

Magic Hat Economics

Counter-cultural ideals and practices of the Nordic Ting Community

Introduction

The basis of today's spirituality is often seen as being individualistic in its eclecticism. However, this claim seems to originate in regarding religion mostly as a belief-oriented system. This is the way in which religion is still usually represented in cognitive religious studies and anthropology.¹ Understanding religion in this way leads to the following line of thought: the collapse of the great narratives means an individualization of religion and spirituality. In materialistic anthropology, however, Webb Keane (2008) and many others have criticized the belief-oriented theory of religion and instead focussed more on ritual, meaning-production and gathering around material objects in their definition of religion.² Others have seen strong collectivistic tendencies in postmodernity, particularly in connection to the so-called neo-tribes. I propose that looking at other aspects of religion than belief can provide us with a better picture of the role of individualization in today's religious life.

My anthropological study concerns one of today's communities with no shared belief system, but with a clear spiritualist orientation. This Nordic Ting Community does not have any defined or committing roles, specialized distribution of tasks, entrance fee to their two annual gatherings, membership or any formal hierarchy. This exiguity of structural differentiation could well be understood to represent 'subjective spirituality' if we consider the thesis of the subjective turn of spirituality (Heelas & Woodhead 2005). This thesis refers

1 For example Pascal Boyer (2001) still defines religion as a belief in the supernatural, although his definition is not explicit.

2 Another example is Talal Asad (1983) who has criticized ideational definitions of religion. Similar thoughts about the significance of rituals can be found also in symbolic anthropology (Douglas 1966).

to the decline of institutional forms of religion with, instead, an increase in subjective experience in spirituality.

But Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) mention that the subject of the subjectivization is rather 'a subject-in-relation' than a differentiated individual. In this way they put more stress on the subjective and also intersubjective aspects of spirituality, than on the mere individualization of it. This is also my understanding, as the claimed increase of individualism would actually necessitate an increase of social structures, at least if we follow the line of thought where individualization is seen to derive from an intensified distribution of work. This might hold true for today's labour market but when it comes to spirituality, social position is not of much significance. If we take the Ting Community as an example, we find that the significance of a person's social position in society at large holds hardly any importance within the community.

It is not, however, in my interest to contribute to the discussion on the increase of spirituality versus institutional forms of religion, since I believe that more or less socially structured forms of religion are represented in various cultural contexts and in various epochs. The problem of individualization leads us to the problem of social structure. I believe that those two concepts are best understood when studied together.

It may be relevant to briefly specify what is here meant by social structure. Quite simply, it is the system of the relations between differentiated roles, statuses and groups. This includes duties, obligations and customs connected to the system. Social structure has been understood to maintain all or at least nearly everything social. I believe, however, that social structure understood in this way is not the only way for communities to organize themselves. We will come back to this suggestion later.³

My aim in this presentation is to show that at least in my field of study, there hardly exists any increase in emphasis on individualism in spirituality. Instead my material indicates a relatively long continuum of a self-organized type of communality which could be understood as neither individualistic nor collectivistic. We will later see that the type of agency which can be observed in the social action of this studied network-like field could actually

3 With structure I do not refer to the concept of 'mental structure' advanced by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963: 277-323) and others. Quite interestingly, Victor Turner (1974: 236) finds that 'structure' in the Lévi-Straussian sense is often maximized in the ritual contexts he himself calls liminal and describes them to lack social structure (i.e. anti structure).

often be described as being intersubjective, rather than subjective, since the participants are acting in formalized but still flexible contexts. It seems clear that this kind of social structurelessness⁴, which is both extremely communal and avoids most constraining social structures, is not easy for us to notice, especially when it is practiced in a 'western context'.

I have studied the counter-cultural Nordic Ting Community since 2003 using participant observation, where I have implemented several methods, such as keeping a fieldwork journal, discussions, interviews, and interpretive reading of the texts produced by the field. My goal has been to study how the ideals of the Ting Community are connected to the experiences of the participants. In my master's thesis I came to the conclusion that the Ting Community talks about their ideals and experiences without usually making a distinction between these philosophically separated worlds (Rantala 2007). The phenomena I observed there are also known from other cases and have been theorized most clearly by Clifford Geertz (1973) through his theory of holy symbols mediating the world of ideals (ethos) and world of the believed, and thus experienced, reality (worldview). In the Ting Community, however, ideals and experiences are understood as being identical in the context of the community's ethos of listening. This is often expressed, for example, with words such as 'community', 'unity', 'connection', 'closeness', 'feeling' or 'love'. The same terms are also used for describing experiences especially when the participants feel satisfied with the collective action. The ideals of listening are manifested particularly in the ritual talking circle of the community, where there is no custom of discussion but instead of listening while only one person at a time is speaking.

