it is served in Catalan homes when there is a Barça football match (alongside Catalan-made Estrella Damm beer and *llonganissa*), thus ensuring the gustatory association between this food and another essential symbol of Catalanism, the Barcelona football team (ibid.).

*Pa amb tomàquet* sums up many of the features and ideas surrounding Catalan culinary identity. It is a prime example of thriftiness in food. According to my informants the dish first appeared in the nineteenth century, probably to soften hard, inedible bread to make it more palatable and to use up overripe tomatoes. I saw an example of how *pa amb tomàquet* allows Catalans to interact with the national ideal of thrift in everyday settings during a meal with a group of young women in their twenties. One of them started to eat the squashed tomato she had used to make *pa amb tomàquet*. These tomatoes are normally thrown away, and the other diners protested in revulsion. She brushed off the criticism, saying: ‘We’re Catalans, we make use of everything’. This casual usage of both national and culinary identity to defend quotidian behaviour shows how ingrained these attitudes are, and moreover how closely national ideals and cuisine are interconnected in everyday life. Once again, this event also displays a collation of some of Fox and Miller-Idriss’s (2008) ideas of everyday nationalism, in this case simultaneously ‘talking about the nation’ and ‘consuming’ it.

*Pa amb tomàquet* is also claimed to be unique to Catalonia, though its spreading to other regions of Spain has altered this conception somewhat, and now the emphasis is more on the process of making it, that of rubbing the tomato into the bread, rather than pouring on squashed or sliced tomato, which is done in other regions. As with the *escudella*, it is the process (cooking) and its position in culinary culture that are considered bastions against the risk of homogeneity. However, *pa amb tomàquet* is recognized as distinctly Catalan by non-Catalans elsewhere in Spain. It is therefore a point of self-identification that is reinforced by interactions with outsiders.

Its component ingredients contribute to this situation. The tomato, as both a central component of Catalan cuisine and a product from the Americas, symbolizes the ideal of an integrationist cuisine open to new influences, of Catalan nationalism as ideally open, willing to accept all those who wish to learn Catalan, adopt Catalan culture and self-identify as Catalan (Llobera 2004). Bread is a basic staple in Catalonia and has received some attention with the recognition of *pa de pagès* (peasant’s or farmer’s bread) as a food with Protected Geographical Indication within the EU. Its description even states explicitly that it is ideal for *pa amb tomàquet*, officially enshrined as part of a ‘traditional’ foodway. Oil too is a matter of

pride as one of Catalonia's main exports, and the fact that it varies hugely from region to region makes it an example of the ideal of regional diversity and variety.

*Pa amb tomàquet* can also be found in all parts of Catalonia. This role as a cultural unifier is particularly important in Catalan food culture due to the inherent diversity in regional cuisines, which might otherwise contradict the claim of Catalan culinary unity. While visiting the Ebro Delta, in the extreme south of Catalonia, which is an area sometimes seen as influenced more by Spain due to its location and history of immigration from other parts of Spain, my host Gustavo claimed that the fact they ate *pa amb tomàquet* regularly there proved that the Delta was part of Catalonia.

The Delta is especially known for its rice dishes. It is Catalonia's foremost rice-producing region, with 22,000 hectares devoted to the crop, and the European Union recognized Ebro Delta Rice as a Protected Denomination of Origin in 1992 (Catalunya.com, 2019). A popular activity in Catalonia is to travel to experience different foods in different regions, and one popular excursion is a trip to the Delta to try *arròs a banda*, a dish of rice, potatoes, fish and vegetables. For inhabitants of the Delta, they perceive this activity as a recognition of the region as Catalan by other Catalans. However, it is also acknowledged, both by Delta inhabitants and Catalans in other regions, that the climate is unsuitable for producing another popular and emblematic Catalan product, cured sausages. The implication was that this inability to produce such a 'national' food, something that can be found in all other Catalan regions, diluted the Ebro Delta's Catalan nature.

This section has described some of the ways in which Catalans experience everyday nationalism through the meanings and associations attached to national foods, consumed either on an everyday basis or at specific, recognized and regular moments throughout the year (there are others, which fall beyond the scope of this article). Ideals and symbols of the Catalan nation, such as national character and history, are made manifest through food. Themes emerging include the ways in which Catalans can experience a connection to a historic past through food, the source of contemporary national identity. Claims to uniqueness, albeit tenuous, also appear here, allowing Catalans to continually underline national differences. These claims are not related to unique ingredients, but to how they are combined and integrated into cuisine through cooking. Other aspects that have received brief mentions are the importance of regional variation and culinary openness, parallels to national ideals. The latter is relevant in light of recent and historical immigration into Catalonia, a topic that cannot be considered in depth in this article, but is highly relevant for contemporary Catalanism (Vaczi 2016; Erickson 2011).

Returning to Fox and Miller-Idriss's (2008) suggested categories for expressions of everyday nationalism, the above discussion of *escudella* and *pa amb tomàquet* demonstrates facets of each category. In talking about the *escudella* and *pa amb tomàquet* as national cuisine, Catalans use the nation as a discursive construct, simultaneously willing the nation into existence and perpetuating it through these discussions. They also 'choose the nation', implicating it in decisions about what to eat, how to prepare food etc., by following the norms of national cuisine, which also prescribe and limit decision-making. This is also a case of 'performing the nation', as Catalans consume food imbued with symbolic meanings, especially at extraordinary events (something discussed further in the next section). Finally, by consuming their national food (a product of the nation), Catalans are consuming their nation.

### **The gastronomic calendar**

The gastronomic calendar is a central tenet of Catalan food culture, specifying that certain foods are eaten on certain days or in certain seasons. These associations are normally related to seasonally available produce or secularized religious feast days. In the case of the former, the celebration of religious feast days is characterized by food, rarely by any religious feeling. For contemporary Catalans, such days provide another connection with a historical and idealized past. For instance, a key part of the celebration of Lent in contemporary Catalonia continues to be the consumption of cod dishes, so much so that February to March is called the *temporada de bacalla* (cod season) in restaurants, markets, media outlets and everyday interactions. The origins of this association lay in historical religious prohibitions on eating meat when the only fish available in rural areas was dried cod. Another popular Lenten food, *Bunyols de Quaresme* (sugared doughnuts), keep up energy levels during a time of fasting.

The situation of organized religion is an interesting one in Catalonia and is worth considering further in this discussion of the gastronomic calendar. During the Franco period religion was a key method of state control, and the claim of the existence of a unified, Spanish, Catholic Church was essential to the Franco dictatorship (1939-1977) in its aim of suppressing separatist regional identities (Guibernau 2004). In Catalonia, however, the church hierarchy was largely opposed to the anti-Catalan measures taken by the dictatorship, and it has been suggested (Llobera, 2004) that the presence of a strong, Catalan 'national' Church was crucial to ensuring the survival of Catalan identity and language during the



period. In particular, the monastery of Montserrat was involved in covert pro-Catalan activities, such as ensuring the continued publication of works in Catalan during that time. Today, the monastery and the distinctive, serrated mountain where it is located continue to be an important site in the Catalanist landscape, and its relic, the Madonna figurine Santa Maria del Montserrat, is one of Catalonia's symbols. Her feast day, 27 April, continues to be celebrated every year.

However, in a sign of the reduced importance of organized religion in everyday Catalan life, in practice the day has been stripped of its religious significance.<sup>3</sup> It is recognized almost solely by the consumption of cakes associated with the day, sponge cakes with decorations that imitate the mountain of Montserrat. Likewise, the celebration of the feast day of Catalonia's other patron saint, St George, on 23 April is entirely secularized. It is celebrated as a romantic day, when lovers and friends exchange books and roses, attend literary events and book fairs, and eat a newly developed food associated with the festival, the *pa de Sant Jordi* (Saint George's bread). Another of the major religious feast days across Catalonia, St John's Eve on 23 June, is also devoid of religious significance in popular celebration. The evening is celebrated by outdoor parties, fireworks and eating the *coca de Sant Joan* (St John's *coca*, a sweet flatbread topped with candied fruits). The foods associated with these days are typical manifestations of what Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) would see as 'performing the nation', as well as simultaneously consuming it through its national products.

Other foods also have associations with particular days or times of the year because of their seasonal availability, such as the *calçots* (spring onions) in February, herbs and fruits in May and June, mushrooms in October, chestnuts in November etc. The popular summer festival bread, *coca* decorated with sugared fruits, was originally topped with seasonal fruits and nuts such as cherries, strawberries and almonds. Heavier foods can be found in the winter months, which is considered to be a seasonal variation because of climate rather than the availability of produce. This can be seen at Christmas, when the universally recognized dish is the *escudella i carn d'olla*, suited to large gatherings and the colder weather; the Christmas leftovers are reused on Saint Steven's Day (26 December) as the fillings for *canelons* or stuffed pasta rolls, another food that typifies a national ideal of thriftiness.

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<sup>3</sup> This situation may result from a strand of anti-clericalism in some forms of Catalan nationalism (Hargreaves 2000), which has gained ground in the post-Franco era, thanks to the association of Catholicism with Francoism. Historical outbreaks of anti-clerical violence in Catalan history, such as the Tragic Week of 1909 and Catalan support of Republicanism in the Spanish Civil War, have also led the region to acquire a reputation as a bastion of anti-Catholic sentiment. In practice, the general view of most Catalans to organized religion is indifference.

The ways in which food and festivity are associated are often considered unique or defining characteristics of Catalan culinary culture. This is not to say that the practice of associating the two is unique to Catalonia (it can be found worldwide), but the foods that are associated with different annual events are essential to claims of gastro-cultural uniqueness. Most Catalans realize that they eat, with a few exceptions, the same foods as their non-Catalan neighbours. This is so even for popularly recognized Catalan dishes, such as *escudella i carn d'olla* and *canelons*. However, what has marked them out as different was their application in Catalan cuisine thanks to the gastronomic calendar.

Today, neither seasonality nor religious prohibitions have the influence on contemporary food availability they exerted in former times. However, the association of the resulting gastronomic calendar with the past has lent it a new significance in light of the renewed awareness of Catalan culture in everyday settings that has been brought about by the pro-independence movement. As a symbol of national identity, awareness and following the gastronomic calendar has gained new connotations as a means of expressing Catalanism. My informants noted this not just in their own behaviour in recent years (and that of others), but also in popular media in the form of magazines, books and television programmes.

Linked with this is also the ideal of following seasonality through the gastronomic calendar and consuming the 'products of the land'. The latter was a phrase often used by my informants, representing ideals such as connection with locality, landscape, history, naturalness etc. Such concepts are similar to ideas related to recent food movements such as Slow Food or what Pratt (2007) calls 'alternative' food movements. Yet Catalan gastronationalism should not be classed as a sub-set of these movements, as in the Catalan context the ideals mentioned above are emotive national symbols. Moreover, the products of the land also have significance in the eyes of Catalans as markers of a unique culinary identity by virtue of their exclusivity to Catalonia and cultivation on Catalan land. By contrast, the Catalan promoters of Slow Food I interviewed distanced themselves from gastronational discourses.

The gastronomic calendar is also relevant in another way for experiencing the nation. When consuming dishes on particular days associated with the gastronomic calendar, there is awareness on an individual level that throughout the rest of Catalonia other Catalans are eating the same dishes. This is exemplified by a Good Friday meal I ate with an older couple, Pep and Rosa-Maria. The main dish on the menu was a cod and egg dish, *Bacallà de Divendres Sant* (Good Friday cod). Although Pep and Rosa-Maria were not religious, they still insisted on making reference to the continued sway of Lent until it ended that Sunday, so

as to respect the gastronomic calendar. The dish itself respects seasonality in its other ingredients, such as spinach and beans, and the large quantity of springtime eggs. Pep also pointed out that the dish included a *sofregit*, proof of its identification as Catalan.

In describing what this dish meant to him, Pep summed up the real importance, the central tenet of the gastronomic calendar in Catalan gastronationalism: 'There is a connection at the level of all Catalonia. You feel linked to a culture; we're all doing the same this Good Friday'. By eating the same things that others throughout Catalonia are eating, an individual Catalan can feel a connection with other Catalans. Much like language or the collective celebration of national days, following the gastronomic calendar creates a connection between the individual and the greater Catalan nation through the shared consumption of the same foods. In this sense, an imagined community of the nation is created not by reading the same texts (or, in Anderson's case, newspapers), but by eating the same foods at the same moment. Jane Fajans (2012) came to a similar conclusion in respect of traditional Brazilian cuisine, for instance, the *feijoada* (bean stew with pork or beef), which is commonly consumed at Saturday lunch and in restaurants on Wednesdays.

Undoubtedly Fajans' conclusions also apply to Catalonia, yet I take this concept further. Pep's words expressed a sentiment that is present throughout Catalonia, one I saw articulated through the consumption of the yearly cycle of foods in the gastronomic calendar. The Catalan imagined community-through-food represents an intriguing development in the gastronomic calendar. It is not just knowing that foods are shared in a general sense that is significant, it is also knowing that other Catalans are consuming these shared foods *at the same moment in time throughout the year*.

### **Food in the Catalan independence movement**

During the fieldwork I conducted in 2012 to 2013, most of my informants were cautious about explicitly connecting food to the independence movement. They saw the secessionist movement as a political wing of Catalan nationalism, not a cultural one that is associated with cultural manifestations like food. While Catalan cultural identity has changed over time, it has appeared more durable than political trends within Catalanism in the last century. With a few exceptions, this view was notably present among the restaurateurs I interviewed, since opinions have become so polarized among the general Catalan population that suggesting support for one side or the other would alienate potential customers with different views. The policy of most chefs and food-industry operatives on this subject follows a popular Catalan saying: 'At the table, never talk about politics'.

At the same time, food could be deployed as a cultural symbol at appropriate moments, as it provided a useful medium to facilitate discussion at pro-independence events. For instance, Spain's National Day on 12 October has become a Catalan anti-festival. Pro-independence Catalans deliberately deny its festive significance as a Spanish national holiday by working and by 'celebrating' *botifarrades*, sausage-eating events. Such events often (though not always) have pro-independence or political connotations, with presentations or talks taking place before the meal. The consumption and association of sausages with this day is heavy with significance. Aside from their privileged position as a food particularly associated with Catalonia, to *fer la botifarra* also has vulgar and insulting connotations. This gesture is present throughout the Mediterranean and involves clenching the hand into a fist, then raising it at the elbow to stand vertically.<sup>4</sup>

This gesture's common name is the *botifarra de pagès* ('peasant sausage', due to the resemblance between the vertical arm and the sausage), but this name can also be applied to certain varieties of sausage. Yet by its name, the *botifarra de pagès* does not just connote confrontation, it is also profoundly associated with the countryside, the *casa de pagès* (farm house) and the food produced there, powerful images in the Catalan national identity discourse (the idealization of the rural is not unique to Catalonia, but is common in other nationalist movements; see Smith 1986; DiGiacomo 1987). This rural ethos also permeated the *botifarrades* I attended, with their convivial atmospheres, barbeques and long tables reminiscent of popular outdoor village festivals. They were spaces where the rural ideal, both national and (occasionally) political, was unified through gastronomy.

During the Catalan National Day (Diada) on 11 September 2012, food-based protests were strongly in evidence. On one of the most prominent thoroughfares of the march was a huge sausage-shaped sign with the words '*A Catalunya fem botifarra*' ('In Catalonia, we make sausage'). Through the medium of a popular saying about food, this phrase not only expresses a cultural fact that can be mobilized as a source of pride and difference for insiders, it can also be a blatant insult for Catalonia's opponents.

The traumatic events of autumn 2017 which I described in the introduction had a deep effect on the mood within Catalonia. When I visited the region in January 2018, many friends and acquaintances described walking around in a sense of shock from late October to December. This too has manifested itself in relationships with food. According to some of

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<sup>4</sup> It should be pointed out that, aside from its rudeness, the sexual and other vulgar connotations of this phallic gesture are not a central element of their expression in Catalan national discourses. One reason may be to avoid emphasising 'male' elements in a movement that appeals to both sexes.

my informants, in September and the early days of October, there were noticeably more food products sporting Catalan flags (the *senyera*) and Catalan companies emphasised their Catalan connections and identity as a selling point to promote their products. After November there was a conspicuous decline in this kind of promotion, as shops and producers seemed to hide the *senyeres* in fear of a potential backlash from consumers who had been jaded, shocked or angered by recent events. For instance, in the popular bakeries of pastry chef Carles Escribà in Barcelona, a seasonal ‘*senyera croissant*’ (a croissant decorated with four red stripes, imitating the Catalan national flag) is offered during the two weeks either side of the Diada. In 2017 they were kept in shops for longer, until mid-October, a response to the demand engendered by pro-independence awareness. By November, following the institution of direct rule at the end of October, demand dropped so low that they were discontinued.

One of the most visible results of the events of October 2017 has been the presence of yellow ribbons in public places. This has become a new symbol of support for independence, as a symbol of the ‘Free Political Prisoners’ campaign led by Omnim Cultural.<sup>5</sup> This campaign has spawned several awareness- and fund-raising initiatives, some of which have focused on food. At Christmas, one was the *Nadal Groc* (Yellow Christmas), where supporters were encouraged to place a yellow scarf or ribbon over an empty chair during the Christmas meal to represent one of the Catalan politicians or public figures imprisoned for rebellion. The intention was to bring home the emotional significance of these individuals’ empty chairs, as they remained imprisoned over Christmas.

The symbolic potential of this act should not be underestimated. An aspect of the Catalan independence movement was explicitly linked with an important festive moment in the Catalan gastronomic calendar, where food is central to its celebration – and not just any food, but recognized national dishes such as *escudella*, *canelons* and other popular seasonal dishes. The performance of the *Nadal Groc* is related to the table, a popular symbol of Catalan sociality and the site where national cuisine is consumed on an everyday basis. In creating a symbolic chair for significant members of the nation, seen by many as unjustly persecuted martyrs for the Catalan cause, one can sense the creation of a fictive kinship with these individuals through the Catalan nation by providing them with a place at the Christmas table, a place for the strengthening and celebration of commensality and family ties. This might

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<sup>5</sup> Omnim Cultural is a Catalan civil-society group. While non-partisan and primarily focused on the cultural aspects, it has increasingly become involved in the pro-independence movement. The ‘political prisoners’ are Catalan politicians and public figures (including the president of Omnim) who have been imprisoned on charges of rebellion since October 2017.

also be an interesting development of the ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1983), as specific members of the nation are imagined to be present through food.

Yet the reactions were not always positive. Restaurant reservations saw a noticeable decline in group bookings from November and over the normally busy Christmas season in December, compared with previous years. In most establishments 21 December, normally one of the most popular in a restaurant’s calendar, was disappointingly under-booked (Castàn 2017), perhaps because it was the day of the elections. When I discussed the issue with local informants inside and outside the food industry, the consensus was that Catalans have preferred to stay home and go out less due to the uncertain and depressed mood in the region. Uncertainty about the economic ramifications of the political crisis have also ensured that Catalans are being more careful with their disposable incomes. One of my informants also remarked that fewer people wanted to meet for Christmas gatherings, a common practice during the season, as the conversation would likely revolve around the depressing topics of the elections and referendum, leading to arguments among friends with different views.

One way in which the Catalan food industry has been affected is through boycotts of Catalan products in Spanish markets. Catalan producers are not unfamiliar with boycotts of their products in the wider Spanish market, and the previous round in 2004 to 2006 (once again a response to a political spat) had a positive result in the long term, as it encouraged these businesses to develop external markets. During an interview with Marta Amorós, the head of the Catalonia Gourmet Cluster, a collective of small to medium enterprises (SMEs) that are high-end food producers, she divided companies within the Cluster into three groups, depending on how they have been affected by market conditions.

First, the companies that have suffered the most are those that were obviously Catalan, had major customer markets in Spain and were easily replaceable. Secondly, there were those who have their sole or main markets in Catalonia. By contrast, they have been affected little and even experienced positive effects, according to Marta: ‘Now, more than ever, Catalans want to buy and protect local products’. Finally, companies within the Cluster that sell principally outside Catalonia and Spain have been hardly affected by the crisis at all. For the purposes of this discussion, the second group is the most interesting one, as it backs up comments I heard in 2012 and 2013 that the recent political crisis has engendered increased interest in and demand for Catalan products by Catalan consumers, both to help local food producers and to have a physical connection with products that represent the Catalan nation.

Food is used not only in the service of the pro-independence movement, but also at pro-union events and protests at which the unity of Spain is emphasised. During pro-union

protests the weekend after the 1 October 2017 referendum, a banner in a mixture of Catalan and Castilian – ‘*me niego a comer “pa amb tomàquet” sin jamón*’ (‘I refuse to eat “*pa amb tomàquet*” without [Iberian] ham’) – became another popular image on social media and news sites (Rodés 2017; Redacció 2017). For pro-union Catalans, the notion of Catalan *pa amb tomàquet* and Spanish *jamón* served together represented a culinary symbol of their own identity on a plate. This combination is a source of debate within Catalan circles, some claiming that it is not ‘properly’ Catalan (in everyday consumption, Iberian ham is one of many possible additions to *pa amb tomàquet*). On 14 November 2017, a public dinner called *Quedamos a dinar. Quedem per comer* (‘We meet to eat’ in both Castilian and Catalan) was organized in Madrid to show support for union by a group of anti-independence Catalans in collaboration with local Madrid-based associations. Far from expressing difference, the meal showcased Catalan and Madrileño foods together (*El Periódico/Efe* 2017), emphasising instead Catalonia’s position as a part of the Spanish state.

