SUOMEN ANTROPOLOGI: JOURNAL OF THE FINNISH ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Volume 48, Issue 3, 2024

EDITORIAL NOTE

It gives me great pleasure to present a new issue of *Suomen antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society*. This issue contains four peer-reviewed articles, an essay, and four research reports.

The first peer-reviewed article in this issue is written by Darmanto Darmanto and Koen Meyers: 'Producing Human Life or Protecting Wildlife? People, Park, and Space on Siberut Island, Indonesia'. In their article, Darmanto and Meyers consider the dialectical processes of the production of space through the establishment of the Siberut National Park on Siberut Island, Indonesia. Using deeply researched ethnographic material, the authors illustrate how diverse and prosaic forms of Indigenous politics play out in a protected wildlife area, a negotiated space in its own right.

Dayabati Roy's article, 'Promises of Development, Land Acquisition, and Dispossession: A Car Factory Project and Peasants in West Bengal, India', continues this production of space theme by focusing on a car factory project launched in 2006 by the government of the West Bengal Indian state. Roy's ethnography takes us to Singur, a village in West Bengal, outlining the intense struggles marginalised and low-caste local inhabitants faced in response to intense land acquisition projects and India's project forms, which are laden with spatiotemporal inequalities. These inequalities, as Roy's article outlines, reveal the disjunctions and disorderliness of planned project actions.

Juhanna Sankelo and Paulino Jijiyo's cowritten article, 'Rural Murle Age-Set Men Tackling Elites in South Sudan', considers the role age-sets play amongst the Murle ethnic group in South Sudan. In a war-torn region faced with continuous violent conflicts, marginalisation, and displacement, the traditional pathways of young Murle men from boyhood to adulthood through to warriorhood are continuously transformed. Yet, as Sankelo and Jijiyo show, age-set networks amongst Murle men continue to play a fundamental role amongst the youth who join armed groups affiliated with South Sudan's political opposition. Age-sets, as portrayed here, help local young men navigate conflicts and ethical codes.

The final peer-reviewed article in this issue, written by Edwin Jiang, is 'Justifying Meritocracy: Criteria of Fairness in China's National College Entrance Examinations (*gaokao*)'. Jiang offers a compelling and novel approach to make sense of people's conflicting claims about the reality of meritocracy in urban China today. Drawing on ethnographic material conducted in a Chinese high school, Jiang disentangles the demanding high stakes of the country's national university entrance exam, the *gaokao*. Weaving together rich ethnography with the theory on ethics reveals how

people's beliefs in structural systems like meritocracy can be understood and made sense of in cognitive attempts people put forth as they strive to live an ethical life.

In the previous issue of *Suomen antropologi* released in the spring of this year, I introduced a new essay series, 'The Anthropologist's Toolkit: Reflections on Ethnographic Methodology'. With a deep sense of pride, we now publish the second essay in this series. In Laur Kiik's short, but thought-provoking essay, 'Encounter: A Basic Concept of Anthropology', Kiik contemplates the meaning of 'encounter', a widely used term by anthropologists that is not always defined or given the theoretical attention it deserves. Kiik considers the open-endedness of 'encounter' as a concept that can help us expand our attention and care in our fieldwork and our analyses.

Alongside the four peer-reviewed articles and methodological essay, this issue also contains four research reports in the form of written *lectio præcursoria*. For readers unfamiliar with public doctoral defences in Finnish academia, *lectio præcursoria* are short 20-minute lectures intended for the general public given by doctoral candidates at the beginning of their defence. *Suomen antropologi* publishes these public lectures from the fields of anthropology and related disciplines to celebrate the work of doctoral researchers who have recently successfully defended their dissertations.

The first two *lectio præcursoria* feature anthropologist graduates from the University of Helsinki's Faculty of Social Sciences. The first *lectio* is by Samuli Lähteenaho, who defended his PhD dissertation, 'A Beach Multiple: An Ethnography of Environmentalism on the Lebanese Coastline', in May 2024. In reading his *lectio præcursoria*, we learn about the sociopolitical processes involved in Beirut's public beach, Ramlet al-Bayda, and how these processes reflect struggles over the significance, value, and use of the Lebanese coastline since the late 2010s.

Following Lähteenaho's piece, we move on to Sanna Vellava's *lectio præcursoria*. Vellava defended her anthropology PhD dissertation, 'On the Trail with a Disease Detection Dog: Collaborations at the Edges of Medical Research', in February 2024. In her *lectio*, Vellava summarises her project, which explores the emerging medical research field of disease detection dogs, considering how dogs are made into medical devices and what kinds of knowledge production processes and practices are assembled around, through, and with dogs.

The third *lectio præcursoria*, by Kristina Leppälä, summarises a thesis from the University of Eastern Finland in the Faculty of Social Science and Business, defended in June 2022. Leppälä's thesis, 'Practices in Medical

Device Innovation: Navigation and Enactment as Social Practice Trades', focuses on the practices of highly educated, cross-functional, innovation workers in a medical device company as they mediate and interact in the office setting.

The final *lectio* in this issue is by Ioana Ţîştea, who defended her thesis, 'Creolising Nordic Migration Research: Entangled Knowledges, Migratisations, and Reflexivities', in April 2024 at Tampere University's Faculty of Education and Culture. In this *lectio*, Ţîştea summarises her research on the new ways in which minor-to-minor knowledges from BIPOC, Romani, and EE perspectives in a Nordic context inter-relate, whilst simultaneously addressing the tensions, social inequalities, and colonial legacies shaping such dialogues.

Once again, I want to thank all of the remarkable individuals who have made this issue possible: the writers, the reviewers, and the editorial team. This journal is a produced by the investment of time and generosity of an amazing collective of people: many thanks to each of you!

Before closing this note, I want to also mention a few changes to our editorial team. First, Anna Pivovarova, serving as one of our editorial secretaries for many years, has stepped down from her role. We extend our immense gratitude to Anna for her commitment to the journal over the years. Anna has been replaced by Pablo Perez: Welcome to the team, Pablo! In addition, Saara Toukolehto, our second editorial secretary, is on maternity leave. Thus, for this issue, I have paired up with Pablo to ensure the final copyediting stages of this issue run as smoothly as possible.

And finally, I want to remind our readers, as always, this issue of *Suomen antropologi* is published as a fully open access journal with no APCs or embargoes.

Suvi Rautio
Editor-in-Chief

Darmanto & Koen Meyers

PRODUCING HUMAN LIFE OR PROTECTING WILDLIFE?

People, Park, and Space on Siberut Island, Indonesia

INTRODUCTION: PROTECTED AREAS AND THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE

On 23 June 2010, a group of Siberut National Park officers visited Simatalu, a village on the west coast of Siberut Island (West Sumatra). The officers intended to conduct conservation work and a regular boundary patrol. It took them eight hours to cross the treacherous Indian Ocean by speedboat from the park office in Maileppet on the island's east coast. The villagers were already waiting when they arrived. Some men asked the officers to stay on the boat and not enter the village. Then, the village head of Simatalu organised a meeting to interrogate the park officers. Some villagers attended the meeting, bringing bows and arrows to intimidate them. Finally, an elder stood up and addressed one of the senior members of staff:

> I know you. Many years ago, you said our land and forest belong to the park and *kehutanan* (Ministry of Forestry). You and your friend said that you have the Conservation Law. We cannot even take a leaf from the park. We will be jailed if we kill a game. We can grow sago only around the settlement. The forest and the animals are reserved for scientific activities. Back then, we were afraid of the government and easily tricked. Now, we are here. Does your ministry have land here? Do you feed the animals and plant trees in the forest? This is our ancestors' land. We live with and from the forest. Our food is there. Our medicine is there. We cannot be separated from the forest.

After tense negotiations, the park officers were allowed to stay overnight in the village head's house. The following day, the locals visited the park and questioned: Who are the owners of the land, forest, and animals in the park? Why did the park divide their ancestral land into conservation zones where people must follow conservation rules? Why did the park prohibit the Mentawai from exploiting forests but allow forest companies to extract timber outside?

Those questions were a nuanced political response to—and an astute critique of—the establishment of a protected area. They illustrate the conflict associated with territorialisation and state control over Indigenous territory (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995) by introducing a park and Conservation Law. They also represent critical questions about the production of space in a protected area, which separates nature, non-human entities, and humans (West 2006; Brockington 2002). Many scholars have shown that a protected area is not only a way of protecting animals, plants, and ecosystems, but involves a complex process of social engineering and development where the idea of nature is developed and the production of space takes place (Escobar 1999; Peluso 1993; West 2006;

Brockington 2022). A park is not a natural place, but constitutes a specific idea about nature, a particular way of thinking about the world, viewing the world, and acting upon the world (West and Brockington 2006). However, the park is not only the product of sociocultural constructions (image, discourse), but also encompasses material productions and social relations (Lefebvre 1991). Hence, the park is not a natural space, given its ecology and evolution and its enactment of an idea about nature. Instead, it reflects the triad of 'spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces' (Lefebvre 1991: 33) in which discourse, imaginaries, experience, institutions, actors, place, and locations are entangled through particular practices, social relations, and powers are encountered.

Neill Smith (1996: 50) argues that protected areas were derived from a particular idea about nature and the environment, a historical product of European social processes and derived from the dualism in European thought. Nature is seen as external, outside the social, and is considered absolute, fixed, and separate from the social. The vision of separation between nature and humans travelled across the world to justify the domination of people and places and became naturalised and instituted in the form of parks, sanctuaries, and reserves, well known as 'fortress conservation' (Cronon 1996; Neumann 1998; Brockington 2002; Jepson and Whittaker 2002). Nevertheless, fortress conservation areas are rarely, if ever, established in an empty space. The space reserved for protected areas has been occupied, claimed, used, and guarded by various groups of people (Kelly 2014; West and Brockington 2006). Many Indigenous and local peoples living in and around the park have produced space (land, forests, and other landscapes) and social relations in their particular ways, which often, but not always,

differ from the way states, private sectors, and conservationists produce protected areas (Ball 2012; West 2006). They see place and space as animate and sentient, inseparable from the totality of the lives of human beings. Sometimes, natural space is also enmeshed in a combination of mythology, storytelling rituals, and sensory experiences and intimately tied to the reproduction of social practices, beliefs, personhood, and institutions that would have been termed 'culture' in anthropology (West 2006; 2016).

Unsurprisingly, a protected area is a space constantly negotiated by different parties and always changing (Kelly and Gupta 2016). Elsewhere worldwide, a park or wildlife sanctuary becomes a middle ground for different actors entangled in social practices (Cronon 1996; White 1991; Graham and Concklin 1995; Highly and Oakley 2020; Faier and Rofel 2014). This middle ground takes the form of empirical questions, bringing into being the actors that appear in conflict or cooperation. The analysis of space (Lefebvre 1991; Smith 1995) offers a processual approach to understanding how a protected area as a middle ground is created, produced, and sustained through a shifting set of social practices and power relations (West 2006; Kelly and Gupta 2016: 178). The shifting involves constant negotiation and is influenced by interpersonal relationships, laws, regulations, social norms/values, and practices on multiple levels. The notion of a middle ground is paramount here as many Indigenous people have forcibly or voluntarily engaged with biodiversity conservation projects and agencies to survive asymmetrical power relations (Rubis and Therault 2020; Cepek 2018). The middle ground also captures the resilience of Indigenous people as they constantly revise and rupture their epistemes to understand the dispossessions they have experienced (DiNovelli-Lang 2013, West

2016). Recognising the resilience of Indigenous people facing conservation institutions has contributed substantially to our appreciation of the agency of Indigenous people in asserting their histories and world-making (Fausto and Heckenberger 2007; Escobar 2016) as well as the way conservation agencies have shifted their position and approach to adapt to a new context and political relations (Kiik 2019).

This article is an ethnographic account of dialectical processes of the production of space through the establishment of the Siberut National Park (hereafter, we refer to this space as the park or simply SNP) on Siberut Island. Specifically, we investigate how the Mentawai engaged with the idea and the agency of biodiversity conservation over time. We try to answer a significant question: Why, despite the Mentawai harbouring deep resentment toward the national park as shown in the quote above, and seeing the protection of nature as fundamentally problematic, do they not overtly reject the presence of the park? We argue that the people's resentment is derived from the different ways the Mentawai and the park see the relationship between humans, the forest, and space. For the Mentawai, the forest is an undomesticated space that must be transformed into a social space through human activities. Social activities (clearing, cultivating, transforming, etc) in the forest and social relationships around the forest are valued and necessary to produce human life. SNP has introduced zonation, separating humans from forests and other non-human entities, reproducing the literal and figurative divisions of space and imposing the idea that a specific forest area is strictly for protecting plants and animals. The park neither reflects the Mentawai social process of producing nature nor recognises the value of productive activities and the history of human labour invested in the land and

forest. We further argue that conservation and the park are a contact space for cross-cultural encounters (Massey 1994; Faier and Rofel 2014; High and Oakley 2020), where park agencies and the Mentawai have become entangled in a network of social practices and mutual (mis) understanding.

In the first part of the article, we describe how the Mentawai produce space, especially forests. We discuss the Mentawai's relationship with the forest, how they see forests, and how their cultural reproduction and social practices are tied to the conceptualisation of the forest as a social space associated with the creation of life. The second part of the article describes the production of natural space through a biodiversity conservation campaign and the park's establishment. The last part of the article demonstrates the negotiation and engagement between park agencies and the Mentawai. We contend that the park's production is shaped not only by conflict and antagonism but also by a more prosaic process of encounter and engagement. We will show that the park has become a porous space for social intercourse. This engagement has contributed to the transformation of the park's attitude towards the Mentawai and the development of new aspirations and desires for the park among the Mentawai. Our case is a valuable example of a park that can be examined as a negotiated space, where Indigenous people might continue their cultural reproduction within a protected area.

The main ethnographic description in the article is drawn from our decades-long engagement with the Mentawai on Siberut Island. We began engaging with the people and the island as students researching how the Mentawai developed a relationship with natural resources two decades ago (Koen Meyers 2003; Darmanto 2006). We then worked together

on a UNESCO project (2002–2011) that supported collaborative and community-based forest management involving the Mentawai, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), and SNP. The second author initiated the collaborative management project in 2000, and lived on Siberut for two years until 2003. He then visited Siberut for a week every year until 2011, and every three years since 2012. The first author joined the UNESCO project in 2004 as a volunteer while conducting fieldwork for his BSc thesis on Mentawai shifting cultivation practices. He then became the manager of the UNESCO project in 2005 and lived on Siberut for almost six years. Later, he visited Siberut regularly and completed 14 months of fieldwork (March 2013–June 2014) for his Master's and PhD theses (Darmanto 2016, 2020). However, the ethnographic materials we present in this article were mainly gathered during our participation in the UNESCO project (2001–2011). Our understanding of the relationship between the park and the Mentawai living in six villages in the South Siberut subdistrict and Simatalu in West Siberut accumulated during the UNESCO project. We inadvertently employed anthropological methods for the project to understand the relations of the Mentawai with the forest and the relations of the park and the Mentawai. We deployed various methods, including focus group discussion (FGD), interview, and observation] through direct participation and collaboration with the park's staff and the Mentawai before and during the project. Nevertheless, we visited eight other villages in Siberut during the anti-logging operation campaign and other activities. We covered 14 of 20 villages on Siberut Island and engaged personally with more than 800 Mentawai men and women during our stay on Siberut. The secondary data (maps, documents, and notes) were gathered from government archives, NGO reports, and local newspapers.

The park staff and the Mentawai generally still refer to us as conservationists and supporters of the park when we now visit Siberut, even though we have become a researcher and international NGO staff working outside Siberut, respectively. However, most park staff and the Mentawai see us as long-time friends since we have engaged with them in the framework of a project and via other modes of engagement. We fluently speak the languages used on the island (Indonesia, Mentawai, and Minangkabau) and have developed continuous reciprocal relations with specific Mentawai families throughout the writing process. Our positionality allowed us to capture the direct encounter between the park's staff and the Mentawai in various places. In the meantime, our involvement with the park and the Mentawai also shapes our argument and how we present it in this article. We occupied a delicate position in close and constant contact with the Mentawai and as part of the Siberut conservation history. A few park staff sometimes perceived us as blind supporters of the Mentawai, while some Mentawai often half-jokingly accused us of being conservation zealots. While we have various positions and perceptions, our long-term and deep engagement with the park and the Mentawai enable us to critically navigate the balance between being researchers and conservation actors. This article is, then, our critical reflection on our participation in biodiversity conservation interventions and our understanding of the agency of Indigenous Mentawai as close and engaged observers.

THE MENTAWAI AND FOREST IN THE PARK

The Indigenous Mentawai traditionally claimed the land and forest on Siberut Island (Figure 1). The Mentawai population is around 70,300 (BPS 2021), and it is socially organised in connected and extended family groups locally called *uma*. An *uma* is patrilineal and exogamous, equating with the anthropological term 'kin group' or 'clan' and the most important social institution. One *uma* consists of roughly two to ten families with five to hundreds of members. The approximately 300 *uma* spread across the island have their versions of their origins, migration processes, and claims over forests and land. The u*ma* migration, separation, and expansion story has revealed how the Mentawai define claims and rights over land and forests (Tulius 2012; Darmanto 2016). Over centuries, different clan expanded, separated, migrated, discovered new land, and established their *uma*. Along the way, they claimed, cultivated, abandoned, and recultivated the land, progressively turning the claimed land into the 'land of the ancestors' (Tulius 2012), a common theme in Austronesian societies (Keller 2008; Fox 2006). As a result of this historical process, there is no land and the forest remains unclaimed. Even those living outside the park have retained strong claims over land discovered by their ancestors within the park area.

Land, including forest land, traditionally cannot be claimed by individuals, but is the property of an *uma*. Each *uma* can trace its genealogy to an ancestor who discovered the land and claimed the rights. However, individuals are allowed to collect products from the forest of other *umas* without a formal permit from the claimants, mainly for subsistence needs and domestic purposes. It is different when an individual ts to create an agroforest or extract forest products commercially. In the latter case, permission to access the land and forest should be obtained from the claimant of the land, which usually involves the payment of compensation. Over centuries, conflicts, internal feuds, external marriage, migration, search for a suitable place to grow crops, and social and economic exchange in parts of the landscape (forest, agroforestry, and rivers) have complicated the Mentawai tenurial system. Hence, the land and forests in the park are often subject to multiple, overlapping, and conflicting claims from hundreds of *uma* living inside and outside the park boundaries. The Indonesian state does not officially recognise the Mentawai tenurial system and claims. Instead, the state designated the island as a 'state forest' under the Forest Authority (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995), dividing it into various logging concessions and the park.

Within the boundary of SNP, there are more than 10,000 Mentawai (Aji et al. 2015; BPS 2021; Persoon 1995). Most have settled in the villages of Simatalu, Simalegi, and Sagulubbek, located on the island's west coast. Most people living in the park are, to a large extent, still horticulturalists and dependent on forests for their livelihoods. People obtain daily sustenance from various resources found in the forest. Sago has always been the main staple, supplemented by tubers and bananas. Small fish, shrimps, and sago grubs are protein sources from gathering and fishing in rivers and along the forest margins. Chickens and pigs are the most important domestic animals, consumed and shared only for communal rituals. Non-timber forest products such as rattan are exchanged for ironware, tobacco, clothes, sugar, rice, and other products. Coconut and patchouli have been commercial crops for many years, while, recently, cacao, bettlenut, cloves, and bananas have been the primary source of cash.
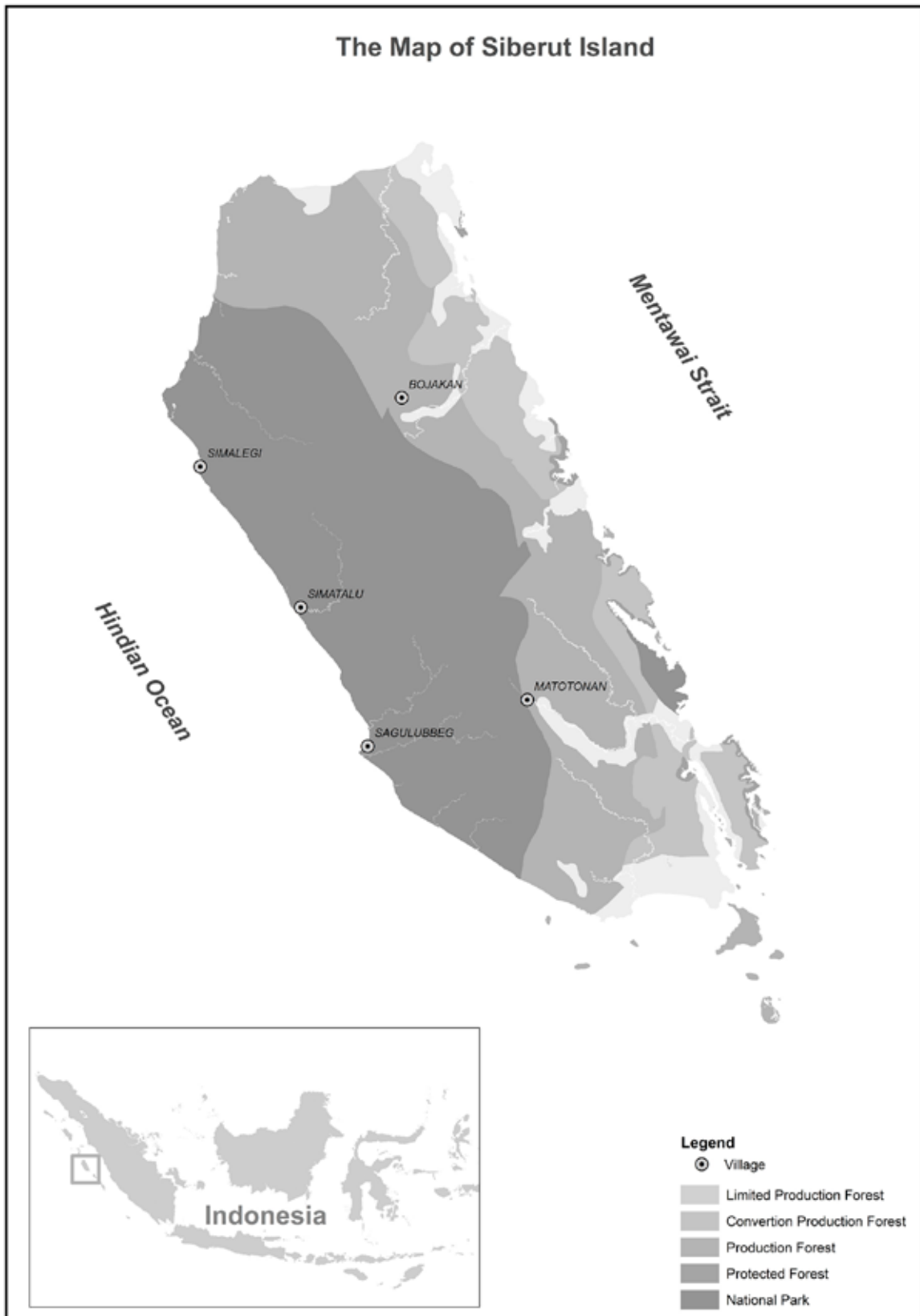
Figure 1.

Opening up forests to establish agroforests, sago gardens or taro gardens is central to the livelihood of the Mentawai, their definition of themselves, and their place in the world (Bakker 1999; Darmanto 2020). Few people have non-farm jobs, such as local government officers, teachers or nurses. All subsistence and commercial activities in the park rely heavily on forest availability, as people have limited livelihood options compared to those living on the East Coast. The narrow coastline and the dangerous waves from the Indian Ocean have prevented people in the park from diversifying and developing coastal livelihoods (gathering sea products, extensive coconut farming, and surf tourism).

THE FOREST: THE HOUSE OF SPIRITS, THE SOURCE OF MATERIALS

The Mentawai refer to the forest as *leleu*. The term connotes an extensive uncultivated spatial area. Physically, *leleu* is characterised by higher altitudes, giant trees, densely uncultivated plants, and nondomesticated animals. Nevertheless, the term *leleu* is neither a simple classification of a physical appearance nor a type of ecological classification or vegetation. The forest is considered an undomesticated and uncultivated space (Reeves 1994). It has been and is still believed to be the space for autochthonous forest spirits (*sikaleleu*), who are a source of blessings (Schefold 1980a). In local myth, the *sikaleleu* were also humans, but due to fears of scarcity, humans and *sikaleleu* carried out a primordial act: *sikaleleu* would become invisible and live in the forest. In contrast, humans would carry on living in the settlement (Schefold 2002). Since that time, they have lived in separate domains but have continued to be respectful of each other. In the forest, *sikaleleu* have their own

'culture', generally an inversion of human culture (Schefold 2002: 442). They have houses, tend wild plants, and keep animals as pets. People can take a *sikalelu's* pets and plants by making an offering through a ritual. A *sikalelu* is a source of blessing and life. Hence, humans should maintain reciprocal relations with the spirits and be respectful (Hammons 2010), especially in the forest.

Leleu is considered the space of ancestral spirits, such that when humans die, the soul (*simagre*) is thought to leave the body (*tubbu*) and enter the forest, joining the autochthonous spirits. The soul becomes an ancestor spirit (*sateteu*), a source of blessings, whose guidance is requested by living humans through rituals. However, the soul that has suffered an unnatural death (*pito'*) is dangerous (Schefold 1991). *Pito'* wander at the margins of the forest and can disturb people. They emanate power (*bajou*) that causes harm to living humans, especially those unknown to the spirits.