The other central conclusion of my study was that the special social world, created in the gatherings, is experienced as being strongly separated from society at large. This experience of course reflects the actual social relations in the studied field. I have used the concepts of liminality and *communitas* for describing this counter-cultural essence of the Ting Community (Turner 1969 and 1974: 47). Although I mostly find the theory of liminality and *communitas* useful for describing the social essence of the Ting gatherings, I will later add some critical remarks to the earlier understanding of liminality, and especially on the concept's relation to agency.

Later I have ended up with the hypothesis that the ritual circle of the Ting Community with its ideals and experiences, which become apparent in it,

4 Or 'anti structure' if we would refer to Victor Turner's (1969, 1974) concept.

does not mirror or underpin the social structure of the community, but actually maintains this type of communality, which is mainly constituted anti-structurally. This may, of course, sound paradoxical, because we are taught to think that it is social structure that maintains social forms. My suggestion, as I mentioned above, is, however, that social forms can also be maintained differently. A talking stick and a magic hat are the central material objects used in the structureless practice of the Ting Community. In this article I will focus on the use of the magic hat and the combination of ideals and practices, which I here call the magic hat economics. I believe that by looking at these kinds of intermediating objects, we will see the problem of individualization much more clearly.

Contexting the field

I will now briefly describe the Ting Community at a general level and locate it in its wider social network and historical context. The network of people which is constituted around the Ting gatherings (*Tingmöte*) held twice a year, is here named the Ting Community. The gatherings do not have one shared exterior aim but we may well regard the gatherings as being their own (shared) aim. The gatherings usually last for two weeks and attract 200 participants on an average from all around the world; about 80 per cent of the participants come from northern Europe. Since 1979, when the Ting was first held, there have been more than 3,000 different participants. For many, these regular, and some occasional smaller, gatherings of the community are very important parts of their lives to which they regularly return.

The name Ting (Swedish, Norwegian, Danish) itself is taken from the name of the ancient North European assembly institution *þing* (transliterated also as *thing*) described for example in some Icelandic medieval sagas. Choosing this name in 1979 reveals some form of a revitalization of Nordic interests which has continued throughout the years. Amongst the Ting Community *þing* is understood as an early form of democracy where all free people were able to participate in decision-making. A well-known story amongst the Ting Community describes the Icelandic Free State between the years 930 and 1276. In this period, there was no king in Iceland. Instead there was a people's rule organized in regular assemblies in *Þingvellir*. Some members of the community have of course 'pilgrimized' this historical site. I now refer to the text by a Danish female informant (approximately 40 years old) addressed to the