These latter points show food’s flexibility as a national symbol that performs the nation (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008). It also brings out the complex identity textures to be found within Catalan identity in all its forms, be it as a nation or region within Spain, or as a nation without a state, or as a nation state in waiting. The discussion thus far may have implied the existence of a rigid split between those for and against independence. It is true that the recent political crisis has encouraged greater polarization between these two viewpoints. However, as the discussion in the latter part of this section demonstrates, there is not always a clear-cut distinction between those who are ‘Catalan/pro-independence’ and ‘Spanish/pro-union’. Food allows the researcher to unpack some of these complexities in the context of everyday nationalism, as it provides fertile ground for continued contestation and discussion of what makes up the nation.

## Conclusion

This brief exposition provides just a glimpse of the rich and complex nexus of associations that is bound up with the everyday experience of the Catalan nation through food. One of the most obvious features of gastronomic identity in the Catalan case is that national ideals, symbols and forms of behaviour have been attached to foods. This makes food a mirror of the nation, being the most obvious way in which Catalans can interact with these ideas on an everyday basis. The ethnographic approach is a highly useful approach for the student of everyday nationalism as it provides insights into how even seemingly small, seemingly trivial elements are utilized in the construction of national identities.

Perhaps the most important conclusion from studying food and everyday nationalism in Catalonia is the performative aspect of nationalism. The continual preparation, consumption and discussion of food is something performed by Catalans every day. In this way, the nation is continually reimagined, reformulated and revived. National food thus simultaneously constructs and reflects the national. Food consumption can be both an individual and a collective experience. This experience allows the individual to become part of the nation, through either the communal consumption of food in the presence of other Catalans or the knowledge that he or she is consuming foods that other Catalans across the region, most of whom they will never meet (Anderson, 1983), are doing the same. It also ensures the ‘catalanization’ of foods grown outside Catalonia into Catalan culture. Finally, this shared consumption of certain foods is a source of unity, not just culturally, but also one that overcomes the individual nuances and disagreements about the future of the Catalan nation.

Returning to the question of discussing everyday nationalism within the discipline of anthropology, borrowing from sociologists Fox and Miller-Idriss’s (2008) ideas on how to categorize everyday nationalist phenomena has been instructive. However, in practice an ethnographic methodology has also exposed the limitations in this approach. It is not easy to separate out the messy textures of social reality into neatly defined categories. Frequently such expressions often encapsulate several of these ways of reproducing nationhood in everyday life. This is especially so for food, which can simultaneously perform many roles in a single context. For instance, in a single meal, cuisine is used simultaneously to talk about the nation (through discussions about the nation and national food during food preparation and over the table), to choose the nation (preparing and eating Catalan food), to perform the nation (through the ritual and symbolic enactment of food practices) and to consume the products of the nation.

In particular, by talking about the nation through food, gastronomy acts as a reflection of national ideas while also being essential for continually reconstructing, replicating and perpetuating notions of Catalan cuisine, and by extension, Catalan identity itself. In the analytical and disciplinary sense, therefore, one must approach gastronationalism not by categorizing its elements into different aspects of everyday nationhood, but by considering the whole cultural system in which it is present.

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## EPISTEMOLOGICAL REFLEXIVITY AND LABYRINTHINE ETHNOGRAPHY

### INSIGHTS FROM A GENDER-SENSITIVE STUDY OF CONJUGAL ABUSE IN A RELIGIOUS SOCIETY

ROMINA ISTRATII<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** This article draws on an ethnographic study of the realities of conjugal abuse and attitudes towards it in a religious society in Ethiopia. The study was prompted by tendencies in gender and development scholarship to transpose feminist aetiologies of conjugal abuse cross-culturally through sociological methodologies without paying sufficient attention to people's local belief and knowledge systems, especially religious beliefs and spirituality, or without being sufficiently reflexive concerning the influence of the researcher's epistemological locus in the research process. As an alternative approach, I suspend a priori conceptualizations of gender, religion and conjugal abuse, combining an anthropological study with participatory development methods to achieve more people-centred and cosmology-sensitive research. Recognizing the colonial underpinnings of western anthropology and the historically obscure character of the anthropological project, I followed a more reflexive approach that made transparent the process of data collection and analysis and drew attention to the centrality of the researcher's identity and personhood in the research process. Even such measures did not predict or resolve a host of other communicational and analytical challenges that emerged in the ethnographic experience and in the process of 'translating cosmologies.' In this essay, I have made an attempt to describe some of these challenges for didactic reasons in order to make anthropological research more tenable for younger researchers, including practitioners of development who engage with ethnographic methods, and to urge greater openness about the limitations and tentativeness of all research that involves multi-dimensional human individuals and realities.

#### Introduction

Intimate partner violence is pervasive in most societies of the world and has been reported as being commonplace in parts of Ethiopia as well (Berhane 2005; CSAE 2006, 2012, 2016; MoWCYA 2013). Ethnographic research into how these realities and attitudes may be related to socio-cultural systems and individual rationalizations has been negligible, while many of the existing studies presume an under-theorized feminist or other sociological aetiology of violence without demonstrating the links empirically (Panos and HBF 2002; Jemberu 2008;

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Kedir and Admasachew 2010; Semahegn and Mengistie 2015; Beyene 2015). To address this lacuna, in 2016-2017 I completed a year of anthropological research in Ethiopia, also spending six months in the villages surrounding the historical city of Aksum in the northernmost Tigray region (Istratii 2019). My objective was to investigate how the intimate partner violence that was reported to be affecting women and the tolerant attitudes towards it could be understood within local conceptual repertoires and world views, especially in relation to the widespread Ethiopian Orthodox *Tāwahādo* faith, a generally non-violent faith.

The main motivation for this study was to demonstrate the need to depart from a dominant methodology in gender and development whereby conceptual and theoretical frameworks are assumed and transposed for the analysis and design of interventions in societies that fall outside of Anglo-American epistemology. Conventionally, such theoretical frameworks have been grounded in western metaphysics of the human self and gender and have engaged with religious traditions and societies in problematic ways (Istratii 2017). My aim has been to raise reflexivity about these Euro-American assumptions and to consolidate a more reflexive approach that recognizes and heeds the epistemological locus of the researcher and integrates local cosmological systems – especially religious belief and knowledge systems – more substantively into the conceptualization, theorization and alleviation of local issues.

Subsequently, for my study of conjugal abuse in Ethiopia I refrained from assuming an aetiology of intimate partner violence a priori and focused instead on investigating how local people spoke of and understood abusive behaviour or harmful situations in marriage by exploring perceived and actual associations with the local religio-cultural context, religious norms and institutions, and personal faith and spirituality. Methodologically I combined a year-long study of Church history and theology working with official texts, online materials and consultations with informed ‘insiders’ with a more reflexive ethnographic approach that recognized the centrality of my identity and personhood throughout the research. I also sought to include participatory methods in the research in order to create more room in which research participants in different social configurations could share their own understandings and opinions.

It has been the argument of this study that any analysis that engages with religious communities, especially those little understood in western societies, must be informed by both the view of ‘insiders’ who have a theology-based familiarity with the tradition and the understandings and experiences of the laity. This is especially urgent for Orthodox and other

Eastern forms of Christianity that have been grounded in claims of historical immutability and the preservation of divine revelations. While lay believers are expected to have diverse understandings and perceptions regarding their own religious traditions, their general framework of existence is expected to be attuned to basic dogmatic premises, deviation from which would risk being seen as heresy. The recognition that most Eastern Christian traditions have been historically embedded in local folklore traditions raises the need for an approach that neither isolates Church discourses from vernacular faith, nor equates the two.

The decision to conduct an ethnographic study of the realities of conjugal abuse and attitudes towards it was also informed by the objective to achieve a better contextualization of gender theorization with local belief and knowledge systems in order to counter easy transpositions of western feminist aetiologies cross-culturally (Istratii 2017). This is especially appropriate in gender-sensitive research in religious contexts on the basis that gender and religious studies have historically often prioritized an ethnocentric ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ in approaching foreign religious traditions, failing to recognize the context-specificity of each religious tradition and the importance of unique hermeneutics and exegetical traditions and their historical embodiments by unique populations (Istratii 2018b). It also reflected the intricacies and particularities of conjugal abuse as a phenomenon that manifests itself within specific contextual parameters and intricate relationships (Kalu 1993; LeVine 1959; Levinson 1989; Counts, Brown and Campbell 1992; McClusky 2001; Shaikh 2007), demanding multi-dimensional and people-centred methodologies to be captured and understood.

However, in employing these methodologies it was important to consider how a suspension of assumptions regarding gender or religion could be achieved by researchers who typically espouse different cosmologies or are often trained in a western epistemological paradigm and might be therefore inclined to favour or unconsciously favour thinking in predefined ways about the domains of life being researched (Keesing et al. 1987; Narayan 1998; Sillitoe 1998; Spickard and Landres 2002: 84; Kapoor 2004). Moreover, for most of its history, western anthropology has been an obscure field and a very subjective process, with the anthropologist collecting, collating and ‘interpreting’ the data away from the eye of the reader, necessitating a more transparent approach. Further recognition of the power dynamics governing relations with research participants, especially in post-colonial or other international development contexts, raised the need for a people-centred ethnographic and immersive methodology. Towards this end, the following strategies were followed in the original PhD project:

- The study incorporated intimate engagement with the historical, dogmatic, patristic and exegetical literature of the local religious tradition and relied on interviews with theologians, clergy and Church historians in order to achieve an understanding of the local theology as very much attuned to the understandings of informed ‘insiders.’
- Efforts were made to be transparent about my own Eastern Orthodox Christian background to the research participants and to convey at the stage of writing how my positionality (as identity/ies) and personhood (incorporating values and beliefs) might have affected the research process and these interactions.
- The diary in which the fieldwork experience and its components were recorded daily included thorough descriptions of my role in the ethnographic occurrence, such as details about the context in which a discussion had occurred, the dynamics of a discussion, the formulation of questions and responses, emotional charge and other elements that could influence how information was shared and received.
- Since translation is so intrinsically grounded in a distinct local cosmology and socio-cultural reality which shapes meanings and adds connotations to a language, as far as possible the analysis employed local terms, which were explained with reference to their discursive deployment by my local interlocutors and the wider society.
- Finally, efforts were made to be transparent about the ways and methods by which data were analysed and interpreted in view of the research participants’ communication strategies and pronouncements, which were defined *inter alia* by the inherent power asymmetries between researcher and research participants, local politics and individual temperament.

While such strategies did not make the anthropological project a less subjective experience – which I would describe as one individual’s articulation of one’s existence and interactions in a certain context for a period of time – this more transparent approach made more visible the tentativeness and limitations of anthropological investigations, granting readers a more informed lens through which to appraise the study and its insights.

Such strategies were supplemented with participatory methods for cultural analysis in an effort to provide research participants with more opportunities and platforms to influence the ethnographic process. I had previously employed an innovative dialogical method for data

collection and cultural analysis for my Master's fieldwork among a Muslim Fulani community in Senegal in order to achieve a cosmology-informed gender analysis in that context (Istratti 2015). Within that experience, together with the participants the participatory methodology had helped to delineate the contours of their socio-cultural realities, also capturing some variation in local opinions and understandings (Istratti 2018a). Echoing other scholars, my study found that participatory research methods were particularly useful in identifying local standards or general beliefs, norms and practices that could be easily articulated in public, also providing insights into local power politics and the socio-cultural configurations that influence communication in the public space (Price and Hawkins 2002: 1358; Bergold and Thomas 2012; Elmusharaf et al. 2017). Therefore, dialogical workshops were employed in this investigation of the realities of and attitudes towards conjugal abuse as a complementary method of exploring societal norms and standards about gender relations, married life, conjugal problems in the research population and, where possible, attitudes to conjugal problems and more abusive situations.

Fieldwork methods included consultations with local specialists, immersion in local life by living in the communities of study, life-based interviews and spontaneous conversations. Research participants included domestic violence experts in Ethiopia, scholars and theologians at traditional Church schools and modern theological colleges, monks and nuns, clergy in the city and villages of Aksum, members of the All Saints' Association under the Sunday School Department of the Church, known as the *Maḥābārā Qədusan* (ማኅበረ ቅዱሳን),<sup>2</sup> and lay men and women from all walks of life in both rural and urban settings. These were combined with insights from six gender-segregated participatory workshops, four of which were held with rural residents and two with members of the *Maḥābārā Qədusan* in the city of Aksum. In total, the study involved about 244 informants, with an equal percentage of male and female participants, albeit engaged using different research methods.<sup>3</sup>

After spending the first year of my PhD programme conducting desk reviews of at least five different bodies of literature and a text-based theological analysis,<sup>4</sup> I entered the research community with a fair understanding of Church dogmatics and teachings on gender relations, marriage and conjugal abuse (to the extent that the available literature permitted me to draw conclusions) and a good sense of gender realities as reported in the anthropological, historical,

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<sup>2</sup> All Amharic and Tigrigna terms appearing in text are transcribed according to the transcription rules set out by the *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*.

<sup>3</sup> A summary table of all the research methods used and the number of research participants is provided in the Appendix.

<sup>4</sup> A table with all the texts that were reviewed for this exercise is provided in the Appendix.



developmental, legal, agricultural, health and domestic violence-related literature. The previous summer had been spent delineating a thorough and detailed fieldwork plan that considered all possible ethical and safety issues that could emerge in the field, as well as undergoing a rigorous ethics review process at the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London). I had also spent the first year learning Amharic and one summer training in Ge'ez, the ecclesiastical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which prepared the ground for the easier acquisition of Tigrigna (the regional language) after my arrival in Ethiopia, initially by taking an intensive course at the University of Addis Ababa with a native-speaking instructor and then alone in the field through various creative strategies (e.g. by mastering the coffee ceremony and using it as a context for chatting and practising the language, and by using a trilingual dictionary to teach the young daughter of my neighbour Amharic and English while she taught me Tigrigna). Despite such thorough preparations and a detailed visualization of how the various steps in the research would be followed, the ethnographic process proved to be considerably more complex, requiring on-going reconsideration, adaptation and close community engagement to be manoeuvred.

A humble suspension of *a priori* assumptions and the mere recognition of the centrality of the researcher's role in research did not predict or resolve the host of other communicative and analytical challenges that emerged throughout the ethnographic experience. Identifying appropriate ways to ask questions that could elicit more genuine replies was a reiterative process of trial and error. Moreover, my interlocutors turned out to be more strategic about what they divulged and in what form, sometimes evading questions by generously giving less pertinent information, sometimes by providing rushed answers that felt superficial, and sometimes by answering with silence or pensive perplexity, which left me wondering whether the question had made little sense to them; whether it had touched a chord, leaving my interlocutors feeling silenced by their own thoughts; whether my interlocutors had little to say about what had been asked; or whether they had too much to say but this was just not the time, the place or the right person to say it to. I found myself constantly trying to decipher both the communication strategies and the content of my research participants' answers.

Subsequently such issues made it very challenging for me to analyse the plethora of interviews and discussions I collected. Despite having trained in three languages in order to be able to conduct this research, and acquiring relative proficiency in two of them, I was challenged to grasp the linguistic manipulations, nuances and implicit connotations of the local language(s) as deployed by my interlocutors, embedded as they were in the tacit politics that governed communication locally. I do not mean to suggest that it was impossible to reach

conclusions about this local society, to which I did not belong, but to underscore that the process was considerably more labyrinthine and tentative, as it required more effort to piece together the information, insights and statements collected in a way that did justice to the multidimensional realities on the ground and that considered transparently the ways in which I influenced the research and the analysis of these realities.

In this essay, I have made an effort to describe some of these challenges for didactic reasons, shedding some light on the relatively ‘obscure’ anthropological project and urging more openness about the complex and tentative process of ‘translating cosmologies’. As a general strategy, I discuss some overarching research themes, important challenges I faced with regard to them and my approach to overcoming them. In this exercise, I am especially keen to address anthropologists engaged in development-oriented research and development practitioners interested in anthropological methods. Anthropology, and especially ethnographic studies of religion, have been imbricated historically in Anglo-American epistemology and thus need to be decolonized through heightened reflectivity about the epistemological locus of the theorist and a better engagement with local belief and knowledge systems multi-dimensionally. Gender-sensitive development researchers, by contrast, have traditionally relied on social theories that tend to overlook local nuances for the sake of promoting feminist objectives and quick ‘fixes’ to what are assumed to be the causes of local issues. The analysis offered here aims to underscore how much more intricate, personal and tentative cross-cultural ethnographic research truly is and how disconnected generic theoretical frameworks can be from the nuanced realities of specific communities, realities that are in larger part unarticulated or articulated in ways that are not directly intelligible to the (usually non-local) researcher.

### **Conceptual and linguistic ambiguities**

Given the decision to desist from conceptualizing conjugal abuse a priori, exploring perceptions of conjugal abuse without employing an existing local term that would assume too much or risk becoming too specific in a way that could direct or bias my interlocutors’ focus and articulations became an important challenge. I also needed to consider how to introduce the topic in ways that did not cause stress or discomfort to my interlocutors in view of the possibility that any of them could be experiencing some form of abuse or could be acting abusively to their intimate partners. The *desideratum* for a neutral, gradual and non-

judgemental approach at all stages of research (along with me being from the ‘outside’) reinforced the need for discreet and culturally sensitive investigative techniques.

As an approach, I generally invited my interlocutors to speak first about marriage problems in the local society (*nay ḥadar šägāmat*; ነይ ሓድር ጸገማት) more broadly, on the basis of which an exploration of more personal conceptualizations of conjugal abuse could proceed where possible. This gradual interviewing approach was found to be effective in motivating interlocutors to speak about both the positive and negative aspects of married life, which usually resulted in them voluntarily referring to what could be classified as harmful or abusive behaviour and situations within their intimate romantic relationships. In turn, this provided me with opportunities to identify local terminology and to use it in further questioning.<sup>5</sup>

I soon observed that my interlocutors did not generally use any abstract or comprehensive conceptualization for abuse, but multiple specific terms for hitting/striking, hurting, the beating stick, arguing, fighting, misbehaving, etc., each of them in specified situations or contexts. One popular term that seemed to be more general and not limited to physical or verbal/emotional abuse was the Tigrigna verb ‘to hurt’ or ‘to offend’ (*bädälä*; በደለ). Discussions with different interlocutors in fieldwork also suggested that the term *bätəri* (በትሪ), for the beating stick, was used symbolically by female interlocutors to represent physical abuse. Male interlocutors did not generally use this term, but tended to denote a physical beating by referring to the heavier stick or staff (*dula*; ዱላ). If I referred to either *bätəri* or *dula* in the context of marriage, interlocutors understood immediately that the question concerned physical abuse. However, asking the question this narrowly limited their attention to physical aggression alone, while the aim of the study was to explore how interlocutors conceptualized abuse more comprehensively.

In most cases when research participants identified some problematic behaviour in marriage, it needed to be established whether they identified any of these with conjugal abuse and, ultimately, to clarify how they conceptualized conjugal abuse, again necessitating a broader term. For the purposes of asking, initially the dictionary term for ‘abuse’ (Tigr: *ṭəqə’at*; ጥቕሳት or Amh.: *ṭəqat*; ጥቃት) was tested. Consultations with a Tigrayan linguist suggested that *ṭəqə’at* had existed in the local vocabulary but that the meaning of ‘abuse’ had recently been reintroduced from Amharic, causing a slight alteration to previous local usage.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ethical processes were followed throughout the research process, which are elaborated elsewhere.

<sup>6</sup> The Tigrayan tutor with whom the author worked explained that in its more conventional usage *ṭəqə’at* means to ‘be on the offensive’, as in the advance of soccer players in the field or in the army.

The word was often used by interlocutors preceded by adjectives such as ‘physical’ (*’akalawi*; አካላዊ) or ‘sexual’ (*naywäsib*; ነይ ወሲብ) to denote different types of abuse. In my interviews and discussions I abstained from suggesting any particular form of abuse and spoke in general terms about ‘conjugal abuse’ asking research participants to share how they understood this in the context of the conjugal relationship.

This was not without challenges for both linguistic and analytical reasons. In the early days of research the difficulty was overwhelmingly linguistic, since I could not pronounce *təqə’at* in the authentic Tigrayan way, being challenged by palatalized consonants and variants. For example, my pronunciation of the *’qa’* (ቃ) as *’qa’* (ቃ) altered the sound of the word slightly, seemingly making it unintelligible to some people. In such cases I needed to paraphrase creatively, asking more general questions about problems in married life (*nay ḥadar šgəmat*) in the local community, the reasons behind them and what aetiologies interlocutors could give for them. I often asked how people understood a healthy or good relationship, or its opposite. Another format was to ask how people defined harmful situations or harmful behavioural patterns in marriage.<sup>7</sup> Listening to local responses, I gradually identified the terms that were used most often to name types of problems and abuse in the intimate relationship, and gradually I started to use these as examples to trigger discussion to the umbrella term *təqə’at* with less responsive interlocutors.