As well as the *sikaleleu and sateteu*, various other dangerous spirits are believed to reside somewhere in or around the forest. These spirits have an even stronger *bajou*. People must be careful when entering the *leleu* because every corner contains spirits that can unexpectedly cause illness. The forest is consequently strongly associated with death and danger. People are reluctant to go into the forest alone and stay there. They venture into a patch of *leleu* with diffidence, taking practical and supernatural precautions. Traditionally, the Mentawai are required to follow specific steps before they can extract and transform the forest without any risk of upsetting the spirits. Rituals asking permission from the spirits need to be performed. Activities such as cutting giant trees, collecting commercial rattan, and clearing trees for a new garden always involve a small offering to the spirits (*panaki*). Gathering minor

products (rattan and flowers) may not involve an elaborate *panaki*, but a short utterance to ask permission from the spirits of the forest is undoubtedly necessary.

The forest is a source of life, since the ancestral spirits' and other benevolent spirits' blessings are essential for the growth of a man or woman, a family or an *uma* (Hammons 2010; Reeves 1994). The ability to feed a family, cultivate the forest, and expand the clan depends on the blessings of ancestors and forest spirits. The ancestor spirits are remembered, summoned, and invited to attend life-cycle events (death, marriage, and a new birth) through various rituals to observe their descendants' future growth. In this sense, the forest provides cosmological material for the souls of living humans. The blessings of ancestral spirits ensure the prosperity of future generations. Without the ancestors, life, growth, and the future aspirations of new generations are impossible. Hence, the forest is a space where humans and more-than-human subjects continue reciprocal relations in a regenerative process.

However, the forest also provides the ecological material that makes people's bodies and provides for their needs. The forest is an essential source of food and materials. People collect mushrooms, the shoots of wild palms, and wild fruits in the forest. They hunt large game such as wild pigs, deer, primates, and the pied hornbill (*kailaba*) for food, ritual purposes, and decoration. The forest also provides essential trade items. Calamus rattan (*Calamus manan*) and agarwood (*Aqualaria malaccensis*), two of the most valuable and sought-after products on the local market, are extracted from the forest. Non-timber forest products, including bark for bowstrings and loincloths, and various herbs, climbers and roots for dyes, poisons, and the manufacture and decoration of baskets, utensils, and other objects, are also taken from

the forest, as is timber for domestic construction. The forest is most valued as a place where one can transform undomesticated space into a social space and produce a new garden (*mone*), a settlement or another cultivation site.

TRANSFORMING THE FOREST, PRODUCING HUMAN LIFE

The importance of the forest is linked to how the Mentawai define their socially perceptible qualities as human beings. They commonly identify themselves using phrases such as 'we are forest cultivators' (*kai sipumone*). Their self-identification as forest people is enmeshed in their myth of the origins of the Mentawai and non-Mentawai people (Bakker 1999: appendix; Darmanto 2020: 237).[1] The Mentawai proudly distinguish themselves from others by skillfully making social spaces in the forest by clearing, cultivating, hunting, and gathering. The forest has, therefore, been transformed and classified into specific social spaces according to the objects or species cultivated or extracted from it, the aims and methods of appropriation, and their arrangement. The central socially valued spaces derived from *leleu* are sago gardens (*pusaguat)*, forest gardens (*pumonean*), taro gardens (*pugetekkat*), dwelling places (*barasi*), home gardens (*bebe-t-uma*), and coastal zones (*nusa*).

Transforming and cultivating forests are, then, the essential work of the Mentawai. As forest cultivators, the Mentawai chop down swathes of the existing forest to make a clearing. They remove the natural vegetation and replace it with culturally valued products—pigs, sago, taro, fruit trees, bananas, and commercial crops. Once they have transformed this portion of the forest into a social space, they frequently build shelters and may spend a considerable amount of time (even years) in these houses. Thus, through

human agency, forests become social spaces. Human actions transform both undomesticated and domesticated spaces. These changes are reversible. Just as a forest can be converted into gardens or a settlement, the settlement can become a forest when humans abandon it. Converting the forest into cultivation sites is also the basic criterion for the definition of Mentawai personhood. A Mentawai person is, thus, distinguished from non-human creatures such as spirits and wild animals, since non-humans do not make gardens and take what is available in undomesticated space. The main difference between humans and non-humans is that humans produce their food and gardens, while others do not.

Transforming the forest also forms the most basic schema in Mentawai culture: activities that transform natural things into social products acquire value and define them as human. Cultivating and transforming forests is associated with intention, self-conscious activities, and something that will eventually provide a specific result that has already been imagined, taught, and anticipated. This requires planning, and it takes time to produce results. A man does not suddenly come to the forest and slash giant trees and all the shrubs. He must plan with another member of his/her *uma*, or at least with his wife, which part of the forest to turn into a garden and how large the plots should be; he must also predict how much effort this will require. Creating a garden requires activities carried out over a period of years before finally yielding results. A man will undoubtedly discuss his plans with others before making a new garden. A series of rituals is also required. Extensive cooperative labour is not common, but a person needs the cooperation of others (at least his wife, if not other members of their clan) to realise his imagined sago garden or agroforest, as the land he will cultivate belongs

to the group and is only produced within the *lalep* (household) institution (Darmanto 2020).

The Mentawai think that part of the forest is dangerous and should remain untouched, but they do not consciously preserve it in an ecological sense (Persoon 2001; Meyers 2003). Instead, they value forests for the raw materials they extract from them and see them as potential sites for social spaces. The forest is, thus, dotted with named places that have meaning in both a cognitive and affective sense, giving meaning and connection to the person's relationship with it. Some of the forests were once, in fact, abandoned gardens and settlements. Durian trees, jackfruit or sago can be found in the deep forest, delineating sites of former human settlements. Such localities are frequently named, referring to past inhabitants or events at particular spots. Those places are still fondly remembered, evoking affective memories for present-day Mentawai, and are an essential justification for claims relating to particular places.

THE CONSERVATION CAMPAIGN, ICDP, AND THE NATIONAL PARK

This section outlines the making of SNP and the production of space within it. We start with the history of conservation ideas and campaigns, the process of establishing SNP, and how the park introduces zones as spaces for conserving biodiversity. While the park was established in 1993, protecting the Siberut rainforest had been promoted and enacted since the mid-1970s. Western biologists, conservation managers, and various international organisations (IUCN, Survival International, WWF, UNESCO) raised concerns about the island's future when the Indonesian government permitted four companies to extract timber there (McNeely

1979; Schefold 1980b; Whitten et al. 1980). Siberut, for a conservationist, was an 'Island paradise for wildlife and people' (McNeely 1979: 159), where traditional Mentawai lived harmoniously with nature. It is important to highlight the historical connection between the scientists, Siberut's biodiversity, the marginalisation of the Mentawai, and threats from logging operations. This connection indicates that the region's biological and cultural significance first drew conservationists to the image of the fallen paradise (McNelly 1979: 163). The presence of logging caused the lost paradise and justified the need for modern conservation.

Scientists and NGOs expressed the idea of biodiversity protection in a Conservation Masterplan and international campaign, 'Saving Siberut'. They gained support from a section of the Indonesian government. In 1980, the Directorate of Nature Protection (PHPA) of the Ministry of Agriculture began discussing conservation projects based on the master plan. It designated a small area as the nature reserve of Teitei Bati (5600 ha) to protect the four endemic Mentawai primates (WWF 1980). The Teitei Bati area was designed as a strict conservation zone. Human activities were prohibited, and the only permissible forms of human intervention were biodiversity research and species propagation projects. The pursuit of livelihood-related activities was not allowed. However, the forest rangers recruited to manage the reserve, mainly Mentawai, did not enforce the regulations and understood that preventing Mentawai from claiming land in Teitei Bati would be socially awkward and could generate severe conflict. The 'Saving Siberut' campaign began to receive strong support from international institutions soon after the island was officially accepted by UNESCO's 'Man and the Biosphere Programme', which was intended to solve human problems through an integrated social and ecological approach (Mitchell 1982). The campaign and master plan were pilot projects on a small scale and primarily provided policy recommendations. The area's reserve and biosphere status existed only on paper, as the reserve's management unit was virtually absent.

Siberut, as a conservation space, did not come into being naturally. It was initially produced by biologists and international organisations who cared for the forests and the people. The idea of a fallen paradise and the urgency of protecting endangered primates and other wildlife from logging constitute the policy, regulations, and conservation intervention. The conservation space was enacted when the West Sumatra province proposed oil palm plantations and transmigration at the end of the 1980s. This time, the actors and the discourse enacting conservation were somewhat different. A Jakarta-based NGO, SKEPHI (Indonesian Network on Tropical Conservation), led the second wave of the 'Save Siberut' campaign, lobbied the newly established Ministry of Population and Environment (KLH), and linked up with several government agencies in Jakarta to halt any resource extraction activities (SKEPHI 1992; Tenaza 1990). With the support of scientists working for the 'Saving Siberut' campaign in the 1980s, SKEPHI created SOS Siberut, an international campaign to cancel the plan for the plantation and end the logging operations, forced resettlement, and transmigration. SKEPHI and the SOS campaign successfully persuaded President Soeharto to issue a decree to terminate all forest exploitation projects. The decision was also influenced by international pressure on the New Order Regime development policy, which marginalised Indigenous people and destroyed the environment, and the emergence of global environmental governance (Goldman 1998), notably represented in the 1992 Rio Summit.

ICDP AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SNP

Following Soeharto's decision, the national government started accommodating the idea of eco-governmentality for Siberut. The termination of logging was followed by the US$18 million Integrated Conservation and Development Project (ICDP) project, a prominent 1990s global conservation initiative supported by international financial institutions (Wells et al. 1999; West 2006). The Asian Development Bank (ADB) funded the project. The island's high degree of primate endemism, the protection of the forest, and its unique Mentawaian society and culture were mentioned as part of the rationale for the project (PHPA 1995: 2). The central premise of ICDP is that biodiversity conservation can be achieved through the sustainable development of economic markets. ICDP was intended to campaign or provide a policy recommendation and to put conservation ideas into practice. ICDP envisioned that biodiversity conservation could stimulate economic development for the Mentawai. At the same time, this development could be integrated into the protection of 'biodiversity' (Wells et al. 1999; West 2006) through non-extractive modes of resource governance such as ecotourism, the harvesting of non-timber forest products, intensive agriculture, indigenous crafts, and other conservation-related enterprises.

The essential objectives and activities outlined in ICDP was establishing a 190 500-ha national park (Barber et al. 1995). The creation of SNP marked the triumph of a two-decades-long biodiversity conservation effort. With lavish funds, ICDP hired hundreds of staff, constructed offices, provided all the necessary equipment (maps, boats and radios), and paid international consultants and researchers to manage the park. In the mid-1990s, the inhabitants of Siberut had seen many people from the mainland and abroad preparing maps, conducting surveys, training, and monitoring Siberut's biodiversity. ICDP claimed that educating the Mentawai about the national park was critical for conservation success (PHPA 1995), illustrating the process of environmental subject-making (Agrawal 2005). The project then contracted a local NGO to increase the Mentawai's awareness about the national park's aims and the importance of biodiversity conservation. The local NGO—YASUMI (Yayasan Suku Mentawai)—consisted mainly of Mentawai but primarily contracted the young and inexperienced. The ICDP awareness programmes were a form of cultural engineering and social intervention, which were as oppressive as the establishment of zonation. They suggested that the Mentawai needed to learn about nature and the possibility of connecting with the forest, the land, and surrounding environmental objects.

While ICDP promoted development, SNP's immediate effect was the introduction of the 1990 Conservation Law. YASUMI and the SNP staff were trained to socialise others about the park and conservation. They informed the Mentawai that the 1990 Conservation Law is the legal framework for establishing the park. The hunting of animals and the presence of humans were not to be tolerated in the park. The Mentawai, especially in the villages of Sagulubbek, Simatalu, and Simalegi, understood the YASUMI explanation of the rules and purpose of SNP in terms of the restrictions and prohibitions. The ICDP understood the historical connections of the Mentawai to the forest, plants, and animals and their dependence on forest cultivation for centuries but paid little attention to the *umas*' claims to the land. The Mentawai eventually perceived that YASUMI was selling their ancestors' land to SNP

(Eindhoven 2009: 172), which meant that their traditional practices were not only prohibited but also unlawful activities.

The attitude of the SNP staff could have been better calibrated to gain sympathy among the local people. With uniforms, modern devices, and a lack of understanding of the local culture, the staff frequently told villagers that the land inside the park now belonged to the Indonesian state and, to a certain extent, was a global possession, standard rhetoric used by conservation agencies (see Li 2007). Most of the SNP staff had Minangkabau origins, seen as arrogant, dominant, and superior people who always looked down on the Mentawai (Persoon 2002). They are renowned for their solid Islamic tradition and see the religion as an integral part of their identity, in contrast to the Mentawai animism and their choice of Christianity (Eindhoven 2007). Moreover, the Minangkabau are the mediators and representatives of Indonesian state policy, which positions the Mentawai culture as backwards, underdeveloped, and marginal. The conjunction of state policy and asymmetrical ethnic relations compels the SNP staff to feel superior and impose the Conservation Law without contextualising the local culture.

The 25-year ICDP plan was abruptly terminated after just six years of activities. An ADB report (2001) cited that the project needed to increase community awareness and provide possible alternative livelihoods. The report partly addressed the project's failure by blaming it on the absence of established and capable NGOs and the inexperience of YASUMI in mediating between local communities and the park management (Eindhoven 2009). The report also claimed that the Mentawai were unwilling to adopt the project strategy to transform their lifestyle of subsistence agriculture into a sustainable market economy. However, the main reason for the failure was articulated in economic terms (Wells et al. 1999; ADB 2001). As a development project funded by a loan, ICDP needed to be more effective and efficient in generating income in the long run. In contrast, the Mentawai saw the failure of ICDP as resulting from the absence of their consent regarding their land and forest. They had never been asked or seriously consulted about any plan or activities implemented on their land. Another issue was the abuse of project funds. The Mentawai became seriously irritated and disappointed to see project money lavished on luxury infrastructure, facilities, and expensive research and consultants. At the same time, they got only a tiny amount of money, cigarettes or a cup of coffee in return for their participation (Darmanto 2011).

Despite being terminated after just six years, the ICDP project has had a lasting impact. SNP remains a powerful institution on the island. The Indonesian state and international conservationists used the park to mould mental structures and impose common principles of vision (and division) of land, forests, and nature that altered how the Mentawai see themselves and their forest. Furthermore, the establishment of the park introduced and produced an entirely new understanding of space, both discursively and materially (Brosius 1999; West et al. 2006). Even though the ADB report did not mention a single word about the impact of the zonation system, SNP created Siberut as a space symbolically and materially through conservation topologies and zonations.

THE ZONING SYSTEM: HOW CONSERVATION PRODUCES SPACE

While the Mentawai see land, forests, plants and animals as part of cultural reproduction and as representing a productive, positive nexus

of social practices and mutual imbrication, conservatism conceptualised Siberut as a distinct space marked by cartographic boundaries and strict regulations. To reconcile the need for biodiversity conservation and the need to preserve people's livelihoods, the WWF masterplan (1980) and UNESCO (Mitchell 1982) divided Siberut into three zones (Figure 2). The first was the 250 000-ha development zone, where commercial logging was permitted with regular monitoring and control. Agricultural development could also occur in the development zone according to strict regulations, along with the collection of rattan, the extraction of timber, and the planting of commercial crops. All hunting with nontraditional weapons was prohibited, and killing Mentawai gibbons, Mentawai macaques, and dugongs were strictly forbidden. The second zone was for traditional use. All traditional activities, such as hunting with arrows and collecting non-timber products, were permitted in the 100 000-ha traditional zone. The Mentawai could clear 0.3 ha of land on gentle slopes and establish a forest hut, but not a settlement. The last zone was reserved for the Siberut Nature Reserve (50 000 ha). In the reserve zone, some subsistence activities, such as collecting fruits and rattan, were permitted, but not for commercial purposes, and it was impossible to establish new agroforest areas (*ladang*).

The establishment of ICDP and SNP followed WWF's proposal under the Biosphere Reserve framework, where development and conservation are reconciled through a zoning system (PHPA 1995; ADB 1995). Yet, the ICDP's zoning system was slightly different to the WWF zoning. ICDP divided the entire island into two main zones: the support zone (213 500 ha) and the park area (190 500 ha) (Figure 3). Like the WWF development zone,

the support zone was reserved for development activities such as commercial logging, settlement, and agricultural activities. The park area was divided into three zones. The sanctuary zone (56 000 ha) was reserved strictly for biodiversity protection. Collecting forest fruits and minor forest products was allowed, but hunting and making new agroforests were prohibited. In the traditional zone (100,000 ha), taking forest products, hunting, and opening new agroforests were allowed if traditional methods were used. However, the traditional zone was not for human habituation. Human settlement was restricted to the 30,000-ha park village zone along the island's west coast.

WWF and SNP have been revised recently to accommodate local development needs. Currently, SNP has a more complicated zonation system, dividing the area into six zones (Figure 4). The three main zones (forest, sanctuary, and traditional use) resemble the WWF and ICDP zonation with slight modifications. The largest is the forest zone (109,710 ha). In this zone, people can harvest non-timber products, gather food, and hunt animals using so-called traditional methods. Using a gun, chainsaw, or modern device to slash trees is strictly prohibited. The sanctuary zone (34 021 ha) is the core zone of the park for natural protection, where all human activities are strictly prohibited. The traditional use zone is focused around the valley containing the major rivers in the park, where humans cultivate taro, tend pigs, plant sago, and grow cash crops such as cacao, bettle nut, and patchouli oil.

The three other zones are new additions to provide a legal platform for the Mentawai to extract forest resources, construct infrastructure, and rehabilitate the degraded land surrounding the settlement. The special zone covers 1781 ha of coastal land along the west coast of Siberut, where people can fish, establish small businesses,

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

The Zonation of Siberut National Park (2019)

Legend
- Sanctuary Zone (34,021,04 Ha)
- Special Zone (1,781.58 Ha)
- Utilisation Zone (5,103.80 Ha)
- Rehabilitation Zone (2,309.09 Ha)
- Forest Zone (109,710.45 Ha)
- Traditional Use Zone (37,574.04 Ha)
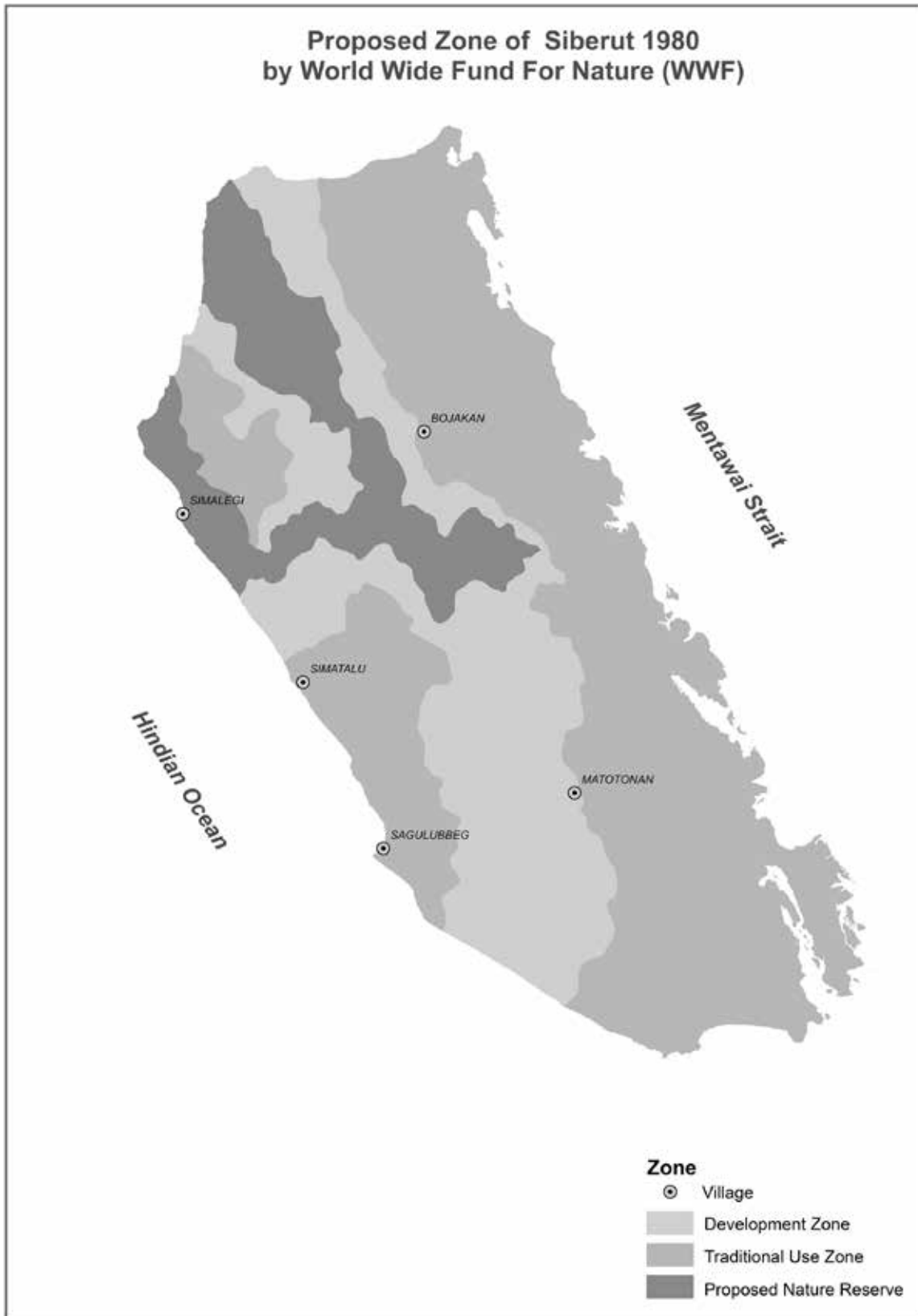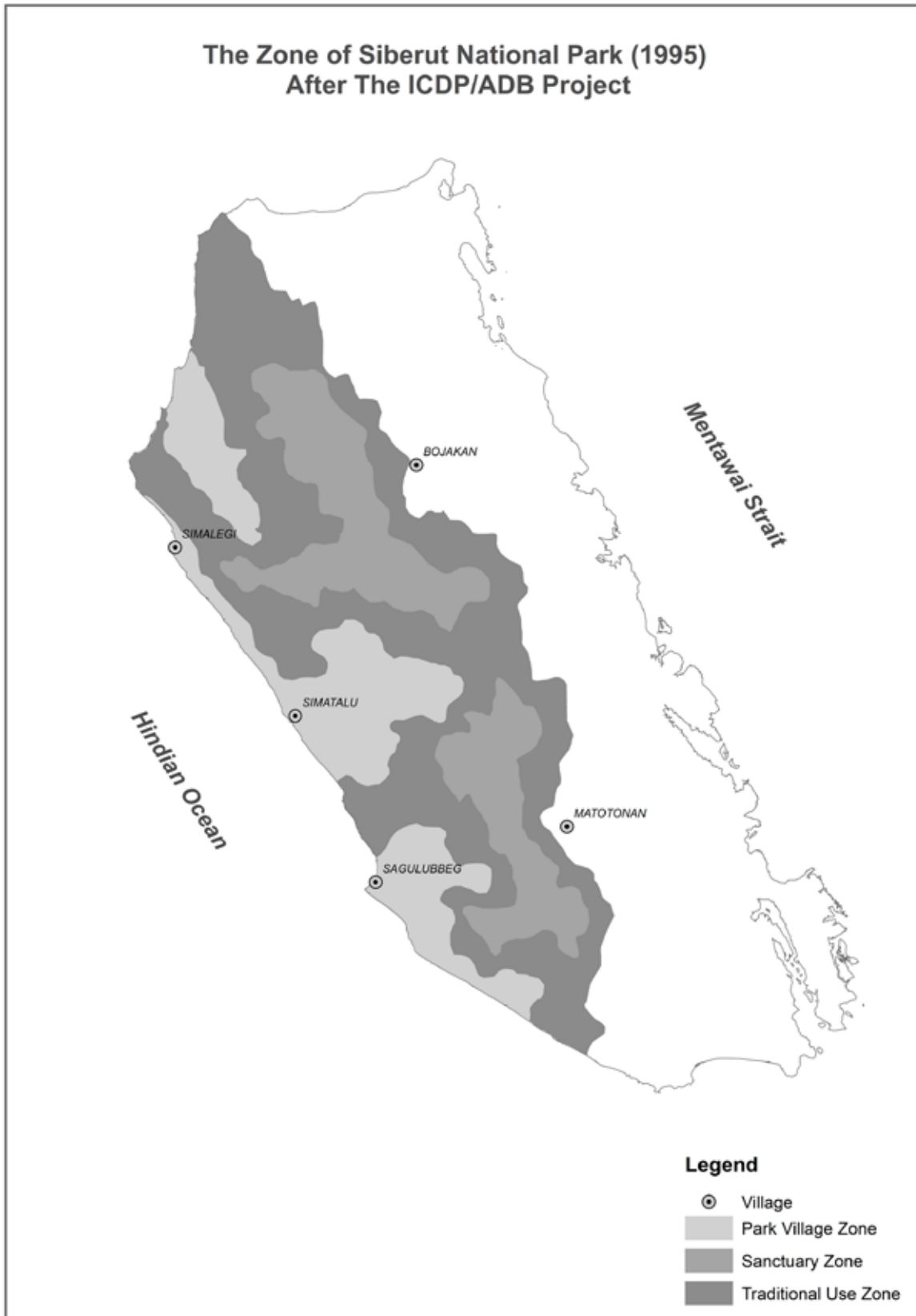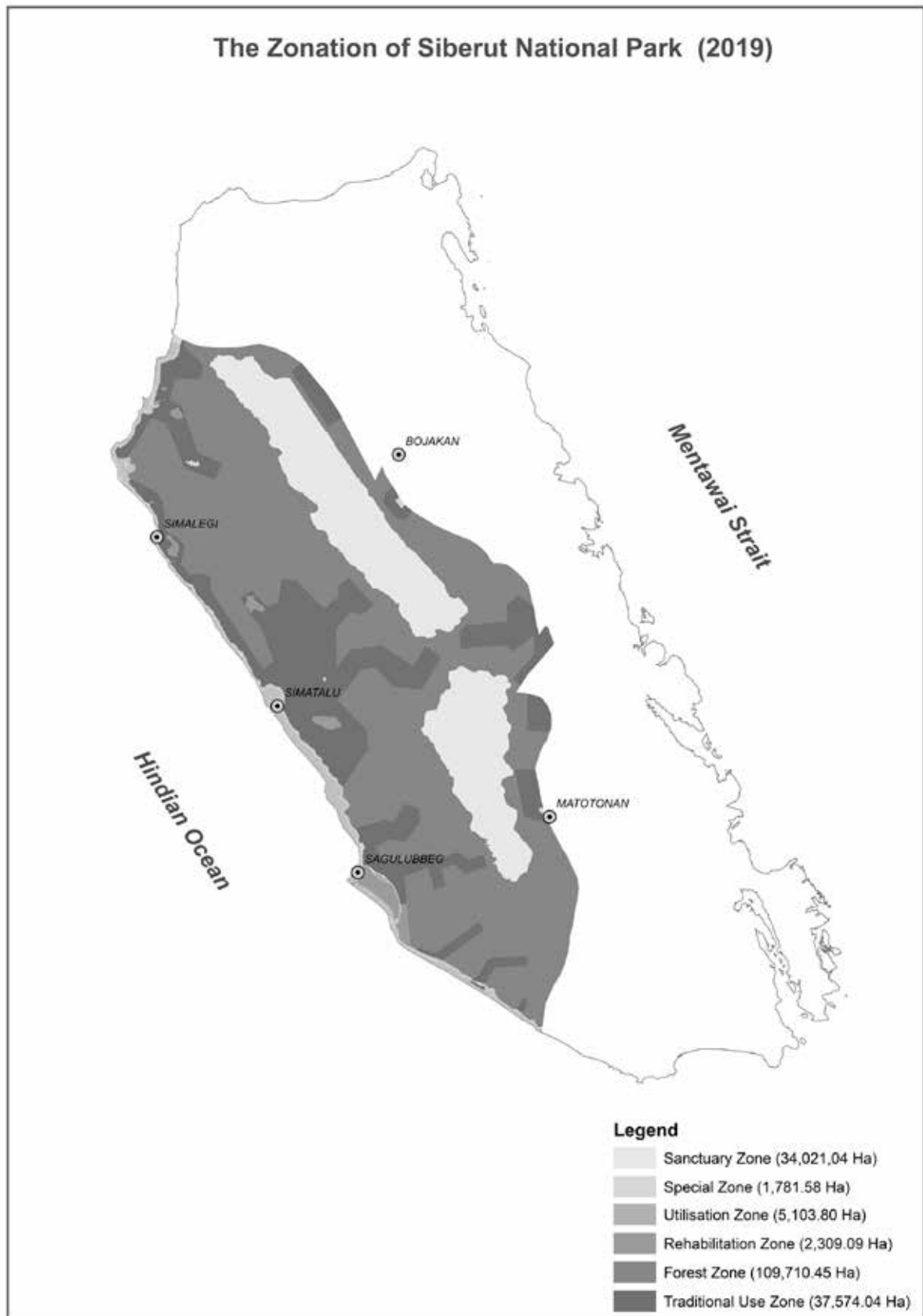
Figure 4.