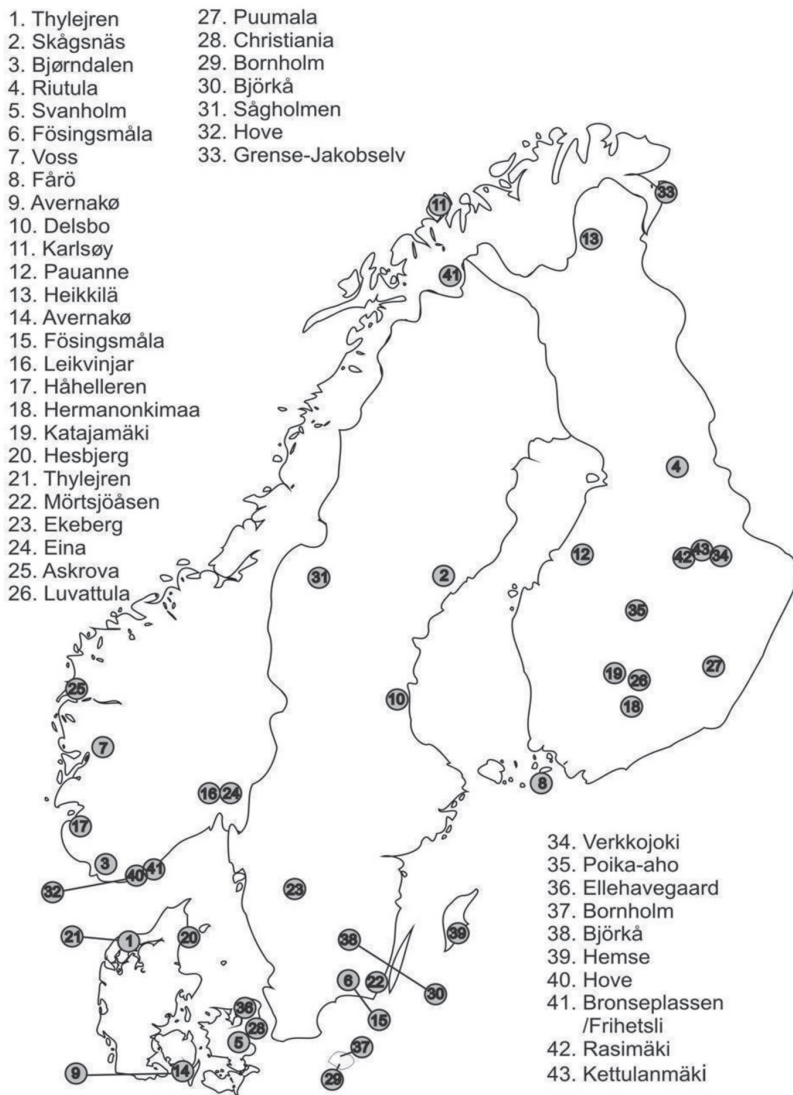


Figure 1. The map of Ting gatherings 1979–2006.

Icelandic environmental activists (e-mail received in June 2008) with the purpose of inviting them to the first Ting gathering organized in Iceland:

It is always hard to explain what Ting is like, because defining it means leaving something out. We have taken this name Ting in respect of our ancestors' democratic traditions, which ruled long before kings. It has special meaning for us to travel to Iceland where this tradition was kept longest.

For situating the field, it may also be interesting to know that the participants themselves sometimes compare Ting to a much larger counter-cultural phenomenon: the Rainbow gathering (www.welcomehome.org); but there is also a strong parallel tendency to emphasize their distinction from it and instead stress the importance of the Nordic locality. According to my material it would be too simplistic to regard Ting as the Nordic version of Rainbow, since the two phenomena have partially different histories.

Who founded Ting and why?

By looking at Ting from the viewpoint of the history of social movements we find another way to contextualize Ting. The Ting Community has had annual summer gatherings since 1979 and winter gatherings since the late 1980s. Originally these gatherings were held as the forum for Nordic environmental and alternative groups such as urban free zones and countryside neo-communities. The host organization of these early years was called Nordisk Samaktion. It was a loose informal network of the mainly Danish and Swedish environmental activists of the time. Another way to locate the founders of the first Ting gatherings in their wider social networks is to mention that they became acquainted in places like the young free-town Christiania founded in 1972, in countryside neo-communities and in Alta in northern Norway, where huge environmental and indigenous rights protests were taking place at the time. A public meeting for organizing the first Ting gathering was held in Christiania and it was announced in spring 1979 in the weekly fanzine of the free-town *Christiania Info Bulletin*. Some of the Ting veterans who participated in the first gathering are over 50 years old today and are still active in the community, while some others appear occasionally at the gatherings. Some of them I know from my fieldwork.

The intended purpose of the first Ting was to organize a wide reaching co-operative effort to campaign for, and to present alternative forms of com-