Linguistic factors emanating from the versatility of the Tigrigna language itself amplified these challenges. Some of the terms that interlocutors used were specific and referred to easily identifiable actions, situations or human behaviour; other terminological choices were more versatile or ambiguous. Particularly prevalent was the verb ‘to disturb’ or ‘to upset’ (*räbbäšä*; ረበሽ), which was deployed ubiquitously, at times with a humorous connotation to suggest that someone was being naughty or annoying, or more solemnly troublesome or even aggressive. Interlocutors used it when they spoke about drunken men picking fights with other men, a husband’s difficult behaviour with a wife, youngsters’ harassment of tourists, a child’s disobedience or other situations. A similarly versatile term was *sədənät* (ሰድነት), which connotes misbehaviour or vulgarity. Again, interlocutors could use it across numerous contexts, including the context of the conjugal relationship. The versatility of this and other terms meant that it was not always possible to pin down an equivalent English translation and that the choice of terminology did not always make it evident whether interlocutors considered the situations they were referring to as abusive.

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<sup>7</sup> A table of the different formats of the question asked in Amharic and Tigrigna is provided in the Appendix.

Analytical challenges also interfered with the exploration of local conceptualizations of conjugal abuse. In general, most respondents did not provide a straightforward definition as to how they understood abuse, but rather spoke in terms of exemplary situations or with reference to the real-life experiences of people around them, whom they might or might not name. While I could list all these examples in my analysis, this would require lengthy descriptions that would become tiresome and could distract the reader from the more specific objective of the research, namely to understand how the realities of and attitudes towards conjugal abuse could be related to the local religio-cultural framework. An important challenge, therefore, was to summarize and analyse the various contextual examples without losing the nuances.

### **Silence and secrecy**

Another formidable challenge resulted from the fact that some forms of conjugal abuse were either never talked about or talked about in ways that left a lot to subjective interpretation. The existing literature on domestic violence in Ethiopia identified sexual aggression in marriage as an important problem, as in research emerging from Tigray (Gessesew and Mesfin 2004; Erulkar 2013; Allen and Raghallaigh 2013; Semahegn and Mengistie 2015; CSAE 2016: 44). However, my female respondents never spoke about this issue: curiously, it was mostly male participants who confirmed that this was a problem in some couples in later phases of the fieldwork. My initial response was to assume that most women were ashamed to discuss this issue because this was taboo in the local society and because they did not wish to expose themselves to gossip. To explore this further, I made a conscious effort to ask more generally about issues of sexuality in marriage, including family planning, when the opportunity and context allowed.

On such occasions, my female interlocutors did not seem to feel shy of talking openly about these issues with me. As women got to know me, they became more willing to admit that, within the local normative system, wives were expected to sleep with their husbands and should not refuse, except for reasonable situations when they physically could not or when it was taboo to do so, such as during pregnancy, post-partum, when they were sick, during their menses or during important fasting seasons. During fieldwork, I was told about the case of an old couple who on a certain day came to the administrative office of the village where I was living to seek advice after the wife refused to have sexual relations with her husband. Subsequent discussions I held with the local health worker and the secretary of the local

women's association, who had been involved in this case, left no doubt that by customary standards the woman was in the wrong and that she should not have refused her husband without a reasonable excuse. On the basis of such incidents, I started to think that sexual coercion was probably an issue for numerous women, but was not considered 'conjugal abuse' *per se* due to the deeply ingrained expectation that wives should not refuse their husbands, which made it their problem if they did.

On numerous occasions, I managed to ask my interlocutors if they thought it was right and acceptable for a husband to pressure his wife to have sex with him when she did not wish to. Virtually all interlocutors, men and women alike, answered 'no.' I often persisted by asking directly if they perceived this as abuse, and they usually agreed that it was indeed a form of abuse. This proved to me not only that the way in which the question was asked mattered and probably provoked my interlocutors' admissions, but also that earlier definitions or examples of conjugal abuse that my interlocutors volunteered should not be treated as comprehensive. Since sexual matters were rarely discussed in public, it is likely that this form of abuse was not immediately salient in women's minds. Moreover, the local society was characterized by a widespread norm of secrecy fuelled by both fear of gossip and what appeared to be inherent mistrust toward others in the community. Despite my exploratory attitude, local social norms, cultural conventions and my interlocutors' personal priorities and society-specific politics impeded full disclosure, as well as conclusive statements on what motivated people's silence each time.

### **Daedalean communication and interpretation**

Ambiguities and challenges in my communication with research participants were especially highlighted in the investigation of individual aetiologies for married life problems and forms of abuse that were reported to exist locally. I was constantly challenged to align my interlocutors' justifications with information they shared at other times, including in participatory workshops, other bits and pieces of information collected in fieldwork and with my own empirical observations. As one important example, all my respondents agreed that the problem of abusiveness was primarily one of men, and more precisely, men's problematic 'character' or 'personality' (Tigr.: *bahri*; ባህሪ or Amh.: *bahrāy*; ባህርይ), often described as 'natural' (*bätäfätrāwu bahri*). Most interlocutors did not explain exactly what they meant by this, which left a lot to exploration.

Recognizing that my respondents adhered to a religious tradition that understands humanity to have been created in the ‘image’ of God, my initial inclination was to read this answer theologically: my interlocutors probably perceived a person’s character to be partially inherent or less easily mutable on the basis of personality traits and inclinations granted by means of biological and divine creation. The emphasis placed on sin could reflect a widespread faith-based understanding that the Fall had corrupted human nature and that every person was inclined to human passions, not excluding the likelihood of their becoming abusive to others. Equally plausibly, it could reflect the more empirical observation that different people had different personalities and that these were not easily changeable.

Interestingly, when respondents attributed men’s problems to their ‘natural’ character, they virtually always added that not all men, and more generally, people were the same. This recurrent statement indicated that they were not speaking about an inherent inclination toward aggression, but rather about an individual’s bad character or heightened use of aggression for reasons that were not made immediately explicit. In addition, my numerous discussions with laypeople, theologians and clergy suggested that the majority of people in the countryside could not have arrived at a deeply theological understanding of *Tāwahādo* Orthodoxy, since it was widely recognized that the vernacular religious tradition had been transmitted customarily, with few interlocutors being able to provide a theological explanation of their religious tradition (see below). Such research cues led me to settle on the unsatisfying conclusion that respondents probably attributed the individual with a distinct, partially inherent character with a possible indigenous Christian underlayer, conscious or unconscious. However, this did not exclude the possibility that such understandings could equally be informed by personal and relational experience with the more biological and sociological aspects of human existence.

A further piece of the puzzle was uncovered in some respondents’ affirmation that certain men’s or people’s bad character (*bahri*) was closely linked to or encouraged by a certain ‘attitude’ or ‘mentality’ (Tigr: *’atāḥasasba*; አተሐሳስባ or Amh.: *’astāsasāb*; አስተሐሳስብ) that such individuals espoused. Such discourses could denote a problem with the wider normative framework, of which the gender asymmetries and norms were often highlighted; they could also refer to some men’s selfish mind-set that prioritized their own comfort and well-being over their wives’. However, when I asked if interlocutors felt that the historical gender-based division of labour and the conventional organization of life in the family could have influenced the type of attitude they were speaking about, their answers suggested that

they had not thought of traditional gender roles in a negative way – most interlocutors only criticized the unfair distribution of labour between the sexes. Most men and women associated gender roles with the bio-physical particularities of male and female persons and did not entertain the possibility of changing them. In other words, by having recourse to mentality or attitude, my interlocutors seemed to denote a certain mind-set that some individuals espoused, but they did not necessarily relate this to gender-specific socialization, wider gender norms or their local ‘culture’ (*bahəl/bahli*; *ᠪᠠᠬᠠ/ᠪᠠᠬᠢ*), probably because they themselves were uncertain and wanted to abstain from making generalizations.

This signified to me, once again, that, despite all the conscious efforts I made not to allow epistemological biases to creep into my analysis, some had done so implicitly nonetheless. In my view, the very fact that I expected my interlocutors to have an elaborate and comprehensive explanation for everything they thought reflected an epistemological bias, since this is what I was used to within the Anglo-American academic community. It should be made absolutely clear here that I am not doubting the ability of local people to theorize social phenomena in depth, since it was precisely what I learned from my research participants that enabled and informed the theoretical insights in this study; rather, I am noting that it was not common in the local population to intellectualize everything. This, in fact, resonates well with the local religious tradition, which is equally experiential and does not privilege the intellect, especially since the mind seemed to be considered particularly susceptible to passions and evil spiritual agents.

I faced similar challenges when I tried to unravel my interlocutors’ aetiologies about why victims of abuse generally chose not to divulge their ordeals, which was reported to be a common practice. One respondent reasoned that women tried to endure the abuse in order to save their marriages and to secure their children’s welfare. One elderly male characteristically affirmed: ‘Because she wants to keep the marriage, she wants to endure it; because she wants to look after her kids. It’s the tradition. But her not telling anyone is wrong’ (14 May 2017). This was a sensible thing to do, since traditionally women in the local society had gone without education, and divorcing meant being left without livelihood options, especially if the woman’s parents were deceased. However, it was interesting that this man described such attitudes or thinking as ‘culture’ (*bahəl*). This was, *prima facie*, at odds with virtually everyone’s assertion that *bahəl* did not allow any form of violence. It is not unlikely that in this instance the man employed the word *bahəl* slightly differently than how it was used on most occasions. My sense from having had multiple conversations with him about



his own marriage is that he meant to say that women's silence on the matter was so widespread that it had become a norm. However, such a 'reading' should still be accepted with caution since he never made the meaning of his words explicit to me.

A younger male respondent considered this and gave a similar answer, although not without some vagueness and elusiveness. He said to me: 'They do not speak out. If they speak out, it looks like something else. What will change for the woman (if she tells the truth)? Due to this, women remain silent' (25 April 2017). The rhetorical question of what would change if she told the truth suggested how practically constrained the average woman was in the local society, which resonated with many women's criticisms of the ineffectiveness of local institutions and the implied destitution that women faced if they divorced. The first phrase, however, '[i]f they speak out, it looks like something else', needed to be deciphered in relation to wider phenomena and culturally specific codes of behaviour and idiosyncrasies. During fieldwork I found that women had reasons not to report the true nature of their conjugal problems, such as a fear of retaliation, shame or a hesitation to expose their husbands to public criticism. Their fears and hesitations reflected the local society, which was described as a community in which everyone watched and scrutinized everyone else's actions, often from a cynical and suspicious point of view. In view of these affirmations, the male respondent cited earlier could be saying that, if women spoke about their problems, those hearing them would doubt that they were telling the truth and might attribute their actions to 'darker' ulterior motives.

### ***Virginity and marriage type***

Another instance of ambiguous discourses emerged in my exploration of the links made between virginity and marriage. According to the church canon as practised, couples must be virgins in order to be married by the service of the Holy Matrimony known as *täklil* (ἡγάλη). This was widely recognized by both men and women in the villages, who in fact observed that traditionally the church ceremony had been performed for deacons only. However, when interlocutors discussed their own personal marital experiences and confirmed that they had married in accordance with the customary marriage, outside the church, the reasons they gave for this were almost never associated with virginity (or the lack of it). My interlocutors simply stated that they had not been to church to marry and rarely elaborated further. Some admitted that they or their spouses had been virgins, but still did not make explicit connections with the choice of marriage type.

This is illustrated in the case of one man who was relatively more knowledgeable about the theological meaning of marriage and its aims and who expressed his commitment to replicate the love of Christ for the church in his own marriage. In a fairly casual conversation with him I had the opportunity to ask if he and his wife had married by *täklil* and whether they had been virgins. The man answered that ‘She had been’ (25 April 2017), without elaborating further. His reply could imply that he had not been a virgin and could reflect a local reality where men were more likely to have had an active pre-marital sex life and are not to be questioned about it. However, later in our interview he referred directly to the option of marrying in the church, explaining that ‘[t]o do like this here is hard’ and affirming that ‘there are not many things religious here’. My intuitive reaction to hearing that they had not married in church, taken in combination with his later affirmations, was to assume that he referred to the strict preconditions imposed by the local priests and local society in relation to *täklil* (i.e. that both bride and groom must be virgins). However, since he never made the association between not being a virgin and not marrying in the church, and in fact blamed the clergy for not being sufficiently knowledgeable in theological matters, his statements could suggest something different.

Canonically speaking non-virgins could still marry in church, but in a different ceremony that would mark one or both of them as non-virgins. Assuming that local priests performed this (most priests in the local society had traditionally not done so), such couples could, theoretically speaking, still go through a ceremony in the church. This, however, disregards the public disgrace that they would likely experience were they to marry in a ceremony that would reveal their active sexual life prior to marriage to the community. A woman not married by a church ceremony that marks her as a non-virgin could be treated with disrespect by her neighbours and could be disparaged in future arguments. This is what one research assistant understood as ‘losing face’ (*wrdät*), although this expression was rarely used in the field. It is likely due to such fears that most people in the local society decided to marry in a traditional or ‘cultural’ non-Church ceremony, going to church only to obtain the priest’s blessings. Marrying in the ‘cultural’ way did not immediately indicate whether one had or had not been a virgin and secured some privacy for the couple. This explanation is sensible, since respondents repeatedly confirmed the pressure of social criticism. However, no participants articulated their rationalizations unambiguously, which means that these suggestions should be considered tentative. This underscores again how easy it can be to misinterpret an articulation and to attach a meaning to it that might in fact be very far from the intended meanings and motivations of the human subjects involved.

### ***The interface of culture and religion***

Another area that proved challenging to investigate was the relationship between ‘culture’ (*bahāl*) and ‘religion’ (*haymanot*; ሃይማኖት), two concepts that participants named and implicitly or explicitly differentiated. As already mentioned, my main objective in this project was to explore the local religio-cultural cosmology in view of Church theology, societal norms and customs, and gender beliefs and ideals in order to achieve a better understanding of how this cosmology might be underpinning attitudes towards conjugal abuse and existing codes of behaviour that were conducive to or alternatively obstructed the various manifestations of the problem.

The terminological choice of the phrase ‘religio-cultural’ in my study was deliberate and reflected a conscious decision not to demarcate spheres of life premised on western epistemology and societal experience. While in western Europe specific histories of secularization have relegated ‘religion’ to the private sphere, steadily separating it from public ‘culture’, in other societies which have experienced neither western Christianities nor a history of post-Enlightenment secularization, such demarcations might be totally irrelevant. This decision was also a response to my exposure to the indigenous *Tāwahado* Orthodox Church, which I understood as a holistic way of life in light of a current condition and an ultimate objective. Here the reference point is humanity’s fall from grace, and the aim is restoration of its relationship with God, the Father, and the achievement of salvation and eternal life. According to the Church, God’s commandments should be lived holistically in all spheres of life, shaping thoughts and attitudes and guiding decisions and behaviour. In a society embedded in such an all-encompassing religious cosmology, a strict separation of ‘culture’ and ‘religion’ would be inappropriate. I therefore approached the investigation of the local religio-cultural cosmology and context holistically and multi-dimensionally, exploring the research themes at the cosmological, institutional, relational and individual levels interdependently.

The appropriateness of this choice was validated early in my fieldwork, which revealed the impossibility of separating non-religious spheres of life from religious spheres because religious symbolism, norms and meanings were pervasive. Many of my participants in fact asserted over and over again that theirs was a ‘religious culture’ (*haymanotawi bahāl*). This widespread conceptualization notwithstanding, local people still spoke in terms of *bahāl* and *haymanot*, which suggested that these two concepts were given distinct meanings, even

though they were perceived to be intertwined in vernacular life. For example, most interlocutors agreed that it was *bahäl* to segregate labour according to gender and that *haymanot* never taught such a division. In other instances, interlocutors affirmed that, while *haymanot* did not permit divorce, people often divorced and that this was acceptable in the local culture. Most pertinent to the research question of this project, it was repeatedly stated that neither *haymanot* nor *bahäl* allowed violence in the conjugal relationship. Such distinctions raised the need to explore how my interlocutors understood these concepts and to define their boundaries, which I did by inviting them to elaborate when they referred to one or the other. In later stages of fieldwork I incorporated a more direct question in my interviews, asking research participants to share how they understood their ‘correct/proper Orthodox faith’ (*təkəkkäl* ‘Orthodoks haymanot; ትክክል ኦርቶዶክስ ሃይማኖት’).

As suggested earlier, *bahäl* in most discourses seemed to encompass the set of social conventions, norms and ways that local residents were familiar with and reproduced in their everyday living. *Haymanot* was identified rather with Church tradition, the word of God, the teachings of the Church and clergy. Numerous participants were of the view that in the past their customs had been in full harmony with *haymanot*, justifying the popular phrase *haymanotawi bahäl*. However, they reasoned that gradually the ‘religious’(*haymanotawi*) character of *bahäl* had declined, with the vernacular religious reality deviating from Church canon and theology as a result of multiple factors, including a gradual hybridization of the former religious culture with surrounding non-Orthodox cultures, the influence of western values and norms as a result of globalization, and many people’s own departure from an indigenous Orthodox way of life due to the influence of modernity and an increasingly feeble embodiment of religious customs and traditions. It was typical to describe this emerging person as ‘worldly’ (*alämawi*; ዓለማዊ). While this viewpoint, which was also shared by many religious scholars, was quite convincing, it proved too linear and did not capture the complex realities that a closer examination of the meanings of *bahäl* and ‘Orthodoks haymanot’ and local testimonies revealed.

Researching in greater depth how my interlocutors conceptualized *bahäl* was one of the most challenging aspects of this study because of local people’s widespread habit of speaking in examples and providing ambiguous or incomplete answers that needed to be deciphered and to be pieced together in a comprehensible framework. Moreover, I felt that in some situations interlocutors were split between wanting to let me know of the more problematic aspects of their vernacular realities and wanting to present their culture in the most positive light, defending it against possible essentialist representations from the outside. For example,

while many respondents attributed some men's misconduct to a certain pernicious attitude or mentality that was sometimes associated with *bahəl*, my interlocutors never explicitly referred to wider norms of socialization, society-wide gender-specific norms or ideals or other social parameters. Other conversations revealed that *bahəl* could have both positive and negative connotations or components, including the highly valued tradition of having elders intervene when a couple were facing problems in their marriage in order to reconcile them. One respondent spoke in turn of 'a culture of helping each other and sharing the work' (25 April 2017). Others referred to the religious gatherings for the veneration of saints (*maḥbär*; ማኅበር) as *bahəl*. Since these were often criticized as having lost their spiritual character and being reproduced out of social 'habit' (*ləmdi*; ልምድ), the notion of *bahəl* seemed to have more negative connotations here. *Bahəl*, then, represented local identity and traditions holistically, which included both aspects that were perceived more favourably and aspects that were judged more critically, to different degrees by different people.

Regarding the meaning of *haymanot*, this seemed a bit more straightforward, without eschewing its own set of intricacies. In general, when my interlocutors spoke about their faith, they referred to their religious heritage and the glorious Aksumite history, Church teachings or the word of God, and moral values and standards that should be embodied holistically. It was not surprising that respondents most often reiterated to me what they had heard priests teaching in church or learned from their spiritual fathers. These teachings came in the form of prescriptions, such as 'go to church and listen to its teachings, respect the one-to-one covenant of marriage, live in peace with your spouses, do not syphon ('eat') other people's money, keep the fasts, do not divorce and do not argue because God is not with you'. Members of the laity who knew a little more about the Church and its history often added that the Orthodox *Täwahədo* faith has been grounded in the teachings of the Early Church Fathers. Apart from these definitions, people offered no other explanation of their *haymanot* that would indicate an informed theological understanding. Most interlocutors displayed an experiential understanding of the faith that was deeply ingrained in a Christian Orthodox understanding of human life and reality, without eschewing some syncretism with non-Orthodox belief systems. The sinfulness of humanity and desired state of 'Eternal Life' (*yäzälä 'älām ḥaywät*; የዘለለም ሕይወት) were universal premises that everyone in the local society could and did articulate.

Interestingly, the way in which marriage and the conjugal relationship were understood and experienced – a central concern for this study – was rarely placed within this framework

of overcoming sin and achieving eternal life, even though most interlocutors spoke about the ideal of a life-long, monogamous ('one-to-one') marriage and the precondition of peaceful co-existence between the spouses to ensure God's blessings. For the most part, marriage was discussed as a social contract in which the spouses should live together monogamously for the purpose of procreating and helping each other in everyday life. While local people clearly attributed the one-to-one covenant to God's laws, they never showed they considered marriage as a spiritual bond or a vehicle for salvation. This indicated that, while *haymanot* denoted the word of God, which comprised the wider metaphysical edifice governing and holding together the local society, it was not necessarily theology that shaped most people's understandings and experiences of marriage.