and construct schools, medical facilities, and other government services. The utilisation zone is also reserved for the future development of villages and government services. It contains hamlets, villages, and traditional settlements, and covers 5103 ha of land. The utilisation zone accommodates the establishment of human habituation and activities, which was legally prohibited in the 1990 Conservation Law. The last zone is the rehabilitation zone, designed to restore degraded forest after agricultural activities. SNP uses the rehabilitation zone to deliver conservation and development projects such as organic farming, replanting, and restoration activities.

While the revised zonation system is intended to accommodate the interests of the Mentawai, the fundamental assumption of the necessity of zonation for biodiversity protection is firmly intact. The zonation system produces a space profoundly different from the Mentawai land tenure and their environment's emic classification and division. The Mentawai have never traditionally believed that all plants, animals, and other living and non-living objects should be conserved and divided into specific zones (Schefold 1970). The entire island is the historical sedimentation of their genealogy, identity, material processes, and social values necessary for the creation of life. Understanding the forest as a site that produces human life is extremely difficult to reconcile with the conservation ethos, which focuses on keeping animals and plants untouched or prohibiting land transformation (Keller 2008). Thus, the zoning system makes no sense to the Mentawai. More bluntly, it turns their world upside-down, rupturing the long-standing nexus of forest–human–non-human relationships and disrupting social histories. It constitutes what Zerner (2003: 48) calls a 'nature plantation', where Mentawai practices and production

are controlled, delineated, and expected to be only traditional and support conservation. Meanwhile, the area beyond SNP is an 'economic plantation, where private companies carry out extractive practices and pursue economic development under state control. With zonation, land, forest, and human activities have become spatially and ontologically separate and legally bound. Zonation is a world model that ignores the complexity of Mentawai social activities and relationships with the forest. It conceptualises nature and forests as separate from people's livelihoods, cultural history, and daily social practices. It defines what people can and cannot do in bounded space and creates an imagined space where humans minimise their intervention in nature, imposing Western imaginaries on the separation of nature and culture (Strathern 1980; West et al. 2006).

THE MIDDLE SPACE: PEOPLE, PARK, AND LIVELIHOOD PURSUITS

The park has, unsurprisingly, become the most unpopular institution on the island (Eindhoven 2009), subject to resistance and contestation. However, the Mentawai have not overtly rejected the park and conservation activities. Open conflicts are exceedingly rare. In the 30 years of the park's history, not a single Mentawai has been criminalised for taking something out of the park. In part, this is because SNP is a 'paper park' (White and Courtney 2004), where conservation rules and regulations have never been seriously enforced nor implemented, and the presence of conservation does not significantly alter the daily relationship between the Mentawai and their forest. The notion of a paper park does not necessarily imply that SNP is crumbling due to a lack of funding. While it does not have a lavish budget like ICDP, the

park receives steady funding from the central government, and the number of permanent staff has increased over the years (SNP 2017). In recent decades, the park has set up more field offices in a few villages inside the park and hired more park guards.

Although the Mentawai may have lost their sense of legal ownership over their ancestral land, the park has neither fundamentally altered their relationship with their forest nor *de facto* prevented them from accessing natural resources. Park officers might have confiscated a few pet primates from villagers, but they have never applied physical force or actual violence to enforce conservation rules (Peluso and Watts 2001; Dowie 2011). Instead, they allowed the Mentawai to live in the villages inside the park and tolerated all forest-related activities. There is a general understanding that enforcing the conservation law or carrying out armed patrols would provoke social unrest and may not be the best strategy to convince the Mentawai to accept the idea of conserving biodiversity. The forest is still the space of ancestral and autochthonous spirits where humans continuously practice reciprocal exchange (Schefold 2002, 1980; Hammons 2010). The Mentawai continue to practice the old ways of opening forests for fruit gardens and other cultivation sites. The park is not present in the daily life of the Mentawai. The large swath of forest inside the park is still *de facto* claimed, extracted, and utilised by all *uma* to expand their clan, generating life and increasing human quality and value (Darmanto 2020). The people in the park are still the forest cultivators, continuously transforming the forest as their ancestors did for being the Mentawai. The paper park allows the Mentawai to use the forest for social and cultural reproduction.

The park staff only occasionally visit the villages and carry out conservation activities. Many of the park's activities are focused on assisting agricultural development and biodiversity monitoring. The activities could include small-scale projects such as local training, making plant inventories or handing out development packages. Forest guards occasionally perform forest patrols or boundary checks, but they do almost nothing if they find some new gardens inside the park. They might talk to the people about the importance of conserving forests, but are generally reluctant to enforce the Conservation Law. The Mentawai have generally welcomed the park's activities and view the park staff as just doing their job as civil servants. So long as the park officers do not openly claim the land, prevent people from creating a new fruit garden or arrest a hunter, the villagers do not openly reject or resist their presence. Indeed, they commonly ridicule the park staff through jokes and rhetorical questions regarding the true purpose of the national park and why primates should be protected. The park is constantly derided, and the Mentawai always ensure that the SNP staff feel it. Villagers always cite and exaggerate the claim that the Conservation Law would punish anyone even if they took just one leaf from the forest. The rejection of the presence of SNP staff in Simatalu, quoted at the beginning of this article, might be an extreme expression of this resentment.

CONSERVATION SPACE AS MIDDLE GROUND

Contemporary relationships between the Mentawai and the park and conservation interventions, in general, are closely shaped by the broader political and economic processes. In recent decades, better education and transportation, and the proliferation of development and the surf industry have rapidly connected the Mentawai to the broader

world transforming the way the Mentawai see themselves and others. These transformations have come with expanding communication, transportation, mobility, and cultural exchanges (Bakker 1999; Hammons 2010; Eindhoven 2019) and brought new desires and aspirations. The Mentawai are now more concerned with sending their children to institutions of higher education on the mainland, building a brick house, and accessing modern medicine than confronting representatives of SNP. They are willing whenever an opportunity arises to participate in conservation or SNP activities. The benefits of conservation work might be marginal, sporadic and temporary, but they can be substantial in the local context, complementing earnings from forest cultivation. The willingness of the Mentawai to work with the park also reflects a broader phenomenon, whereby the Indigenous community develops a social craft to sustain its pursuit of development and cultivate ties to outsiders with access to jobs, cash, power, and influence (Conklin 2020: 344; High and Oakley 2020). The new aspiration includes participating in park management. The villagers often claim that the park is better off employing the Mentawai, who know the forest, animals, and plants, than non-Mentawai, who cannot even walk in the mud. The aspiration to participate in park management illustrates an attempt to pursue recognition of their identity by state agencies (Eindhoven 2019).

While Mentawai engagement with SNP is mainly aimed at material benefits, it does not prevent a strategic collaboration that exceeds pragmatic objectives. Occasionally, the Mentawai are willing to collaborate with the park and conservation agencies when encountering larger extraction projects outside the park (DTE 1999, 2006). In 2019, a few *uma* from South Siberut supported SNP. A symbolic cultural performance was employed to show that they share a common ecopolitical agenda of conserving Siberut natural forest when the Ministry of Forestry issued a permit for a company to establish a forest estate and a proposed oil palm plantation in Central Siberut (Jakarta Post 2017; Harbinson 2019). The Mentawai often employ environmental rhetoric, share conservation agendas with national and global environmentalists, and are willing to fill the 'tribal slot' (Li 2007; Trouillout 2003: 7) to build alliances and seek political support from conservationists. They understand that the presence of the park gives Siberut a national and international profile and exposure that can help them when they come into conflict with timber companies or oil palm plantations. Even those who support resource extraction frequently join conservation projects and deploy environmental rhetoric to increase their bargaining power in negotiations with timber companies. The changing and dynamic positions and responses to SNP are part of their strategy to navigate their relations with both conservation and extractive agencies from outside, and their answer to the division of their ancestral land into both protected and extractive zones. Another example lies in the engagement of an *uma* in Siberut with conservationists through informal relations and even a campaign to protect primates (Puailiggoubat 2017; Cahyaningrum and Setyawan 2021). Mentawai responses to the park and conservation illustrate the complexity of Indigenous subjects: they simultaneously conform to and deviate from Indigenous images and imaginaries (High and Oakley 2020: 238).

Furthermore, the park is not a static institution. Decentralisation and the global movement of Indigenous people also tip the balance of power relations between the park and the Mentawai. The Indigenous movement since the mid-1990s (Persoon 1998; Li 2000;

Afiff and Lowe 2007; Davidson and Henley 2007; Darmanto and Setyowati 2012) and the recent political dynamic of customary rights issues (Rachman and Siscawati 2016) have strengthened the position of the Mentawai in asserting land claims when they encounter conservation agencies. The power balance has forced the park to adjust its approach. The park never criminalises people hunting primates by enforcing the Conservation Law. The power balance also encourages the park to engage with NGOs, anthropologists, and social activists, learning the benefit of understanding the land rights issue. They somehow *de facto* recognise Mentawai's rights over their land and resources. The encounter has forced the park to abandon law enforcement activities and change the direction of park management policy. The park is difficult to differentiate from any other state institution, given that it mainly provides small-scale and nonviolent development activities rather than enforcing forest patrols or capturing a hunter.

The Mentawai, SNP, and conservation agencies are in constant negotiation and have arguably developed the park as a contested space (Faier and Rofel 2014) or a 'middle ground' (White 1991; Conklin and Graham 1995), a pragmatic and temporal space of accommodation, cooperation, and resistance. The park has a programme, a state budget, and the power and authority to conserve the Mentawais' forest, and they need the Mentawais' participation and acceptance. The Mentawai have customary land rights and *de facto* acknowledgement from the park. Conservation strengthens the Mentawai and the park by asserting their mutual interest in conserving biodiversity and claiming ancestral land in the face of extractive activities outside the park. The middle ground they occupy is, of course, fragile and uncertain. However, at least

they can avoid open conflict and create a space where the conservation campaign and activities are welcomed, even if not entirely accepted and implemented. One of our interlocutors from Simatalu succinctly summed up the relationship between park staff and the Mentawai as follows:

> We are both looking for food in the same forest for our families. We are both Indonesian citizens. We both understand that the forest is important. People of the park have kids going to university. We want a better education for our children, too. They live from protecting our forest. We do our work in the forest to continue our lives. They would not evict us. They want to return home safely and reunite with their kids and friends after work. They are afraid of doing nasty things as some did in the past. They know that they need us. They try to make friends with us. They enjoy the banana and taro we cultivate in the forest when they visit us. Sometimes, they give us something. Probably to persuade us not to go hunting. We do not need them to continue our life. We do not need them [to tell us] how to prepare for our future. We have been cultivating forests for generations and will continue to do so. As long as the park allows us to do the things our ancestors did, we have no problem with them.

There is a general view that the SNP staff are government employees carrying out their conservation duties to feed their families and obtain a better life. The Mentawai are pursuing the same thing by clearing land, cultivating forests or hunting animals for the markets on the mainland. The notion of 'food and family' here is key, since it succinctly illustrates how the middle ground between the park and the

Mentawai is embedded in the pursuit of a better livelihood (Highly and Oakley 2022) by both sides. It also show that Mentawai ideas of human and forest relations remain intact even though they slightly accepted the presence of the park in their place.

While there have been prominent social accommodations in the park, if a random Mentawai were asked about the park or conservation NGOs and their activities, they would say that the idea of conserving forests, animals, and plants is still strange. The accommodation and acceptance of the park illustrate that biodiversity conservation has come to permeate local language and speech, but, at the same time, unsettled the way the Mentawai develop relations with the forest. It shows how the park becomes a reality and is envisioned to penetrate the local realm. Mentawai's willingness to participate in park activities reveals that the park is not only a discourse, but already part of the social fabric of Mentawai life, which has cosmological and material effects in producing space and identity. However, we might also argue that the Mentawai have wisely tried to accommodate conservation ideas and practices in their cultural reproduction to reduce the pressures of conservation and to defend a space for survivance (Rubis and Theriault 2020) and the resurgence of Indigenous world-making practices (Escobar 2016) in the context of an ongoing imbalance in power relations.

CONCLUSIONS

We have described two contrasting ways of producing a forest as a space. For the Mentawai, transforming the forest into a social space and establishing connections with the non-human entities in the forest are central to the production of human life. Since the campaign 'Saving Siberut' and the establishment of SNP, however, the Mentawai have continued to confront different ideas, images, and relations with the forest, which starkly contrast with their own. For biodiversity conservationists, a forest is a natural space constituted by maps, boundaries, a list of protected animals, regulations, and policy pronouncements for protecting wildlife. Moreover, conservation activities highlight the production of conservation space, encompassing global ideas, images, discourse, networks, campaigns, development, finances, project support, and desired social practices (Lefebvre 1991; Smith 1996). The park has become a new cosmology of space—a way of seeing and being in the world through the lens of nature protection (Brosius 1999; Watts 1993; West 2006; West and Brockington 2006). The encounter between the Mentawai and conservation intervention reveals two completely different visions of space and two fundamentally different visions of the forest-human relationship.

These visions represent a contraposition of humans, nature, and life (Keller 2008), with mundane social practices and engagement situated between these two polarised visions. Neither the park nor the Mentawai is an unchanging agency dictating spatial relationships; they are involved in constant negotiations. The Mentawai have realised that they do not have enough power to cancel the presence of the park or challenge the Conservation Law but recognise their strong position in the contemporary discourse on Indigenous rights and decentralisation. Both know contemporary political relations prevent park officers from employing Conservation Law, force, and actual violence in their duties. SNP is a paper park (White and Courtney 2004; West and Brockington 2006) and does not conform to a standard storyline of the displacement, dispossession, and expropriation of local populations that can be found in the political

ecology literature of parks in Africa and elsewhere (Peluso 1993; Neumann, 1998; 2004; Brockington 2002; West et al. 2006; Kelly 2011). We contend that the status of SNP as a paper park is not caused mainly by a lack of resources, poor design or ineffective enforcement. Instead, it is both produced by the Mentawai's' various strategies to survive against a backdrop of powerful conservation institutions (Rubis and Thériault 2020) and the changing political-economy dynamic of the Indigenous people and the outside world, especially after the national decentralisation process aligning with the global Indigenous movement. The Mentawai do not feel defeated by the presence of the park as other Indigenous/local groups around the globe have felt (Keller 2008; Dowie 2011). Their current cooperation with the park and other conservation initiatives not only points to their aspirations and desires to cultivate relations with external conservation agencies (High and Oakley 2020), but also illustrates their confidence in continuing their 'world-making' (Escobar 2013, 2016; Cepek 2008).

In extending the critical literature on the violent creation and impact of protected areas, our article indicates that the shift in access, subjectivity, political relations, and social practices regarding protected areas (Kelly 2014; Kelly and Gupta 2016) does not always worsen Indigenous people's livelihoods, lives, and well-being. Instead, our case inadvertently points to the way forward to transform existing conservation practices. Various scholars (Büscher and Fletcher 2020; Massarela et al. 2023; Perfecto et al. 2019; Kashwan et al. 2021) call for a radical transformation for violent, racialised, and militarised protection to create a socially just, democratic, inclusive, decolonised, and regenerative form of biodiversity conservation. Although these are significant and timely

endeavours, it is equally crucial that conservationists and anthropologists alike document the transformations that have already occurred in protected areas (Kelly 2014; Kelly and Gupta 2016) in which Indigenous people's agencies play crucial roles without simply elucidating the latest jargon, ideas or arguments.

The Mentawai might not offer a sophisticated radical critique of Western ideas of human nature underlying conservation and the global political-economic structure underpinning the existing conservation agendas. Nor do they openly challenge the structures of powers in the park and park management as radical social movements do. Nevertheless, they force the national park to accommodate their way of relating to the forest and the more-than-human world in the forest that resembles the ideas of regenerative ecology (Kashwan et al. 2021; Altieri and Toledo 2011). They have pushed the park to acknowledge their land rights and recognise the co-existence of human and non-human nature, avoiding legal enforcement and violent approaches and accepting the direct democratic Mentawai's governance of the forest as recently promoted by convivial conservation scholars (Büscher and Fletcher 2020; Massarela et al. 2023). In doing so, the Mentawai reshape the park as a new space where their interest in engagement with biodiversity conservation is part of the Indigenous way of being (Cepek 2008, 2018), whereby forests and other natural resources are continuously a part of the production of human life. Paying careful attention to the negotiation space might open our eyes to the diverse and prosaic forms of Indigenous politics in protected areas already before us.

DARMANTO
RESEARCH FELLOW AT THE ORIENTAL
INSTITUTE, CZECH ACADEMY OF
SCIENCE
ORCID: 0000-0002-5327-7658
darmanto@orient.cas.cz

KOEN MEYERS
CONSERVATION DIRECTOR, SUMATRAN
ORANGUTANS SOCIETY
koen@orangutans-sos.org

NOTES

1 We wish we could describe the myth fully here. The myth recounts that the ancestors of the Mentawai, Western, and mainland people were siblings, but had different attitudes towards working in the forest. The Mentawai and the mainland people's ancestors loved working in the forest, while Westerners' ancestors loved working with steel, computers, and reading books. Nevertheless, the mainland people's ancestors followed in the footsteps of Westerner ancestors, learning how to make machines, but forgetting how to live in the forest. In this myth, the forest not only affected social relations between the ancestors of the Mentawai and others, but also explained their differences.

REFERENCES

ADB (Asian Development Bank) 1995. *Siberut National Park Integrated Conservation and Development Management Plan. Vol. I/III*. Jakarta, ADB/Ministry of Forestry.

ADB 2001. *Project Completion Report on the Biodiversity Conservation Project in Flores and Siberut (Loan 1187-INO[SF]) in Indonesia*. Jakarta: ADB.

Afiff, Suraya and Celia Lowe 2007. Claiming Indigenous Community: Political Discourse and Natural Resource Rights in Indonesia. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 32 (1): 73–97. https://doi.org/10.1177/030437540703200104.

Agrawal, Arun 2005. *Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Aji, Gutomo B. Herry Yogaswara, Fadjri Alihar, Toni Soetopo, Abadi Prayitno, Intan A. P. Dalimunthe, Diana A. Ekaputri, Luh K. Katherina, Abdurrahim Aliansyah, Lengga Pradipta, Irina Rafliana, and Neneng Susilawati 2015. *Kajian Kawasan Hutan Kabupaten Kepulauan Mentawai [Studies on the forest areas of Mentawai Islands district]*. Tuapeijat: Pemerintah Daerah Kepulauan Mentawai dan Pusat Penelitian Kependudukan Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia. Unpublished Report.

Altieri, Miguel A. and Victor Manuel Toledo 2011. The Agroecological Revolution in Latin America: Rescuing Nature, Ensuring Food Sovereignty and Empowering Peasants. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 38 (3): 587–612. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2011.582947.

Bakker, Laurens 1999. *Tiele! Turis! The Social and Ethnic Impact of Tourism in Siberut, Mentawai*. Leiden: Leiden University.

Ball, Christopher 2012. Stop Loss: Developing Interethnic Relations in Brazil's Xingu Indigenous Park. *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 17 (3): 413–34. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1935-4940.2012.01256.x

Barber, Charles V., Suraya Afiff and Ahmad Purnomo 1995. *Tiger by the Tail: Reorienting Biodiversity Conservation and Development in Indonesia*. Washington D.C: World Resources Institute.

BPS (Badan Pusat Statistik) 2021. *Kabupaten Kepulauan Mentawai Dalam Angka 2020–2021*. Tuapejat: Badan Pusat Statistik Kepulauan Mentawai.

Brockington, Dan 2002. *Fortress Conservation: The Preservation of the Mt Reserve, Tanzania*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Brosius, Peter J. 1999. Analyses and Interventions: Anthropological Engagements with Environmentalism. *Current Anthropology* 40 (3): 277–309. https://doi.org/10.1086/200019.

Büscher, Bram and Robert Fletcher 2020. *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature Beyond the Anthropocene*. New York: Verso Trade.

Cahyaningrum, Eka & Arif Setyawan 2021. Strengthening Cultural Values for Primate Conservation on Mentawai Island, Indonesia. *Oryx* 55 (2): 172.
https://doi.org/10.1017/S0030605321000053.

Cepek, Michael L. 2008. Essential Commitments: Identity and the Politics of Cofán Conservation. *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 13(1): 196–222. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-7180.2008.00009.x.

Cepek, Michael L. 2018. *Life in Oil: Cofan Survival in the Petroleum Fields of Amazonia.* Austin: University Texas Press.

Conklin, Beth 2020. Shifting Cultivation in Amazonia's Middle Grounds: Propagating Connections Across Eco-Political-Economic Landscapes. *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 25 (2): 340–350. https://doi.org/10.1111/jlca.12492.

Conklin, Beth and Laura Graham 1995. The Shifting Middle Ground: Amazonian Indians and Eco Politics. *American Anthropologist* 97 (4): 695–710. https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1995.97.4.02a00120.

Cronon, William 1996. *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature.* London: W. W. Norton & Co.

Darmanto 2006. Studi Ekologi Perladangan Hutan Tradisional Masyarakat Mentawai (Pumonean) di Pulau Siberut, Sumatra Barat. In H. Soedjito (ed.), *Kearifan Tradisional dan Cagar Biosfer di Indonesia: Prosiding MAB 2005 untuk Peneliti Muda dan Praktisi Lingkungan di Indonesia.* Jakarta: Komite Nasional MAB Indonesia-LIPI.

Darmanto 2011. Konservasi Global, Taman Nasional, dan Praktek Lokal di Pulau Siberut, Sumatra Barat. *Jurnal Ilmu Kehutanan* 5 (1): 51–65. https://doi.org/10.22146/jik.582.