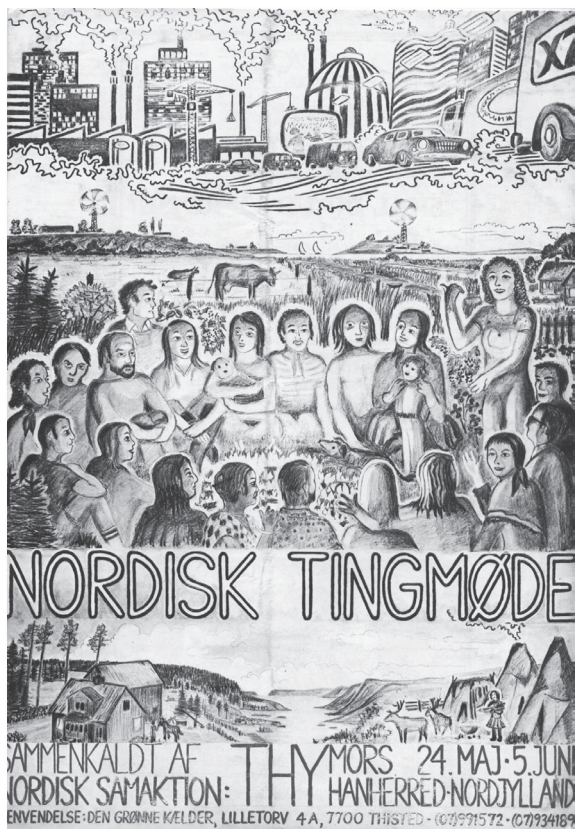


Figure 2. The very first Ting gathering invitation. *Nordsamlaren* no. 3, spring 1979.

munity. The invitation, or advertisement (Figure 2), was published in many Nordic environmental magazines, for example in the Finnish *Komposti* and in the members' magazine of *Pehmeän teknologian seura* (Soft Technology Association). Some of my Finnish informants got the information about the gathering from these two sources. Spiritual, anarchistic and 'green' themes were present in the poster: aware looking citizens are talking in a circle in an idyllic countryside landscape with wind energy production plants and happy looking animals, while the background of the busy city with lots of cars, factories and noise is shadowing their seemingly harmonious existence. The actual spirit is perfectly expressed in the spiritual and political manifesto published in various alternative media after this first gathering: 'The north for us is an organic system. The earth itself, Earth Mother, is self-organized.'⁵

5 Regnbuemanifest translated from Danish by the author (*Nordsamlaren* 1979, June).

Nowadays the gatherings are not directly political, but the strong combination of self-organization and spirituality has been kept. But what does this mean in the practice of camp life? There is no use of electricity or alcohol. The participants take part in discussions, walk in nature and organize their activities themselves in smaller circles and workshops. The most central self-organizing and self-organized activity is the Ting talking circle. The circle is strongly and explicitly a ritual event, but it also has its spontaneous performative sides.

The hat: practice and ideals

I refer again to the same e-mail by the Danish woman, which was referred to above. As I mentioned, she wrote the text for the Icelandic environmental activists with the purpose of inviting them to 'the family'. I think this piece illuminates the Ting brilliantly from an insider's point of view:

So who are we? We could use the term hippie, but that is just a cliché. We are spiritual anarchists and also practical survivors in nature, whom we honor as our mother. We believe in community as a consciousness-expanding recipe. We find each other to be a soul-family. I could say we form a temporary Pippi Långstrump like community. We are all ages and with many beliefs (and disbeliefs), most participants are young. There are also a few who come from non-Nordic countries.—Our main form is the circle, where we meet and share our hearts. We have no leaders, but some people take more responsibility for organizing. We have workshops and circles in almost any thinkable subject. It is up to the participants to initiate what they want. We help each other with practical tasks. We don't sell and buy, we share. We finance by putting donations in the magic hat.

But what is this 'financing by putting donations in the magic hat' in practice? A hat-round is usually made in the context of a formal talking circle, which is held twice a day during the gathering. The round takes place between the shared meal and a very central phase of the circle, the talking circle.⁶ The magic hat itself, as a material object, is a concrete and usually very colourful

6 At the talking circle each participant has the possibility to speak or express herself while holding the talking stick and while the others listen. Usually there is no discussion; instead people take turns speaking one at a time.



Figure 3. The posters in the summer issue show the context of environmental action at the time. Nordsamlaren was founded in 1979 by the Nordisk Samaktion network.

item. But also the entire economics of the community, and of the gatherings, along with the ideals of sharing is called magic hat. These two aspects cannot be separated.