### **Capturing the non-discursive**

This naturally leads to an exploration of the role that personal faith and spirituality played in married life and its influence on conjugal behaviour. Any such objective is challenging by its very nature, since both spiritual experience and human conscience are largely unseen realms of human existence and might underpin individual rationalizations, motivations and behaviour in myriad implicit and multi-dimensional ways that an observer can never know in full. As a pragmatic research strategy, I explored how research participants' religious beliefs and faith-based values and standards (as expressed in their discourses) underpinned decisions about marriage, divorce and most importantly abuse, while participating as much as possible in local religious life to observe and experience how local residents embodied their faith and possible implications for their interactions with others in their society. The religious gatherings, of which I attended around fifteen to twenty during fieldwork, offered a very important space in which to experience vernacular religious observance, also providing me with a comparative measure for understanding better behaviour in more private realms, including the conjugal relationship.

The conversations I had with various interlocutors indicated that the religious gatherings were viewed mostly as social events that enabled community members to gather together, to share news about each other and others around them and to drink in a socially acceptable context (especially for women, who could not go to local beer houses or bars as men increasingly did). However, this does not exclude the possibility that local people were simultaneously or fundamentally motivated by a deeply ingrained understanding that these religious gatherings brought blessings to their families and that adherents were expected to

fulfil them as part of their faith. The way in which these were delivered and experienced, often resulting in excessive drinking by some men, which was associated with reported incidents of aggression toward others (including wives), may be compared to more unusual cases of individuals who felt that this vernacular practice of experiencing and living the faith had departed from a theologically meaningful *praxis* and who attempted to embody these highly valued religious norms in a more conscientious and pious manner.

While such differential embodiments could suggest these individuals' different spiritual states and a stronger or weaker faith-based conscience, this could not always or automatically be established both because the internality of the individual could never be penetrated and because faith was experienced in so many ways and realms that it could be manifested unconsciously or in more implicit ways in the rationalizations and actions of most people in the local society. The same challenge emerged from a closer look at faith in marriage, especially around local people's divorce stories. Repeatedly, my respondents affirmed that divorce was a sin and that it was opposed to God's ideal for a monogamous, long-lasting marriage. However, when I asked if this recognition had influenced their decisions to divorce, they replied without hesitation that they had had no other option. For example, one female respondent and her husband divorced after twenty years of marriage because she was infertile. When I asked whether she thought divorce was a sin she answered affirmatively, but added also matter-of-factly that she and her husband had been unable to have children, suggesting that this generally sufficed as an explanation for divorce in the local society. More importantly, like most other divorced women I spoke to, she attributed her divorce to God's thinking by affirming: '*Haymanot* is useful, but it does not allow divorce. But, because everything is of God, one cannot do anything. But, we separated by God's *hasab*' (12 March 2017). Another female respondent similarly observed: 'Yes, it (*haymanot*) is useful (in married life). Meaning, we are taught to be bound together in marriage. But divorce isn't a human's *hasab*, it's God's *hasab*. So, there is nothing we can do' (12 March 2017). The term *hasab* (ሐሳብ) can be translated as 'thought', 'idea', 'opinion' or 'intention', conveying essentially the notion that all things happened for a reason that was beyond human capacity to understand in full, but that these did not fall outside of God's omniscience and good intentions for each individual. Despite not being able to fulfil the religious ideal of a life-long marriage, it would be wrong to conclude that these women lived without a consideration of divine laws, since it was precisely their perception of God's relationship to and presence in human life that helped them 'make sense' of their disappointing divorces and to cope in their aftermath.

The complexities surrounding the study of lived faith were also evident in how research participants selected their spouses and rationalized this choice, as well as how they experienced their married life. For most rural male residents (who had more say in this decision-making compared to women), the choice of spouse was based on physical, material and socio-cultural factors, with marriage being largely a matter of practicality and basic attraction. On the other hand, more heartfelt Christian men sought a spouse who could fulfil religious standards and ideals as they articulated them. Regardless of personal piety, however, most women and men in the local society believed that spouses who shared the same commitment to the faith experienced marriage in a more fulfilling way and suffered less risk of the possibility of divorce. To a large extent this was found to be accurate, but here too the situation proved to be more complicated and nuanced. It is interesting to juxtapose, for example, the case of very pious women and the strong loyalty that they displayed for their husbands and family life with women in society who married primarily for practical reasons and were more prepared to divorce their husbands if the latter failed to meet their responsibilities. One female interlocutor, whom I came to know very well, was especially committed to following her husband in everything he did, attending to his needs with tremendous eagerness and dedication at all times. Our more confidential conversations suggested that she did not do this because he was an exceptionally good husband to her (he, like many other men in the society, downplayed intimacy and did not pay her the attention she desired), but because she was driven to do so *regardless* of his behaviour. This was a highly educated professional woman married to a highly educated professional man who raised seven children, for the large part by herself, since her husband was often working or travelling across the country. It is also notable that this woman did not have any theological training; rather, her behaviour reflected her traditional upbringing, strong faith and personality. This type of dedication was noticeably different from the dedication many other women showed to their husbands, for whom marriage was understood and experienced as a social contract in which they and their husbands had to meet their respective duties and expectations. While these women would not hesitate to divorce if their husbands failed to meet their conjugal responsibilities (e.g. being responsible breadwinners), the former wife appeared prepared to endure her husband's faults in the most challenging of situations.

Religious upbringing and motivations, therefore, could partially determine women's attitudes as wives, but it could also influence men's decisions and behaviour in their marriage. An encounter I had with a married man in one of the villages of study is particularly illustrative. After lamenting his married life in a private chat, he sought my theology-



informed advice on how a hypothetical husband attracted to another woman should respond to this situation in a Christian manner, without admitting that he was talking about himself at any point in our conversation. This hypothetical man had been married to his first wife for many years, with his wife giving birth to ‘good’ children, suggesting that she had fulfilled her expectations as a woman and wife in the local society. However, he had suddenly developed an attraction for another woman and was contemplating an illicit affair or a divorce from his wife and a second marriage. My interlocutor was acutely aware of the immoral connotations that such actions could have, since his hypothetical man would be divorcing his wife with no reasonable justification. He himself attributed the protagonist’s unlawful ‘temptation’ to Satan: it was Satan who had entered his head and had implanted in it the desire for another woman. Yet, he still wondered if the love for the other woman could be considered genuine love according to the understanding of the faith. Since I never pretended to be impartial about these debates, I drew on Pauline teachings and suggested why, within Orthodox theology, human actions outside God’s ‘laws’ would not be considered truthful love. My response seemingly made sense to my interlocutor, who intuitively exclaimed that this was ‘the’ Orthodox understanding, despite my insistence that he should speak to his spiritual father and consult with him about the matter. To this he nodded, although he appeared quite torn over the prospect of talking to the local priest about such a morally questionable matter.

The reason I tell this story is to show how a faith-based sense of morality and righteousness seemed to influence this man’s discourse and rationalization, potentially deterring him from a decision that could hurt his wife and spoil his marriage (assuming that the story referred to him). Moreover, this example draws attention to the more unusual and personal situations and conversations during fieldwork that enabled me somehow to penetrate men’s (and women’s) internal worlds and embodied spirituality. One might argue that expressing my personal opinions or knowledge could influence my participants’ views or ‘interfere’ with their lives, but it would be hypocritical to suggest that any research of this type does not currently do that. I would rather argue that it was precisely my transparency about who I was as an Eastern Orthodox woman and my motivations in conducting this study that enabled me to build relationships of respect and trust with the local people and to achieve more intimate conversations with some of my interlocutors, leading to the insights and observations that have informed this study. My experience suggests that all people appreciate mutuality and equal treatment, so that if we would like our research participants to share their views with us, we must be willing to do the same with them.

## Conclusion

Within gender and development studies, researchers have consistently favoured sociological methodologies that have paid little attention to local discourses or the process of ‘translating cosmologies’ in the analysis of local issues. Many have raised the need for epistemologically reflexive research and for anthropological and multi-dimensional engagement with communities immersed in non-western belief and knowledge systems, but few ethnographic experiences have been made sufficiently transparent to demystify the anthropological process and demonstrate a more transparent and people-centred approach. The objective for this essay was to share some of the more challenging aspects and deeper lessons of my study on intimate partner violence in a religious society outside Anglo-American epistemology, which attempted to overcome some of these limitations. The paper has drawn attention to the intricacies of cross-cultural research, underscoring the urgency for more transparent discussion about data collection and analysis that accounts explicitly for the researcher’s role in the anthropological process and affirms openly the limitations and tentativeness of all research that involves multi-dimensional human individuals and realities.

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### Appendix: Tables 1-3

**Table 1. All research groups and sample sizes**

Research group	Total size (N)	Females (f)	Males (m)	Interviews (voice-recorded or note-taking)	Informal discussions
London					
Lay people in London	14	8	6	9	5
Clergy in London	2	-	2	1	1
Ethiopia (excluding Aksum)					
Domestic violence experts in Ethiopia	4	4	-	4	-
Theologians and teachers of the faith in Ethiopia	11	1	10	9	2
Aksum city and countryside					
Lay people in Aksum	122	76	46	61	61
Clergy and monks in Aksum	23	-	23	12	11
Teachers of the faith in Aksum	12	2	10	9	3
Participatory workshops	56	31	25	-	-
Total	244	122	122	105	83
<p>* Personal interviews followed the formal process of asking for consent prior to the conversation taking place. Most but not all were voice-recorded, according to the preference of the interlocutor.</p> <p>**Informal discussions were more impromptu, being opportunistic discussions of considerable length that had a more general (as opposed to personal) tone. In some cases, multiple discussions were conducted with the same interlocutor. The information was transferred to the fieldwork diary and then collated into a single record of discussions per interlocutor. Permission to use the information in an unattributed fashion was sought usually during or after the conversation.</p>					

**Table 2. Types of Church-related materials examined (not exhaustive)**

<p><b><i>Canonical/liturgical books and relevant Andämta Commentary (AC)</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Fätha Nägäšt (FN)</i>, translated by Paulos Tzadua and edited by Peter L. Strauss, English, 1968</li> <li>• <i>Ethiopic Didascalia (ED)</i>, translated by Harden John Mason, English, 1920</li> <li>• <i>The Bible, the Old and New Testament Books</i>, Amharic, 2000 (EC)</li> <li>• <i>The Book of the Old Testament, Genesis and Exodus: Commentary and Interpretation</i>, Amharic, 1999 (EC)</li> <li>• <i>The Book of Baptism, Holy Matrimony and Uncion</i>, Amharic, 2008 (EC)</li> <li>• <i>The Book of St Paul, Reading and Interpretation</i>, Ge'ez and Amharic, 2007 (EC)</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Theological works</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Order and Canon Law of Marriage of the Ethiopian Tewahedo Church</i>, by Abba L. Mandelfro, English, 1976</li> <li>• <i>Notes on the Teachings of the Abyssinian Church: As Set forth by the Doctors of the Same</i>, translated by A. F. Matthew, English, 1936</li> <li>• <i>The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church: Faith, Order of Worship and Ecumenical Relations</i>, by Mekarios et al., English, 1996</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>EOTC official web materials and webpages</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Doctrine of the Ethiopian Tewahedo Church', English</li> <li>• 'The Sacrament of Matrimony', English</li> <li>• 'Christian Doctrine and Living: Introduction to Christianity' by Abba Bekele, English</li> <li>• 'Divine Plan and Gender Equality,' by Deacon Gebre Egziabher (Jr.), English, 2015</li> <li>• The Coptic Church, 'Sacrament of Matrimony' (link provided on the EOTC website), English</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Relevant books found in the Ethiopian market</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The Spiritual and Social Life of Christian Women</i>, by K.K. Merahi, English, 1998</li> <li>• <i>The Order of Marriage and Social Ethics</i>, by K.K. Merahi, English, 1990</li> <li>• <i>Married Life and its Living</i> by Qomos Samuel, Amharic, 2008 (EC)</li> <li>• <i>On Women and Donkey: Gender and Christian Perspective</i>, by Heregewoin Cherinet, English, 2015 (Amharic, 2005 EC)</li> <li>• <i>The Commentaries on Married Life: As Taught by Saint John Chrysostom</i>, by Mämhär Shimelis Mergiya, Amharic, date not specified (probably 2004 EC)</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>John Chrysostom's commentaries</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chrysostom's commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews, original Greek</li> <li>• Chrysostomic contributions to AC section on the Epistle to the Hebrews, translated by Roger Cowley, English, 1988</li> <li>• The traditional compilations of Chrysostom's commentaries by Ethiopian scholars:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Därsan</i>, Amharic, 1987 (EC)</li> <li>○ <i>Tägsas</i>, Amharic, 1987 (EC)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

**Table 3. Formats for asking about local conceptualizations of conjugal abuse**

How do you (m/f) understand spousal abuse?	<i>Bä ḥasabki/ka, nay ḥadar tqə'at 'entay malät 'əyu?</i> (በ ሐሳብኪ/ካ ናይ ሓዳር ጥቕሳት እንታይ ማለት እዩ? ) <i>Bä ḥasabš/h, yä tдар tqat mändənäw?</i> (በ ሃሳብሽ/ህ ሃትዳር ጥቃት ምንድነው? )
What is the meaning of spousal abuse?	<i>Nay ḥadar tqə'at tärgum 'entay 'əyu?</i> (ናይ ጥቕሳት ተርጉም እንታይ እዩ? ) <i>Yä tдар tqat mən tärgum 'alläw?</i> (የትዳር ጥቃት ምን ተርጉም አለው?)
How do you (m/f) understand an abusive marriage?	<i>Bä ḥasabki/ka, tqə'at zäläwo ḥadar 'entay malät 'əyu?</i> (በ ሐሳብኪ/ካ ጥቕሳት ዘለዎ ሓዳር እንታይ ማለት እዩ? ) <i>Bä ḥasabš/h, tqat yalläw tдар mändənäw?</i> (በ ሃሳብሽ/ህ ጥቃት ያለው ትዳር ምንድነው? )
How do you (m/f) understand abusive/harmful situations in a marriage?	<i>Bä ḥasabki/ka, tqə'at/bädäl zäläwo kunätat ḥadar wəst 'entay malät 'əyu?</i> (በ ሐሳብኪ/ካ ጥቕሳት/በደል ዘለዎ ኩነታት ሓዳር ውስት እንታይ ማለት እዩ? ) <i>Bä ḥasabš/h, tqat/bädäl yalläw huneta tдар wəst mändənäw?</i> (በ ሃሳብሽ/ህ ጥቃት/በደል ያለው ሁኔታ ትዳር ውስጥ ምንድነው? )
How do you (m/f) understand harmful behaviour in a marriage?	<i>Bä ḥasabki/ka, bädäläña täbay ḥadar wəst 'entay malät 'əyu?</i> (በ ሐሳብኪ/ካ በደለኛ ጠባይ ሓዳር ውስት እንታይ ማለት እዩ? ) <i>Bä ḥasabš/h, bädäläña täbay tдар wəst mändənäw?</i> (በ ሃሳብሽ/ህ በደለኛ ጠባይ ትዳር ውስጥ ምንድነው? )
How do you (m/f) understand an unhealthy relationship/marriage?	<i>Bä ḥasabki/ka, zäytəuy rəkəb/ḥadar 'entay malät 'əyu?</i> (በ ሐሳብኪ/ካ ዘይጥዑይ ርቅብ/ሓዳር እንታይ ማለት እዩ? ) <i>Bä ḥasabš/h, təna yälelläw gənəñunät/tdar mändənäw?</i> (በ ሃሳብሽ/ህ ጤና የሌለው ግንኙነት/ትዳር ምንድነው? )
How do you (m/f) understand a harmful relationship/marriage?	<i>Bä natka/natki ḥasab, bädäl zäläwo rəkəb/ḥadar 'entay malät 'əyu?</i> (በ ሐሳብኪ/ካ በደል ዘለዎ ርቅብ/ሓዳር እንታይ ማለት እዩ? ) <i>Bä ḥasabš/h, bädäl yalläw gənəñunät/tdar mändənäw?</i> (በ ሃሳብሽ/ህ በደል ያለው ግንኙነት/ትዳር ምንድነው? )

## UNDERSTANDING SACRED OBJECTS

### TOWARDS AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORY OF RELIGIOUS MEANING

CARLES SALAZAR<sup>1</sup>

#### **Abstract**

The anthropological theory of religious meaning proposed in this paper is based on a multimodal approach to human communication. According to this approach, meaning originates not in a set of propositions about the world but in modes of experience of and engagement with it. These modes of experience include different forms of communication in which their performative component trumps their propositional content, modes of communication that are normally defined as ‘symbolic languages’ when religious scholars try to translate them into explicit verbal statements, that is, into a set of propositions. Of all these modes of communication or symbolic languages, in this article the focus is on sacred objects, that is, objects that evoke their absent signifieds by being simultaneously objects of thought and instruments of thought.

**Key words:** cognition, fetishes, meaning, religion, religious anthropology, sacred objects, symbolism.

#### **Introduction**

What does ‘explaining religion’ actually mean? What kind of explanations can anthropology provide for religious phenomena that are different from those produced by other disciplines? One way of addressing this question is to compare religion with other human traits for which we do have an explanation. If explaining religion consists in identifying its natural foundations, as researchers working within the framework of the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) strongly emphasize (e.g. Boyer 2001), whether these are adaptive predispositions or by-products of human cognitive equipment, religions appear to be remarkably similar to natural human languages. Without a doubt religion originates in cultural learning. But the actual specific weight of that cultural learning turns out to be much less significant than has traditionally been assumed in the social sciences, in what Tooby and Cosmides (1992) disparagingly dubbed the ‘Standard Social Science Model’. The exposure to religious ideas acts as the spark that activates sets of hard-wired inferential systems out of which religious belief and

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behaviour are ultimately constituted. Hence it is these pre-cultural inferential systems that ‘cause’, in the last instance, religious belief, rather than religious cultural representations per se. My purpose in this paper is to question this view, which is widely accepted among the proponents of a naturalistic analysis of religion.

The analogy between religions and human languages has two stark limitations. There is first the universality of language: all human beings brought up under unexceptional conditions, apart from those suffering from some neuropathology, develop linguistic capabilities. This situation clearly does not apply to religion. Even though the percentage of unbelievers the world over, especially taking into account the whole history of the human species, is certainly very small, it seems wholly inappropriate to classify atheists, agnostics or sceptics as sufferers from some form of cerebral disorder. Furthermore, as I have argued elsewhere (Salazar 2018), human languages do not seem to be ‘believable’ in the same way that religions are. The problem of believability as applied to language brings to the fore what to my mind constitutes the main difference between language and religion, namely the issue of meaning. Whereas languages are a vehicle of meaning but are essentially *meaningless*, religions are *meaningful*.

But what is the meaning of religion, and how should we approach it? In this article, I would like to provide some building blocks for an anthropological theory of religious meaning. By an anthropological theory of religious meaning, I understand a theory with a broad comparative scope, capable of encompassing all recorded manifestations of religious behaviour, but specifically concerned with what we normally understand as popular or non-erudite religiosity. Secondly, it has to be an ethnographically grounded theory, for it is only through ethnography that religious meanings can be perceived and analysed (cf. Sterelny 2017).

### **The experience of the sacred**

Let me start not by defining religion (I shall return to this issue) but by describing the experience of the religious, specifically the experience of the sacred. The sacred does not refer here to some set of ultimate or transcendental values (cf. Rappaport 1999) but is a surrogate for the beyond, the supernatural, which does not necessarily allude to some supreme moral principles or values but rather to ‘another form of reality’ (Pitarch 2010). A very common way of experiencing the supernatural is by means of sacred objects or fetishes. A sacred object is an ordinary object, sometimes with some unusual

characteristics, that is believed to be endowed with extraordinary power, which in general can be defined as the capacity for self-effacement, that is, the capacity to go beyond itself. Perhaps one of the best-known accounts of the power of sacred objects is that provided by Durkheim on the *churinga*, the sacred things of the Arunta in Australia. The *churinga* are pieces of wood or bits of polished stone of a great variety of forms, but generally oval or oblong in shape. As Durkheim points out (1915: 119-21), they are objects of high religious value, and women and young men not yet initiated into the religious life may not touch or even see them. They have the power to heal wounds and to make the beard grow, they confer important powers over the totemic species, they give men courage and perseverance, and they weaken and depress their enemies.