Darmanto 2016. *Maintaining Fluidity, Demanding Clarity: The Dynamics of Customary Land Relations among Indigenous People of Siberut Island, West Sumatra.* M.Phil. Thesis. Murdoch: Murdoch University.

Darmanto 2020. *Good to Produce, Good to Share: Food, Hunger, and Social Value(s) in a Contemporary Mentawaian Society.* Ph.D. Thesis. Leiden: Leiden University.

Darmanto and Abidah B. Setyowati 2012. *Berebut Hutan Siberut: Orang Mentawai, Kekuasaan dan Politik Ekologi.* Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama.

Davidson, Jamie and David Henley 2007. *The Revival of Tradition in Indonesian Politics The Deployment of Adat from Colonialism to Indigenism.* London: Routledge.

DiNovelli-Lang D 2013. The Return of the Animal: Posthumanism, Indigeneity, and Anthropology. *Environmental Society.* 4: 137–56. https://doi.org/10.3167/ares.2013.040109.

Dowie, Mark 2011. *Conservation Refugees: The Hundred-Year Conflict between Global Conservation and Native Peoples.* Massachusetts: MIT Press.

DTE (Down to Earth) 1999. "Logging and Palm Oil Treat to Siberut", Down to Earth no. 42 (Agustus). https://www.downtoearth-indonesia.org/story/logging-and-palm-oil-threat-siberut. <Accessed 3 September 2024>

DTE (Down to Earth) 2006. "Struggle Against Logging Goes on in Mentawai", Down to Earth no. 68 (February). https://www.downtoearth-indonesia.org/story/struggle-against-logging-goes-mentawai. <Accessed 3 September 2024>

Eindhoven, Myrna 2007. Penjajah Baru? Identitas, Representasi dan Pemerintahan di Kepulauan Mentawai Pasca Orde Baru. In Henk. S. Nordholt and Gery van Klinken (eds), *Politik Lokal di Indonesia.* Jakarta: Yayasan Obor Indonesia.

Eindhoven, Myrna 2009. The Influence of History and Politics on the Environmental Future of the Mentawai Archipelago. *Asia Pacific Forum* 44: 55–81.

Eindhoven, Myrna 2019. *Products and Producers of Social and Political Change: Elite Activism and Politicking in the Mentawai Archipelago, Indonesia.* Ph.D. Thesis. Leiden: Leiden University. https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/handle/1887/73421.

Escobar, Arturo 1999. After Nature: Steps to an Antiessentialist Political Ecology. *Current Anthropology* 40 (1): 1–30.
https://doi.org/10.1086/515799.

Escobar, Arturo 2013. Comment on M. Blaser, 'Ontological Conflicts and the Stories of Peoples in Spite of Europe: Toward a Conversation on Political

Ontology. *Current Anthropology* 54 (5): 561–562. https://doi.org/10.1086/672270.

Escobar, Arturo 2016. "Thinking-Feeling with the Earth: Territorial Struggles and the Ontological Dimension of the Epistemologies of the South." *AIBR (Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana)* 11 (1): 11–32. https://doi.org/10.11156/aibr.110102e.

Faier, Lieba and Lisa Rofel 2014. Ethnographies of Encounter. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 43: 363–377. https://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102313-030210.

Fausto, Carlos, and Michael Heckenberger 2007. Indigenous History and the History of the „Indians". In Carlos Fausto and Michael Heckenberger (eds). *Time and Memory in Indigenous Amazonia: Anthropological Perspectives*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Fox, J. James 2006. Place and Landscape in Comparative Austronesian Perspective. In James J. Fox (ed.) *The Poetic Power of Place: Comparative Perspectives on Austronesian Ideas of Locality*. Canberra: Australian National University Press.

Goldman, Michael 1998. Privatizing Nature: Political Struggles for the Global Commons. In Michael Goldman, (ed.) *Privatizing Nature Political Struggles for the Global Commons*. London: Pluto Press.

Hammons, Christian 2010. *Sakaliou: Reciprocity, Mimesis and the Cultural Economy of Tradition*. PhD Thesis. California: University of Southern California.

Harbinson, Rod 2019. An Indonesian Forest Community Grapples with the Arrival of the Outside World, July 1. https://news.mongabay.com/2019/07/an-indonesian-forest-community-grapples-with-the-arrival-of-the-outside-world. <Accessed 2 September 2024>

High, Casey and Elliot R. Oakley 2020. Conserving and Extracting Nature: Environmental Politics and Livelihoods in the New "Middle Grounds" of Amazonia. *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 25 (2): 236–247. https://doi.org/10.1111/jlca.12490.

Jakarta Post 2017. Mentawai Residents Oppose Permit for Industrial Forest. Jakarta Post website, 14 September. https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2017/09/14/mentawai-residents-oppose-permit-for-industrial-forest.html. <Accessed 2 September 2024>

Jepson, Paul & Robert J. Whittaker 2002. Histories of Protected Areas: Internationalisation of Conservationist Values and their Adoption in the Netherlands Indies (Indonesia). *Environment and History*, 8 (2): 129–172. https://doi.org/10.3197/096734002129342620.

Kashwan, Prakash, Rosaleen V. Duffy, Francis Massé, Adeniyi P. Asiyanbi, and Esther Marijnen 2021. From Racialized Neocolonial Global Conservation to an Inclusive and Regenerative Conservation, *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, 63 (4): 4–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/00139157.2021.1924574.

Keller, Eva 2008. The Banana Plant and the Moon: Conservation and the Malagasy Ethos of Life in Masoala,Madagascar, *American Ethnologist* 35 (4): 650–664. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2008.00103.x.

Kelly, Alice B. 2011. Conservation Practice as Primitive Accumulation, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 38 (4): 683–701. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2011.607695.

Kelly, Alice B. 2014. The Crumbling Fortress: Territory, Access, and Subjectivity Production in Waza National Park, Northern Cameroon. *Antipode* 47 (3): 730–747. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12132.

Kelly, Alice B. and Clare, A. Gupta 2016. Protected Areas: Offering Security to Whom, When and Where? *Environmental Conservation*, 43 (2): 172–180. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0376892915000375.

Kiik, Laur 2019. Conservation Land: Toward The Anthropology of Professionalsin Global Nature Conservation, *Critique of Anthropology*, 39 (4): 391–419. https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X18821177

Lefebvre, Henri 1991. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Li, Tania Murray 2000. Articulating Indigenous Identity in Indonesia: Resource Politic and Tribal Slot. *Comparative Study of Society and History* 42 (1): 149–179. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500002632.

Li, Tania Murray 2007. *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development and the Practice of Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Massarela, Kate, Judith E. Krauss, Wilhelm Kiwango, and Robert Fletcher 2023. Exploring Convivial Conservation in Theory and Practice.

In Kate Massarella, Judith E. Krauss, Wilhelm A. Kiwango and Robert Fletcher (eds), *Convivial Conservation: From Principle to Practices*. Mayflay Book. https://mayflybooks.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Convivial_Conservation_Book_ONLINE.pdf

Massey, Dorren 1994. *Space, Place, and Gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

McNeely, Jeffrey 1979. Island Paradise for Wildlife and People. *Oryx* 15(2): 159–164. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0030605300024261.

Meyers, Koen 2003. *The Changing of Cultural and Ecological Roles of Siberut People in the Management and Conservation of Their Natural Resources*. Master Thesis. Antwerp: The National Higher Institute of Fine Arts.

Mitchell, Arthur 1982. *Siberut Nature Conservation Area, West Sumatra: Management Plan 1983-1988*. Bogor: WWF.

Neumann, Roderick 1998. *Imposing Wilderness: Struggles Over Livelihood and Nature Preservation in Africa*. Berkeley: Univ. Calif. Press.

Peluso, Nancy Lee 1993. Coercing Conservation?: The Politics of State Resource Control. *Global Environmental Change*, 3 (2): 199–217. https://doi.org/10.1016/0959-3780(93)90006-7.

Peluso, Nancy Lee and Michael Watts 2001. Violent Environments. In Nancy. L. Peluso and Michael Watts (eds). *Violent Environments*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Perfecto, I J. Vandermeer, and A. Wright 2019. *Nature's Matrix: Linking Agriculture, Biodiversity Conservation and Food Sovereignty*: New York: Routledge.

Persoon, Gerard 1995. *Special Report Sociology/Anthropology Specialist in Siberut Project Site*. Jakarta: Departemen Kehutanan, ICDP.

Persoon, Gerard 1998. Isolated Groups or Indigenous Peoples: Indonesia and the International Discourse, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Globalization, Localization and Indonesia*. 154 (2): 281–304.

Persoon, Gerard 2001. The Management of Wild and Domesticated Forest Resources on Siberut, West Sumatra. *Antropologi Indonesia*, 64: 68–83.

Persoon, Gerard 2002. Defining Wildness and Wilderness: Minangkabau Images and Actions on Siberut (West Sumatra). In Geofrey Benjamin and Cynthia Chou (eds). *Tribal Communities in the Malay World: Historical, Cultural and Social Perspectives*. Singapore: ISEAS.

PHPA (Directorate General of Forest Protection and Nature Conservation) 1995. *Siberut National Park Integrated Conservation and Management Plan, Vol II: Plan for Conservation and Development Activities*. Jakarta: PHPA.

Puailiggoubat 2017. Sosok: Mentawai Penyelamat Primata. *Pualiggoubat*, No. 353 (1–14 February): 17.

Rachman, Noer Fauzi and Mia Siscawati 2016. Forestry Law, Masyarakat Adat and Struggles for Inclusive Citizenship in Indonesia. In Christopher Antons (ed). *Routledge Handbook in Asian Law*. London and New York: Routledge.

Reeves, Gleen 1994. *Spaces of Life; Spaces of Death: The Relationship of the House (uma) to the Production of Space and Identity in a Rereiket Community, Mentawai*. Canberra: Australian National University.

Rubis, June Mary and Noah Theriault 2020. Concealing Protocols: Conservation, Indigenous Survivance, and the Dilemmas of Visibility, *Social & Cultural Geography*, 21 (7): 962–984. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2019.1574882.

Schefold, Reimar 1970. Religious Conceptions on Siberut, Mentawai. *Sumatra Research Bulletin* 2 (2): 12–24.

Schefold, Reimar 1980a. The Sacrifices of the Sakudei (Mentawai Archipelago, Western Indonesia): An Attempt at Classification. In Reimar Schefold, J. W Schoorl. And J. Tennekes (eds). *Man, Meaning, and History: Essays in Honour of H.G. Schulte Nordholt*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Schefold, Reimar 1980b. The Siberut Project. *The Survival International Review*, 5 (1): 4–12.

Schefold, Reimar 1991. *Mainan Bagi Roh: Kebudayaan Mentawai*. Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya.

Schefold, Reimar 2002. Visions of the Wilderness on Siberut in a Comparative Southeast Asia Perspective. In Geofrey Benjamin and Cynthia Chou (eds). *Tribal Community in the Malay World: Historical, Cultural and Social Perspective*. Singapore: ISEAS.

SNP (Siberut National Park) 2017. *Siberut National Park Annual Report*. Padang: Siberut National Park.

SKEPHI (Indonesian Network on Tropical Forest Conservation) 1992. *Destruction of the World's Heritage: Siberut's Vanishing Forest, People and Culture*. Jakarta: SKEPHI.

Smith, Neill 1990. *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Smith, Neill 1996. The Production of Nature. In George Robertson and Melinda Marsh (eds). *Future Natural.* London: Routledge.

Strathern, Marilyn 1980. No Nature, No Culture: The Hagen Case. In Cathy MacCormack and Marilyn Strathern (eds). *Nature, Culture and Gender.* Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.

Tenaza, Richard 1990. Can Siberut be Saved? *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 14 (4): 74–76.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph 2003. Anthropology and the Savage Slot: The Poetics and Politics of Otherness. In Michel-Rolph Trouillot (ed.) *Global Transformations*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-04144-9_2.

Tulius, Juniator 2012. *Family Stories: Oral Tradition, Memories of the Past, and Contemporary Conflict Over Land in Mentawai Indonesia*. Leiden: Leiden University.

Vandergeest, Peter and Nancy L. Peluso 1995. Territorialization and State Power in Thailand, *Theory and Society*, 24 (3): 385–426.

Watts, Michael 1993. Development I: Power, Knowledge and Discursive Practice. *Prog. Hum. Geogr* 17 (2): 257–72. https://doi.org/10.1177/030913259301700.

Wells Michael, Scott Guggenheim, Ahmad Kahn, Wahyudi Wardojo and Paul Jepson 1999. *Investing in Biodiversity: A Review of Indonesia's Integrated Conservation and Development Projects*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.

West, Paige 2006. *Conservation is Our Government Now: The Politics of Ecology in Papua New Guinea*. Durham: Duke University Press.

West, Paige and Dan Brockington 2006. An Anthropological Perspective on Some Unexpected Consequences of Protected Areas. *Conservation Biology* 20 (3): 609–6016. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1523-1739.2006.00432.x

West, Paige, Jim Igoe and Dan Brockington 2006. Parks and Peoples: The Social Impact of Protected Areas. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35: 251–77. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.35.081705.123308

West, Paige 2016. *Dispossession and the Environment: Rhetoric and Inequality in Papua New Guinea.* New York: Columbia University Press.

White, Alan T. and Courtney, Catherine A. 2004. Policy Instruments for Coral Reef Management and Their Effectiveness. In M. Ahmed, C.K. Chong and H. Cesar (eds). *Economic Valuation and Policy Priorities for Sustainable Management of Coral Reefs*. World Fish Center Conference Proceedings.

White, Richard 1991. *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Whitten, Tony, Jane Whitten and Alan House 1979. Solution for Siberut? *Oryx* 15(2): 166–169. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0030605300024273

WWF. 1980. *Saving Siberut: A Conservation Master Plan*. Bogor: WWF.

Zerner, Charles 2003. Dividing Lines: Nature, Culture, and Commerce in Indonesia's Aru Islands, 1856–1997. In Paul Greenough and Anna Tsing (eds). *Nature in Global South: Environmental Projects in South and Southeast Asia*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Dayabati Roy

PROMISES OF DEVELOPMENT, LAND ACQUISITION, AND DISPOSSESSION: A CAR FACTORY PROJECT AND PEASANTS IN WEST BENGAL, INDIA

ABSTRACT

This article examines how the futures promised by the postcolonial state through various projects leave peasants sceptical about a new government project at the rural margin of India. Focusing on a car factory project undertaken in 2006 by the government of the West Bengal Indian state, I explore how a half century-long project of land reforms shaped the dispossession politics of the peasants whose lands have been acquired for a car factory project. Based on an ethnography in Singur, this article explores how a car factory project at the very onset of its implementation instilled a sense of harm to life and livelihoods. Consequently, that project produced forms of spatiotemporal inequality between different socioeconomic groups in connection, not only with their ownership of land, but also with their respective vision of their work futures.

Keywords: project form, dispossession, land acquisition, peasantry, India

INTRODUCTION

It was the month of May in 2006. Amidst the midsummer heat and the excitement across the eastern Indian state of West Bengal, a segment of citizens celebrated the Left Front's (LF) overwhelming victory. Simultaneously, news of a new project spread in the state. This new project planned to establish a Tata Motors, a global company, car factory on a stretch of 997 acres of agricultural land in Singur, a community development block situated around 45 km from the Kolkata metropolitan area. The newly re-elected chief minister of the LF government in West Bengal and the chairperson of Tata Motors jointly declared this car factory project a panacea for the area's development deficit. Several villagers of Singur from all corners of the land earmarked for the car factory project, however, gathered in the next week to protest when news spread of the Tata Motors team and government officials' visit. Since that protest, Singur remained in the eye of a political storm that lasted until Tata Motors moved out of Singur and relocated the car project to Gujarat, a western Indian state, in October 2008.

The West Bengal government was resolute in acquiring these agricultural lands by virtue of the colonial Land Acquisition Act of 1894, according to which, lands can be acquired for the

purpose of the 'public interest' without requiring approval from the landowners. Nirupam Sen (2006), the then-industry Minister stated, '[I]t is a question of not just those who are losing land, but also of the economic growth of the state'. Notably, West Bengal's growth rate fell to 4.9%, below the India-wide average, which was 5.5% during the last decade of LF rule (2001–2010) (Ghatak 2021). The LF government, thus, sought, as Mohanty (2007: 2) noted, to 'change both gear and strategy in an effort to sustain the economic growth that West Bengal has seen in the last three decades or so'. However, when the government used the story of growth to justify its attempt at rapid industrialisation, scholars made a broader point related to rampant industrialisation and urbanisation in South Asia. Drawing from Harvey (2005), who argued that a shift in emphasis has occurred in contemporary capitalism from expanded reproduction to accumulation through dispossession, Banerjee-Guha (2008) suggested that the appropriation of lands purportedly aimed at industrialisation and generating employment have often been diverted by real estate speculation and elite consumption.

This article explores how both registered and unregistered sharecroppers, women, and landowners differ in their experiences during the anticipatory phase of dispossession. Under the compensation packages offered by the LF government, only landowners and registered sharecroppers (albeit minimally) are entitled to receive monetary compensation. Other groups, such as unregistered sharecroppers, landless peasants, and women, all individuals who depend primarily upon these lands, are situated beyond the purview of compensation packages, and, thus, participate in the anti-land acquisition movement. Since the beginning, these economically and socially marginalised people came together to forge a unified

anti-land acquisition movement against the state government. Much has been written about the effects of land acquisition on the marginal and low-caste people of India (see, for instance, Banerjee-Guha 2008; Jenkins et al. 2014; Levien 2018; Sud 2014) and, in the particular context of Singur, the location of my study (Das 2016; Majumdar 2018; Nielsen 2010; Roy 2014; Sarkar 2007; Sau 2018). Some recent research (Gardner 2018; Noy 2020, 2022, 2023; Oskarsson 2018) importantly examined the unequal consequences of dispossession and how compensation packages create new forms of discrimination. This article contributes to these studies by explaining how the threat of anticipated dispossession produces forms of spatiotemporal inequality between different socioeconomic groups connected not only to their ownership of land, but also to their respective vision of future work.

Contestations emerged when the Tata Motors' car factory project, which the government identified as in the 'public interest', mediated how different groups of people in the region live and pursue their livelihoods. Subsequently, anticipating dispossession and minimal compensation packages engendered a differentiated terrain in which people perceived and encountered land acquisition for a car factory project based on their respective positions. Various socioeconomic groups in Singur diverged regarding how they framed the meaning of land acquisition for their futures and responded accordingly to the anticipated dispossession. For instance, when I approached one of the affected villages, trudging along a muddy road, a sharecropper woman commented passionately:

> [W]e have cultivated a small amount of land as unregistered sharecroppers for a few decades. The government is

about to dispossess us of these lands for Tata Motors, which has come to establish a car factory on the rural frontier. If that happens, how can my son survive without these lands? Our lives are almost over, what will happen to him? So, I shall fight till the end and, if necessary, sacrifice my life for the sake of defending these lands so that my son can live off them.

The question that arises is how a car factory project, which the government considered a remedy to several developmental deficits, permeates the social world of diverse segments of the peasantry. Projects involving an organisational technology are generally planned so that human intervention can achieve a particular goal within a specific timeframe. The project form can, thus, structure and transform social realities based on a particular template. The Singur car factory project, therefore, came into conflict 'with the concrete experiences' of the peasants and the 'social rhythms of time' (Bear 2014: 6–7). Abram and Weszkalnys (2011: 3–4) define a project as 'the ordered preparation for development' that operates 'as a particular form of promissory note'. Knox and Harvey (2011: 143), scholars of infrastructures, showed in their study how a road construction project in Peru was promoted 'as a way of mitigating some of the dangers of underdevelopment, economic isolation, and political volatility'. By promising a better future, this car factory project in Singur was also advanced as an attempt at rapid industrialisation. However, a rift emerged between the project and its implementation when the former permeated social worlds through its predetermined template of actions, mediating how different groups of people from the concerned project area live and pursue their livelihoods. That is, a rift emerges because

a proposed project usually presumes that the target people are rational actors presumed to work methodically across the segmented times to produce a new social reality that promises a better future.

Abram (2014: 129) noted that 'multiple temporalities' might exist within a project. Drawing from an ethnography of a movement against land acquisition, this article explores how various social forms in a project area engage with the promises of a better future promised by a project. Do peasants anticipate that a project template of actions does not consider their livelihoods and other concerns? Do they have a deep sense of insecurity for their future? These questions become significant given the influential arguments put forward by Bear (2017). Specifically, she asserted that the analysis of how a specific community, institution, and individual construct 'pasts and futures to take action in the present' is significant, but not 'sufficient to understand and act on inequality' (Bear 2017: 143). What we need, as she emphasised, is a critical political economy of capitalist time that traces forms of accumulation, the emergence of contradictory rhythms, and varying degrees of security and insecurity (Bear 2017, 2020).

Instead of dealing with issues related to capitalist accumulation alongside labour and work, project forms in neoliberal India often deal with issues that concern the management of populations who typically suffer from prioritising economic growth. As Li (2007: 7) correctly argued, 'experts tasked with improvement exclude the structure of political-economic relations from their diagnoses and prescriptions'. Project forms, therefore, attempt to contain any disruptive temporalities that emerge during implementation. Given that the conflict between capital and labour lies within the purview of power dynamics, project forms

seldom attempt to intervene in the conflict between capital and labour. One of the relevant questions that immediately arises is whether certain kinds of issues always remain elusive simply because they lie beyond the purview of project forms. Both project planners and project executors instantly intervene in and manage any unwanted contingencies arising as a result of conflicting interests in the population during project implementation. But, planners and executors may play hardly any role in issues that often appear as part of the fundamental conflicts between capital and labour.

Moreover, a project might fail due to often conflicting timelines and agencies, while the promises, expectations, hopes, and deprivations a particular project form brings remain in the minds of the target populations. By contrast, people frame their expectations and aspirations related to any future projects based on the past and future, which took shape based on previous project forms. Thus, a disjuncture often arises between the ordered times that project forms layout and the multiple disorderly temporalities that exist during project implementation.

In this study, I conducted an ethnographic exploration in a village in Singur between 2006 and 2008. In doing so, I spent more than three months in this village, and remained in touch with the area and its people intermittently in subsequent years. I closely observed, sometimes as a participant observer, the intense struggle against land acquisition. In addition, I interviewed around 90 people from different strata and conducted several rounds of informal discussions. Among the interviewees, several were women, including young and elderly people since they stayed at home, while working men were away from home during the daytime. However, I attempted to visit their workplaces, the agricultural fields.

The first section examines the context of

imagining the time for industrialisation and how a car factory project planned on a stretch of fertile agricultural lands resulted from the promise of creating employment. The second section explores the contestations of futurity, guarantees, and values emerging from peasants' resistance to the proposed car factory and the subsequent land acquisition. The third section explores how peasants conceptualised dispossession based on the construction and reconstruction of their experiences of governmental policies, such as land reform programmes in the past. Finally, the fourth section summarises what we can take away from this narrative of project forms and their implementation, and what this research contributes to the work on projects and project forms.

INDUSTRIALISATION: A PROMISE FOR THE FUTURE

The Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)], the dominant force of the LF government, represented an alliance of some left-wing political parties. In West Bengal, they aimed to write a new 'development' script based on their sense of time after their seventh consecutive electoral victory in May 2006. The new development script placed more emphasis on economic growth, industrialisation, and urbanisation. Their sense of time seemed linear, acting as a driving force for the capitalist conception of human history and Marxist (orthodox) communists. Nigam (2007: 1047) rightly argued that 'a certain narrative of progress and history that derives from a certain rendering (reading) of Marx' involves a well-entrenched notion that is 'shared by the bourgeois economics (…)'. This notion of time supposedly prioritises the future and rejects the past. Similarly, in the LF government's script, a stage perception existed in which industrialisation

follows agriculture. They assumed that agriculture in West Bengal had developed to its limit, and, now, it industrialisation's time. As Buddhadeb Bhattacharya (2007), the erstwhile Chief Minister, stated, industrialisation was the only viable path at that moment to create employment for the aspiring youth in West Bengal. Asserting his faith in the historical inevitability of capitalism, he thus argued, 'the process of economic development evolves from agriculture to industry. The journey is from [the] villages to cities (...) it is incumbent on us to move ahead; there will be the end of history' (2007: 3).

Time as envisioned by the LF government was also a temporality, whereby, as Abram and Weszkalnys (2011: 7) argued, 'as global corporations have become increasingly willing to move their activities to offshore, states have competed to attract their investment'. Steur and Das (2009: 67) stated that almost all countries in the global South, including the 'communist' countries 'have become "transition" countries, competing to attract foreign direct investment and reform according to the strictures of global capitalism'. The question that arises now is whether we can recognise the establishment of a private car factory through the acquisition of peasants' agricultural lands as an instance of exercising governmentality. In their study on road construction, Knox and Harvey (2011: 144) argued that we should consider the construction of a road 'an ideal example of the exercise of governmentality' since its implementation is 'oriented towards the freedom of the population'. The term 'governmentality' was used by Foucault (1991) to define the techniques of modern governments that 'have as [their] purpose not the act of government itself, but the welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health, etc (...)' (Graham et

al. 1991). In the same way, we can also consider industrialisation and investment as ways of managing underdevelopment, unemployment, and economic isolation along with promoting a sense of security in many developing countries like India.