Although I focus much on the ideals of the community I look at them through the use of concrete items. Objects like the magic hat and the talking stick have been called *fetishes* in earlier studies with the purpose of illuminating (superstitious) beliefs of the studied communities. The members of the Ting Community, however, mostly do not believe that the items themselves have special powers. Let me give you an example of the talking circle in December 2007: People reacted with surprise when I asked for permission to take the cone of a Norway spruce (*Picea Abies*) with me for the purpose of academic elucidation. The cone was being used as a talking stick at the ongoing Winter Ting in Sweden. In the following round most people accepted my request but some of them added that in their opinion there does not exist any special power associated to the particular object. Somebody even suggested: ‘You can of course take this and bring another cone to the circle.’ The speakers mostly shared my preliminary interpretation that the power of these objects was believed to reside in the socially shared ideals and meanings associated with the

objects and not in the objects themselves. Thus these objects can very well be understood as mental tools for social interaction rather than as fetishes.

Technically speaking the circulation of the magic hat can be compared to the collecting of money in a church. Also at the Ting gathering no specific amount of money is demanded. Nobody controls how much somebody contributes or whether she or he contributes at all. The money is usually put into the hat discreetly. The custom reveals the community's ideals of voluntariness and equality since no entrance fee is required. In this way all get an equal opportunity to participate. Social class or differences of income are avowed not to matter, since everybody shares the same meal and contributes to the magic hat equally and voluntarily. In the circles and other communicative situations structural roles such as profession, education, economic position and status in the wider society are rarely mentioned. Spatially this social liminality becomes apparent in the entrance to the space of the Ting gathering where there is usually a 'Welcome Home' sign (written in two or three languages) inviting all human beings to enter.

Magic hat economics is—and this cannot be exaggerated—extremely informal economics. State support and entrance fees for the gatherings are widely refused. The magic hat contains the whole budget for a gathering and for organizing it. But for what purpose is money collected? It is needed mainly for the rent of the place, and for the groceries. Sometimes foodstuffs are also donated to the gathering and some participants may, for example, reciprocally volunteer at an organic farm. Root vegetables, herbs, fruits, hunted rabbits, woollen blankets, fish, jams and other groceries, handicrafts like handmade soap, beautiful natural objects such as stones, artistic or practical works or even ideas, tea and coffee—and not the least musical and other kind of artistic performance are also contributed to the 'hat'. In these cases, however, the contributions are of course not necessarily put concretely into the hat. According to most participants one of the most valuable types of contribution are self and organically grown groceries.

Even though the magic hat economics principally do not require money or any particular object of value, there is actually a tension between the dependence of the market economics in reality and the quite hegemonic ideal of self sufficiency and living in harmony with nature. During the early years a significant amount of participants were from countryside neo-communities and there was some effort at community living.⁷ Regular liminal ways of life—

7 In Nordsamlaren in June 1979 the percentage is 70 but I have not been able to check the validity of this claim. Personally I feel a bit sceptical that such a large percentage

for example as a wandering street performer ‘outside society’ is another ideal.⁸ However, looking at collective address books collected at the gatherings it seems that nowadays the large majority of the Ting people are from relatively urban environments⁹ where they live a regular life with paid work, studies or social benefits.

I now refer to one speech in a small 7-hour circle, which I recorded in January 2004 with the permission of its 13 participants. The upset reaction of a Danish middle-aged male on seeing people cooking for themselves in the common kitchen, is an example of how the communal ideals are expressed in Ting:

To come back to Rainbow and Ting. All those beautiful people come together and they can listen to each other. If this was something we had to pay for, we would need security companies and fences. It's easier to simply come together as we do here. I really believe in the circles. But sometimes I become frustrated and hate everyone. Normally I just walk away, if I see bad things. If I go to the kitchen and I want to cook popcorn for everyone I see people cooking their own private foods. It is a rule—there are no rules—but this is my rule: if you cook, cook more than you need and share it with someone you don't know.

The man's comment makes it explicit that the work done in and for the gatherings, together with some principles of sharing is actually at least as important in the magic hat economics as the monetary contributions. Ting does not have a defined organization. An example of this would be that after the Summer Ting 2008 the Swedish Ting-family was most probably going to give the funds or also ‘the magic hat’ to the ‘Norwegian family’ for organizing the next two Ting gatherings. The next host could thus have a nest egg if there was money left in the ‘hat’. Sometimes, however, it is supposed that the next host

of the referred 250 participants (Nordsamlaren 1979) would be from countryside neo-communities.

- 8 Victor Turner (1974) and Ulf Hannerz (1992) would use the concept of liminoid when referring to the case in industrialized society. I prefer the concept of liminal because I do not think there is such an essential difference between ‘tribal’ and ‘modern’ societies, which Turner has been criticized for believing to exist (e.g. Drewal 1991).
- 9 That means towns and cities mostly on a Nordic scale which hardly include any metropolis scale urban environments (address books at Nordsamlaren 1979–2006).