Maurice Godelier came across a very similar case of hallowed objects among the Baruya in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. These were the *kwaimatnié*, objects that are secretly kept by the masters of initiation rituals and that can only be shown in special circumstances. *Kwaimatnié*, meaning ‘make grow’, are objects that cause men to grow and that turn initiates into warriors and give them the power of hunting and of war, that is, the power of death. Godelier (1995: 97) was given the privilege of seeing some of them:

Un Kwaimatnié se présente comme un long objet entouré d’une bande d’écorce de couleur rouge, un Yipmoulié, bandeau dont les hommes baruya se seignent le front et qui est rouge de la couleur du Soleil, leur père. Il me fut donné d’avoir le privilège de voir ce qu’il y avait à l’intérieur d’un Kwaimatnié. L’homme qui vint me le montrer, accompagné de son fils qui devait en hériter, écarta avec précaution l’écorce et je vis couchés côte à côte une pierre noire, des os, une noix. L’homme ne me dit rien et se mit à pleurer silencieusement, puis il referma le tout avec précaution et partit. Emotion devant un objet qui n’était pas beaux mais qui probablement pour lui était sublime.<sup>2</sup>

In this particular context, ordinary objects such as a black stone, a few bones and a nut seem to be endowed with this self-effacing power to go beyond themselves, giving men the power of war and death. Their mere presence can cause this strong emotion in the

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<sup>2</sup> ‘A Kwaimatnié appears as a long object surrounded by a strip of red bark, a Yipmoulié, a headband which Baruya men use to bless their forehead and which is red in the color of the Sun, their father. I was given the privilege of seeing what was inside a Kwaimatnié. The man who came to show it to me, accompanied by his son who was to inherit it, carefully removed the bark, and I saw lying side by side a black stone, bones, a nut. The man said nothing to me and started crying silently, then he closed it carefully and left. Emotion in front of an object that did not look beautiful but probably for him was sublime’ (my translation).

man who is showing them, making him cry. In fact, they are not exactly 'ordinary' objects, for they possess some special characteristics. Godelier goes on to tell us that the black stone has the shape of an adze blade and is meant to represent Venus, the morning and evening star, which for the Baruya was a sacrificial victim offered to the python snake, master of thunder and rain. One of the bones was an eagle bone. Eagles are taken to be metamorphoses of a mythical animal called 'original dog', which accompanied the first woman before men appeared on the earth. The other bone was a human bone probably belonging to one of the clan's ancestors. It was tapered like a punch and was used to pierce the nose of the initiates. Finally, the nut was a brown disk bearing a drawing that resembles an eye, which the Baruya call 'baby's eye'. It was used, among other things, for different forms of life-enhancing magic (Godelier 1995: 97).

We shall now move on to consider a very different type of sacred object: the fetishes used by Yaka healers from south-west Congo to counteract the activities of sorcerers and witches. According to René Devisch (2002: 178), these objects have the power to channel phantasmagorical forces that annul or deter the malignant energies released by an evildoer. These are the *nkisi*, a term that can be translated as fetish, charm, medicine, potion or power object. In the words of one of these healers, the *nkisi* might include:

glass shards collected from a tomb, earth surreptitiously taken from below the bed of an old widow suffering from rectal piles and who cannot control her urination, a piece of cloth or leaves which have been used by a girl at the time of her first menstruation that I secretly steal from her, a madman's saliva, a rooster's heart, the 'sperm of lightning' [that is, vitrified sand, or latex exuded from a tree mutilated by lightning], the blood of murder victims, and other residual substances whose usage is revealed to me in dreams. (Devisch 2002:176)

What does the healer do with all this stuff? He asks a not yet nubile girl to put them into a cartouche, which he seals with a resin. The healer then whispers a spell in partly inaudible tones while his wife holds the cartouche in her left hand. The cartouche is then deposited on the tomb of an irascible ancestor, and on the evening of the third day the healer treats it with a mixture of toxic plants and waste materials while turning his back to it. Finally, he carries it home, tying it to his rectum with a loincloth knotted between his legs. Again, we see a mixture of ordinary things with somewhat extraordinary or weird characteristics. Devisch draws our attention to the residual character of most of them, which might be related to the way in which the Yaka understand the nature of the malignant energies produced by the sorcerer. Note as well the multimodal character of

the experience of the supernatural that these objects generate. It is often not the object on its own that produces the desired effects, as it has to be made and obtained in a certain way, as well as being treated in a certain way by the healer and his assistants.

The last example of hallowed objects I would like to introduce here might seem more prosaic, but it is nonetheless more symptomatic, I argue, of their nature than the more or less standard ethnological exotica I have just described. I am in a Catholic parish in the west of the Republic of Ireland in the house of a middle-aged woman, married and the mother of three. She is showing me different kinds of things that, in one way or another, are valuable to her. She begins with an album of photographs. There are all kinds of pictures in it, from her marriage, from the marriage of one of her sisters, from her children's graduations, the trips they made to Barcelona and other places, etc. The interesting thing about them is the little things she attaches to them from time to time. One is the cross that her daughter received for her Holy Communion, another is a medal given to her youngest son when he was christened, yet another a piece of the tie the daughter used to wear when she was at school. She also tells me about the dress her husband bought for the girl's graduation at Athenry vocational school. She recognizes that it is not a big deal, but still they paid €400 for it, and she tells me about the care with which the girl looks after it, how much she liked it, etc. She made two blankets when both her eldest son and the girl were about to be born, one pink, the other blue, because she did not know whether it was going to be a boy or a girl. Anyway, she still keeps the blankets. 'They think I am mad, with all the things I keep [she is referring to her sisters]. Not Mamó (her mother), though – she also *believes in keeping things*' (my emphasis).

A few days later, I paid a second visit to the same house. There were candles everywhere, because of the kids' exams. In the dining room there were two pictures of them, with a candle beside each. Today the youngest son had an exam at 8:30 in the morning, so the mother woke up at that time and observed a 'morning vigil', praying for him. Later the girl phoned and asked her mother to pray for her, as did the eldest son, who was sitting the exam in Dublin. When I ask her about the prayers she was offering, she pulls a big envelope out of a drawer full of prayer cards plus bits and pieces from different places: receipts, bills, phone numbers, memorial cards, little prayer books. She also has a relic of Padre Pio, a little card with, she says, a small piece of Padre Pio's body (it looks like a piece of bone). It has healing properties, she adds, in a matter-of-fact manner. She also shows me the rosary. Each person should have one, she says, and

it goes with you to your grave. Her husband has one too, probably acquiring it when he was little, and he has kept it ever since. The rosary is a big thing here in Ireland, she says. Then she shows me a plastic bag with a couple of woollen socks, a handkerchief and a wooden cross. These were the socks that Daideo (her father, who passed away some years ago) was wearing when he was in hospital just before his death, together with his handkerchief and a wooden cross.

In this case, sacred objects such as relics, rosaries, crosses and prayer cards mix freely with all sorts of mementos, souvenirs, phone numbers, bills, etc. I did not ask the woman why she was keeping all these things, though it was clear to me that they all had some sort of story, a life of their own. She did not handle any of them with special care, not even Padre Pio's relic, nor the rosary, but they all seemed to be wrapped up with some kind of significance, more or less sacred, more or less profane. One of them at least was explicitly endowed with supernatural power, like the bones of the Baruya's ancestors. Another might be associated with the substances used by the Yaka healer in his incantations, though no phantasmagorical energy could be produced from it. A complex network of metonymical and metaphorical relationships brought all those objects together and linked them to their (absent) signifieds. Webs of meaning and interwoven modes of experience blend the sacred with the symbolic. For, as Durkheim pointed out long ago, the sacred *is* the symbolic, though for reasons different from those he envisaged.<sup>3</sup>

### **The meaning of religious belief**

Sacred objects are therefore meaningful objects, but they are meaningful in a special way. The philosopher Tim Crane has recently demarcated the meaning of religious belief in terms of what he calls the 'religious impulse', which, following William James, he defines as the 'claim that there is an unseen order and that our greatest good is to live in harmony with this order' (Crane 2017: 54). Behind the world as we see it, therefore, is a deeper, truer, perhaps better reality. But what kind of order is this 'unseen order'? And why is it 'unseen'? Crane refutes the idea of the supernatural as a characterization of this unseen order because, in his view, that would bring religion too close to magic. If that were to happen, it would deprive religion of its social character, and that is an essential component of all religions, Crane maintains, following

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<sup>3</sup> See my critique of Durkheim's sociological theory of religious symbolism (Salazar 2015).

Durkheim's well-known analysis.<sup>4</sup> Of course, definitions are always arbitrary. However, there is a sense in which too radical a separation between magic and religion turns out to be somewhat misleading.

A very important distinction should be emphasized at this juncture, one that is especially relevant when we are discussing the meaning of religious belief, namely the distinction between erudite and popular religion (see Boyer 2009: 308-9; Salazar 2018). Whereas erudite religion is typically the product of a minority of religious specialists in literate cultures (theologians, priests, etc.), popular religion refers to the set of religious beliefs and practices that are characteristic of ordinary folk. The beliefs of religious scholars originate in long years of hard training, not dissimilar in that sense from the beliefs of other erudite minorities such as scientists or philosophers (McCauley 2011: 153-4). Anthropologically speaking, there is no 'mystery' in the assimilation of such beliefs, no matter how bizarre, extraordinary or counterintuitive they happen to be. Assimilation is possible thanks to the intellectual effort entailed in the in-depth study of theology. Certainly, erudite and popular religion are not completely independent of each other. However, it would be very disingenuous to consider popular religion as merely an unsophisticated version of its scholarly counterpart.

It is in this sense that popular religious practices and beliefs, which are likely to be condemned by religious scholars as 'superstitions', come closer to what we normally understand by 'magic'.<sup>5</sup> And it is in this sense too that the concept of the supernatural could be useful as a definition of the world view – what we might call the 'folk ontology' – that is characteristic of popular religion. Having said that, I rush to add that there is a very important difference between popular religion and superstition, interestingly a difference that is normally neglected by CSR practitioners. I shall expand on this below: at this point it is the concept of religious meaning that I want to focus my

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<sup>4</sup> He cites approvingly Durkheim's critical views on the idea of the supernatural as a definition of religion (Crane 2017: 10), according to which this idea would be alien to the majority of societies in so far as they lack the concept of the 'natural' and hence cannot conceive what the 'supernatural' could possibly mean. However, this is a fallacious argument. All individuals in all human societies have an intuitive representation of the ordinary world, let us call it the 'natural' world, which does not correspond to the view put forward by the natural sciences and is challenged or contradicted in many different ways by religious ideas. This is precisely the point that Crane fails to grasp in his critique of the concept of the counterintuitive (2017: 47-8), which he wrongly sees as that which 'contradicts contemporary, scientific, secular culture'.

<sup>5</sup> Magic might not be 'social' in the same ways as religion is: there is no sense of belonging or collective effervescence in magical rituals, etc. But magical beliefs and practices have to be shared in one way or another in order to be effective, i.e. to be meaningful (see Lévi-Strauss 1963: 168, 180-5).

attention on. Let us take as our point of departure Crane's definition of the religious impulse as an attempt 'to make sense of the world by seeing a kind of meaning or significance in things' (2017: 39), a meaning to be found in the 'unseen order' whose existence constitutes the core of any religious belief. Let us further assume that this unseen order corresponds to the idea of the supernatural or, as Crane prefers to call it, the 'transcendent' (ibid.: 54-5), which in any case refers to something otherworldly, strange, uncanny, numinous, 'radically other'.

Ethnographers of the religious have come across different manifestations of this radical otherness in particular cultural elaborations. The Greek villagers studied by the Charles Stewart (1991: xv) used the term *exoticá*, literally 'things outside or beyond'. Among the Tzeltal Indians of Mexico, it is the *chu'l* (sacred, 'other') which, according to their ethnographer, 'is not so much another place but rather another sort of reality or form of existence – perhaps we could call it “virtual” – that develops in a time and space distinct from ordinary understandings of these dimensions' (Pitarch 2010: 202). Polynesians from Tikopia talk about *manu*, which Raymond Firth (2011: 192) tentatively defined as 'supernatural power'. And, perhaps in a slightly different sense, we could also include the Fang's notion of *akyunge*, by which they refer to anything surprising, extraordinary or miraculous (Fernandez 1982: 436). Note that there is an at best ambivalent moral significance to these notions of the supernatural that is totally absent from the Greek *exoticá* and the Fang's *akyunge*, and less than clear with respect to the *chu'l* of the Tzeltal and the *manu* of the Tikopia. As already noted, the common denominator of them all is the idea of otherworldliness: they all point to an 'unseen order' of sorts, even though it is unclear to what extent our greatest good is to live in harmony with this order.

### **Knowing about the supernatural**

How does anyone come to know about, and believe in, the existence of a supernatural order? Modes of cultural transmission in general and of religious communication in particular can vary widely from society to society. However, specifically in respect of religious communication, there are certain common denominators that no anthropologist who has done research on popular religion can fail to notice. Prominent among them is the use of symbolic languages. A symbol is merely something that stands for something else. However, the phrase 'symbolic language' or 'symbolic communication' is explicitly used here to refer to a form of communication that is different from ordinary

verbal or linguistic communication. In symbolic languages the relationship between signifier and signified is tenuous, ambivalent, indeterminate, inchoate (Fernandez 1974). Unlike ordinary linguistic signs, symbols cannot simply be read, they have to be interpreted.

Religious communication is overwhelmingly symbolic communication. This takes place not only by means of the religious language par excellence, the language of ritual, but also in the metaphors and metonymies of mythological narratives, in sacred chants, anthems and dances, in works of art and all sorts of sacred objects, amulets and fetishes. We might wonder why popular religions the world over, and as far back as archaeological evidence allows us to go,<sup>6</sup> should make use of this apparently indeterminate form of communication. One way of answering this question would be to refer to a very special characteristic of symbolic signifiers, namely that they are signifiers with an 'absent' signified. Might not that absent signified be the 'unseen order' that all religions seem to refer to? Apparently, nothing could be more absent or self-effacing than what cannot be seen. Invisibility is not necessarily absence, even though the presence of the invisible is certainly a weird, counterintuitive presence. In any case, it is arguable what this absent signified might refer to. Perhaps 'absent signified' means simply the absence of the signified, that is to say, meaninglessness.<sup>7</sup> Superstitions are the clearest instance of absent signifieds. Superstitions are not instinctive, as we have to learn them, but the ways in which they manifest themselves in behaviour resembles a nervous tic, that is, a mindless action, rather than intentional behaviour. There might be theories about particular superstitions that provide them with a kind of meaning, but nobody behaves in a superstitious way because of their knowledge of that theory. A superstition is what most clearly exemplifies a 'virus of the mind'. Superstitions are almost unintentional, sometimes even against the subject's will. In Boyer's terms (1990: 72-8), the relationship between the event that generates superstitious behaviour – for example, someone mentioning a calamity – and superstitious behaviour, such as touching wood, is indexical and not representational.

What applies to superstitions, however, cannot be extended to religious behaviour in general. It is true that religious behaviour in popular religion does not originate in a

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<sup>6</sup> We should remember that the oldest sculpture on record is famous the 40,000-year-old lion-man or *Löwenmensch*, discovered in the Hohlenstein Stadel cave in Germany, and that in all probability it had some magico-religious significance.

<sup>7</sup> This point has been forcefully maintained by some analysts of religious rituals, such as Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) and Staal (1979); cf. Salazar 2014.



‘theory’ about the world, consequently being devoid of propositional content or meaning. But propositional meaning (i.e. the meaning contained in a set of explicit propositions about the world) is not the only way of producing meaning: symbolic communication can also be seen as a means of accomplishing that end. Note that symbolic communication is not a defective or less efficient form of communication (cf. Bloch 1974). The need for interpretation, the fact that symbolic meanings do not seem to be immediately understandable, does not originate in some sort of incompleteness of the language itself that must somehow be compensated by the interpreter’s work. Symbols have to be interpreted in so far as we want to translate them into ordinary language. It is the translation into ordinary language, the exegesis of symbols, that creates the indeterminacy or ambivalence. In a way, it could be argued that all forms of communication that depart from ordinary linguistic communication become ‘symbolic’, that is, ambivalent, indeterminate, etc., as we attempt to translate their messages into ordinary language. Furthermore, at least certain forms of symbolic communication, such as ritual language, and maybe music and singing as well (Mithen 2007), are evolutionarily older than linguistic communication. It could be the case, therefore, that the human mind had a stronger predisposition for symbolic, that is, non-linguistic forms of communication than for linguistic communication *sensu stricto*.

Thus, a simple ‘why wouldn’t they?’ could be another way of answering the question as to why popular religions make use of symbolic languages. There is nothing inherently ambiguous, indeterminate or mysterious in such languages: it is our attempt to translate them into ordinary, analytic language that makes them look ambivalent and indeterminate. As James Fernandez (1982: 341-2) perceptively observed with regard to the Bwiti religious cult among the Fang of Gabon:

We can only impose theological consistency in the origin myths of Bwiti. Fang theology was embedded in diverse lore and was not clear to begin with. There was little interest in the topic. (...) Moreover, the theology does not emerge from recitations of the origin myths alone. Much is contained elsewhere in the liturgy and in what is being sung or danced about. We have to consult many interwoven modes of experience.

Two key ideas clearly emerge from this passage. First, the Bwiti’s followers had little interest in theology or theological consistency, which had to be ‘imposed’ upon them. Secondly, much of that theology is contained in ‘interwoven modes of experience’. Here Fernandez is using the concept of ‘theology’ in a loose sense, not as a systematic

set of propositions about the supernatural or the divine, as is normally the case in literate religions, but rather as a Geertzian web of significance in which meaning – the meaning of the supernatural or sacred – does not appear in propositional form.

### **What can be shown cannot be said**

Let us now return to the experience of the sacred made possible by sacred objects. Sacred objects, I argue, are meaningful objects in a special way. In all of them subjects can very often produce explicit statements concerning their meaning. There is a clear explicit reason for why some of these objects have the properties they have. The black stone of the Baruya represents Venus, the sacrificial victim offered to the python snake; the wooden cross in a plastic bag is the cross a man was holding on his deathbed, etc. For the Yaka healer, however, it seems that it is their highly implausible, uncanny, tortuous nature that constitutes the very discourse of their significance ('earth surreptitiously taken from below the bed of an old widow,' etc.). Be that as it may, in no case does there seem to be a 'theory' that explains how these symbolic meanings can be produced or their mysterious power generated. We might think that the woman who keeps the socks, the handkerchief and the cross belonging to her father does not need any theory to account for her behaviour: anyone can see the metonymical association between those objects and the man who once possessed them. Conversely, we might need a theory to explain why Padre Pio's relics have healing properties. Yet no theory was ever given to me: 'That's the religion' is all I could get whenever I asked. Besides, on the few occasions when I managed to obtain further elaboration, I had the impression that they were trying to make me happy with an improvised explanation rather than providing me with a real account of their behaviour.

What caught my attention at that time was not only that all those symbolically charged articles with different degrees of sacredness or 'otherworldliness' were kept in the same place, the same drawer, but also that their handling, the way the woman was actually pulling them out of the drawer and showing them to me, did not seem to make any distinctions among them, as if they were all part of the same meaningful totality.

Let me dwell a little longer on this concept of meaningful totality. Sure, the three ethnographic cases described above were not only culturally heterogeneous but also phenomenologically incommensurable, at least to some extent. But there is a sense in which, by considering all of them as part of the same meaningful totality, controversial though that might be, we may gain some deeper insight into the roots of their

significance and, by implication, into the process of the production of religious meanings.

The key issue to be addressed here is the un-thematized or pre-reflective nature of their enigmatic powers. What if we see those objects as parts of an extended mind of sorts? In other words, suppose they are not external entities in the world whose existence and properties have to be accounted for, but the very means by which that external world is perceived and understood? In their article about the extended mind, Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998) give the example of an imaginary patient suffering from Alzheimer's disease whom they call 'Otto'. To make up for his loss of memory, Otto carries around with him a notebook in which he writes down any new information he learns. Otto's notebook plays the role usually played by biological memory in healthy people. Clark and Chalmers's point is that Otto's beliefs about the world, in so far as they are based upon the information contained in his notebook, are in actual fact constituted by that notebook instead of by his biological memory. In other words, Otto's notebook is not an object in the world but has become part of his (extended) mind. From here they conclude that '*beliefs* can be constituted partly by features of the environment, when those features play the right sort of role in driving cognitive processes. If so, the mind extends into the world' (ibid.: 12). Is not Otto's notebook therefore also a kind of 'sacred object', similar to the Baruya's black stones, the Yaka's glass shards or Padre Pio's relic?

There is a difference, however, between Otto's notebook and the sacred objects we have been dealing with. The difference is important because it is what draws the boundary (certainly, not a clear-cut boundary) between the meaningfulness of the world and the meaninglessness of the tools one may use to perceive and understand that world. The process of enculturation, in the sense of which of these objects are believed to acquire their specific characteristics (remember, a multimodal process in which different forms of learning might coexist), is inherent in the value they have for the subjects who make use of them. Yes, Otto can also give us an explanation for why he is using that notebook, an explanation analogous to that provided by a neuroscientist regarding the workings of biological memory. But just as we do not need to know how our biological memory actually works in order to remember, so too Otto could very well forget why he is using that notebook (perhaps as a result of the disease he is suffering from); yet his notebook would still be as useful to him as our brain is useful to us, even

though we know nothing about how it works.<sup>8</sup> By contrast, none of the subjects who deal with sacred objects can actually ‘forget’ what makes those objects sacred and still make use of them according to that property. The confusing thing here is the fact that none of them seems to have a theory of their sacredness. So what is it, then, that they cannot ‘forget’? It is not a theology, understood as a set of propositions about the nature of the sacred and the divine, but the set of interwoven modes of experience that provide them with their sacred nature. These modes of experience are not dissimilar in kind from those that made my informant keep her dead father’s socks in a plastic bag.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to provide the outline of an anthropological theory of religious meaning that takes as its point of departure the study of sacred objects. Certainly this is not a fully-fledged theory, but merely an expanded theoretical argument that aims to identify some key issues in the anthropological study of religion. An anthropological theory must be a species theory, that is to say, it ought to be able to explain human behaviour, religious beliefs and practice in this case from the perspective of the whole human species. Furthermore, an anthropological theory must be ethnographically grounded. If it is a theory of religious meaning we want to advance, this does not mean that the meaning of (religious) meaning should not be understood *a priori*, for meaning is an analytical concept that does not stare ‘any observer in the face’ (Whorf 1956: 213). As intentional entities, meanings are not *in* the world but *about* the world. However, an ethnographically grounded theory of religious meaning entails that the transmission of meaning cannot be taken for granted. CSR scholars have done a good job of providing a species perspective that so far has been somewhat neglected, when not altogether derided, by mainstream anthropological theory. However, overall CSR researchers have glossed over the issue of religious meaning,<sup>9</sup> apparently because they (wrongly) see religion as on a par with human natural languages, an analogy that

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<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Clark and Chalmers mention language as an instance of what they call ‘socially extended cognition’ (1995: 17-18). Language can certainly be an instrument of cognition instead of an object of cognition in so far as it is meaningless, as I have argued above, this being a condition that sacred objects can never have.