However, a car factory and land acquisition for it as project forms could engender exclusion and harm in the minds of the people. For instance, comparing land dispossession for industrial development under state-level developmentalism and neoliberalism in India, Levien (2013: 381) argued that, in 'the present regime "land broker states" have emerged to indiscriminately transfer land from peasants to capitalist firms for real estate'. Central governments might have failed 'to achieve the ideological legitimacy of its predecessors', as he noted, reflecting 'a regime of land for production with pretensions of inclusive social transformation' (Levien 2013: 381). The question now arises, as Sanyal (2007) and Chatterjee (2008) indicated, whether small producers (principally the peasantry), who have been continually dispossessed of their lands and/or other means of labour, are simultaneously provided with some other means of livelihood as part of 'governmentality'. The car factory project in Singur and the ensuing resistance among dispossessed peasants against this project enlighten us as to how the factory project could mark a rupture in the system of governance lasted for more than three decades—from the late 1970s to the late 2000s.

After the economic reforms of the 1990s, industrial licensing policy in India underwent crucial changes due to the implementation of liberalisation policies and the subsequent decline in the role of the central government and planning commission in both conceiving and financing state-level developmental projects. Various state governments from the Indian

Union gained greater autonomy in economic decision-making as well as the opportunity to attract investors to their respective locations (Rudolph and Rudolph 2001). West Bengal was no exception. The then-LF government of West Bengal sought to turn the tide, albeit belatedly, by 'unleashing capital from the reigns of red tape', swinging 'between favouring citizens and encouraging business' (Abram and Weszkalnys 2011: 7) just after their victory in the assembly election in 2006. It took every effort to attract footloose capital and woo investors to strengthen the industrial sector of West Bengal. Investment from Tata Motors for a car factory in West Bengal was part of these rejuvenation efforts by the state and, thus, represented a breakthrough, easing the path for industrialisation and a considerable achievement in attracting investment.

While imagining this time period as the perfect juncture for switching from agriculture to industrialisation, the LF government never denied that segments of marginalised people would lose their jobs as part of this shift from agriculture to industry. However, the LF communists strongly believed that these job losses were indispensable in the historical transition from one stage to another. They presumed that it was the law of historical development, a trajectory one cannot change at will. Just after announcing this car factory project in May 2006, I conducted an exclusive interview with a district-level leader[1] of the ruling LF party at his residence in Singur. He explained how the government projected the establishment of a car factory on agricultural lands as a measure of enhancing development. He stated:

> It is undeniable that some peasants have lost their land in many places as roads widened, industries came up. But, due to consequent economic and social development, job opportunities have increased enormously. In such areas, even a day labourer now gets work on 300–350 days per year instead of only 100 days per year in agriculture. Many outside people will begin to stay here in quarters as industry develops, and they might require domestic help. Women from peasant families can earn more by working as maid-servants.

My conversation with this party leader also revealed that, since the beginning, the large landowners, most of whom were absentee, were ready to hand over their lands to the government for this project. By contrast, the marginalised peasants and some other people, most of whom did not have land but depended to some extent upon it for their livelihoods, were vehemently against the land acquisition (Roy 2014). Although this leader branded the anti-land acquisition movement as an offshoot of the provocation from opposition parties, he could not deny that marginal peasants were reluctant to give up making use of these lands. While the car factory project form promised a better future to the peasantry, the latter anticipated harm to their lives and livelihoods. Despite envisioning a promise to both the larger society and the local peasantry, the project form's values were measured based on a capitalist logic. The temporalities of the peasants, thus, differed from the temporality of the project, leading to the anti-land acquisition movement.

The representatives of political parties and the ruling LF parties, including the dominant CPI(M) party in particular, imagined the present as a capitalist time, which should set aside other practices that act as a deterrent to capitalist accumulation. Marxist communists jumped at the chance for growth in the economic development of West Bengal, while the modern

time—or the neoliberal time—trumpeted an unleashing of capital and encouraging business beyond the reach of the state. Rapid investment and industrialisation represented an urgent call in that moment, no matter who was displaced resulting from this effort. Like the liberal or the neoliberal camp, Marxist communists presumed that some proportion of individuals would never directly benefit from this project. However, Marxist communists also believed that the marginalised people at this capitalist time could obtain work in various sectors arising from industrialisation.

The question lay in how the government as a protagonist of this project measured the value of labour. My research found that the government recreated forms of inequality as part of the project. Notably, the patterns of the plan for setting up a factory explicitly revealed that the landowning class privileged the project space at the cost of the marginalised or landless labourers. The planners never hesitated to state that this car factory project would displace a segment of marginalised people from their lands and livelihoods. They viewed the acquisition of lands and the subsequent 'exclusion' of marginalised peasants as part of this transition from agriculture to industrialisation. This specific segment of the peasantry was considered extra or 'unwanted', visibly beyond the main stage of the project performance. They were, rather, the footloose labourers who might be carried through the emerging stages in this transition narrative, placed in the service of the propertied class as labourers including as domestic help.

In this narrative, the project form considers the present as a capitalist time during which economic growth signifies economic prosperity. Governments pursued moving up to the stage of industrialisation since the contribution of agriculture to the gross domestic product (GDP) was receding, and agriculture was collapsing. However, Mohanty (2007: 11) argued that, despite the decline of agriculture's share in GDP to a little more than 20% (which later declined to 15% in 2022–2023 (Times of India 2023)), it still accounted for almost 60% of all employment. In the discourse of its promise, marginalised peasants found that those promises were, indeed, meant for the propertied class who possessed lands ready for acquisition and for the educated youth serving as skilled labourers in the car factory. In the sections to follow, I explore how the anti-land acquisition movement emerging as a part of implementing the described project compelled planners to consider them as similar stakeholders and rethink the efficacies of project forms in the existing project areas.

CONTESTATION OVER THE PROMISES OF DEVELOPMENT

Singur village, the village under study, comprises 160 households and nearly 1000 inhabitants. Among these households, around 67 belong to Scheduled Castes (SC), 73 belong to the *Mahishya*[2] caste, and the remaining 20 belong to the *Gowala*[3] caste. SC are officially designated groups of people and among the most disadvantaged socioeconomic groups in India. SC families are primarily landless labourers although some have small plots of land. Around one-third of all households in this village have been sharecropper peasants for generations, but have not been registered as *bargadars*[4] in government records, betraying the limitations of the land reform programme of the LF government. The question arises regarding what kinds of contestations emerged as a consequence of the conflicting interests, contrasting visions of development, and contradictory values. Why did peasants contest this car factory project, which planners positioned as a 'public interest'

project? Villagers who resisted the car factory project were unsure during the initial period whether they could ultimately save their lands from acquisition. For instance, an elderly woman, possessing no land, stated, '[W]e live off sharecropping and gathering food from these lands. We collect different types of edible herbs from different corners of these lands. We also rear goats and cattle that graze on these lands. We would not survive without these lands.'

A young agricultural labourer candidly offered this explanation:

> Although I don't have land, I am entirely dependent on these lands to earn a livelihood. Thus, we won't allow these lands to be acquired. Even if the landowners agree to sell their lands, we won't leave these lands. I used to work in a rolling mill in an industrial area, and earned US$12 per week. But, due to an illness I could not continue that work. Now, I am working as an agricultural labourer. Many have been working as day-labourer in industries and businesses in urban areas, but often they return [to the village] due to the closure of factories or some other troubles. Work outside the village is unstable and not reliable, while our income from agriculture is more secure and provides us with food throughout the year.

This agricultural labourer who previously worked in an industry knows the extent of insecurity faced by wage labourers. His words remind us of Parry's (2013: 348) findings, which showed how insecure wage labour is, even in public sector industries, and how it is differentiated from the regular (permanent) workforce.

Thus, when the then-Chief Minister of West Bengal, the Buddhadeb Bhattacharya-led state government, outlined the promise of the

project, declaring that this car factory project would create jobs for thousands of young peasants and shape the country's future, most of the peasants contested these job creation promises. Peasants contested the promise of jobs in future since they envisioned this project form as a source of greater economic precarity. Their own experiences in erstwhile land reform projects and in moving in and out of industrial work shaped peasants' opinions. Notably, a remarkable number of *bargadars* joined the crowd that blocked the passage of the team's visit mentioned above as a means of protest. Despite the land reform project promises, many *bargadars* in this village are not registered and, thus, have no legal right to the land they have tilled for generations. Villagers still recall the *Tebhaga* movement, via which the rights of *bargadars* were recognised by the government of West Bengal. The *Tebhaga* movement broke out in the undivided Bengal province in the late colonial period, demanding that two-thirds of crops should go to sharecroppers, which extended for some years into the postcolonial period. The erstwhile (Congress) government amended the Land Reforms Act in 1971, whereby *bargadars* would receive three-fourths of the crops they cultivated, enhancing the two-thirds share originally demanded during the aforementioned movement. In 1978, the LF government began the *Operation Barga*[5] campaign to register the names of *bargadars*, in an effort to prevent their eviction. Their hereditary rights to cultivate the land they sharecropped became legally protected.

But, in this part of West Bengal, the *Operation Barga* programme was not implemented in its true spirit. As such, a considerable number of unregistered *bargadars* illustrated the limit of the much-trumpeted project in one of LF's strongholds. What went wrong with this project? One of the LF leaders

in Singur placed blame on the *bargadars* for failing to register their names despite the best efforts of the party and the government. He argued that the unregistered *bargadars* wanted to maintain good relations with landowners and, thus, had no interest in registering their names. The question becomes why the ruling party could not ensure registration of *bargadars*? One elderly villager explained the phenomenon thusly: '[S]oon after the LF came to power, most of the landowners who were previously aligned with the erstwhile Congress party became supporters of the ruling LF party and, thus, the latter spared their lands from being registered under *Operation Barga*.'

Peasants now heard new promises regarding a car factory project, while the government failed to deliver on the promises granted through the land reform project. The LF government tried to acquire their lands through new promises for a better future, while unregistered *bargadar* peasants still yearned for the lands they had cultivated. *Bargadars* and landless labourers, thus, began to vehemently resist the land acquisition move by the government. They were at the forefront of this anti-land acquisition movement since they were not entitled to any compensation given their lack of land ownership as well as any formal recognition as a *bargadar*. Women *bargadars* and from landless families who previously toiled these lands also joined this movement. This typical combination of economically and socially marginal families were likely responsible for strengthening the movement from the very beginning.

It was not only women from the landless and *bargadars* peasant families who previously laboured on the lands resisted the land acquisition move by the government; women from small and middle peasant families who rarely laboured on the lands also participated in this resistance

in large numbers. When the dominant discourse engaged in debates on issues like the viability of agriculture or industrialisation as the only path towards 'development', these peasant women forcefully questioned the very discourse of 'development' and organised themselves into a resistance movement against 'development'-led dispossession. Just as women-led groups in peasant revolutionary organisations 'influence [the] movement trajectory' (Tyagi 2018: 123) amongst the Maoist in Telangana, India, the peasant women of Singur also became essential to protestors by 'creating [a] robust support system that can sustain' the anti-land acquisition movement.

The entire concern of peasant women revolved around issues of land, both private property and communal lands. They asserted that such lands were indispensable to their subsistence. For instance, I met an unregistered sharecropper woman who worked in a paddy field during my fieldwork in June 2006. She explained, '[T]his land is like a mother to us, feeding us throughout the year. Hence, we can't part with it at any cost. We would rather fight with all our might to defend the land.' Likewise, a woman from a modest landholding family stated, '[O]ur husbands are not educated enough and only know how to cultivate. You cannot force us to give up our land.' They seemed to fear being driven from all their means of livelihood, regardless of what they had enjoyed thus far from a subsistence level of agriculture. A woman from a small landholding family who owned one acre of agricultural land candidly explained, '[T]his piece of land belonged to my father-in-law. Now, this piece of land is the property of our family. We, all of our family members, cultivate and live off the land. Nobody can force us to part with this land.' She felt a deep attachment to this piece of land. While unaware of her legal entitlement prescribed by the Hindu succession

Act[6] vis-à-vis the widows of male successors, she correctly stated that she had a right to this piece of land belonging to her husband or her in-law's family, revealing that she would die to save it from the expropriators.

The women belonging to the sharecropper and landless families tell another story, rendering the situation of land rights among women multifaceted. Peasant women are generally not registered as *bargadars* or sharecroppers in West Bengal. Notwithstanding their high level of involvement in agricultural production, they are rarely recognised as a *bargadar* or sharecropper. However, the policy directive of the West Bengal government from 1992, pledged that, during the redistribution of land, 'to the extent possible' government-allocated land should be granted either to a woman individually or jointly to a husband and wife. However, the pattern of land redistribution suggests that the allocation of *pattas*[7] tends to reinforce existing gender inequalities in property rights (Brown and Das Choudhury 2002). This not only applied to the case of women's entitlement, but also to the implementation of the land reform policy as a whole.

Women within unregistered *bargadar* families felt more vulnerable and, therefore, vigorously participated in the anti-land acquisition movement. They perhaps anticipated that, once the acquisition was completed, they would become nonentities in relation to the lands upon which they cultivated for generations. Their families would not be entitled to any compensation or rehabilitation programmes offered by the government, since they have no legal rights to the land. Thus, when the government stepped forward to acquire the lands, peasant women, cutting across various landholding families as well as sharecropper and landless families, objected to the government move possibly by virtue of the 'subsistence

ethic'. Fearing a loss of subsistence barred them from buying the narrative of industrialisation. Subsistence security, which they achieved through consistent economic efforts in their everyday lives based mainly on the land regardless of their rights, has remained their primary importance. These practices related to the 'desire for subsistence security' stemming from their economic lives albeit experienced socially 'as a pattern of moral rights', as Polanyi (1957) argued. Scott (1976: 6) systematically followed this line of thought, arguing that such practices 'were nearly universal in traditional society and served to mark it off from the modern market economy'. While 'the subsistence ethic' is, in general, a given of peasant economics, as argued by Scott (1976: 5–6), peasant women are swayed more by this ethic.

Following the announcement of the car factory project in May 2006, between June and August, government officials tried to enter the villages on three or four occasions to distribute notifications to peasants whose lands were marked for acquisition. Each time, these women blocked entry to their villages. They arranged themselves in such a way that whenever and wherever they saw officials proceeding towards the villages, those first noticing the officials immediately blew conch shells from their houses. Both the conch and the conch's sound are sacred symbols in Hindu caste communities. Individuals belonging to this religious community use a conch in almost all of their religious activities. In Islam and Buddhism as well, the conch is considered a symbol of the divine realm. Once heard, other women would respond by blowing conchs so that the information could spread from one hamlet to another, covering the entirety of the earmarked area. Immediately, women rushed to where the officials were approaching holding broomsticks[8] in their hands. Women's vigilance previously

continued throughout the day. Such resistance took place several times in the months preceding land acquisition. In addition, they creatively applied newer forms of protest demonstration, at times employing traditional weapons and holding the brooms in their hands and at other times wearing garlands of vegetables. These types of demonstrations obviously carry some traditional meanings and concepts. Holding a kitchen knife in one hand was more likely to symbolise an attempt to resist an approaching enemy. By contrast, holding a broomstick in hand symbolised sweeping or cleaning nasty things from the area, which included the threat to their way of life posed by the land acquisition.

While contestations related to the promises of development and the peasants' resistance against the car project expanded, members of the ruling political party began to garner peasants' consent to acquire land in writing. In July and September 2006, the government issued notifications for land acquisition and distributed monetary compensation to willing landowners. In addition, the government seized the opportunity to set up several police camps immediately in and around the villages. All of these camps were supposedly established to tighten the grip of the administration on the situation. The government acted, indeed, in a definitive way to acquire the land for the car factory project. On 1 December 2006, the government began fencing off land earmarked for Tata Motors. The next day, a few thousand police forces swooped down on the fenced land, fired teargas shells, and chased away villagers who gathered there to protect their land.

The government fenced in lands, surveilling them by a few thousand police posted to temporary camps established around the area. The farmlands virtually turned into a battlefield with around 1000 acres cordoned

off from all sides to prevent any movement of the villagers inside the fenced-in areas. The aggrieved peasants attempted to smash the fence and enter the lands once cordoned off, and permanent police camps, including watchtowers, were erected across the boundaries allowing for day and night surveillance. However, the strong police force guarding the fenced-in lands always overpowered the peasants. Subsequently, the steam of the movement slowly dissipated. The only hope among the agitating land losers rested in court cases, pending in both the High Court and the Supreme Court, which challenged the legality of land acquisition in Singur. Specifically, the petitioners challenged the land acquisition move by the government 'in the name of the public interest'. They argued that the government acquired the lands in Singur in the interests of a large industrial party.

Finally, amid the controversy regarding the land acquisition and the pending cases in the courts, Tata Motors decided to move out of Singur in October 2008, when the Supreme Court delivered a final judgment, declaring that the land acquisition move was illegal and void. The peasants engaged in various efforts to sabotage the car factory project and its narrative of progress. They stalled the project by disrupting its time-conscious temporality through break-ins and court challenges. They also increased the cost of and risks to the project by compelling the government to hire guards to protect the acquired lands. In addition, the court cases challenged the narrative of promised economic development, asserting that it was at best in the interest of the private sector, but never in the public interest. The court cases ultimately succeeded, but the peasants had already doomed the project by undermining its temporal, operational, and narrative logic.

PERCEIVED EXPECTATIONS, HARM, AND DISPOSSESSION

It is now clearer how multiple temporalities—that is, the car factory project, the erstwhile ruling LF, and the peasants' own temporalities—were at play and how those temporalities contested 'notions of progress and betterment embedded in the plan' (Abram and Weszkalnys 2011: 14). Latour (1996: 23) argued that a project form is 'a fiction since at the outset it does not exist'. Since it does not exist, 'the relationship between spatial plans and the realities imagined in them is always fragile and multivalent' (Abram and Weszkalnys 2011: 15). We now see how the peasants conceptualised the project forms and the subsequent dispossession based on the construction and reconstruction of their past. One leader of the anti-land acquisition movement stated as follows:

> The landless peasants supported the movement because they knew that their survival depended on safeguarding the lands. If a car factory is constructed, they won't get a job, but will lose their livelihoods instead. The 1000-van rickshaw pullers would be jobless in that case. They carry crops such as potatoes from the field to the local cold stores.

Another person who lived off his 2.33-acre plot of land was also highly doubtful of the promise offered by the government of a job in the car factory. He argued, 'Being farmers, we know only the plough and the sickle and nothing about a car factory. So, how could we get jobs there? We are against the acquisition of this land.' Another marginalised peasant contested the logic of the government vis-à-vis its land acquisition move. He asked, 'Why is a car industry set up in this area? What benefit would the farmers get from such an industry? Why isn't an industry to produce farming equipment or fertiliser and pesticides set up, such that the

farmers can access cheap agricultural products?' Thus, these peasants were sceptical about the project's promise that land-losers would obtain jobs in the proposed factory.

Majumder and Nielsen (2016: 79) found that the long-term formation of land-based identities and subjectivities in West Bengal 'embody contradictory and very ambivalent aspirations insofar as they simultaneously produce a desire for land *and* for respectable off-farm employment'. These scholars might not have simply posited a binary between these two kinds of aspirations, but also considered off-farm employment respectable. In the case I describe here, we see how a prosperous *Mahishya* family possessing around four acres of land and two submersible tube wells for irrigation set up an off-farm enterprise alongside agriculture. One member of this family stated the following:

> [W]e purchased one acre of land, two submersible tube wells, and a power tiller using our savings generated from agriculture. Along with our cultivation work, we began to invest in manufacturing porcelain insulators used as non-conductors for high-voltage electricity transmission. We have employed about ten women for this household industry and are planning to expand production. But, all of the enterprise activities are upset by this acquisition of land, which threatens both our agricultural as well as industrial activities.

Another landowner-cultivator with 2.5 acres of land asserted,

> We appealed to the government to save our multi-crop land and, instead, acquired low and marshy land available a few kilometres away. That will save the peasants and

facilitate setting up an industry. We are also in favour of industry, but not on multi-crop land.

These landowners are neither against farming nor against industries; instead, they favour both farming and industries. In other words, unlike the LF communists who believe the perception that industrialisation must follow agriculture, landowners do not believe in the linear historical perception whereby industrialisation must follow agriculture. Instead, they realise that, as a part of their everyday experiences, farming or industries alone cannot create employment for all.

Notably, among 160 households in the village, 135 almost fully depend on agricultural activities to earn their livelihoods. However, a few substantial landowners engage in jobs and businesses, while their lands are tilled by *bargadars*. They commute to adjacent towns to do odd jobs in factories, shops, and small businesses. Around 30 villagers have migrated to cities like Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore to work principally as goldsmiths or construction workers. In addition, I noted ten cases of reverse migration, whereby migrants returned to their own village after the factory or enterprise in which they worked closed down or upon finding it more profitable to work on the land than to work in small factories and petty businesses. Villagers are quite aware that industries shed 'surplus' workers occasionally in the name of rationalisation and modernisation. Thus, they had coined the slogan 'open the closed factories and build up new factories, but not at the cost of agriculture', to oppose constructing a car factory on agricultural lands.

An elderly villager made another point:

I am a marginal farmer. None of my sons has been able to find a job. The government is talking about jobs. Even if some people are provided jobs in the Tata [Motors] factory, at most one member from a family may get a job; but if they leave the family behind, what will happen to the rest, especially the older members like us? No one cares to look after other members of the family. On the contrary, if we can retain the land, it will give us security in old age. Because the land belongs to the entire family, including the old members, it can ensure that the elderly are protected.

He also argued,

[T]he government suggested that peasants can deposit the money they receive as compensation in a banks and live off the interest. But, the interest rates are decreasing day by day. One day might come when people will have to pay the bank for saving their money in it. So, what benefits would a peasant gain from saving money in a bank?

Thus, this car factory project formulated through a narrative based on the universal time of capitalism ignores the multiple peasant temporalities existing at the frontier. From these statements and arguments from peasants, we see that the rural economy with all its facets was poorly impacted and all types of peasants were united against the land acquisition move of the government. To quote Cernea (1999: 17), it seemed that the '[e]xpropriation of land removes the main foundation upon which people's productive systems, commercial activities, and livelihoods are constructed'. As such, Harvey's (2005) arguments ring true, whereby a shift in emphasis occurred in contemporary capitalism from expanded reproduction to accumulation by dispossession.

The people's representatives often acted as ardent advocates of the narrative for capitalism. While they actively engaged in the discursive field of capitalism, they merely ignored the conflicting interests of multiple temporalities. The president of Singur Panchayat Samiti[9] stated, 'Although we, the local self-government officials, were not consulted during the initial process of selecting the location, we subsequently got involved in the process through a meeting called by the District Magistrate and became part of the process'. This, thus, demonstrates that the local self-government and the people's representatives did not matter much in the narrative of industrialisation and investment in India. This is to say, the people's representatives and the local party functionaries were initially in the dark about the project although they later acted as a 'shadow state'. This adheres to Das's (2016: 2) arguments following Harriss-White's (2003) analysis of the local state, 'with the declared objectives of industrial development'. Abram and Weszkalnys (2011: 7) refer to this as a neoliberal government trying to unbind capital from red tape, whereby '(...) democratic states swing between favouring citizens and encouraging businesses'. However, when investment becomes most important, governments do not ignore state and non-state institutions, but call upon them for mediation in the messy zones of confrontation between the government and divergent social forms.

This narrative reveals that economic interests were often contradictory and conflicting among individuals from a single locality. Multiple temporalities existed at any given time, producing several conflicting interests. Capitalism acts as a universal measure of value, indeed, homogenising these multiple interests, with the former always coming into conflict with the latter. Thus, when measured in terms of economic interests, a village society is divided into separate interest groups, cross-cutting their castes, religions, and party affiliations. Singur provided us with one such example, where conflicting interests associated with land acquisition polarised villagers, castes, and even party loyalties. It reveals how peasants conceptualised the issues related to dispossession based on the construction and reconstruction of their past and their future. Whenever they explained the extent and forms of dispossession as part of the car factory project, they relied on their past experiences to create consistent narratives for the anti-land acquisition movement. Thus, their previous experiences of deprivation resulting from the implementation of various other governmental projects shaped their perceptions of dispossession. The future previously promised by the government that failed to materialise haunted them as they attempted to interpret the promises scripted in present project forms.

CONCLUSIONS

Through my analysis of the Singur car factory project, we observe how a space, both temporal and spatial, has been reproduced as part of the interventions, which influenced how people viewed their future and assumed roles in transforming their social realities. The car factory project imagined a temporal frame and intervened in the lives and livelihoods of peasants to bring about a new future. Yet, the latter vehemently resisted this project intended to transform their social realities into 'time-conscious' industrialised realities. Whether their resistance promoted 'alternatives to the neoliberal post-reform models of development pursued in India' (Nielsen 2010: 145) is not a relevant question here. What is significant in this context is how a disjuncture emerged between the normative template of planned

project actions and the disorderly temporalities that exist during project implementation.

In a context in which governments prioritise economic growth and consider the rate of GDP as a marker of development,[10] this project form considers these GDP-related issues while framing its objectives for implementation. It designs a normative template that generates the desired values for a well-defined future. The specific template does intervene in the ethnographic realities to structure the human and non-human resources to produce a new social reality. The project forms consider human resources as acting methodically according to the rules and rationalities inscribed within them. Nevertheless, the time that the project forms predict as appropriate for the transition to industrialisation in our case contrast with the temporality of various actors who imagine their time in their own ways. The temporality of the project forms in which planners design actions for the targeted actors differs from the temporalities of the targeted actors. The social process that emerged as a part of the implementation of project forms cannot always succeed in managing the unruly temporalities at the grassroots level.