Magic hat materializes the ideals of equality and voluntariness in the Ting Community. There is no entrance fees for their gatherings, they are funded only by the magic hat offerings which include money and other kinds of contributions. This hat was used at the Norwegian winter Ting in 2008–9. Photograph by Merete Kilerich.



will organize the whole thing from scratch. There are, however, some items of kitchen equipment (like big pots and tents) and dry groceries (like spices and beans), which have been left from earlier gatherings owned by the Ting Community.

The system of rotating the responsibility for hosting gatherings between the ‘families’ of the four Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland) has been practiced since the beginning in 1979. This also makes it easier to avoid defined roles and social positions in organizing. A certain nationality is not required: basically anyone can be involved in the families organizing the gathering and nobody is personally obliged to participate. There is no official form of economics in Ting and it is not organized for example as a formal association with formal positions and memberships. Some bank accounts have been opened in the four countries but the participants have not been willing to donate to these accounts nearly as much as to the hat.

For most members of the Ting Community money itself is not understood to be bad. But at the gatherings, and occasionally outside of them, the partici-

pants do not use money in their reciprocal transactions. One example of this was a situation when one informant offered to contribute to the cafeteria bill and the answer of the other one was: 'Please, put it to the magic hat.' In this case money has first to be sacralized through the magic hat. Sacralization happens by cutting the connection between money and its original owner. This practice is a bit paradoxical as it also produces boundaries in this principally very universally welcoming community, between the insiders and the people in the rest of society with whom exchanges are acceptable.

Some non-monetary contributions are also called magic hat offerings as has already been referred to above. These are cooking, heating water, cleaning, organizing, chopping wood, digging 'shit pits', making signs and decorations, composting, constructing shelters and building up tepees and saunas, buying and delivering groceries and other goods needed at the gathering. There are numerous other tasks, which are needed for a healthy and wealthy life in the camp. Of course, families with children and the single people, the cleanly and the bohemian, people who eat much and people who fast have different needs. Some are more work-shy than others and some are more used to camp-life than others. Some people naturally take more responsibility in some areas than others. The distribution of tasks is also voluntarily based and this fact sometimes causes frustration and arguments.

There are also arguments about the type of groceries used in the kitchen. Game or fish given to the camp as a gift can cause a long debate between participants who do not want the animal products cooked in the communal kitchen and participants who want to receive the gift and cook it. This kind of debate was held at the Summer Ting 2008 on the island of Samsø in Denmark as some hunted rabbits had been given to the camp by local people visiting it.

Charles Macdonald (2008) suggests, following Thomas Gibson (1985, 1986: 44–8), that there is a huge contradiction between the more theoretized reciprocal distribution practices like the rabbit case described above and the economy based on sharing. He describes sharing like this:

There is no exchange of any sort at least between humans: what is *shared* is not *given*. If there is a gift, it is one bestowed by nature, by unseen forces of the universe. Inuit say the seal has given himself to man. The only giver is the seal or the spirit of the seals. The Palawan say the Master of the pigs has given them one of his children. (Macdonald 2008: 13.)

The idea of economics totally distinct from reciprocal transactions is interesting although we cannot go deeper into this question here. However, it seems

as if the magic hat economics is more about sharing than exchange, as described earlier (the rabbit case). The meal in the circle is shared and not given. However, sometimes somebody announces to the circle what she or he has given 'to the hat' when she or he has just arrived. That clearly is gift giving and even in its most ceremonial form. But nobody talks about giving with reference to the monetary contributions to the hat. Magic hat money is anonymous and understood to be owned together, if owned at all.

Similarly, work done for and in the gatherings can be interpreted as an exchange as well as a sharing by the actor himself or the observer. Small details affect the interpretation. For example, it is easier to see the server of the meal as a giver when she or he has participated in cooking. In that sense 'sharing' and 'giving' are not objective categories but depend on the interpretation of the actors connected to their way of thinking, ideals and background information. Among the Ting Community there are no clearly defined rules for sharing but there are certainly many widely shared ideals concerning sharing, both expressed verbally and easily observed in action.