<sup>9</sup> In a foundational text of CSR, Lawson and McCauley (1990) defended the need to integrate ‘explanation’ and ‘interpretation’ in the study of religious phenomena. That should be the aim of what they called the ‘interactive’ model between explanatory theories that search for causal laws and the interpretative endeavours concerned with meaning and experience. Unfortunately, that much desired interpenetration and integration between these two forms of the analysis of religion (and *a fortiori* of all culture) remains to be seen.

can only have some purchase if religious beliefs and behaviour are equated with superstitions. Or it may be because a lack of ethnographic research makes them blind to the constitutive power of cultural meanings in human behaviour.

The need for the ethnographic method in the analysis of religious meaning emerges from the specific nature of that meaning. In popular religion, meaning does not originate in a set of propositions, a 'theology', but in a form of engagement with the world. This engagement might include different forms of communication whose performative component trumps their propositional contents. These forms of communication are normally defined as 'symbolic languages' when religious scholars try to translate them into explicit verbal statements, that is, into a set of propositions. Of all these modes of communication or symbolic languages, in this article I have focused my attention on sacred objects. These are objects with absent signifieds that evoke notions about the sacred, the divine or the supernatural.

One way of approaching the analysis of sacred objects is by means of the extended mind hypothesis. What if such objects were instruments of thought rather than objects of thought? That would explain their pre-reflective or un-thematized nature. However, that would leave the culturally specific value that these objects have for their users unaccounted for, since sacred objects are simultaneously instruments of thought and objects of thought. That is what makes them 'symbolic': as we think about them, they take us to another form of reality. And yet there is nothing mysterious in these symbolic languages, just as there is nothing mysterious or 'unnatural' in the supernatural itself, as long as we do not translate them into propositional language. Sacred objects are uncanny, baffling and enigmatic because we cannot find a theory that accounts for their sacred nature. But we cannot find that theory because there is no such theory other than the object itself and the set of interwoven modes of experience that place it into a meaningful totality. In conclusion, therefore, perhaps the anthropological theory of religious meaning that this article has been aiming at cannot, and should not, go beyond the expanded theoretical discussion offered here.

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## LEARNING KIN TERMS: A SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

ROBERT PARKIN<sup>1</sup>

The first observation on the topic of how children learn kin terms from a social anthropological perspective must be that not very much work has been done on it, despite the emergence of a corpus of work on the anthropology of children in the last half-century or so. This may be because of a general rejection within the profession of an early attempt at explanation, that of the Polish-British anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski in the 1920s. His explanation was bound up with the different but related theory of extensionism, which, by contrast, is far from dead. In order to understand his explanation, it is necessary to go into what is meant by extensionism in some detail.

This states, essentially, that where primary kin one genealogical step away from ego share terms with relatives more than one step away, the nearer designation is the ‘focal’ one, other specifications of the term being ‘extensions’ of it. Examples include the well-known terminological equations father = father’s brother, mother = mother’s sister, sibling = parallel cousin (i.e. mother’s sister’s children and father’s brother’s children) and child = same-sex sibling’s child (i.e. a man’s brother’s child and a woman’s sister’s child). In the first two cases, father and mother are the focal specifications of their respective terms. This position also started with Malinowski, and it has been followed by anthropologists influenced by him, including Meyer Fortes, Harold Scheffler and his collaborator, the linguist Floyd Lounsbury and Warren Shapiro. As far as Malinowski himself is concerned it affects his psychological interests, which were never far away from his more social, or cultural, anthropology. That is, the stress in his explanation is more on how the individual agent cognizes such terminological relationships than on their social foundations. Extensionism itself has been opposed by structural-functionalists and especially structuralists, for which it is the entire category that one should focus on in conducting analyses: for example, one should take M and MZ together as a single category of the classification if they have the same terms. Anthropologists associated with this line of argumentation include Claude Lévi-Strauss, Rodney Needham,

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Louis Dumont and myself, as well as Edmund Leach, who tackled this question with explicit reference to Malinowski's own material (1958), being contradicted shortly afterwards by Floyd Lounsbury (1965). At root, this comes down to the difference between genealogy involving the stepwise calculation of relationships and the use of whole categories as an aspect of language use. Extensionist theory relies on the significance of genealogical thinking; structuralist, anti-extensionist positions on the primacy of category.

However, Malinowski took extensionism further and in *The sexual life of savages* (1929) claimed that children too relied on extensionism in learning kin terms. That is, they learned the terms for referents within the nuclear family first, starting with the mother (henceforward M; the primordial bond for Malinowski). They then learned to see mother's sister, in this example, as a kind of mother. In the Trobriand Islands, where Malinowski worked, mother's sister was always a presence for her nieces and nephews and almost a substitute mother for them, hence an intimate relative both sociologically and terminologically. This, for Malinowski, aided the child in seeing the association between mother and mother's sister within the Trobriand kinship terminology as plausible and therefore in adopting it (Malinowski in Young ed. 1979: 85ff.). However, he also admitted that there was what he called a 'different feeling-tone' (ibid.: 91) when the term was used for the mother's sister rather than the mother.

What his theory does not explain is what happens when the kinship terminology has a different pattern, as in English, where there is no terminological equation between parents and other kin types, and where there is instead an aunt category also including both mother's sister and father's sister and both mother's brother's wife and father's brother's wife. No doubt the two consanguineal aunts might be considered closer to ego than the two affinal ones. But regardless of affective closeness or remoteness, they all fall into the same category, with mother's sister and father's sister in particular being at an equal genealogical distance from ego: there is no extensionism in the terminology itself. Thus, the British infant is not likely to be able to learn the English classification in the same way as Malinowski suggests of its Trobriand counterpart. And in any case, among the Trobrianders too, what if ego has no actual mother's sister? Also, do children really learn kin terms in a set order, starting from the nuclear family and moving outwards? Or is the order more random, depending on when particular relatives come into their lives? More generally, the usual objection is that what children learn is a pre-existing, culturally determined classification. They are not making it up each time: that is, it is not the case that each child creates or constructs the classification through the psychological or cognitive procedure that allegedly leads to the making of these

extensions. Malinowski's explanation is often taken as suggesting this, probably unfairly, but more recently Warren Shapiro has suggested it quite explicitly (e.g. 2013), and Lounsbury (1965) certainly hinted at it. The most we can say is that this is how the child may learn a classification that existed before he or she was born. There is also a link between extensionist theory and a further doctrine of Malinowski's, namely the primacy of the nuclear family as the site not only of care, but also of socialization. This is another theory that is not borne out by worldwide ethnography, where extended, joint, stem or matrilineal families may be more significant.

At the present day, however, it is probably more important to consider the possible contribution of evolutionary psychology here. Some years ago, Barry Hewlett pointed out that there was little interest in kinship in such approaches, compared with, say, the genesis and transmission of religious ideas or of group and network formation (2001: 103). One problem with this experimental approach is that, while it may be possible to show humans grouping and regrouping concepts into categories in isolation from any collectivity in laboratory or other experimental conditions, there is no proof that those subjects are not acting on the basis of preconceived ideas derived from their own collective life and prior socialization into it (cf. also Parkin 2009). In fact, learning by children is a matter of trial and error, of making mistakes and being corrected by adults, of having what seems to be a natural gift for the free association of ideas curbed and redirected by adults into the socially 'proper' way of doing things. All children can do is learn a pre-existing classification, rooted in the respective speech community, and partly or wholly under the influence of their parents or other authority figures.

Ultimately, therefore, for the anthropologist the actual family situation provides a better environment than a lab for such studies, one in which certain basic predictions can be made, such as the fact that, assuming regular cognitive development, the infant will learn the existing classification eventually, however many fits and starts there have to be first. And we can also predict something about how children are taught kin terms and categories by, for example, being informed that a certain visitor is their cousin, or being told to thank Auntie for her present. We should also acknowledge that they may have terms of their own: for example, in Berlin playgrounds, German *keule*, literally 'club', but also 'mate', is reported as being used for elder brother (Thomas Zitelmann, personal communication), despite being feminine in grammatical gender.

However, I acknowledge that the researcher interested in these questions will want more than that. For example, the cognitive psychologist presumably wants to know how, and at

what developmental stage, the infant learns first, to draw distinctions consistently and correctly, and secondly, learns their significance, as well as how these two steps are related and, perhaps, the order in which different categories emerge in the infant's consciousness as either fully formed or merely tentative. One question must be, therefore, how these developments match, or are a reflection of, the infant's cognitive development generally. However, for the social anthropologist there is another issue here, namely differences between both world cultures and families within them in how and when the family's influence as a collectivity makes itself felt.

For example, does a time come when the infant is expected to know, or has to be taught, who its relatives are, or is it left more or less to its own devices, except when it asks a question about relationships or makes a mistake? Also, what part does schooling play in this, given especially differences in educational philosophies and practices globally, not to mention in the availability of modern schooling. In short, there is clearly variation in how different societies perceive and deal with this problem. Nonetheless, while long-term fieldwork with a single family not one's own is probably unfeasible because of the number of years the process typically takes, as I have just suggested, the family situation does approximate to a 'natural' controlled environment in which certain things can be predicted.

At this point, I return to a point touched on earlier, namely the very different patterns of kinship terminology one finds around the world in unpredictable distributions. Thus at the minimum we have various forms of prescriptive system, sometimes called Dravidian and Kachin, which are associated with cross-cousin marriage. These are the only forms that very obviously reflect the operation of specific social rules, here rules about whom one should and should not marry. There are also so-called Crow-Omaha systems, which exhibit some form of lineal unity, respectively matrilineal and patrilineal, through equations linking referents in different generations down one or more matrilineal or patrilineal parallel to one's own. As a result, we get equations like mother = mother's brother's daughter (Omaha; not mother = daughter, NB) and father = father's sister's son (Crow; not father = son, NB). There are also terminologies that give a separate term to every kin type within a certain genealogical range from ego, sometimes called Sudanese. Conversely terminologies called Hawaiian or generational give the same term to all kin in a particular generation. Then there are systems like English, which isolate primary kin but unite second-order kin like parents' siblings and siblings' children on both sides of the family and have one umbrella term for one class of remoter kin, namely cousin, in all generations. Malinowski's explanation might suit the first and second of these, as they may well equate each parent with his or her same-sex sibling,

though do not always do so by any means. But this does not apply to the other cases, where such equations are lacking by definition. Malinowski's theory therefore cannot be a universal theory, and even in its own terms problems have been identified with it and objections raised to it. Finally here, what happens when, as on Yap and Chuuk, studied by David Schneider and David Labby, and by Ward Goodenough respectively, kin terms, though they exist, are rarely used in either address or reference?

One early anthropologist with an interest in children and their upbringing, at the instance of her supervisor, Franz Boas, was Margaret Mead. She wrote one book on the Omaha of North America (1932), indicating that children are not taught the kinship terminology as a system, but merely corrected for each use; also that grandparents often take on this role. More famously, she worked in Papua New Guinea, where she reported (1963 [1930]: 77) that 'Children use no kinship terms among themselves and are not conscious of exact relationships'. Moreover, they tend to ignore adults' attempts to explain terms to them and focus more on individual identities than relationships, not like adults – a comparison that is perhaps not totally clear but that recalls a point of Piaget's. Mead says, 'The first consciousness of relationships outside the household group comes with the recognition of some common avoidance' (ibid.). In her example of this process, one event, the moving into the village of a sister's husband whom they must avoid, forced a group of children to reassess their relationships and learn the adult system.

This suggests that learning to use a kin term properly is associated with the behaviour expected in relation to it. In another passage, from *The Basuto* by E.H. Ashton (1952: 43), we are told that children often use a wrong term for, for example, their mother if they hear a different term being used by another individual who is related differently to her. This either leads to spasmodic attempts at correction or to ignoring the error until the child corrects it itself. The child may also be applauded or mocked for the correct or incorrect use of kin terms.

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## REVIEW ARTICLE

Review of J.P.S. Uberoi: *Mind and Society: From Indian Studies to General Sociology*, ed. Khalid Tyabji, Delhi: Oxford University Press 2019, 346 pp. ISBN 9780199495986

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Summarizing the work of J.P.S. Uberoi is exceptionally challenging, for many reasons: his work questions core modern concepts and structures, as well as the received history of science, philosophy and religion that have moulded the ways we think; also, it is a body of work that has not received the attention it deserves.

This book is a selection of essays spanning 45 years (1968-2013), and it makes a good introduction to Uberoi's work, which is of a significance that could yet have a transformative influence on social anthropology; even though its radical and ambitious outlook in many ways runs counter to the direction that the discipline has taken since Uberoi studied anthropology in Manchester in the 1950s and published his first book, *Politics of the Kula Ring: An Analysis of the Findings of Bronislaw Malinowski* (1962), a chapter of which won him the Royal Anthropological Institute's Hocart prize. Malinowski's analysis of the system of symbolic exchanges among Trobriand Islanders is one of the most detailed expositions of an economic system that is radically different from our own. The brilliance of Uberoi's first book is that it analyses the Trobriand political system that functioned alongside these exchanges: the Trobriand Islanders' long boat journeys represented a political as well as an economic system, which Malinowski seriously neglected, as the internal evidence of his 1922 monograph partly indicates.

To summarize the barest outline of his life, Uberoi studied electrical engineering at University College London, before switching to social anthropology in Manchester through the influence of the sociologist Basil Bernstein, a switch that opened doors into a deep understanding of the relationship between *Science and Culture* (the title of his second book, 1978). Inducted into the Manchester School of anthropology by Max Gluckman, Victor Turner and others, he did fieldwork among Tajik communities in northern Afghanistan before switching to the Australian National University at Canberra, where he completed his

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PhD. From 1968-1999, invited by M.N. Srinivas, he taught sociology in the Delhi School of Economics ('D School'), becoming its longest-serving professor and a teacher of genius. Here, with Veena Das and others, he started a European Studies Programme, a rarely attempted corrective to the Orientalist tradition that 'defined' the East, as well as a necessary prerequisite to decolonizing Indian academia from unexamined concepts so as to forge a genuine Indian sociology.

In Khalid Tyabji's words, in his Forward to the present book (xi), Uberoi's work represents 'the only Indian approach to academic scholarship that has seriously attempted to undertake the swarajist programme of considering modern Western civilization in its entirety from an independent, decolonized, Indian perspective'. In this regard, there is very little to compare his work with, and few have had the courage to follow his initiative in analysing Western modernity from an Indian perspective; though one recent work of scholarship, written in the vicinity of Oxford, that echoes Uberoi's project from a similar perspective to Uberoi's far-reaching anthropology of science is Jeremy Naydler's *In the Shadow of the Machine: The Prehistory of the Computer and the Evolution of Consciousness* (2018).

Uberoi's volume is divided into three parts. The first, 'Of Universal Knowledge', sets the scene in terms of the sometimes polemically expressed aim of 'defying the European monopoly of the scientific method of knowledge'. The first essay, 'Science and *Swaraj*', was published in the second issue of *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (1968), and forms a kind of prelude to Uberoi's three books on the relationship between science and society (1978, 1984, 2002), in each of which he shows how the scientific method formulated in the West needs to be analysed as part of Western culture, rather than as separate and independent from it. A central argument is that 'the sciences of the expert and the military-industrial complex are everywhere in alliance with, or constitute the other half of, the politics of the elite', while 'the opposite, non-dualist attitude ... was driven underground, especially after the failure of the radical Reformation and the so-called peasants' war in Germany (1526).' (14-17). The key moment when science was institutionalized in Britain Uberoi sees as the creation of the Royal Society in London in 1660, coinciding with the Restoration of the monarchy that ended the Commonwealth, which he interprets as the hierarchical social order being internalized by the scientific order.

In this initial essay, Uberoi quotes Lévi-Strauss, speaking on 'urgent anthropology', that 'Anthropology is daughter to this era of violence', there being a distinct lack of any real 'reciprocity of perspective' between exploiters and exploited (or dispossessors and dispossessed). Alongside this is a response to this urgent anthropological theme by Ralph

Beals to the effect that the erstwhile human subjects of anthropology require yet more study since ‘they were clearly apt to disappear shortly’. As Uberoi comments, ‘This formula is the new bland euphemism of international social science for genocide committed and connived at by rich and powerful governments’ (5). This prefigures the argument in Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s seminal work *Decolonising Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People* (2012/1999), which attacks the objectifying tendency in anthropology for the unconscious part it has played in the power structures imposed over indigenous people, precisely by pretending to be objective.

Uberoi’s European studies highlight an ‘underground’ European tradition that evolved from ancient thinkers such as Pythagoras, via Paracelsus and others, to Goethe’s scientific method, which challenged Newton’s method to connect nature with man as a partner, rather than as an object of domination and objectifying study, which Goethe (and Uberoi) see as the Newtonian approach. Goethe’s method regarded the experiment, and the human body or senses, as mediating between subject and object. Subjectivity is largely excluded from modern science and relegated to the ‘Arts’. By contrast, Goethe emphasizes training one’s subjectivity as an observer in terms of that most challenging of all branches of *scientia*: self-knowledge. Without cultivating knowledge of the self, how can we become aware of our own unexamined beliefs and prejudices, inherited from (to use Durkheim’s phrase) the collective representations through which we were socialized?

Self-knowledge is generally recognized to be one of the hardest of attainments, yet the educational system (including the teaching of anthropology) gives little guidance. Without training one’s subjectivity, how can one conduct objective observation and analysis, since one’s use-of-self-in-relation-to-others is the instrument through which one chooses which informants to cultivate and which pieces of information to pursue and to define as ‘data’?

Part One ends with essays on the use of science in agriculture, the split between the sciences and the arts in the University systematization of knowledge, and the place of students in the social and political structure of university life.

The first essay in the second part, ‘Of Modern World Culture’, offers a radical reassessment of the three key theorists of social anthropology and sociology, Marx, Durkheim and Weber, considered here in reverse order. Uberoi sees Weber’s methodology as being haunted by a Hamlet-like failure to choose between or transcend the Western mainstream’s dichotomy between rationality and empiricism, as well as because of its lack of a concept of a social system. Durkheim’s understanding of the power of symbols is vitiated



by a failure to extend this symbolic analysis to uncover the ‘false consciousness’ underlying unequal power relations, as in colonialism. On Marx, Uberoi focuses on the dialectical methodology used to analyse the alienation of labour. The last essay in Part Two extends these insights to advocate a greater emphasis on the role of labour in the community: ‘Whenever and wherever Marx considered the organization of labour he was essentially optimistic about the future, but... when he considered the system of property he became pessimistic and gloomy...’ (195). Another essay, on sociolinguistics, follows P.B. Pandit’s work to show how India’s norm of multi-lingualism was belittled by successive scholars and planners, who continue to advocate ‘linguistic assimilation’ on the assumption that ‘cultural homogeneity [is] necessary for national advancement’ (92-3). Pandit’s work, as cited by Uberoi, mainly focuses on state and major languages (i.e. the seventeen languages represented on India’s currency notes), while tribal (and other sub-state-level) languages in India face linguistic genocide, since they are largely excluded from schools, in contravention of India’s Constitution, which is supposed to guarantee every child’s right to education in his or her mother tongue.

Other essays here summarize structuralism from an Indian perspective (first published under the title ‘For a Sociology of India’, 1974), critique Frazer’s foundational influence on social anthropology by offering an analysis of civil society as a mediation between King/State and the individual, and analyse the position of the industrial worker in post-war Britain.

At the centre of this Part is an essay entitled ‘The Three Lives of Things in a Post-modern Economy’, first published as ‘Sociology of Commerce and Industry’ in 2008. It was preceded by an article entitled ‘Technology of Obsolescence’ (1989), which introduced the prevalent practice of ‘built-in redundancy’:

The iron law which prevails today is that contemporary technological innovation displaces and replaces old with new technology after an ever-decreasing interval of time. How much longer can such a system of power and desire, utility and fashion continue to sustain...?

This rule seems to apply across the spectrum of the manufactured goods that are emblematic of ‘modernity’. Above all, it is apparent in military hardware, where technological innovation moves increasingly rapidly, and new weapons systems, requiring increasingly costly manufacture, become obsolete ever more swiftly.