Thus, during the project planning, the actors in the project area confronted the time template of the project forms. Various actors in the ethnographic situation hardly believed in the project forms' conception of time, which predicted that the current time was appropriate for industrialisation. Contestations over promises of development that emerged as part of the peasants' resistance against the proposed car factory and the subsequent land acquisition aptly illustrate how people belong to their own plans for their future. People construct their futures based on the spatiotemporalities of the ethnographic space. Divergent segments of a population often imagine their future viewing

their position in a particular sociopolitical structure. Despite its promises, the project forms hardly won over all of the people. The crucial reason for its failure was that one size did not fit all. In other words, 'the capitalist time is a dense and heterogeneous historical product' (Bear 2014). Its promises do not always relate to peasants' desires and their consciousness of time, and, thus, do not seem to matter in their lives and livelihoods.

The ethnographic reflections on the social processes that emerged during the implementation of these project forms demonstrate that the conflicts of interest were not simply a product of contrasting values, but, instead, represented a product of deprivation. In an ethnographic situation, diverse segments of the peasantry who did confront or accept the car factory project not only placed different values against parting with their lands and the impact of a car factory, but also raised concerns over their dispossession. Despite belonging to different segments of the population, they considered this project a cause of inequality. That is, it was an event that unravelled issues related to inequality. A sense of deprivation or dispossession overwhelmed their perception surrounding the factory project. Peasants were overwhelmed by the imminent threat of dispossession shaped by their experiences from past projects. They interpreted issues related to dispossession and acted accordingly to thwart the implementation of the car factory project by constructing and reconstructing their pasts and futures based on past projects promised. Despite being viewed as a magical panacea capable of saving the country, industrialisation and investment hardly bothered to heed people's wishes.

Finally, we can take away from this narrative of project forms and the dynamic process of project making how project forms

constitute several conflicting temporalities extricated from an ethnographic situation. This mirrors Carse and Kneas's (2019: 10) study of an infrastructure project, which showed how unbuilt and unfinished infrastructures 'can become the axes of social worlds and sites where temporalities are knotted and reworked in unpredictable ways'. In addition, project forms endeavouring to control the future often end up being futile. In fact, this futility results since, as Li (2007) correctly argued, some 'problems that are deemed structural or political' and are considered intractable for project forms often render the ethnographic space messy. Projects are likely to reframe problems in technical terms (Li 2007: 7). As such, the primary finding from this narrative of project forms is that, amidst the contestation over values, what becomes predominant is the way in which issues of inequality haunt a segment of people who are not even considered a direct beneficiary of that project.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

About the author: Dayabati Roy, PhD, is a senior researcher affiliated with the University of Jyvaskyla (Finland), as part of an Academy of Finland-funded project.

DAYABATI ROY
SENIOR RESEARCHER
dayabatiroy@gmail.com

NOTES

1   The leader belongs to the district committee of Hooghly, in which the Singur block is located.
2   *Mahishya* is one of the agricultural castes in West Bengal, ranked as the middle caste in the caste hierarchy.
3   *Gowala* belongs to the other backward caste category (OBC). They are traditionally milkmen or herdsmen and considered a prosperous caste.
4   The sharecropper *bargadar* is a type of tenant who borrows land from landlords or other landholding classes for cultivation with the condition of giving a specific fixed share of the crops produced on the land to the landowners. The stipulated share of crops is three-fourths to the sharecropper and the rest to the landlord.
5   In the initial days of the Left Front government of West Bengal's reign, they launched the '*Operation Barga*' programme to register the names of sharecroppers so that landowners could not evict them.
6   Under the Act, if a Hindu male died intestate, in the first instance, all of his separate or self-acquired property devolves equally to his sons, daughters, widow, and mother. However, the laws governing property inheritance are exceedingly rarely implemented and the devolution of land property—specifically, agricultural land—in rural India primarily follows prevailing local customs.
7   *Patta* is a piece of paper recognising the ownership right of a beneficiary to a plot of land distributed by the government under the Land Reforms Act.
8   A broom in the local culture is also considered a symbol which could sweep away bad fortune and evil forces.
9   Panchayat Samiti is an intermediate level of the Panchayat Raj Institution or local self-government in India.

10 Recent developments show that the increase in the rate of economic growth alone cannot ensure prosperity among populations. Notably, despite the state's lack of economic dynamism, as Ghatak (2021) states, 'the rate of growth of purchasing power in rural areas of West Bengal has been higher than the national average' over the last decade. He attributed the increased growth of purchasing power as well as a sharp dip in poverty levels in West Bengal to the cash transfer programmes of the state government.

REFERENCES

Abram, Simone and Gisa Weszkalnys 2011. Introduction: Anthropologies of Planning-Temporality, Imagination, and Ethnography. *Focaal* 61: 3–18. https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2011.610101.

Abram, Simone 2014. The Time it Takes: Temporalities of Planning. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 20 (S1): 129–147. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12097.

Banerjee-Guha, Swapna 2008. Space Relations of Capital and Significance of New Economic Enclaves: SEZs in India. *Economic and Political Weekly* 43 (47): 51–59. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40278211.

Bear, Laura 2014. Doubt, Conflict, Mediation: The Anthropology of Modern Time. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 20 (S1): 3–30. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12091.

Bear, Laura 2017. Anthropological Futures: For a Critical Political Economy of Capitalist Time: ASA's Raymond Firth Lecture, 2016. *Social Anthropology* 25 (2): 142–158. https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12412.

Bear, Laura 2020. Speculation: A Political Economy of Technologies of Imagination, *Economy and Society* 49 (1): 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2020.1715604.

Bhattacharya, Buddhadeb 2007. Thousands of Young People Want Job. They Will Shape the Country's Future. *Indian Express*, 19 January.

Brown, Jennifer and Sujata Das Choudhury 2002. *Women's Land Rights in West Bengal: A Field Study*. RDI Reports on Foreign Aid and Development No. 116. Seattle: Rural Development Institute. https://resourceequity.org/record/2405-womens-land-rights-in-west-bengal-a-field-study. <Accessed 12 August 2024>

Carse, Ashley and David Kneas 2019. Unbuilt and Unfinished: The Temporalities of Infrastructure. *Environment and Society* 10 (1): 9–28. https://doi.org/10.3167/ares.2019.100102.

Cernea, Michael M. 1999. Why Economic Analysis is Essential to Resettlement: A Sociologist's View. In Michael M. Cernea (ed). *The Economics of Involuntary Resettlement: Questions and Challenges*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Chatterjee, Partha 2008. Democracy and Economic Transformation in India. *Economic and Political Weekly* 43 (16): 53–62.

Das, Ritanjan 2016. The Politics of Land, Consent, and Negotiation: Revisiting the Development-Displacement Narratives from Singur in West Bengal. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 13: 1–17. https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.4103.

Foucault, Michel 1991. Governmentality. In Graham Barchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (eds). *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. London: University of Chicago Press.

Gardner, Katy 2018. We Demand Work! 'Dispossession', Patronage and Village Labour in Bibiyana, Bangladesh. *Journal of Peasant studies* 45 (7): 1484–1500. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2018.1442326.

Ghatak, Maitreesh 2021. The Story of Bengal's Economy. *Hindustan Times*, 15 April. https://www.hindustantimes.com/elections/west-bengal-assembly-election/the-story-of-bengal-s-economy-101618471498847.html. <Accessed 12 August 2024>

Harriss-White, Barbara 2003. *India Working: Essays on Society and Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Harvey, David 2005. *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jenkins, Rob, Loraine Kennedy and Partha Mukhopadhyay 2014. *Power, Policy and Protest: The Politics of India's Special Economic Zones*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Knox, Hannah and Penny Harvey 2011. Anticipating Harm: Regulation and Irregularity on a Road Construction Project in the Peruvian Andes. *Theory, Culture & Society* 28 (6): 142–63. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411420889.

Latour, Bruno 1996. *Aramis or The Love of Technology*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Levien, Michael 2013. Regimes of Dispossession: From Steel Towns to Special Economic Zones. *Development and Change* 44 (2): 381–407. https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12012.

Levien, Michael 2018. *Dispossession Without Development: Land Grabs in Neoliberal India.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Li, Tania Murray 2007. *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Majumder Sarasij and Kenneth Bo Nielsen 2016. 'Should the Son of a Farmer Always Remain a Farmer?' The Ambivalence of Industrialisation and Resistance in West Bengal. In Patrik Oskarson and Kenneth Bo Nielsen (eds). *Industralizing Rural India: Land, Policy and Resistance.* New York: Routledge.

Majumdar, Sarasij 2018. *Peoples Car: Industrial India and the Riddles of Populism.* New York: Fordham University Press.

Mohanty, Mritiunjoy 2007. Singur and the Political Economy of Structural Change. *Indian Institute of Management Working Paper Series.* No. 601. Calcutta. https://www.macroscan.org/pol/feb07/pdf/Singur.pdf. <Accessed 12 August 2024>

Nielsen, Kenneth Bo 2010. Contesting India's Development? Industrialisation, Land Acquisition and Protest in West Bengal. *Forum for Development Studies.* 37 (2): 145–70. https://doi.org/10.1080/08039411003617252.

Nigam, Aditya 2007. Genealogies of Globalization: Unpacking the 'Universal' History of Capital. *Economic and Political Weekly* 42 (12): 1047–1053.

Noy, Ita 2020. Public Sector Employment, Class Mobility, and Differentiation in a Tribal Coal Mining Village in India. *Contemporary South Asia* 28 (3): 374–391. https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2020.1801579.

Noy, Ita 2022. The Politics of Dispossession and Compensation in the Eastern Indian Coal Belt. *Critical Anthropology* 42 (1): 56–77. https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X221074831.

Noy, Ita 2023. Waiting for Displacement: Land, Compensation, and Spatiotemporal Inequality in a Mining-Affected Village. *Geoforum* 144: 103821. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2023.103821.

Oskarsson, Patrik 2018. *Landlock: Paralysing Dispute over Minerals on Adivasi Land in India.* Action: ANU Press

Parry, Jonathan 2013. Company and Contract Labour in a Central Indian Steel Plant. *Economy and Society* 42 (3): 348–374. https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2013.772761.

Polanyi, Karl 1957. *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time.* Boston, USA: Beacon Press.

Roy, Dayabati 2014. *Rural Politics in India: Political Stratification and Governance in West Bengal.* New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.

Rudolph, Lloyd I. and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph 2001. Iconisation of Chandrababu: Sharing Sovereignty in India's Federal Market Economy. *Economic and Political Weekly* 36 (18): 1541–1552.

Sanyal, Kalyan 2007. *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality and Postcolonial Capitalism.* New Delhi: Routledge.

Sarkar, Abhirup 2007. Development and Displacement: The Story of Land Acquisition in West Bengal. *Economic and Political Weekly* 42 (16): 1435–1442.

Sau, Ranjt 2018. A Ballad of Singur: Progress with Human Dignity. *Economic and Political Weekly* 43 (43): 10–13. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40278091.

Scott, James 1976. *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia.* London: Yale University Press.

Sen, Nurupam 2006. 'Land Reform not an End in Itself': An Interview. Frontline. December 29. https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/article30211984.ece. <Accessed 12 August 2024>

Steur, Luisa and Das, Ritanjan 2009. What's Left? Land Expropriation, Socialist "Modernizers", and Peasant Resistance in Asia. *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 54: 67–72. https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2009.540105.

Sud, Nikita 2014. Governing India's Land. *World Development* 60: 43–56. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2014.03.015.

Times of India 2023. 'Share of agriculture in India's GDP declined to 15% in FY23: Govt. Times of India, December 19. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/share-of-agriculture-in-indias-gdp-declined-to-15-in-fy23-govt/articleshow/106122335.cms. <Accessed 12 August 2024>

Tyagi, Juhi 2018. Women, Leverage and Peasant Revolutionary Organizations: The Maoist Organization field in Telangana. *Economic and Political Weekly* 53 (23): 123–131

Juhanna Sankelo & Paulino Jijiyo

RURAL MURLE AGE-SET MEN TACKLING ELITES IN SOUTH SUDAN

ABSTRACT

The Murle age system is often presented in a negative light in the South Sudan conflict reporting, which links age-set activities to communal violence, cattle rustling, and the abduction of women and children. Such assessments by outsiders overlook the positive effects of age-sets on interethnic relations in rural areas, where young people follow the Murle tradition and navigate the complex influence networks of Murle society. We focus on pastoral Murle youth in Pibor born in the 1980s and 1990s—that is, the laŋo age-set. By drawing on in-depth life-story interviews, this article studies how Murle laŋo masculinity is constructed, embodied, and negotiated. The analysis of our ethnographic data exemplifies how early childhood emotional bonds with caregivers, conflicts, and marginalisation impact the life trajectory of one Murle man. Our results show the connectedness of political orientation, tradition, and masculinity to intergenerational conflict and competition for political and societal power in Murle society. The study increases our understanding of Murle laŋo men's survival strategies. Specifically, it shows that these rural marginalised Murle youth build alliances beyond kinship and ethnic ties, defend land, advance the goal of peace with neighbours, volunteer for unpaid community work to fight idleness, and act as a counter force to prevent manipulation by political and military leaders.

Zɔɔz

Zɔɔz nici ɔp bayiz ci ɔl o maac een murle abaak Murla, ki gɔl ci bayizo, ki gɔl ci ganonto been culanɛ ci kobɛkɛ ɔl kaal. Gi ci titiny bayize ceen murlen nɛɛn, buluwa kibeen kerenɛ ogi o murle gɔɔn anya bayiz o gɛɛr gɔɔn aruwɔn ɔl, ma kɔran tiin moda ma kagaman ŋai ki dɔɔl ci modo. Mazin liŋliŋɔnti nici aŋamnek kaal o abon agɔɔn bulowa o abaak murla loce o ɔl o kolik een junup ŋawo azɔɔzi kaal o bayiz uneŋ murlo. Ma golowa ci kaŋamneka kalyanit o bayiz o een murlen, ayelza rɔŋrɔŋanɔnɛt ci arɔrɔŋanon nigi ki, gɔɔl ci adiŋdiŋani Jowanɛ o adilyai, gɔl ci siaso, ki kɛranɛ, ki kaal ci akati ŋayetin ki jorɛnɛɛn zɛɛ been ŋerɔn ci aŋerɔɔn alata o murlo aŋɛrɛ sias giye ci arɔɔŋi rum o. Bayizi ween aturuwen aroŋnyi, ayelzai bule o kazi lango, agamta nigi bayiz ci aromɛn niŋgi dook kodoye, ma arican ganɔɔn ma buk ɔp calaŋ aŋɛɛr nɔgɔ siasa karabɔŋ een zɔɔz ci takirzetu.

Keywords: masculinity, *laŋo*, life story, tradition, elites, Murle, South Sudan

INTRODUCTION

The Murle people live in rural areas of South Sudan near the Ethiopian border in East Africa. These southern regions of Sudan were colonised by the British until 1956, and have been affected by civil wars[1] since the mid-1950s (e.g., Thomas 2015). In 2011, South Sudan gained independence, but political and ethnic violence continued, straining relations between the country's 64 ethnic groups. During these violent conflicts, Murle age-set men defend their land, people, and cattle, rely on the age-set's diviner for advice, uphold Murle principles of acting honourably toward enemies who surrender, and renew political relations with their neighbours.

Today, the estimated 200 000 Murle people[2] are confronting social, political, and economic marginalisation by the South Sudanese government (Krause 2019). Approximately 55% of the population of Pibor is aged 18 or younger (UNOCHA 2020). A vast majority of the Murle in the Greater Pibor area lack birth certificates and identity documents. Thus, they cannot exercise certain civil rights including the right to officially marry. Without identity cards, the Murle cannot apply for jobs the United Nations (UN) and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) have allocated for South Sudanese citizens (Markó 2021: 72). People living under such circumstances in South Sudan are sometimes classified as 'stateless persons' (UNHCR 2017).

The Murle social system is hierarchical and organised in groups of men and women of the same age—that is, age-sets (*buul*). A new age-set is created approximately every ten years (Lewis 1972: 86). Currently, the established Murle age-sets from the youngest to the oldest are as follows: *guzule,* (youth born in the 2000s); *kurɛnɛn* (1990s); *laŋo* (1980s); *bothothniya* (1970s); *tithi* (1960s); *muden* (1950s); *doroŋwa*

(1940s); and *mara* (1930s). Murle age-sets associate with specific animal species as totems through which they establish relationships with other members of society. This is a common practice in African Indigenous relational ontologies, whereby people are viewed as connected to land, animals, and other beings (Chilisa et al. 2017: 328).

In addition to marginalisation, Murle age-set youth must navigate the complex conflict context in South Sudan. As Ann Laudati (2011: 21), a human-environmental geographer specialising in sub-Saharan Africa, shows, narratives portraying the Murle as 'a hostile people' and practices aimed at preventing outsiders from visiting the Murle are maintained by multiple actors in South Sudan. Previous research has criticised the UN of slow, inaccurate, and biased reporting about incidents affecting the Murle (Rands and LeRiche 2012: 23; Santschi et al. 2014: 16). The special representative of the UN secretary general (SRSG) in South Sudan in 2011–2014, Hilde F. Johnson (2016: 127)—an anthropologist by profession—reported that the UN was also accused by Jonglei communities of 'favoring the Murle'.

The analytical focus in many studies relating to southern and South Sudan has remained on the country's two largest ethnic groups: the Dinka and the Nuer (e.g., Pendle 2015, 2021; Wild et al. 2018). Less attention on fieldwork-based research during the last decade has been paid to small marginalised ethnic groups, such as the Murle (e.g., McCallum 2013; Felix da Costa 2018). Specifically, research focusing on young Murle age-set men who must endure the consequences of communal violence and the hidden political motives underlying such violence has been limited.

The traditional pathway of young Murle men from boyhood to adulthood through

warriorhood has transformed in recent decades. Youth now join armed groups affiliated with South Sudan's political opposition and navigate conflicts by leveraging the age-set network. Murle masculinity norms and practices adopted by these men are shaped and impacted by multidimensional contextual factors such as armed conflict, poverty, multiple marginalisation, and displacement. In this article, we describe how these dynamics impact a life trajectory of one Murle man (Jijiyo) and how particular narratives and age-set practices contribute to upholding ethical values that affirm sharing and nobility among the vulnerable and adversaries.

Reports that show the positive impacts of Murle age-sets rarely gain visibility in conflict reporting. For example, in July 2020, at the height of intercommunal fighting, Murle age-set youth captured a group of armed Dinka and Nuer youth from Jonglei in Maruwo, the Greater Pibor Administrative Area (GPAA). The attackers included a military general, an ethnic Bor Dinka, who at the time of his capture held a position in the peace-monitoring mechanism in Juba. The Murle youth did not harm the attackers, who laid down their weapons. Neither the government nor international organisations agreed to transport the captives. On 3 August 2020, to protect the lives of the attackers, the *lano* age-set leader (overall)[3] struggled to raise the money to charter a plane and organise their transport to Juba. This case illustrates that these Murle youth obeyed the laws of war by not harming surrendered attackers, and that a Dinka military general tasked with overseeing the peace mechanism fought as part of an irregular armed group. This incident, however, was not included in the UN South Sudan Panel of Experts' report on the fighting in Jonglei and the GPAA of February–August 2020 (UNSC 2020).

This article is based on in-depth life-story interviews with Jijiyo and ethnographic fieldwork in South Sudan. Here, we investigate how Murle *lano* masculinity is constructed, embodied, and negotiated. We focus on the *lano [lango]* age-set (born in the 1980s), which forms the backbone of the Murle community defence force. This prominent social group in Murle society numbers roughly 15 000 socially active males and females in Pibor [GPAA].[4] The youth of this age-set have not yet been the subject of a specific study. Most *lano* men were born and have lived during Sudan's second civil war (1983–2005). Identifying with a small African antelope (kob), the word *lano* denotes 'friend' and 'kob'. The *lano* communicate their ethnic identity as members of the age-set by wearing black-and-yellow necklaces (beads) and clothing, and, at times, by also wearing specific hairstyles and scarring patterns (Andretta 1983: 86).

In this article, we argue that the Murle tradition, age-set socialisation, as well as young men's shared experiences of marginalisation and conflict are essential elements affecting *lano* men's masculinity, upon which these rural men build social activism and gather support against elite manipulation. This study contributes to the existing research on African masculinities and marginalised social groups in East African pastoralist age-set societies by increasing our understanding of the challenges Indigenous youths such as Murle *lano* men face as they grow up and become men. Specifically, we examine: (1) how Murle masculinity is constructed, embodied, and negotiated by *lano* men; and (2) how *lano* men resist attempts at manipulation by elites. We illustrate that rural Murle *lano* men who follow the Murle tradition and society's social norms and practices navigate the challenges of everyday life by joining an

age-set and by undertaking responsibilities as *laŋo* age-set men in Murle society as well as by 'volunteering'. The term 'volunteering' refers to unpaid community work conducted for the benefit of Murle society. We also show that *laŋo* men forge alliances across intersecting identities of ethnicity and political orientation to advance the goal of peace.

The article is organised as follows. After explaining the methods and materials used, we explain the relevant scholarship on the Murle tradition, youth, marginalisation, African masculinities, and cultural learning in East African pastoralist societies. Then, we examine the shifts in *laŋo* men's roles and statuses through a selection of life-story events of one Murle man who joined an age-set and became a leader. We also discuss the contributing factors to the experiences of Murle men who are struggling with undertaking traditional male roles. Lastly, we conclude with an analysis of the counter-manipulation strategies *laŋo* age-set men use to reduce violence and resist unjustified orders imposed by political and military leaders.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This article draws upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted in South Sudan in 2016–2020. Our primary data were collected through participatory methods, such as observation, open-ended group discussions, semi-structured qualitative interviews, and numerous conversations. During the period from February 2016 to October 2017, we had the opportunity to interact daily with Murle interlocutors. We held discussions in Murle, Arabic, and English. By using these languages, including through research collaboration, we could access a cross-section of Murle society, as well as better assess the validity of the sources. The ethnographic

data, comprising field notes, observations, interviews, and audio recordings, were collected during fieldwork in Pibor, Likuangole, Verteth, Kongor, (Jebel) Boma, Maruwo, Gumuruk, Manyabol, Pochalla, and Akobo (Figure 1).

From October 2017 through the end of February 2020, we interviewed Murle interlocutors in Juba and conducted the life-story interviews with the *laŋo* leader (overall). The core in-depth life-story interviews were held in Juba, South Sudan (8 October 2018); in Nairobi, Kenya (9 October 2018); and, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (12–15 October 2018). We examined rural Murle masculinity through the life story of a Murle *laŋo* man who grew up and became a leader in an age-set society. By using a life-story method (Hubbard 2000), we examine how some *laŋo* men follow the Murle tradition (*kɛranɛ*) and join age-sets, and experience violence and its consequences. We also study how they contribute to peace, stability, and nation-building. These interviews aimed to learn how *laŋo* men's experiences 'emerge from particular structural relations and the role of individual agency' (Hubbard 2000: para 7.1).

Our qualitative data analysis, including thematic organising of the interview data, identified three main themes: warring, marriage, and resilience. We created a timeline by triangulating interview data with field data, corroborating it with other available secondary sources. The secondary data includes relevant anthropological and sociological research on Murle society, theoretical research on masculinity which we discuss below, as well as data produced by international organisations on South Sudan (UNHCR 2017; UNOCHA 2020; UNSC 2020) and fieldwork-based research published by NGOs (Burtscher 2021; Rands and LeRiche 2012; Santschi et al. 2014).
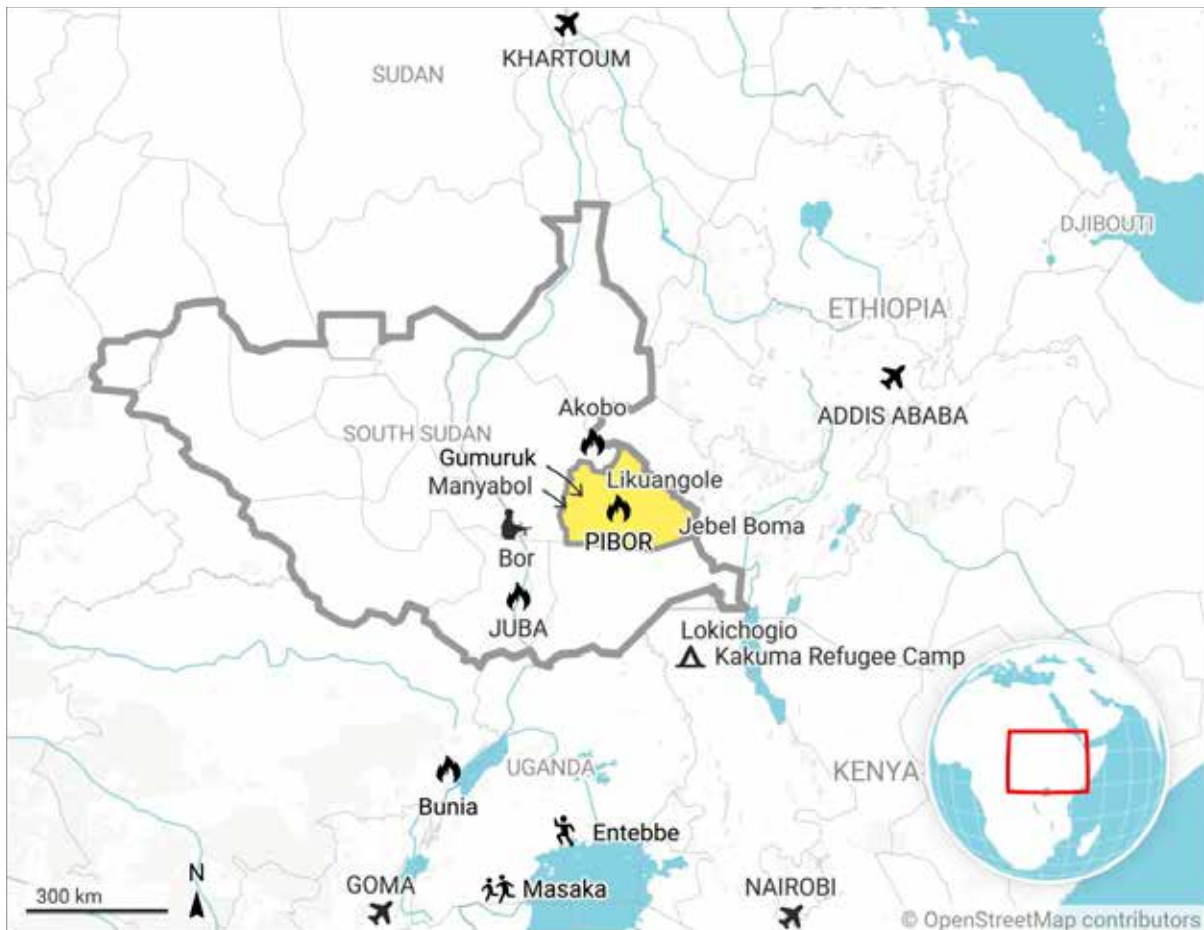
Created with Datawrapper

Figure 1. Map of specific locations in the GPAA, South Sudan, and East Africa.