Macdonald (2008) essentially separates sharing from giving. I here agree with Kenneth Sillander's (2008) comment where he suggests that maybe there is yet a continuum between two different forms of sharing, the first allowing preliminary ownership, the second forbidding it. Looking at the Ting Community studied, the members of which know both economical principles, it is difficult to draw a strict line between the two distributive forms, that is, sharing and exchanging, which Macdonald supposes always exists. Neither is it easy to find any strict principles concerning ownership in sharing. It would be interesting to go deeper into these questions that are so closely connected also to the problem of social structure, where reciprocity clearly constitutes the structure, while sharing does not necessarily do so. While looking at the question of individualism I see strong collectivist ideals in the practice of the Ting Community and in how the association between actor (or preliminary owner) on the one hand and the contribution on the other hand is tried to be kept separate.

As with many counter-cultural ideas the magic hat economics also has models from past times.¹⁰ With its idealization of the indigenous people the Ting Community is purporting to have some sort of 'stone age economics' with eternal affluence. This game of let's pretend occasionally reflects the reality of the participants. Despite evident differences between the situations and

10 This phenomenon is studied a lot. See for example Yinger 1982.

the members' attitudes, planning and timetables are seldom seen as important. The ideal is, instead, to have a natural free flow which supports the individualistic principle of freedom of choice. On the other hand, this is achieved in the shared context of common meals and collectivistic economics, which is an experimental alternative to today's capitalist world, also proposed to represent individualist economics by its ideologists.

The members of the Ting Community are of course conscious of the fact that the economic flow which goes through the magic hat primarily comes from the monetary system in which most participants get their salaries, business profits, social benefits and other kinds of monetary transaction. This fact ties the greatly anti-structural magic hat economics to its large-scale context in the economic macro structure.

Most members are of course very critical of the growth-based economics of our societies. This attitude can be seen in the practices where efforts to expand do not exist, either in terms of quantity of participants or in terms of quantity of magic hat monetary contributions. A few participants of course would like to stress the universally welcoming aspects of Ting, but this thought has not led to any regular increase of participants. The amount of participants has remained quite stable during the last few years.¹¹

The spontaneous nature of the economics means that on some days a meal can be made of poor ingredients because of too meagre offerings to the magic hat. Another day dinner is served too late, because of lack of volunteers. On the other hand, after good offerings and excellent cooking the meal can be very abundant. The coincidental nature of the magic hat economics represents the counter-cultural principle of aimlessness, while the equal nature of the economics represents a ritual *communitas* type of liminality. Even though the use of the magic hat with all its details certainly is very unique, there is no reason to believe that it is extraordinary. These kinds of egalitarian practice can, no doubt, be found also elsewhere in the context of the today's social and spiritual movements.

11 The exception during the last years was the Winter Ting 2003/4 on Björkå in Sweden to where more than 300 different participants arrived. Actually the amount has been quite stable since 1979. The average amount has been around 200 participants with periodical peaks and falls. After occasional peaks in the amount of the participants some practical means have been used for the purpose of restraining the growth. One is an occasional avoidance to publish invitations on the internet.

To conclude

In a western commonsense way of thinking it is widely believed that the significance of the individual is growing. Also the ideologists of the capitalist economy believe in developing individual efforts at producing an ever increasing amount of wealth. As a whole the individualization thesis is very much of a piece with common sense. Also in the counter-cultural Ting Community many people think that their gatherings are vehicles for this kind of individualization process. On the surface it really looks like individuality is a very central ideal in Ting although communitarian aspects are explicitly observable, too. Maybe the individualization thesis is attractive also because of its coherence with the western commonsense thinking shared both by ideologists of official economics and among idealists in counter-culture. It is evident, however, that individualization does not take place in the Ting Community. I presume that the situation inside the Ting Community indicates much wider themes in today's spirituality and that, at a general level individualization does not take place instead of communalization. There are several reasons for my position and I hope I can make some of them clear in the following.

I have followed Keane's (2003, 2008) method of studying 'ideational objects' such as ideals and meanings through material objects and bodily experiences. As is shown, in the Ting Community the material objects, such as the magic hat and the talking stick, are important mediators between the participants. People associate their ideals about sharing and listening to those objects. In mediating ideals and meanings between the participants they certainly are not items for individualistic spiritual action, but for a collective one. A focus on materiality has helped to study also abstract and sometimes idealized concepts like 'ideal' or 'experience', since they are revealed through the signified items, bodily reflections and spatial formations. Beliefs, too, could be equally observed through the concrete material forms and objects.