The 2008 essay in the present volume takes these insights much further, highlighting

‘dual-use technology’ for war and peace and the pre-eminent place of military technology in today’s world economic system in an arms race that never even slowed down after the ‘Cold War’ (1945-1990). This essay juxtaposes commerce to industry, arguing that they are not so much complementary, as Saint-Simon, Marx and mainstream orthodoxy maintain, but essentially contradictory, as Thorstein Veblen argued: in technical matters, industries work together; but ‘as business units they are competitors in a strategy of mutual defeat’ (Veblen 1925/1964: 13). On the subject of obsolescence, summarizing the shifting variables in terms of the ‘machine life’ or ‘use value’, ‘market life’ (‘exchange value’) and ‘vogue life’ (‘social or fashion value’), Uberoi’s summary encapsulates the problem:

In other words, the system of technology, in the traditional sense of engineering, says that the machines are good for 20 years; and economics as the ‘science of scarcity’ says that they should be paid up with interest in 10 years and then scrapped; but the sociology of fashion will declare them to be out of date and wish them replaced within 5 years. (151)

Uberoi quotes President Kennedy: ‘We’re in an arms race with ourselves – and we’re winning!’ – along with some hard evidence to show how the arms race combines with ever-shortening spans of obsolescence to form a system of ‘creative self-destruction’ (146, building on economist Joseph Schumpeter’s phrase) at the heart of present-day capitalism: ‘This accelerated development of armaments is therefore the most potent single evil, peril and bad example that faces the world today’ (148). At least a third of the world’s skilled scientists, technicians and engineers are employed in the arms industry by some estimates, while the world’s middle- and low-income countries have been drawn in as suppliers of raw materials and cheap skilled labour, not to mention ‘as gullible customers of its products and designs, mostly those outdated or discarded and obsolete’ (149). This is a systematic feature of the arms industry and trade. For example, during Britain’s Falklands War with Argentina and its wars with Iraq in 1990 and 2003, the RAF faced an older generation of planes that Britain had sold to Argentina and Iraq, and therefore easily shot down.

At the same time, corruption in arms deals is systemic, being at the centre of the world’s black economy (Feinstein 2011; reviewed by Padel 2010), and these deals boost the rising financial burden of unrepayable debt owed by ‘developing’ or ‘underdeveloped’ countries to countries termed ‘developed’ – part of the control imposed over ‘developing’ countries, and populations everywhere, through debt (Rowbotham 1998). In fact, retaining an arms industry at its centre seems to be the key structural feature of those countries that are defined by the

IMF/World Bank as 'developed'. The arms industry and trade is at the heart of the world economy. Yet, as Uberoi puts it, 'This simple truth is hidden from us everywhere': thus, Abdul Kalam, India's 'missile man', has helped to 'create a self-delusional sense of security and a fictitious modern, strong and progressive self for India' (146-152). Why aren't students of economics and other social sciences encouraged to analyse critically the central role played by the arms trade and unrepayable debt in the world system of relations?

In other words, Uberoi is highlighting a scientific *culture* that produced the schism or compartmentalization at the heart of our modern epistemology and value systems, which has allowed, for example, 'the backroom boys' (arms scientists) to develop their weapons of mass destruction without apparently troubling their consciences. In the practice of the 'hard sciences' and engineering/technology, this manifests itself in an even more extreme dehumanization that Uberoi calls 'the end of modernity' through the twin violence of Auschwitz and the atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. 'Post-modernism', in this sense, could be said to be born from these acts of violence, in which the full destructiveness of science and technology was turned on fellow human beings.<sup>2</sup>

Part Three, 'Of the Indian Modernity', focuses particularly on Sikhism, the subject of *Religion, Civil Society, and the State: A Study of Sikhism*, Uberoi's fourth book (1996), which starts with a strong critique of standard sociological efforts, showing Uberoi's use of structuralist methodology. Two outstanding essays reproduced in the present volume are 'Sikhism and Islam: A Structural Analysis', and 'Religion, Civil Society and the State in India' (a chapter from the 1996 book). The latter starts with a structural analysis of the Hindu and Muslim cultures of medieval India, showing the elementary significance of the *Sannyasi-Brahman-Raja* triad in the Hindu scheme, and its relationship with the trinity of Sufi, Ulema and Sultan, or *Tariqat-Shari'at-Hukumat*, in the Muslim order, corresponding to 'religion', 'civil society' and 'state'. Of great interest in its own right, this formed a prelude to Uberoi's analysis of Sikhism, engaging with his own culture (of special interest, since his father was a Sikh spiritual teacher of considerable influence) to bring out the essence of Sikh history and values, including emphases on civil society and martyrs (topic of the penultimate essay in the volume), both of great significance to India as a whole.

The final essay, 'Metaphysics of the Indian Modernity: The Theory of the Name', searches the origin of Indian modernity in the *bhakti* tradition that started in the sixteenth century and its later synthesis with Sikh thought.

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<sup>2</sup> This argument is extended much further in Uberoi's *The European Modernity* (2002).

This third part would have done well to incorporate Uberoi's 1972 essay 'The structural concept of the Asian Frontier',<sup>3</sup> still used for anthropological teaching on frontiers in the South Asian context, which emerged from his Afghanistan fieldwork. Rather than looking on frontiers in South Asia as peripheral, he suggests that they embody 'the principles of mutuality, reciprocity and exchange'. As for 'the message of the frontier', this highlights 'the virtues of liberty', calling to mind James Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009) characteristic of cultures in Burma/Myanmar, and also of many cultures in Northeast India.

Uberoi's writings are not necessarily comfortable to read, challenging assumptions, often polemically, that we often prefer to hold on to. I consider my own books (Padel 1995 [new edition 2010a], 2010b, 2013) to have been quite deeply influenced by his thinking, since he played the role of assistant supervisor to my Oxford D.Phil when I was affiliated to Delhi University in 1982-86, especially in his emphasis on 'studying up' or 'reverse anthropology', and the analysis of a broad, overarching social structure.

The essays in *Mind and Society* have the power to stimulate anthropologists in new ways, outlining a method of social analysis with huge potential for decolonizing the collective mind, not just for Indian society, but world-wide. Uberoi's method offers a way to ensure 'that international intellectual exchanges are based on mutuality, reciprocity and equality, and not on the old patterns of dominance and dependence among nations (63-4).

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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### NATIONALIZING CUISINES: AN EXPLORATION OF ALIMENTARY ALLEGIANCES AND CULINARY COMMUNITIES

ASHLEY THUTHAO KENG DAM<sup>1</sup>

**Atsuko Ichijo, Venetia Johannes and Ronald Ranta (eds.)**, *The emergence of national food: the dynamics of food and nationalism*, London: Bloomsbury Academic 2019, 236 pp. ISBN: 978-1350080485.

**Jukka Gronow and Lotte Holm (eds.)**, *Everyday eating in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden: a comparative study of meal patterns 1997-2012*, London: Bloomsbury Academic 2019, 207 pp. ISBN: 978-1350074132.

Whether it is one-minute recipe videos on YouTube and Facebook or carefully constructed food images on Instagram, the topic of food dominates both the contemporary mass media and academic research. Moving away from its initial placement as an object within biological, nutritional and consumption-oriented research spaces, the socio-political and cultural fascination with food has grown considerably. As a result, a sociological approach to researching food has emerged, situating food as a dimension of social life that is demonstrative of contextual social conditions, social organizations and dynamics. Through its exploration, food offers researchers glimpses into the multitude of relations that generate and perpetuate the sociocultural idiosyncrasies of a given society, especially as it relates to notions of ‘identity’. In both *The emergence of national food* and *Everyday eating*, the ways in which a certain ‘food nationalism’ arises or does not arise are explored through various case studies.

While both texts play with the idea of this notion of a shared culinary tradition or heritage, which is then linked to national identity under a nation-state paradigm, *Everyday eating*

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functions purely under the assumption that such a thing exists to begin with. Starting from the perspective that, despite different nation-state designations, Nordic populations potentially share similar foods and eating histories and practices, *Everyday eating* examines the eating patterns of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden over a fifteen-year period. In order to capture the potential shifts and changes in all four Nordic countries, Gronow et al. frame the complex process of eating within a so-called ‘eating system’ which combines the physical, organizational and socio-cultural aspects of eating in order to narrow down the research’s focus to three elements: eating patterns, meal formats and the social organization of eating. Consequently most of their research findings provide entire inventories of typically eaten meal foods (for which they offer both distinct definitions and criteria), insights into the daily rhythms of eating across these populations (e.g. timings for mealtimes and the general temporality of eating) , commensality practices, perspectives on gender in relation to food and cooking, and commentaries on issues of sustainability, food insecurity and dietary health within the Nordic countries.

Through this framing, *Everyday eating* generates a uniform research model which unites its twelve chapters under the aforementioned focuses as guiding themes. Drawing on two data sets, one collected in 1997 and the other in 2012, Gronow et al. utilized telephone and web-based surveys that were representative of these populations to interview over 13,000 people living in these four Nordic countries. The research questions focused on discerning whether shared eating rhythms existed among the Nordic countries and whether the eating rhythms and practices they identified were simply declining or disappearing altogether (Gronow et al., 2019). This seemingly systematic approach, they argue, allows data comparisons between the countries across the two time periods, thus demonstrating the distinctions between culturally or nationally idiosyncratic phenomena (Gronow et al., 2019: 10).

While Gronow et al. provide ample amounts of data to support some of their claims, there are moments in the text when their conclusions for each chapter seem to contradict one another or are presented as definitive despite the ambiguity of their findings. For instance, in discussing the changes in the types of foods that are eaten during meals in the Nordic countries, the authors stressed that ‘traditional Nordic national food cultures’ persisted over the fifteen-year period of research through the presence of distinctive hot and cold lunch cultures, overall simplistic meal formats and the prominent inclusion of meat in dinner dishes, while also saying that there were numerous changes which challenged the existence of these ‘national food cultures’ (Gronow et

al. 2019: 30). Among the changes they identified in food consumption, it was noted that meal choices included more wholesome and ‘healthier’ options that centred around fruit, vegetarian options, less sugary items (e.g. cakes) and increased water consumption – trends that the authors argued demonstrated a ‘harmonization’ and ‘homogenizing’ of Nordic food culture – while also maintaining two sentences later, rather confusingly, that ‘underlying distinct national patterns’ remain consistent (ibid.). In another chapter on Nordic countries’ daily rhythms of eating, the authors address this tendency and claim that ‘shared eating rhythms’ will continue into the future despite the inconclusiveness of their findings: ‘Despite this ambiguous finding, we believe it is justifiable to extrapolate from our results...’ (Gronow et al. 2019: 53). Although nuance and scepticism are inherent in nearly all research, the authors’ seem to draw stark conclusions despite the absence of data which would directly support their claims.

While carefully crafted, the text has an interesting isolating aspect to it: despite focuses on the shifts in the behaviour of populations, it ignores the demographic fluctuations in each Nordic country. This weakness is touched upon in the text’s conclusion, which calls for further in-depth research on the same topics in response to new demographic changes and the de-homogenizing of Nordic populations. Methodologically the text suffers from the problem of the incomparability of the two data sets, based respectively on telephone interviewing in 1997 and an internet survey in 2012. While the authors argue that this difference in survey method does not impact on their results, one might ask whether research participants would have devoted the same level of attention and detail to their responses through web-based surveys than through direct telephone interviews.

Despite its acknowledged limitations, *Everyday eating* offers a well-organized and detailed account of Nordic eating patterns between the late 1990s and 2010s. Overall the text reads fairly easily, being usefully supplemented with detailed tables that were clear and not in the least overwhelming. While it lacks some critical analysis regarding the ways in which each Nordic country has changed since the turn of the millennium, it offers solid data on what Nordic countries are eating, how they are eating them and how they feel about it. The text’s findings reinforce this idea of a shared, core, Nordic food identity, as well as noting the influence of the social organization of daily life as a dominating factor in shaping eating patterns. Many of its findings suggest that fluctuations in socioeconomic status, in conjunction with age, have produced noticeable changes in eating patterns and practices, thus producing a sense of



‘desynchronization’. This attention to transformation and in food and eating practices further substantiates the relevance of the authors’ research within Nordic countries’ rapidly evolving foodscapes (Gronow et al., 2019: 46).

In sharp contrast, Ichijo et. al’s *The emergence of national food* presents a critical analysis of the ideas of ‘national food’ and ‘food nationalism’. Organized into three thematic parts, the authors provide fourteen chapters that elaborate on the emergence of ‘national food’, distinctive examples and accounts of national foods, and examples and accounts that criticize the existence of national foods. Although numerous ‘obvious’ examples of national food are avoided (e.g. France, Italy, India and Japan), this volume provides a diverse collection of accounts which traverse often overlooked groups and regions in food studies such as eastern Europe, Latin America, Scotland, Palestine and Catalonia. *The emergence of national food* highlights a number of foods which tend to be repeatedly contested for the designation of ‘national foods’: can one food, or several types of food, truly embody the diversity of the human experience for an entire nation? This inquiry is but one of many addressed in the text: as Ichijo et al. stress, ‘this volume does not claim to have defined the method of studying food and nationalism...it showcases what different methods and different combinations of methods can reveal’ (Ichijo et al. 2019: 12).

The first section presents an assemblage of case studies which embody an ‘orthodox’ understanding of national food, meaning that such foods are composed and fixed within a process of nation- and state-building endeavours. Whether it is Bacalhau (salted cod) in Portugal, Potica (hearty leavened bread) in Slovenia or the microculture *Bacillus Bulgaricus* in Bulgaria, such foods are staples in what it means to be a part of the said nation; consumption and appreciation of ‘national foods’ become necessary in shared national identities. Many of these case studies drew most of their ‘national food’ designations from observances of historical cookbook and cooking texts throughout the ages, allowing the long-held significance of certain foods within given nation-state contexts to be traced. For some examples, such as Slovenian Potica, the authors combine historical narratives with current events to explain this hearty type of bread’s rise to global fame as demonstrated through interactions between the Pope, U.S. President Donald Trump and First Lady Melania Trump. The interweaving of historical and current events as a format for many of the case studies explains and outlines the origins and potential trajectories of designated ‘national foods’.

The second section of the text provides more examples of national food within a framework taken from cultural studies and historical analysis, which in combination critically analyse the said ‘national foods’ as signifiers of specific (often sociocultural) dynamics. From poverty and class in relation to Scottish Haggis and deep-fried Mars Bars to various Catalan delights, this section stresses the idea of food and national food(s) as being indicative of several overlaid identities of populations. Given that the identified ‘national foods’ are so closely interlinked with notions of identity, some examples highlighted different forms of protest and resistance through foods, while others focused on differentiating ethnic heritage and regional affiliations from nation states. Venetia Johannes discusses how the Barcelona chef Ada Parellada created a charity dinner menu that showcased the colour yellow in order to signify the importance of differentiating Catalan cuisine from Spanish cuisine: ‘[Chefs] tread a fine line between celebrating their Catalan heritage as a part of their personal brand and avoiding the negative associations with being “Catalan” in Spain today’ (Venetia Johannes in Ichijo et al. 2019: 94). Similarly, Mona Nikolić examines how the homogenization of numerous forms of identity (e.g. regional, religious, ethnic) exemplifies the power dynamics that exist between various groups in attempting to achieve a unified ‘national identity’ in food and cuisine. The inclusion of anecdotes of resistance through food and cuisine was an incredibly enriching aspect of this volume, as they demonstrated the complexity of attempting to classify populations’ foodways and cuisine systematically within the restrictive frameworks of ‘national foods’.

The final section is entirely existential, with its constant battle over whether or not ‘national foods’ are a universally observed phenomenon that actually exists. From analysis of *cuy* in Andean Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, Poutine in Canada and New England cuisine in the United States, Ichijo et al. simply conclude that ‘it depends’ (Ichijo et al. 2019: 175). The most intriguing set of examples in this section was that of Israeli ‘national foods’ in juxtaposition to designated Palestinian ones; both case studies cite ‘modernity’ and the other’s foodways as shapers of current perspectives on what ‘national foods’ meant for each. This choice to highlight the historically turbulent relationship between Israel and Palestine demonstrates how, as a medium, food acts as a form of diplomacy and an indicator of social relations and dynamics.

Overall, *The emergence of national food* is a thought-provoking read with interesting case studies. The text differentiates itself by focusing on case studies of ‘national foods’ and ‘national cuisines’ by actively seeking research on underexplored groups in food studies. It provides a

wide selection of methodologies from the social sciences which contribute to the continuance of the study of food and nationalism while inviting further holistic approaches. The text could have benefited from expansion of the plethora of perspectives around boundary-making, nation-building and the dichotomies between regional pride and ethnic pride, but as it stands it is still very good.

Although both *Everyday eating* and *The emergence of national food* provide collections of case studies outlining the extensively complex topic of food within the framework of a conceptualization of nationalism, each has its own unique perspective and approach. Read together they appear to be diametrically opposed, but as stand-alone texts they are well-researched, insightful volumes on their respective topics. Regardless of the research focus, these two works will make interesting reading for food scholars, food researchers and food enthusiasts alike.

**PETER GRAIF**, *Being and hearing: making intelligible worlds in deaf Kathmandu*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2018, 160 pp. ISBN: 9780999157039.

*Being and hearing: making intelligible worlds in deaf Kathmandu* does what excellent anthropological analysis should do – give us a window into a community and *make sense* of experiences that are typically obfuscated. Peter Graif’s analysis of the ontologies of deaf people in Nepal is simultaneously compelling, depressing and extremely heart-warming. Using a narrative structure heavily reminiscent of Geertzian thick description – which, incidentally, is an extremely helpful tool with which to discuss sensory experiences that exist beyond the visual – Graif expertly weaves a brilliant volume of ethnographic narrative and insightful analysis.

The book fits well into the recent sensorial turn in anthropological discourse. Theorists like Sarah Pink, David Howes and Tim Ingold have theoretically conceptualized ways of encountering sensorially different ontologies (see Pink, 2015; Howes 2003, 2005; Ingold 2000). What *Being and Hearing* brings to the discussion is an expert example of *how* to experience and write about these worlds and of what the repercussions may be of not understanding them. Graif’s ground-breaking method for doing ‘deaf ethnography’ combines visual imagery and written description to give readers both (1) a comprehensible concept of the *experience* of being deaf in Nepal and (2) an understanding of where this experience fits into the larger scale of ontologies. He explains a reality, a world that exists for the deaf community of Kathmandu that is experientially and sensorially unique. Furthermore, the wit and incredible intelligence of his informants highlights what many ethnographic narratives have striven to show – the inescapable irony that those in minority communities are often very much more perceptually aware than they are perceived to be.

Graif expertly unpacks the relationship between sensorial worlds and ‘making sense’ of things. His informants’ ethnographic narratives showcase how we can ‘not know’ about the people and things that surround us when we privilege the visual sense. One of the pivotal moments of the book occurs when Graif explains that the deaf (in Kathmandu, but presumably around the world, as deaf experiences are predicated on a phenomenological and sensory engagement) are constantly involved in a process of ‘being found’ and ‘not being found’ by the rest of the (hearing) world (74). Furthermore, he takes a reflexive stance to explain the relationship between this and anthropological discourse:

The classic anthropological ambition to make the foreign intelligible must thus grapple with the fact that deaf people dedicate a great deal of their social labor to making themselves intelligible or not. Engaging with anthropologists writing books, in other words, is a very deaf thing to do. In this regard, the deaf reveal an intrinsic tension between *being* and *perceiving*. They negotiate this tension as a political strategy, and they render the ostensible fact of presence and absence itself as a domain of critical social activity. (74-5)

In six chapters of the book, Graif covers a broad range of topics, from ‘the sense of things’ to politics and aesthetic linguistics (1). He carefully unpacks a range of deaf experiences, providing an amazingly rich and diverse ethnographic account of what may otherwise be seen as a homogenously ‘disabled’ community. Each chapter is carefully considered, following one or two main ‘protagonists,’ or ethnographic informants, whose stories Graif analyses as part of a larger sociopolitical narrative of navigating invisibility and intelligibility within a world dominated by sacred sound.

The opening chapter follows a man pseudonymously called Arjun, who is tragically misunderstood by his family. Able to communicate and read in a number of languages, Arjun is exceptionally intelligent and interacts marvellously with the guests at his family’s guest house – and yet his family always see him as stupid. They simply don’t see him because they have no reference points from which to engage his experience, and, although Graif (and likely the readers) may be perturbed by this, Arjun himself doesn’t seem to mind too much. This theme is picked up throughout the book, with many informants going out of their way to actively educate those around them about just how intelligent they actually are. This comes to a head with a description in the fourth chapter of two deaf activists travelling to the smaller towns outside Kathmandu to teach NSL (Nepali Sign Language). They announce that they will be hosting an event, and the gathering crowd becomes stunned when they begin speaking to each other in sign language. Rina, the focal point of this story, speaks entirely in sign language and uses bold clothing choices and an expressively charismatic personality to draw attention to herself, rather than her interpreter, as a way to be ‘heard’ by the hearing.

Graif’s description of these and many other ethnographic segments in the book are expertly crafted, and he always reminds the reader of the broader contexts in which these interactions are taking place. His analyses are ground-breaking in providing a new way of thinking about sensorial engagement that is both inclusive and empowering to the ‘disabled’ – a term Graif questions – whose voices are not always heard. In *Being and hearing*, Graif reminds us that we

cannot be complicit in our lack of understanding(s) and that ‘intelligibility’ is a worthy goal for all.