This study has two authors. One author, Paulino Jijiyo, is a Murle *laŋo* man from Pibor who shared his life story and knowledge of the Murle tradition and age-sets, drafted the Murle-language abstract, and took part in the analysis of research data during and after fieldwork. The other author, Juhanna Sankelo, a doctoral researcher from a Nordic country, shared fieldnotes, conducted life-story interviews, and had the main responsibility for the analysis as well as drafting the article. We (Jijiyo and I) focused on one Murle age-set, reflected on one *laŋo* man's experiences, and filtered our data through the lens of

laŋo. These biases and limitations influenced the interpretation of our data. However, the research collaboration also offered insights into an understudied topic—Murle masculinity—and assisted in placing *kɛranɛ* or the 'Murle tradition', the Murle language, and young Murle *laŋo* men's perspectives at the centre. The late paramount chief of the Murle, Sultan Ismail Konyi (d. 10 March 2021), who was also the Boma State Governor in 2017–2018, granted his permission to conduct our research, and shared his knowledge on historical events and the Murle tradition. We feel the approval of Sultan Ismail Konyi and the *laŋo* leader

(overall) afforded us the opportunity to publish fieldwork-based research findings about Murle society, particularly about the *laŋo*. Our Murle interlocutors, with the exception of the *laŋo* leader (overall) and the author of the article, remain anonymous for their safety. All translations from Murle to English are our own.

MARGINALISATION, MASCULINITY, AND MURLE MEN

Murle marginalisation has its roots in colonial politics. In colonial Sudan, the British coloniser's military campaign against the Murle included harsh reprisal attacks (Collins and Herzog 1961: 131). The Murle were inclined to seek assistance from the North (Sudan), while resorting to passive resistance towards the British (Lewis 1972: 158). The Murle age system and traditional authorities played a pivotal role in resisting changes imposed by the colonial administration. Murle resistance against the coloniser emphasised men's role as warriors. In these remote rural lands, Murle men still assume the role of warriors, participate in political decision-making, herd cattle, migrate to cattle camps, and pay bride price—a way of life that Margrethe Silberschmidt (2005: 191) associated with men in the Kisii region of Kenya 'before colonial rule'.

Masculinity as a norm and practice is historically, contextually, and geographically situated and shaped by particular temporality and spatiality (see, e.g., Barker and Ricardo 2005; Messerschmidt and Connell 2005). Murle masculinity builds on Murle traditions, experiences of marginalisation, and the specific rural context in which the Murle live. Raewyn Connell (2016: 307) observes that colonialism disrupted Indigenous gender orders and institutionalised a dominant form of masculinity.

Many rural Murle age-set men embody a kind of dominant, hegemonic masculinity that draws on tradition, which also responds to marginalisation and valorises the brave warrior and protector. This masculinity has been attributed to a wider continental African trope that Kopano Ratele (2014: 32), a South African psychologist researching men, masculinities, and violence, describes as 'hegemony within marginality'.

Yet, neither Murle masculinity nor the Murle tradition is fixed; they evolve over time. The term 'tradition' perhaps indicates that the whole Indigenous Murle worldview encompasses a belief system, rituals, social norms, and practices. Through age-set practices, Murle youth are socialised to uphold the society's ethical values. For the Murle, tradition (*kɛranɛ* < *kɛɛr* 'custom'; *ɛɛrɔn* 'journey, travel') is grounded in Murleland, arises from generational experiences, and is transmitted orally through shared experiences. The Murle perception of 'tradition as journey', from past to present, resonates with how speakers of some other Indigenous African languages also understand tradition. For example, in the Sesotho language, the word *setso* ('tradition') means 'where things or people come from' (Ratele 2018: 214). In the South African context, Ratele (2015: 151) observed that 'tradition and culture are often embraced as a resource by men and women, and boys and girls who may not have access to other vehicles of power'. He maintained that oppressive policies partly explain why rural marginalised men in post-colonial societies turn to tradition (Ratele 2018). We draw on this work to explain why *laŋo* men rely on traditional age-set practices, as well as to examine the transformative shifts in Murle *laŋo* masculinity and novel ways to navigate Murle manhood, such as by opting out of age-sets.

Coming of age in Murle society is not a smooth process, but fraught with intergenerational tension and competition for political and societal power. Intergenerational conflict among youth groups in East Africa, as Israeli sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt (1971: 310) showed, has the potential to lead to 'organized rebellion' or 'estrangement from certain collective values of the older generation'. In Murle society, Elizabeth Andretta (1983: 93) attributed the tension to the vague timing of transitions and status changes. Such tension among the Lotuho and Lotoya communities (the Monyomiji age system) may intensify when the transfer of power nears (Simonse 1998: 65–68; also Kertzer and Madison 1980). These observations align with a survey of 21 African age systems, in which Anne Foner and David Kertzer (1978) found that life-course transitions of youth from one role to another involve problems related to the timing of transitions, age discrepancies, and role discontinuities. Because Murle age-sets do not have a set date for the transfer of power to the next age grade (Andretta 1985: 89), members of older age-sets try to hold on to political offices (and accompanying resources) as long as they can. As Andretta (1983: 104) observed, 'Murle elders do not retire.'

In Global South youth studies, Clarence Batan et al. (2021) called for more attention to the concept of the 'fluidity' of youth in Africa. These scholars pointed out that the word 'youth' does not merely indicate age in Africa, but rather a social status; a youth is someone who has not yet become independent. They also perceive African youth as 'social shifters' rather than young people who transition from one phase of life to another. Alcinda Honwana (2012, 2014) used term 'waithood' to describe the liminal phase in which youth get stuck between childhood and adulthood for failing to

earn their living and provide for their families. Scholars researching African youth use notions such as 'hustling' for the opportunistic manner that youth search for a better life by utilising social connections and mixing languages, while 'precarity' draws attention to the life-threatening circumstances in which youth struggle to survive without access to health care or education (Cooper et al. 2021). We consider this work in our analysis of shifts, practices, and strategies among *laŋo* age-set men, including 'volunteering' by Murle youth.

The transition from boyhood to adulthood among East African pastoralists involves methods of cultural learning and socialisation into an age-set. Marginalised youths in war-torn societies such as the Murle who may not have support from family or schools (e.g., due to the loss of family members and a scarcity of schools in rural areas including cattle camps) are highly perceptible to targeted socialisation, the teachings of chiefs and elders, and fellow age-set members. Socialisation methods strengthen the sense of belonging to one's own age-set. In a review article which examines 32 texts related to East African pastoralist societies, Temechegn Bira and Barry Hewlett (2023: 103) demonstrated that 'teaching is an important process of cultural learning'. Much of the learning also happens outside formal schools. Specifically, warfare and defence skills, herding skills and knowledge, and cultural values are acquired through teaching and by participating in adult activities (Bira and Hewlett 2023: 87–88). Teaching by 'stimulus enhancement' such as giving knives or sticks for a given assignment is a common method of teaching in pastoralist societies (Bira and Hewlett 2023: 99). Eisenstadt (1954) emphasized the educational role of age-sets in adopting values and knowledge of one's own society and passing this knowledge on to the next generation.

Barker and Ricardo (2005: 9) labelled the type of socialisation through 'informal learning' in which older males transmit the necessary knowledge or skills to younger men as 'rites of passages'. We use this work to illustrate the impact of socialisation into the *laŋo* age-set may have on young Murle men as well as on other members of Murle society.

Research focusing on South Sudan has also investigated ethnic violence, the role of political and military elites in conflict escalation, and the militarisation of pastoralist societies. In a case study focusing on the Dinka–Mundari–Bari conflict, Paul W. Gore (2014: 15) dates the weakening of traditional administration, civilians turning to their ethnic communities, and the emergence of an urban military elite in southern Sudan to the mid-1960s. By 'elites', we refer to wealthy and often highly placed political and military leaders who create networks between the capital Juba and their home areas and, as Naomi Pendle (2015: 432) asserts, provide 'access to government resources and security'. In Bahr El Ghazal, the western part of South Sudan, politico-military elites in Juba created patronage networks with the help of the (Dinka) *titweng* age-set who protected their cattle wealth (Pendle 2015: 423–424). Elites cling to power, blocking youth from the opportunity to access socioeconomic and political mobility (Abbink 2005: 24). For example, Jana Krause's (2019: 480) study on local conflicts and stabilisation highlighted the detrimental impact of urban elite politics on conflict resolution efforts in rural areas of South Sudan. In a study focusing on armed Dinka and Nuer cattle-herding youth, Hannah Wild and colleagues (2018) explained how third parties make guns available and exploit youth to serve political objectives. Diana Felix da Costa (2018: 12) observed that powerful individuals use the Murle age-set system 'to build their own

armies'. We cite these works to illustrate the role of elites in conflict escalation as well as the strategies *laŋo* men use to confront attempts at manipulation.

JOINING OR OPTING OUT OF AGE-SETS

In East Africa, age-set societies such as the Murle are built upon social networks, particularly solidarity. Social practices help to establish and maintain relationships, build new alliances, and increase community resilience. Membership in an age-set is a resource upon which a young Murle man builds his identity and from which he draws support for his family's defence and social security. The age-set looks after its members, providing them with various needs for social welfare, a responsibility the state is unable to meet. This example illustrates the capacity of the age-set underpinned by ethnic affiliation and tradition to create community, form boundaries, and function as a system of support and solidarity (Woodhead 2011: 127–128).

From the numerous interactions we had with Murle interlocutors during our fieldwork, we learnt that several principles are integral to Murle norms on social relations, as well as ideals underlying traditional Murle masculinity. These principles guide Murle youth to respect the elderly, not to beg, to share food, honour guests and enemies, assist the vulnerable, cooperate with the community, and reconcile conflicts through traditional mechanisms. Men of the *laŋo* age-set observe the Murle norms related to the desirable physical appearance, such as refraining from braiding their hair, since it is perceived as inappropriate for men. In official meetings in the town of Pibor, many *laŋo* men wear the traditional southern Sudanese attire, a men's suit, which has an embedded back pocket.

Furthermore, two important Indigenous principles that guide *laŋo* age-set men's actions emerged from our field data: *ɛzɛɛth* ('loyalty') and *ɔrkɔɔr* ('togetherness'). These principles affirm the notion that age-set members acquire social connections through the philosophy of comradeship and brotherhood. *Laŋo* membership is strongly associated with the willingness to defend Murleland, which is perceived as one of the core responsibilities of a Murle man. A leader of the Murle *laŋo* age-set, Jijiyo, stated:

> Somebody who wanted to be a man and really wanted to be in our age-set, there are two things … involved… we try to defend the land ... If you want to be a man, you defend your people and your land. It shows that you really are a man, if you do this, you sacrifice yourself, yes. (Jijiyo, Juba, 19 September 2019)

Scholars have noted a similarity between a military command structure and East African age-set organisation (Lewis 1972; Simonse 1998). In the (Jebel) Boma context south of Pibor, Andretta (1989: 22) observed that the Murle village 'becomes the primary military and social unit'. Just like youths in rural areas elsewhere in South Sudan (Pendle 2015: 412–413; Krause 2019: 483), Murle youth also join age-set and community defence groups out of loyalty and for the survival of their society.

The *laŋo* leader (overall) speaks on behalf of the age-set as well as Murle society, who largely rely on the *laŋo* to protect their people and cattle. Jijiyo explained as follows:

> A *laŋo* leader is a person who has the support of the entire age-set. There is no official selection. A leader has to respect himself and respect others. I encourage the youth when there is a need to defend land and cattle, and discourage them when it is not acceptable to fight. (Jijiyo, Juba, 8 October 2018)

Most Murle age-set youth come from families and clans that belong to 'Black commoners' (*ɔl ci kolik*). In the Murle tradition, commoners are placed under the spiritual authority of 'red chiefs' (*alaat ci mɛɛrik*), the drumchiefs of the four Murle drumships (clans): *Thaŋajon*, *Ŋarɔthi*, *Kelenya*, and *Ŋinvach*. Red refers to the colour of the feather; nowadays a cap may distinguish the chief from the rest of the people. Murle ideals dictate that, while commoners may need to fight for society, red chiefs and their sons are not supposed to take part in battles. This unwritten customary rule is reinforced by the notion 'if the red chief's son goes first [to fight], all youth will die' (Jijiyo, Juba, 18–19 September 2019). This saying embodies a norm that regards commoners as the protectors of Murle society.

The moral principle of acting honourably towards one's enemies, such as not harming those who surrender, has also been put into practice. In July 2020, Murle age-set youth captured a group of armed Dinka and Nuer attackers in Maruwo in the southern part of Greater Pibor. The attackers surrendered their weapons. The *laŋo* youth identified the leader of the armed group as a Dinka military general who worked for the peace-monitoring mechanism in Juba. Neither the International Committee of the Red Cross nor the South Sudanese authorities took up the task of transporting these armed men out of Murleland. The Murle youth held the captives unharmed until the *laŋo* leader (overall), with great difficulty, managed to raise the money to charter a plane and organise their air transport to Juba on 3 August 2020. The families of the captives were unwilling to contribute towards the cost of the flight to rescue their relatives.

However, not all Murle men embrace and adopt the traditional ideals of masculinity, particularly in relation to joining age-sets and defending the Murle. The traditional pathway to Murle masculinity is becoming harder or much less desired for some men as their communities confront multiple changes and challenges following the independence of South Sudan and the ongoing wars. In their earlier work, R. W. Connell (1996 [1995]) theorised that masculinity is multiple and hierarchical; it may include several types of masculinities, such as hegemonic, complicit, subordinated, and marginalised masculinities. Beyond the warrior type of manhood ideal we observed among many *laɲo* age-set men, there are also other Murle versions of African masculinities, such as those shaped by Islam, Christianity, conflict, and urban and Western influences (Barker and Ricardo 2005: 4). The strategies that some Murle men adopt demonstrate 'individual adaptations' associated with transitions in age-set societies (Foner and Kertzer 1978: 1101).

One category among Murle men has involved struggling with juggling two different worlds. Some of these men work in international or local NGOs where they must adhere to the rules of neutrality. During our fieldwork in Pibor (2016–2017), we observed that some Murle men working for NGOs felt pressured to participate in age-set activities, including fighting or allocating resources such as vehicles or fuel for purposes benefitting their age-set. Some joined the Murle community defence force during conflicts and some also lost their lives while defending Murleland. It was obvious that some of these men found it difficult to be involved in both worlds since the traditional norms of loyalty and commitment to Murle society and land entail warring, which were incompatible with their new roles.

Another category of young Murle men chooses not to join or identify with age-sets. They reject the traditional Murle male roles of warring and protecting Murle society, relying instead on personal connections to substitute for the lack of network and support the age-set provides. These men do not gain the important technical and historical knowledge that age-set members acquire (Eisenstadt 1954: 107). Consequently, they struggle with accepting the Murle ethnic identity and the cultural stigma attached to it. Yet, these youth might benefit from the achievements of age-sets, such as the recovery of raided Murle cattle, embodying a type of complicit masculinity (Messerschmidt and Connell 2005: 832).

There is also a category of young Murle men who shun age-sets because of a physical or mental disability, a problem with toxic substances or due to involvement in criminal activities. Some of these young men embody a type of subordinate masculinity. They are at risk of being excluded from their own society because they defy socially acceptable behaviour in Murle society. The Murle have a narrative, which talks about a Murle who was unable to live up to the standards and values of a traditional society; as a result, he was excluded from the Murle community and died shortly thereafter. This narrative, widely shared in Pibor, demonstrates that the socialisation of individuals in Murle society carries the expectation of accepting the values and norms of traditional society, while also indicating the psychological toll of social exclusion.

Murle men who repudiate traditional Murle roles face repercussions. One is related to the socially structured society which provides the age-sets' bargaining power. Murle men who disdain age-sets can hardly influence local political decision-making. Social networks of

Murle men who opt out of age-sets are less developed since they cannot rely on the social support of the age-set. They fail to embrace Murle ethnicity and, instead, deemphasise their ethnic identity in public settings. For these youth, ethnic ties and loyalties are irrelevant. Murle men who choose not to join an age-set may be regarded as demonstrating and performing a different kind of masculinity, sometimes one less violent. By so doing, their inability to conform to the Murle normative system, of which age-sets are an integral part, however, leaves them on the margins of Murle societal practices. This means that they lack important social networks and a means of influencing consensual decisions in Murle society.

TRANSFORMATIVE SHIFTS IN ROLES AND STATUSES

When talking to young Murle men in Pibor, we found that their stories described future uncertainties, a lack of jobs and opportunities for education, and persistent communal conflicts. Many youth aspired to a position as a civil servant in the local administration or a rare opportunity for a paid job with international organisations and NGOs. Some youth were idle, constrained by socioeconomic difficulties. Some other young men tried to survive by helping their families to cultivate land, herd, and hunt. For rural Murle youth, herding is a backup option, a survival strategy. For many youth who do not have relatives in the capital, moving to urban areas such as Juba is difficult due to the lack of support networks and gainful employment in town (see, e.g., Honwana 2014: 33).

Many young rural Murle men also kept themselves busy by 'volunteering'. The oft-heard phrase 'we are just volunteering' (*ola kaliŋliŋ dɔwuk*) refers to defending the land, as well as other types of unpaid community work performed for the benefit of Murle society. Work without pay includes tasks compatible with Murle principles, such as carrying sick people to the clinic or searching for missing persons. In a parallel practice, Sarah Mathew (2022) illustrated how participation in raids in Turkana society was voluntary, yet often mandatory due to various considerations related to maintaining social cohesion and norms. In Murle society, volunteering in community defence groups and joining rebel groups are strategies that the rural Murle youth in Pibor use as they adopt an active role to navigate the harsh social realities during 'waithood' (Honwana 2014: 30). In urban areas, such as in the Mahad neighbourhood near the Konyo Konyo market in the town of Juba, playing football is one way for young Murle men to avoid idleness (Isabirye 2024).

There are also many similarities in the past experiences of these rural Murle men. As children, many *laŋo* men looked after the family cattle, hunted game, and migrated to cattle camps. Many were also recruited as 'warriors' at an early age, lost family members and friends in wars, were displaced due to conflicts, and grew up in refugee camps. These young Murle men had to learn to cope with economic hardships. They followed the Murle tradition of protecting Murle civilians, property, and livelihoods (see, e.g., Johnson 2016: 106). Assuming the role of warriors, they responded to marginalisation by honing warring tactics and by participating in traditional practices.

But, confronting Murle marginalisation from the government, particularly in the post-independence era after 2011, meant that *laŋo* men had to adopt new roles beyond the traditional roles of warring and rustling cattle. The life-story interviews with Jijiyo, the *laŋo* leader (overall), were conducted in three main sessions in October 2018, when he was in his

30s. Jijiyo's story is one of violence, trauma, and poverty. Three main themes emerged in our interview data: warring, marriage, and resilience. We highlight the main shifts and turning points in his life story under the following labels: Pibor, Kakuma, Entebbe/Masaka, rebellion, and marriage.

PIBOR

Coming from an ordinary Murle cattle-keeping family, Jijiyo looked after the cattle like many other Murle boys of the same age. At the age of 9, he went to the bush carrying an Arab gun with a 20-bullet magazine. Jijiyo's father had obtained the gun in exchange for 15 cows in order to protect the family's cattle wealth against attacks from wild animals. Between the ages of 9 and 14, Jijiyo served for 5 years as a *bɛkchok*[5] for a Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) General in Boma County. Childhood and youth in Jijiyo's life were filled with hardship, hunger, and emotional suffering.

Jijiyo's elderly stepfather died in 1999, when Jijiyo was 10 years old. Then, his mother was struck by a stray bullet and killed during a communal conflict in 2000. Jijiyo found her body in the vegetable garden at the family home. His mother's wish was that Jijiyo would obtain an education (*yeedinet)*, not kill, fight or seek advice from witchdoctors, and never to go to Nyandit, a ritual place near Akobo visited by non-Christian Murle. Jijiyo's mother was the fourth of an older man's six wives. She made a conscious decision to convert to Christianity, while her own mother remained a follower of the Murle tradition all her life.

Only in November 2018 was Jijiyo able to organise a (symbolic) burial for his mother. Jijiyo also changed his surname to his mother's surname to honour his late mother. That process

helped him to strengthen his connection to his childhood family and roots, and to heal from these traumatic losses during the war. Jijiyo credits his protective grandmother for his lack of tribal marks and scarifications, which age-set youth often get in cattle camps. He explained, 'My grandmother did not allow me to have them [scarifications, etc.] done' (Jijiyo, Juba, 24 October 2018). These examples show that Jijiyo's mother and grandmother, two strong Murle women, provided a moral compass that Jijiyo followed in his life even after their passing.

KAKUMA

One phase of life known as *bɛkchok* ended when Jijiyo's good friend was injured. Jijiyo helped him to reach Lokichogio in Kenya, and, later, the Kakuma refugee camp. Having lost both parents in the conflict in southern Sudan, Jijiyo remained in the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya in a zone reserved for minors without parents. There was a sign of hope. The Lost Boys of Sudan—a programme established by the United States (US) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)— offered thousands of Sudanese refugees the possibility for resettlement in the US, Canada or Australia. Jijiyo also submitted applications in 2001–2003. He recalls:

> On 6 February 2004, I went with my friends to see the list of refugees selected to travel to those countries. I noticed that Murle and Equatorian names had been deleted. Persons that were approved to travel were Dinka and Nuer only. A few Murle managed to go since they claimed to have Dinka wives. The list was approved by 'UN managers of staff', who were Dinka and Nuer. (Jijiyo, Juba, 8 October 2018)

At Kakuma, the differentiated treatment of southern Sudanese refugees was a great disappointment for Jijiyo and for many Murle. Laudati (2011: 28) observed that, since the Murle were excluded from the Lost Boys programme, they could not develop support networks abroad, especially in the US, from where the Dinka and Nuer drew support.

It took another year before the Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005) ended, following the 2005 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which was signed between the southern rebels of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and the Government of Sudan in Khartoum (Thomas 2015). Refugees from southern Sudan in Kakuma, Kenya, including Jijiyo, were advised to return to their homes. To heed his late mother's advice, Jijiyo went to Uganda to seek an education before returning to Pibor.

ENTEBBE/MASAKA

In Uganda, one adaptation strategy for Jijiyo involved converting to Christianity. Jijiyo converted to a charismatic form of Christianity because he had to survive:

> I became a Christian because the church people promised food and support if I converted to Christianity. So, I converted, but we still follow the traditional Murle ways. I was given food and a place to sleep at the doorman's office. This was in exchange for cleaning the church on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, for teaching children in Sunday school, and for coaching children to play football and to run. Although they promised, the church did not pay my school fees at the Modern Primary School of Entebbe, because they said that I failed to clean the church. (Jijiyo, Juba, 8 October 2018)

This excerpt demonstrates that some Murle adapt to situations of duress by converting to Christianity, referred to as *thuwen* ('faith'), while at the same time holding on to *kɛranɛ*, the 'Murle tradition' and way of life. In Judith McCallum's (2013: 135) interview, Sultan Ismail Konyi affirmed the notion that, unlike conversion to Islam, 'the church does not change the identity of the Murle'. This idea is reflected in the Murle language, which has an expression for converts, *eet ci ŋan agama jok jor* ('a person who received the spirit of God recently'), as well as for the Murle who converted back to the tradition, *eet ci emironek jowane o loocu* ('a person who turned away from God'). These phrases illustrate how language adapts to the reality where the Murle juggle multiple identities.

This account also indicates that Jijiyo, a refugee boy belonging to an ethnic minority, had no real choice. He felt that conversion to the form of Christianity endorsed by the Ugandan Calvary Chapel in Entebbe along with the responsibility of carrying out a lengthy list of daily chores were preconditions for the provision of food and shelter. Yet, those recruiting him to the church failed to deliver on the promise to pay his school fees. Out of kindness, two American pastors living in the town of Masaka, Uganda, came to his rescue, and Jijiyo, the head boy of the senior class (S3), later graduated from Masaka High School near the Tanzanian border.