The beliefs of the participants expressed in the circles and elsewhere at the Ting gatherings are so wide in their diversity that they can be seen as individualistic. I hope, however, that it has become evident here that beliefs in the Ting Community do not have much relevance at the communal level. The meditative listening in the circle is the main spiritual practice of the gatherings regardless of the different beliefs expressed there. Spirituality is very much a shared thing in the Ting Community. Experience is widely shared in the countless circles and workshops, as is awareness. Beliefs are also shared but not in the sense that all have identical beliefs, but in the sense that the participants become conscious of the beliefs of others. Thus my material does

not support the argument that today's spirituality has become increasingly individualistic. The ritual of the gathering itself along with the particular form of its economic base is rather collective.

Self-seeking is usually associated with New Age spirituality (see Heelas 1996). It is certainly one obvious aspect of the spirituality in Ting, but not the only one and definitely not the most important one. A more important aim is to connect to each other and engage in discussion away from every day life. This can best be seen in the circles. The meeting in the Ting circle is about harmony, sharing, communality and oneness. The personal opinions are not seen as very important in themselves, but as a part of a common process. In the talking circles, which often last for several hours, it is commonly experienced that 'the circle talks—not the speakers.' Even though people also express themselves to a great extent, I do not see any sign in this of an emphasis on individualism.

These kinds of ritually formal aspects of today's spirituality can well be compared to the so-called traditional spirituality, because of the world-wide common importance of gatherings with and around material objects in religious practices. Examples of the latter in the Ting context are the magic hat and the talking stick, which have been discussed in this presentation. Other material objects to gather around are the central fire (in summer) and 'the altar' or also 'the centre' (in winter). These items are important means for Ting magic which functions highly socially and inter-subjectively. There might not be anything new or exceptional in this: people meet each other and mirror themselves, and they look for themselves in order to better connect to others. And for all this, people often use material items.

Despite the strong harmony orientation of the community it may be important to add that listeners are not the same as hearers. Listening, although it is a silent action, is not passive, but actually contains very strong moments of agency: focussed listening takes the words from the speaker's body through the listener's body. This process of course necessitates, on the part of the listeners, their own experience and reflection. On the other hand, it is sometimes strongly experienced that the focussed eye-contact of the listeners produces feelings of collective consciousness and mild but effective feedback to the speaker. This meditative listening is often expressed as a heavy bodily and spiritual practice. On the other hand, while experiencing strong groundedness, the participant's bodily being can be experienced as very easy-going and light. As the participant feels grounded in the circle she or he may not want anything else but to stay and to be there. The participants are tied to each other through that practice, certainly neither through the beliefs nor through the social structure.

Despite some ascetic interest in the community we cannot exaggerate how much the talking stick owes to the magic hat. While people sit and listen their bodily needs for food, protection and heat arise, and these are satisfied by the vital force of the magic hat regardless of the participants' own economical position or contribution. This helps the participants feel accepted and equal. Without the hat, listening would not be the same.

I see the ritual circle as a major vehicle for the community to transform the gatherings into a liminal stage where the participants' individual roles and statuses are temporarily suspended. In contrast with classic interpretations of liminality, agency is not at all limited, even though it is highly gravitated by the ritual forms. In the circle the strict form is also experienced to strengthen agency. People participate, because they feel free there and they find the circle safe and emancipating. Although the attraction to the circle is often strong, participants are free to leave at any moment. Even though I call this action ritual and liminal I would emphasize the activity and strong agency, instead of a passive following of tradition that is often associated with these terms. In this I agree with the remarks of Margaret Thompson Drewal (1991), Catherine Bell (1992, 1997) and others concerning ritual and performance.

Political pragmatists from left to right declare that we have to choose a point on the line between individualism and collectivism, while utopian models combine strong communality with an emphasis on freedom of choice. Maybe we should listen to those utopians while measuring their communities' level of collectivism and individualism. In the Ting Community, too, people stress a harmonious mutual existence where the person and the community are meant to strengthen each other. Similar utopian harmony-orientation can be found also elsewhere in the context of social and spiritual movements. The key word is neither collectivism nor individualism, but relatedness beyond social structure.

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