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**JENNY MUNRO**, *Dreams made small: the education of Papuan Highlanders in Indonesia*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books 2018, 206 pp. Hardback. ISBN 978-1-78533-684-3.

*Dreams made small* studies how the aspirations of students from the Papuan highlands who migrate for higher education to North Sulawesi are refashioned due to the racialized everyday violence of Indonesian rule over Papuans. Drawing on ethnographic observations among students from 2005, the aim of this book is to show how education is a privileged site where Papuans continue to experience racism and stigma, leaving students vulnerable to exploitation and dropping out. Munro convincingly demonstrates that violent racial, political, gendered and directly emotional dynamics shape the educational, political, social and personal dreams of Dani students from the Papuan highlands. She also succeeds in showing that education is a site of racialization, regulation and resilience that relies on the logic of Indonesian superiority. She demonstrates this by providing rich ethnographic evidence, sharing female and male students’ life-stories and offering insights into the lives of Papuan individuals from different generations, both at university and upon their return to the Papuan highlands.

One way in which Munro sets out to go beyond the existing literature is that – unlike some of her predecessors, who tackle Papuan nationalism by focusing on the government’s policies, historical events or human rights issues – she frames her account by using the daily experiences

and understandings that lead to the Papuan desire for a sovereign Papuan state (10). She also unravels in detail the way Papuans resist racist colonialism by relying on the politicization of 'black' as an identity (79). Thus, she successfully shows how more subtle forms of violence than those mentioned above reshape inner processes (178).

Readers are first briefly familiarized with the ways in which education became an early space of racialization in the context of the Dutch colonization up until Indonesia's rule over Papua today. Munro shows that, under the Dutch colonial administration of West Papua (the western half of the island of New Guinea), racialized inequalities were enabled between Indonesians and Papuans of Malay and Melanesian heritage respectively (12). While she explains that in recent years the definition of 'Indigenous Papuan' has led to affirmative action programmes aimed at empowerment, both Indonesians and Papuans nevertheless describe Papua as Indonesia's most underdeveloped province, with the poorest 'human resources' in the country, an expression recalling the dominant technical interpretations of development (102-3). In the view of Indonesians and Papuans, education is the key improving project that might close this wealth divide and, as some believe, allow Papua children to overcome their presumed ignorance and laziness (4).

Throughout the book, Munro convincingly articulates what she calls 'diminishment' as an analytical frame with which to explain the belittling of Papuans on several levels. The author explains that 'diminishment' describes their loss of power over population and territory, as they are treated with violence to such an extent that many fear they may become extinct (8). Their persona is also diminished through expressions of shyness and feeling inadequate in the company of Indonesians. As a result, educated Dani youth confronted with Indonesians' expectations of submissiveness limit their relationships with Indonesians. 'Stigma' is also explored, as highlanders have been stigmatized as drunken, primitive, violent and promiscuous for decades past (122). For example, students think that the penis gourd (*koteka*) is a strong symbol of alleged primitiveness that is unique to their region, and they express strong feelings of embarrassment concerning it (175). However, a revealing finding of Munro's is that students also see it as a way of making a statement about their cultural identity. Wearing it can demonstrate courage and commitment. The main worry of male students with regard to the *koteka* is how they are seen 'through the gaze of others' (175-6) and become a subject of mockery.

In Chapter 1, entitled ‘Ethno-Racial and Political Dreams of Education in Wamena’, Munro starts off in Wamena (the main city of West Papua from which students originate) to capture the social and political imaginaries that inspire the pursuit of education among parents, schoolchildren and local leaders, as illustrated in three ethnographic vignettes. For older Dani informants, formal education is associated with Dutch colonialism and Christianity, but for younger Dani it is linked to the Indonesian government and thus to Islamic schools. What matters it that education can lead one to do something in the community like build a church, which is aligned with both traditional forms of leadership and the process of ‘becoming modern to challenge Indonesians’ (42).

Chapter 2, entitled “‘Newcomers’ and ‘Masters of the Land’ in North Sulawesi’, and Chapter 3, ‘Stigma, Fear, and Shame: Dani Encounters with Racial and Political Formations in North Sulawesi’, take the reader to the university campus of the National University of Manado (the capital city of North Sulawesi), where the author and the Dani students among whom she lived are considered newcomers in relation to Indonesians. North Sulawesi is the province of eastern Indonesia that attracts the highest number of Papuan highlanders, numbering approximately three thousand. People from Manado are ninety per cent Christian and differentiate themselves from other Indonesians but they reproduce racial stigmas in the dominant language of the nation state. Munro observes the everyday ways in which students sustain themselves: living in dormitories, cooking Dani food in the forest, waiting for money from their relatives and sponsors, and embracing the Christian churches run by Indonesians (65). She concludes that hierarchies are revealed through Dani’s very way of living, that is, through their lived practices of cultural affiliation (65, 77). For example, in order to prepare their traditional pig feasts at the end of the semester, Dani students head off to the jungle carrying a dead pig and celebrate in culturally appropriate ways. However, this gives Indonesians an image of strange people heading off to the dirty jungle and causes them to look down on Papuan living conditions.

Chapter 4, “‘Discipline is Important’: Aspirations and Encounters on Campus’ and Chapter 5, ‘Belonging, Expertise and Conflict in Highlanders’ Social World Abroad’, investigate in more detail the many challenges Dani students face to avoid dropping out or being exploited in North Sulawesi. Their daily encounters with the university administration confirm their different treatment and Indonesians’ inability to recognize them as equal to themselves. According to



Munro, the aspiration for higher education among young Dani is linked to the desire to contribute to transformation back home (103). In the university, rather than gaining tangible skills and experiences, they learn to navigate the bureaucracy and academic authorities, which equips them for particular roles back home (121). Dani leaders and elders tend to expect young people to bridge the gap between the Dani and Indonesians officials and to help return indigenous people to power. What is significant is that this approach to education is shaped by a politics of racialization and differs from the usually declared aims and outcomes of higher education.

Chapter 5 highlights both the supportive environment and the internal divisions and stereotypes that are perpetuated among Dani students. For instance, Valley Dani are perceived as being ‘rough’ and as having issues in relation to alcohol. As a result, other Dani groups tend to exclude them from their activities (135). Munro reasons that these tensions are mainly due to Dani attempts to maintain ‘appropriate behaviour’ to counter Indonesians’ stigmatization of them (13).

While most of the chapters are focused on male students, Chapter 6, entitled “‘Study First’: Sexuality, Pregnancy, and Survival in the ‘City of Free Sex’”, shows that questions of education are deeply gendered. Given the nation-wide call for young people in Indonesia to develop themselves into ‘good quality human resources’ and therefore delay marriage (141), students are instructed to ‘study first’ and postpone family formation until graduation. In the perspective of Indonesians, Papuan’s alleged promiscuity is thus contrasted with the myth of Indonesian sexuality, which is seen as moral (142) and contributes to Papuans’ racialization. Indeed, women are stereotyped as having loose morals and being under the control of ‘shameful’ men (9). Yet Munro shows that many Dani students challenge this stereotype, as it goes against their knowledge that reproductive achievements, just like educational ones, are a political act of resistance against the destructive consequences of Indonesian colonization of Papuans, including genocide (142). In this sense, Munro shows that, even though opportunities for formal employment have increased for women, successful Dani womanhood still means marrying, producing children and being a housewife (164). In this context women’s strategies differ. Betty decides to avoid the shame of being pregnant and unmarried by leaving her studies and returning home. In contrast, Linda decides that the stigmatization of premarital sexuality can be mitigated by other achievements, leading her to give birth while studying and deciding to remain on

campus until she finishes her studies. To other students, her situation is acceptable by virtue of the fact that she has a husband in Wamena who sends her money and has acknowledged the baby.

In the last chapter, entitled 'Doing Good Things in a Dani Modernity', Munro moves on to explain how, in the relative absence of individual opportunities, Dani graduates aspire to acquire knowledge equipping them to contribute to development upon their return to the highlands. For Munro, the Dani gain some status with education, but not to the extent that it fundamentally alters their relations with Indonesians. After graduating, they tend to use their education to counter their diminishment and help others to avoid humiliating experiences (158). Munro thus concludes that Wamena people dream of a modernity that ensures their survival, which is not an effect commonly associated with education, urban mobility or migration. All in all, Dani elders tend to talk of political power in terms of independence or indigenous reclamation, while young Dani focus more on the task of changing everyday inequalities (174).

To summarize, Munro's book's main strength is its dense empirical basis, giving insights into the subtle ways in which racism and stigma are experienced by educated Dani. She convincingly shows how education consolidates Papuans' aspirations while creating new ones in the face of their racialization. Analytical depth is provided by the theorizations of diminishment, racialization, stigma and education (20-28), but one weakness of the book is that its theorization of modernity could have been taken further in order to provide a clearer epistemology of this critical term, which is covered a little too rapidly. At times modernity is understood as contemporariness or progress, as when Munro explains that the Dani view education as a way to 'catch up with cultural, racial and intellectual "moderns"' (4) and demonstrate 'modern commitments' (34), while at other times modernity is presented as a technique of administration or regulation that only exists in contact with Indonesians. For instance, 'Dani modernity', as expressed in the last chapter, is characterized by the Dani's desired levels of control over the conditions of their interaction with Indonesians (158): 'the modernity that Dani graduates express hopes for is one that shelters Wamena people, that ensures their survival and that allows them to determine how, when and for what purposes Dani interact with Indonesians' (174). However, it may have been the author's choice to limit theories in favour of in-depth ethnographic data.

This is nonetheless a minor remark on what overall is a richly detailed and comprehensive portrayal of Dani students. Jenny Munro's monograph is an important book to read for both students of Pacific anthropology and education as well as more generally.

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**AURÉLIE NÉVOT**, 2019. *Masters of psalmody (bimo): scriptural shamanism in southwestern China*. Leiden and Boston: Brill 2019, xxii, 263 pp. ISBN 978-90-04-41484-6 (e-book), 978-90-04-41483-9 (hardback). €143.00, US\$172.00.

Aurélié Névot's *Masters of Psalmody* is a recent entry in Brill's Religion in Chinese Societies Series. It is framed as an exploration of 'the religious, political and theoretical issues' that are integral to the ritual practices of *bimo* shamans among the Yi peoples of Yunnan, Sichuan, Guizhou and Guangxi provinces, though it does not offer an ethnographic account of *bimo* traditions as such (p. ix). Rather, Névot's latest work is largely composed of linguistic and philosophical reflections on the written language of Yi shamans, which are interspersed with ethnographic commentaries. At its high points, the monograph commands considerable disciplinary authority as the summation of nearly two decades of fieldwork in southwestern China and provides a theoretical bookend to the author's more methodologically grounded French-language publications. There are a number of low points as well, foremost among which are, in my mind, the author's overwrought forays into the philosophy of language, which detract significantly from the volume's otherwise expert discussion of textually based forms of shamanism. I will return to this issue below.

The core of *Masters of Psalmody* orbits around the concept of *se*, a graphic sign that, in the language of Yi shamans, means both 'writing' and 'blood'. In large part, Névot adopts two theoretical tentpoles that structure her representation of indigenous perceptions of *se*. The first, which is pronounced in both the author's prose and her textual exegesis, approaches the dual meaning of *se* from the standpoint of Derridean linguistic analysis. As Névot makes clear in the introduction, one of the volume's primary theoretical goals is to extend the Derridean critique of 'phonocentrism' to area studies and regional sub-disciplinary research on scriptural shamanism in southwestern China (14). The second, which is evidenced in the author's extensive discussion of the indigenous metaphysics of language, is Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's *Métaphysiques Cannibales*. Given the prevalence of this theoretical orientation in

Névot's writing, the volume may be considered a contribution to the metaphysical turn in the human sciences, as it represents an effort to integrate both continental textual criticism and postmodern critiques of metaphysics into the analysis of ethnographic data. The author's success in this regard varies considerably from chapter to chapter.

With regard to the volume's structure, *Masters of Psalmody* is organized into seven short chapters, which ostensibly mirror seven different 'reflexive [research] axes' that are promoted by the author (21). The first and second chapters focus on the transcription and performative recitation of Yi writing (彝文), which is used by *bimo* shamans. The third and fourth chapters then move on to assess the physicality of Yi ritual materials, offering a metaphysical commentary on the use of *bimo* manuscripts as 'an interface between the world of humans and the world of spirits' (24). In contrast to the theoretical tone of the first four chapters, Chapter 5 offers a meta-ethnographic critique of 'a series of sacrificial acts common to all... *bimo* cults' (139). The sixth chapter then offers a brief theoretical exegesis of a particular *bimo* manuscript, the performative dimensions of which deviate from the forms of textual recitation outlined in the first five chapters. Finally, Chapter 7, which is arguably the strongest in Névot's monograph, explores the effects of globalization and the Chinese government's efforts to homogenize Yi languages in their oral and written forms.

With a general social-science audience in mind, the fifth and seventh chapters are, without a doubt, the most engaging in *Masters of Psalmody*, as they succeed in integrating qualitative data into the author's theoretical discourses on metaphysics and the philosophy of language. Additionally, aspects of *bimo* shamanistic practice are undergoing a rapid cultural transformation due in part to the proliferation of mobile technologies and the Chinese government's efforts to create a homogenous Yi nationality. This gives the fifth and seventh chapters the quality of a salvage ethnography, the respective value of which, in this case, Névot does very well to articulate and defend against potential criticism. Unfortunately, however, throughout the rest of the volume, there is very little for the reader to contemplate by way of grounded qualitative research or analysis. This constitutes my main criticism of *Masters of Psalmody* and raises questions regarding the volume's intended audience.

Throughout the majority of the publication, the reader sees so little of the actual ethnographic situation of Névot's fieldwork that one would be forgiven for thinking that the work is a contribution to theoretical linguistics rather than the religions of contemporary Chinese societies. In the first four chapters in particular, it is as if *bimo* rituals take place in a culturally sanitized vacuum, shorn of any economic, social, ideological or material context. As a consequence, despite the volume's exhaustive theoretical exploration of the language, writing and utterances of *bimo*, the reader is left with no feeling for the rites themselves, nor the individuals who perform them. Ironically, there is very little of the ethnographic in Névot's ethnography. Although we are compelled to praise the author's general cultural

awareness and her time spent in the field, the absence of both qualitative and quantitative data largely prevents her from communicating her undeniably extensive disciplinary expertise to the reader. In a sense, this makes the work difficult to recommend on its own merits, though considered in relation to Névot's French-language publications, *Masters of Psalmody* takes on a different dimension entirely. Presented as the culmination of two decades of fieldwork in southwestern China and as the summation of the author's two previous French-language monographs on Yi shamanism, *Masters of Psalmody* provides readers versed in Névot's œuvre with a thoughtful, philosophical bookend to a rich body of research.

In conclusion, *Masters of Psalmody* is less a contribution to the anthropology of Chinese religions than an effort to breach the walls of the philosophy of language using Yi shamanism as a cultural backdrop. The closer the author sticks to her ethnographic source material, the stronger the monograph reads. The fifth and seventh chapters are, in particular, excellent in this regard and constitute valuable disciplinary contributions. However, the further the author drifts into philosophical anecdotes and efforts to expand upon Derridean conceptualizations of language, the more it feels as if the book has been cast adrift without an intellectual historical rudder. I would recommend *Masters of Psalmody* to general readers with an interest in the anthropology of language, students of transcultural shamanism and regional specialists well-versed in the cultures of southwestern China. Nevertheless, it is perhaps advisable to engage with the author's French-language works before digging too deeply into Névot's first English-language monograph.

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**LOUISE STEEL** and **LUCI ATTALA** (eds.), *Body matters: exploring the materiality of the human body*, Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2019, 240 pp., ISBN 978-1-78683-415-7.

This edited text feeds into the branch of post-humanist literature that views the ontology of 'being' in the world as one co-constituted by humans and non-humans and their ongoing interactions. The book is innovative in that all the authors view the body itself – with its fleshiness, excretions and even decay – as the site where new discursive productions can take place, dispossessing the construction of 'being' in the world from its stubborn Western humanist and Cartesian foundations. The editors use the term 'New Materialities', which contributes to the field of New Materialism by moving past the latter's third-way feminist commitment to the production of scholarship on embodiment and the politics of gender and draws in material that

has always been considered extra-discursive. This includes residue, dust, decay and all the other ‘things’ that come from delineating boundaries between what is human and non-human. Translating this approach into a variety of different disciplines, the final product is a foundation (and inspiration) for future scholarship to work with and through the human body as a material in a theoretically informed way.

The book starts with an essay by the editors that introduces the scholarship on the ‘New Materialities’ as a tool with which to approach studies of the body. It then moves on to nine chapters that draw in a plurality of disciplines, namely archaeology, medieval history and anthropology. The chapters are in conversation throughout the book, but the reader pulls out certain themes that group specific chapters together.

Thus, Eloise Govier’s and Ros Coard’s chapters engage with the process of transformation from what are deemed insignificant substances to materials that are imbued with social, cultural or economic value. In her work on the residues found in human remains in her archaeological field-site at Çatalhöyük and her reading of a performance artist’s production of artwork by engaging with her own ‘matter’, Govier looks at how elements such as carbon or cinnabar, or human matter such as nails and shed skin, have their own capacities to affect form through their interactions with humans. By doing so, she shows how material is transformed through interaction and interrelation with other agential beings. Similarly, Ros Coard challenges a-theoretical conceptualizations of small, dead matter that does not hold value, showing instead how it becomes the dust that constitutes our environment. Through inhalation and other interactions that come from extended dwelling and growth within a place, dust, in its turn, feeds into our own bodies, which are constantly ‘becoming’. Her strongest point is that this process of becoming does not involve an accumulation of self, but rather the disintegration of the self into one’s environment, thus allowing for a continuous, cyclical way of being in the world.

Another theme is the development of dependent relationships between human bodies and ingestible or applied natural products and, through that, the sedimentation of moral, cultural and medical practices over time. Luci Atalla discusses obtaining corporeal knowledge by ingesting a plant which has hallucinogenic properties and is also used in ayahuasca. To her, food is not an unproductive material only consumed or experienced by the human, as both humans and plants generate a space for new ontologies through eating – and hallucinating. She writes of the plant-person, a combined state of mind and stage of ingestion that allows the user to communicate with

the plant and acquire knowledge of medical cures and practices corporeally. Elizabeth Rahmen's work on the Xie community in north-west Amazonia shows how socially desired values are shaped through water and tobacco's penetration of human flesh, starting in infancy. Her work highlights how the porosity of the human body is accommodating of the formation of the ethical self by allowing materials to cohere gradually through repetitive tasks that revolve around the river, such as bathing, handling and hammocking, among others. Kate Nialla Fayers-Kerr's work on the body painting practices of the Mun in south-western Ethiopia privileges discussion of the interaction between materials such as clay and the body, instead of its aesthetic and symbolic value that 'says something' about the Mun's social structures. Writing against the conceptualization of skin as a finite entity where social values are performed, she renders the processes of handling and experimenting with earthly materials as locations where knowledge of the 'community of substances' is formed.

A third theme is the inquiry into the enactment of the spiritual and religious on the body as material. Looking into funerary practices in the Neolithic and Bronze ages, Louise Steel demonstrates the material formations of ancestry by showing how living humans were instrumental in their creation by handling and transporting bodies at different stages of decay. Challenging the dichotomous separation of the individual from the collective and the evasiveness and non-materiality of ancestors from the living, she shows how, long after death, bodies begin a process of collective personhood by melting into a collective of ancestry. Harriet Webster's work on miracles in medieval Europe also looks at bodies between moments of death and resurrection as sites where the spiritual and immaterial became tangible and visible exceptions. The body becomes the intellectual place where a miracle is measured, enacted and performed in order to validate the separation between the material and immaterial realms. Also working on the medieval period, Janet Burton looks at how holiness is socially constructed using the bodies of saints, which were manipulated and transformed into relics that held enormous spiritual power. This manipulation was instigated by humans, who stole, bit off and dismembered the dead bodies of saints in order to feel closer, more at one with higher beings. She demonstrates how body parts gained symbolic power after death by such interferences, being restituted and preserved as holy materials in the form of relics.

Under the last theme of material tactile 'usage', Carl Walsh looks at the construction of elite culture in Middle Bronze Age Kerma in Egypt through the interaction of humans with ceramic

drinking cups during certain courtly and funerary practices. Walsh's interesting methodology involves handling the cup and measuring its weight and volume as a way of generating corporeal knowledge about a civilization that has no textual or iconographic records. His research questions and methodology both go beyond the study of the material to include its usage and interaction in co-creating elite social norms.

In conclusion, this book is an eclectic collection of work which generates several conceptual openings to understanding the body as matter in the post-humanist turn in the social sciences. In doing so, it succeeds in putting forward a new ontological approach which is worth engaging in a variety of disciplines. On the other hand, for non-specialists the text lacks a thematic flow, making it difficult to overcome disciplinary idiosyncrasies, especially given its variety of ethnographic, historical and archaeological research methods. However, overall the text provides a good foundation for scholarship wanting to engage with human body 'parts' in any academic conversation.

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