From Masaka, Jijiyo returned to Pibor. He became the leader of a new age-set, *laŋo*, which gradually attracted more youth and then separated from an older Murle age-set, *bothothniya*, in 2009. In many regards, Jijiyo's story is typical for many Murle boys who join age-sets. Jijiyo's experiences of inequality and the unfair treatment of the Murle were the driving factors of his sense of social responsibility that led him to engage through age-set organisation

and become a leader. Yet, these decisions came at a hefty price to him as the violent conflict in South Sudan escalated after independence in 2011.

REBELLION

The political and ethnic conflict persisted after South Sudan gained independence in 2011. One notable development in the post-2011 era was the *laŋo* age-set participation in the Murle-led rebellion movement against the national government in 2012. Hilde Johnson (2016: 121) determined that human-rights abuses of civilians involving SPLA soldiers had angered many Murle. *Laŋo* men were in their early 20s, eager to assert their masculinity and impress women by fighting for social justice for the Murle. But, many of the younger Murle boys had no choice but to fight because defection was not an option (Human Rights Watch 2015: 50). Some Murle cited the harsh disarmament campaign as a reason for joining the rebellion (Human Rights Watch 2015: 48). We understand that many *laŋo* men supported the rebellion in 2012–2013 as a reaction against post-independence policies, which they felt disregarded the Murle contribution to the liberation war. This justification is expressed in the lyrics of a Murle song we collected in Pibor in 2017: *karyayith zaany buk, munyathotha, kawo tho* ('We have been separated [from Sudan] also, in the star [in the flag], we all are there [we contributed]'). In the South Sudan flag, the yellow star represents unity. The ex-combatants Guðrún Friðriksdóttir (2018: 10) interviewed in Burundi similarly cited social injustice and oppressive policies as reasons for joining armed groups.

Another significant development was the *laŋo* joining the armed opposition movement, the South Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army 'in Opposition' (SPLM/A-iO), in February 2015. That same year, Jijiyo's older sister and her husband were killed in two separate incidents in the conflict. Their orphaned children were left without care and the responsibility fell to Jijiyo. The deaths of family members also left some fundamental questions, necessary for the construction of his identity, unanswered. Jijiyo explained, 'I think my sister would have known my birthdate [day], but now I don't know who to ask' (Jijiyo, Juba, 24 October 2018). The loss of family property, including Jijiyo's school certificates and identity documents, in a fire that destroyed the family house in Pibor during the conflict in 2015 made life even more difficult.

The following year, in July 2016, fighting between the government and opposition forces broke out in Juba. In the weeks that followed, the SPLM/A-iO forces moved southward to the Democratic Republic of Congo, reaching Bunia. That journey took a toll on the forces. The core group of forces was flown by UN aircraft from Goma to Khartoum, where Jijiyo also received medical attention for injuries he sustained in the bush while carrying his commander. In October 2018, the commander, now South Sudan first vice president, recognised Jijiyo's display of bravery during the conflict through a letter of appreciation. But, the recognition was cold comfort for the personal losses Jijiyo suffered during the rebellion.

Following the rebellion, Jijiyo, the *laŋo* leader (overall), used his role as a political and military leader over Murle age-sets to build a new alliance with the Nuer to challenge the government. In March 2021, inheriting the leadership from Sultan Ismail Konyi, SPLA Lieutenant General and paramount chief of the Murle who in the 1980s founded the Murle brigade (*Berget)*, further reinforced his status as the *laŋo* leader (overall) (Sankelo and Jijiyo

2023: 388). This development consolidated his status as a Murle leader who, like the late Sultan, draws his legitimacy from multiple sources of power—traditional, spiritual, political, and military—which some other Murle leaders cannot do. Jijiyo, whose family comes from the largest commoners' clan—the Mayngule clan—challenges the notion of the political dominance of the chiefly clan in Murle society (James 1973: 202).

Jijiyo's life stories were marked by turning points—traumatic losses of family members and experiences of inequality—but, also, positive experiences including the kindness of strangers which instilled confidence in society. Jijiyo's joining the SPLM/A-iO and resisting the government demonstrates a new transformative process for his role as traditional Murle warrior.

MARRIAGE

The age-set system underpins the construction of the identity of Murle men. Male roles in such societies are commonly marked by transitions from one age grade to the next. These transitions are unique for each age-set due to the historical and environmental settings in which they live (Foner and Kertzer 1978: 1086). In Murle societies, transitions are flexible (Arensen 1992). Murle men remain in the same age-set throughout their lives; however, they achieve 'age grades' individually. Their system is similar to that among the Latuka [Otuho] of southern Sudan (Kertzer and Madison 1980). Otuho youth transit through warriorhood to elderhood at a pace that depends on whether the males have gathered sufficient wealth to marry.

In principle, Murle men of fighting age can marry and, thus, elevate their status. But, to achieve marriage—that is, to become a man—many age-set youth who participated in the Murle rebellion or joined armed groups are struggling to collect the required number of cattle to gift a bride and build a house. Unlike some other East African pastoralist societies, Murle society frowns upon circumcision: it is not a precondition for marriage for a boy or a girl. A circumcised Murle man is pejoratively called (*eet ci) legerenyo* ('a man with no skin on his penis').

Marriage is without a doubt one of the most significant transitions in the life of a Murle *laŋo* man. Dianne Singerman (2007: 6), who first used the notion of waithood, observed in the Middle Eastern context that delayed marriages change the institution of marriage as youth deviate from the morals of their parents and society, such as by engaging in premarital sex. In Murle society, parents and relatives can challenge a marriage initiated by a girl and a boy without consulting the parents and relatives on both sides. Elopement, whereby a girl disappears with a boy usually for a period of three days, is a way for girls to resist the decision of parents who might have already selected another husband for their daughter. In the case of an elopement, the girl's family can open a case in a traditional court to claim cows from the man with whom their daughter eloped.

Murle marriages often serve the purpose of building alliances and strengthening family, clan, and age-set ties. For Jijiyo, marriage was an important part of becoming a trusted adult male in his society. Marriage helped him gain the respect of his age-set and was essential to his becoming a leader. Jijiyo explained:

> A Murle man without a wife is hopeless … If you are not married, you cannot be a leader. They would not allow you to speak during communal events. (Jijiyo, Juba, 8 October 2018)

Like the Xhosa men of South Africa who are required to 'demonstrate masculinity through speech' (Mfecane 2018: 300), Murle masculinity also manifests itself in the ability to speak convincingly in social settings. In community meetings, the speaker establishes connections with the audience as well as demonstrates their place in the social hierarchy at the beginning of the speech by introducing the self, clan, marriage, and village/birthplace to prove that the speaker is a 'son' (or daughter) of Murleland. Thus, traditional (common law) marriage was also a means via which Jijiyo could access the political power upon which he later built.

Jijiyo's story offers a lens via which to view the life experiences of one Murle *laŋo* man who became a husband, a father, and a caretaker of orphaned children, as well as a prominent community advocate and a military commander. He resisted marginalisation by taking an active role and became a leader in his age-set. His story illustrates the opportunities, constraints, and turning points of life-course transitions. It also draws attention to the early childhood emotional bond between Jijiyo and his mother and grandmother, which may have influenced how Jijiyo viewed women's roles in society later in life. This idea aligns with the observation that 'the roles of mother and grandmother carry high status in Murle society' (Andretta 1983: 101).

COUNTER-MANIPULATION STRATEGIES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS AMONG *LAŊO* MEN

Some Murle leaders are known for their connections to specific age-sets to whom they provide resources. These individuals contribute to conflicts by pushing for the appointment of their relatives as the 'eyes and ears' for local

government positions in rural areas. These military and political leaders are notorious for using youth as a proxy to undermine security and to impose unjustifiable social hierarchies on other groups of society. There are also 'Murle intellectuals'—that is, a loose group of urbanised 'honourables' with some education who have established their political careers at the local or national level. They demand respect from their constituencies in rural areas, from whom they are, however, both socially and economically alienated. Individual adaptation strategies, such as joining rebel groups, fighting with weapons, and resorting to age-set chiefs and diviners, are part of a process young Murle men use to challenge the authority of traditional leaders, politicians, and military men.

As a collective, the *laŋo* uses several means of active and passive resistance to influence sociopolitical decision-making in Murle society. These means include coordinating activities and ideas independently with neighbouring societies' chiefs and military leaders without involving the local authority; reserving the right to decide whether to mobilise youth—that is, to prepare youth for battle to defend Murleland, people, and cattle from attackers; organising age-set meetings and dances without seeking approval for such events from local authorities; being absent from community meetings; organising a sudden movement of age-set youth from the village to the bush (*balala*), thereby triggering concerns of impending insecurity; rejecting the common form of cultural learning in pastoralist societies, such as task assignment, and; stepping in as a group to prevent corrupting activities.

Some *laŋo* activities affect hierarchies and patriarchal relations. In a society that builds on social inequalities and values seniority and males (Stewart 1977), the *laŋo* actively promotes equality among the Murle. For example, in an interview with Radio Miraya, the *laŋo* leader

(overall) encouraged Murle men to send their girl children to school, help their wives with domestic work, and stop early child marriage and the abuse of women (Kuthurchar 2018). Furthermore, men of the *laŋo* age-set listen to the advice of mothers, particularly the *dole ci lilu*, the *laŋo* age-set's diviner (Sankelo and Jijiyo 2023: 392). These *laŋo* activities may challenge the authority of male traditional leaders as well as local government authorities.

In addition, the activities of the *laŋo* safeguard access to traditional lands and prevent grazing and farming lands from being exploited by extractive industries. For rural Murle, ethnic identity, traditional ways, hunting, herding, and farming are important parts of life and Murle cultural survival. These interests of rural Murle are incompatible with the business interests of Juba elites. In particular, the southern area of the Greater Pibor, rich in natural resources, has attracted the interest of elites. The area has several sacred sites which consist of cultural and spiritual objects. For example, Mount Kathangor and the Maruwo Hills are known as the burial places of early Murle chiefs (Lewis 1972: 82–83). Caves in the Maruwo Hills were a secondary burial place for the bones of dead chiefs, as well as a place where sacred drums were kept (Arensen 1992: 254). Mount Kathangor is also indicated as the residing place of *Apayok*, the supreme being of Jie [Jiye], an ethnic group inhabiting the boundary areas of the GPAA and Eastern Equatoria State (Burtscher 2021: 28). In addition, Indigenous peoples, such as the Murle, have responsibilities toward sacred sites (Clifford 2013: 75).

For example, in August 2022, *laŋo* age-set youth prevented the work of a mining company in Jebel Boma County, forcing the GPAA local government to act (The City Review South Sudan 2022; Radio Tamazuj 2022*)*. This incident illustrates how rural Murle

youth 'subvert and disrupt gerontocracy' (Batan et al. 2021) through the means available to them. Youth stepping into the role of traditional leaders responsible for the welfare of civilians serves as a moderation technique, a dynamic used by rural youth to curb corruptive activities (see also Honwana 2012: 167).

Engaging in social activism carries implications on the youth. Some Murle leaders who hold government positions have threatened to harm the age-set leader's family and closest friends. The age-set demonstrated its strength to sustain and stand by its leadership despite numerous attempts by Murle elites to dismantle the support structure by buying loyalties and by sanctioning abuse. *Laŋo* men and their family members and supporters have been arbitrarily detained and ill-treated in detention. These abuses and offences include acts amounting to physical and psychological torture, such as severe beatings, mock executions, and extrajudicial killings (which remain uninvestigated). The level of systematic violence some *laŋo* men and people close to them have sustained far exceeds the 'beatings' that Foner and Kertzer (1978: 1088) found commonly occurred in the 1970s during transitions in East African age-set societies.

Likewise, *laŋo* men's counter-manipulation strategies carry implications on elites. Violence and the use of youth as a proxy have been a means via which elites obtain political power and economic benefits (Wild et al. 2018). The brutal violence against some *laŋo* men and their close friends and family members points to a gradual erosion of political and moral authority among some Murle political and military leaders. The influence of 'Murle intellectuals' has diminished. Following the passing of the two most respected Murle red chiefs, Ismail Konyi and Barchoch Lual, in 2021, attempts by some Murle leaders to assume multiple roles

have failed. The ability of the *laŋo* leadership to block attempts by the local government authorities and their Juba affiliates to mobilise Murle youth in the GPAA may defuse tensions in neighbourly relations. Thus, a Murle political leader in Juba essentially must win the support of the *laŋo* age-set to execute any plans in rural areas.

Yet, these counter-manipulation strategies also have implications on the neighbours of the Murle in contexts involving conflicts. One *laŋo* strategy involves embracing the Indigenous Murle ethical code, which has helped to reduce fighting and contributed to the goal of peace. Similar strategies have been used by other pastoralist groups in East Africa. For example, Pendle (2021: 893) observed that some members of Dinka-affiliated armed groups in South Sudan 'reinterpreted norms to allow restraint' as a means to mitigate the attempts of militarised leaders to control them.

Another *laŋo* strategy is forging an alliance with age-sets from neighbouring societies. Alliances are formed as a reaction to the challenges *laŋo* men encounter in enacting traditional male roles as protectors of Murle communities. The *laŋo* age-set has successfully built alliances with parallel age-sets across ethnic lines, as well as with armed groups affiliated with both the government and the opposition. The interethnic network the *laŋo* has established within the Upper Nile region such as with the Lou Nuer, and in the Eastern Equatorial region with the Jie and Toposa, has enabled the *laŋo* leadership to pre-empt fighting and resolve cattle-rustling disputes. Such cooperation has also assisted in the recovery of abducted women and children. Reciprocal relationships with neighbours have politically strengthened the *laŋo* and reduced the possibilities of ill-intended manipulations of youth by elites.

Ultimately, forming alliances is not a

new development among African pastoralists. According to Andretta (1985: 2), maintaining a broad network of contacts gives pastoralist peoples 'the adaptive advantage', which contributes to their survival in times of uncertainty. The benefits of networking are also found among pastoralists in northern Uganda, who 'meet and mix' in cattle camps with herders from other communities, while maintaining preparedness to defend their animals (Simonse 2005: 244). Among the Lotuho in South Sudan, David Kertzer and Oker Madison (1980: 103) considered the ability to easily mix with unrelated people an 'environmental adaptation response' of members of pastoralist age-set societies. The novelty of the *laŋo* approach—and yet another moderation strategy—is that, now, Murle youth seek alliances with like-minded youth to promote peace rather than fighting. These actions demonstrate that rural *laŋo* youth in villages no longer accept a passive waithood, if they ever did.

CONCLUSIONS

This article contributes to the existing research on African masculinities and marginalised social groups in East African pastoralist age-set societies. In it, we illustrate that the competition over political and societal power between younger and older generations of Murle has led to an outcome in which the younger men, such as the *laŋo*, resort to traditional age-set practices to challenge marginalisation and abusive practices by elites. In turn, elites, in their manipulation attempts, draw on the Murle value of respecting older people, as well as resort to cultural learning methods that are typical in pastoralist societies, such as stimulus enhancement and task assignment.

This study on Murle *laŋo* masculinity provides a new perspective regarding what it

means to be a Murle man. The life story offered an interpretation of Murle ideals through a *laŋo* man's subjective lived experience by increasing our understanding of how violent conflict may shape opportunities for a secure childhood and youth and create constraints through traumatic losses, disappointments, and experiences of inequality. Turning points in the life story such as rebellion and marriage were complex transitions. The life story of the *laŋo* man is nonetheless a survival story, exemplifying what young Murle men must endure as they undertake the role of protector in their home communities. These experiences reflect a considerable amount of hardship, but also remarkable resilience.

Our analysis indicated that social changes are gradually affecting gender relations in Murle society. We showed that embracing the Murle tradition does not necessarily mean turning one's back on women; rather, it illustrated that mothers and grandmothers can have a lasting impact on the lives of their sons. Relating positively to women's participation in Murle society, the study shows that at least some *laŋo* men are transforming the Murle form of African masculinity. For them, the age-set is a resource that men who opt out of age-sets do not have. The study also shed light on Murle men who opt out of these traditional roles and examined the contributing factors to their experiences.

Yet, our results also revealed that joining age-sets, warring, and making peace with adversaries still constitute the standard of desirable masculinity expected from a *laŋo* age-set man in rural areas. *Laŋo* age-set men and women, who together make up a large part of the Murle adult population, resist marginalisation from the government by joining political rebel groups, forming alliances with age-sets from neighbouring societies as well as with armed groups affiliated with the

opposition and through marriage. These young Murle men leverage the age-set organisation and inter-ethnic alliances, fostering reciprocal relationships within a wider network.

Our observations during our fieldwork affirm that Murle youth adopt strategies as individuals as well as at the age-set level to navigate the challenges of marginalisation and attempts at manipulation by corrupt politicians and military men. Specifically, by resorting to traditional age-set practices, our results ultimately contradict the work of researchers such as Mamadou Diouf, who claimed that African youth reject ancestors and traditions (Diouf 2003: 7; Burton and Charton-Bigot 2010: 5). Murle *laŋo* men act by joining age-sets, community defence groups, and at times rebel groups, refusing to wait any longer. Through social activism, these youth contribute to the well-being of Murle society, including by 'volunteering'—that is, by forming an informal (and often unpaid) workforce.

Furthermore, using the example of captured enemy fighters in Maruwo, our study demonstrates the ability of the traditional age-set organisation to emphasise unity (conformity), solidarity, and ethical values, providing a solid foundation for peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms based on Murle Indigenous laws. We describe how young *laŋo* men uphold the ideals of Murle society, such as by affirming nobility among the vulnerable and their adversaries. Murle *laŋo* men are transforming their society by rejecting the elite's corrupt practices. The results speak to the need for peace practitioners and researchers to expand consultations beyond national- and subnational-level authorities to include different social groups in dialogues at multiple levels of the hierarchical Murle age-set society, and genuinely seek to include the perspectives of all parties to a conflict.

Yet, this study also more broadly contributes to the literature by adding to our understanding of the challenges young Indigenous men face as they grow up and become men. More recently, Global South youth studies have emphasised the need for 'localized knowledge' (Batan et al. 2021), and research practices that consider social realities from the Global South as well as the diverse ways youth navigate everyday challenges (Cooper et al. 2021). As rural Murle men go through the complex transition from childhood to adulthood, they resort to traditional practices, adhering to social norms, and resist ill-advised instructions from local authorities as well as prevent the manipulation of youth by elites.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

JUHANNA SANKELO
DOCTORAL RESEARCHER
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI, FINLAND
juhanna.sankelo@helsinki.fi

PAULINO JIJIYO
MURLE AGE-SET LEADER
PIBOR, SOUTH SUDAN

NOTES

1 Sudan's First Civil War (1955–1972), Sudan's Second Civil War (1983–2005), and the South Sudanese Civil War (2013–2018).

2 Most recent population projections estimate that the total population in Pibor is 227 854, comprising 118 985 females and 108 869 males (UNOCHA 2020).

3 Any Murle age-set may have several (youth) leaders. We use the word 'overall' for the *laŋo* age-set leader who coordinates activities with other leaders of the age-set.

4 The male population of Pibor aged 18–61 years was estimated as 39 123 (17% of males), and the female population aged 18–61 years was roughly 44 659 (20% of females).

5 The Murle word *bɛkchok* denotes a bodyguard who follows the orders of someone else, such as a child soldier, whereas *kerorowe* is a word used for a trained bodyguard, an adult, who oversees someone's security.

REFERENCES

Abbink, Jon 2005. Being Young in Africa: The Politics of Despair and Renewal. In Jon Abbink and Ineke van Kessel (eds). *Vanguard or Vandals: Youth, Politics and Conflict in Africa*. Leiden: Brill.

Andretta, Elizabeth H. 1983. Aging, Power and Status in an East African Pastoral Society (Murle). *Studies in Third World Societies* 23: 83–109.

Andretta, Elizabeth H. 1985. *A Reconsideration of the Basis of Group Cohesion among the Murle of the Southern Sudan*. Doctoral dissertation. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.

Andretta, Elizabeth H. 1989. Symbolic Continuity, Material Discontinuity, and Ethnic Identity among Murle Communities in the Southern Sudan. *Ethnology* 28 (1): 17–31. https://doi.org/10.2307/3773640.

Arensen, Jonathan E. 1992. *Mice Are Men: Language and Society Among the Murle of Sudan*. Dallas: International Museum of Cultures.

Barker, Gary and Christine Ricardo 2005. *Young Men and the Construction of Masculinity in Sub-Saharan Africa: Implications for HIV/AIDS, Conflict, and Violence*. Washington, DC: World Bank.

Batan, Clarence M., Adam Cooper, James E. Côté, Alan France, Terri-Ann Gilbert-Roberts, Siri Hettige, Ana Miranda, Pam Nilan, Joschka Philipps and Paul Ugor 2021. Global South Youth

Studies, Its Forms and Differences among the South, and between the North and South. In Sharlene Swartz, Adam Cooper, Clarence M. Batan and Laura Kropff Causa (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Global South Youth Studies*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190930028.013.4

Bira, Temechegn G. and Barry S. Hewlett 2023. Cultural Learning among Pastoralist Children. *Cross-Cultural Research* 57 (1): 74–110. https://doi.org/10.1177/10693971221134180.

Burton, Andrew Ross and Hélène Charton-Bigot 2010. *Generations Past: Youth in East African History*. Ohio: Ohio University Press.

Burtscher, Doris 2021. Medication Is Like Food. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Vienna Evaluation Unit. https://evaluation.msf.org/medication-is-like-food-perceived-healthcare-needs-and-access-to-healthcare-an-anthropological. <Accessed 30 November 2023>

Chilisa, Bagele, Emily Thenjiwe Major and Kelne Khudu-Petersen 2017. Community Engagement with a Postcolonial, African-Based Relational Paradigm. *Qualitative Research* 17 (3): 326–339. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794117696176.

Clifford, James 2013. *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Collins, Robert and Richard Herzog 1961. Early British Administration in the southern Sudan. *The Journal of African History* 2 (1): 119–135.

Connell, Raewyn 1996 [1995]. *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Connell, Raewyn 2016. Masculinities in Global Perspective: Hegemony, Contestation, and Changing Structures of Power. *Theory and Society* 45 (4): 303–318. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-016-9275-x

Cooper, Adam, Sharlene Swartz, Clarence Batan, and Laura Kropff Causa 2021. Realigning Theory, Practice, and Justice in Global South Youth Studies. In Sharlene Swartz et al. (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of Global South Youth Studies*, 2–16. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190930028.013.1

Diouf, Mamadou 2003. Engaging Postcolonial Cultures: African Youth and Public Space. *African Studies Review* 46 (2): 1–12. https://doi.org/10.2307/1514823

Eisenstadt, Shmuel N. 1954. African Age Groups: A Comparative Study. *Journal of the International African Institute* 24 (2): 100–113. https://doi.org/10.2307/1156134.

Eisenstadt, Shmuel N. 1971. *From Generation to Generation: Age Groups and Social Structure*. New York: The Free Press.

Felix da Costa, Diana 2018. *Changing Power among Murle Chiefs: Negotiating Political, Military and Spiritual Authority in Boma State, South Sudan*. Juba: Rift Valley Institute.

Foner, Anne and David Kertzer 1978. Transitions over the Life Course: Lessons from Age-Set Societies. *American Journal of Sociology* 83 (5): 1081–1104. https://doi.org/10.1086/226675.

Friðriksdóttir, Guðrún S. 2018. Ex-Combatants as Social Activists: War, Peace and Ideology in Burundi. *Conflict, Security & Development* 18 (1): 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2017.1420311.

Gore, Paul W. 2014. The Overlooked Role of Elites in African Grassroots Conflicts: A Case Study of the Dinka-Mundari-Bari Conflict in Southern Sudan. *Sudan Working Paper*. Bergen: Chr. Michelson Institute. https://www.cmi.no/publications/file/5314-the-overlooked-role-of-elites-in-african.pdf. <Accessed 30 November 2023>

Honwana, Alcinda 2012. *The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa. First edition*. Sterling, Va: Kumarian Press.

Honwana, Alcinda 2014. 'Waithood': Youth Transitions and Social Change. In Dick Foeken, Ton Dietz, Leo De Haan and Linda Johnson (eds). *Development and Equity: An Interdisciplinary Exploration by Ten Scholars from Africa, Asia and Latin America*. Boston: Brill.

Hubbard, Gill 2000. The Usefulness of Indepth Life History Interviews for Exploring the Role of Social Structure and Human Agency in Youth Transitions. *Sociological Research Online* 4 (4): 102–113. https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.390.

Human Rights Watch 2015. "We Can Die Too": Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers in South

Sudan. Human Rights website, December 14. https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/12/15/we-can-die-too/recruitment-and-use-child-soldiers-south-sudan. <Accessed 27 February 2024>

Isabirye, David 2024. Black Star Football Club: Igniting the Passion for the Game in South Sudan and Beyond. Kawowo Sports Website, 15 April. https://kawowo.com/2024/04/15/black-star-football-club-igniting-the-passion-for-the-game-in-south-sudan-and-beyond/. <Accessed 17 April 2024>

James, Wendy 1973. Reviewed Work: The Murle: Red Chiefs and Black Commoners, by B. A. Lewis. *Sudan Notes and Records* 54: 201–204. https://www.jstor.org/stable/42677944.

Johnson, Hilde F. 2016. *South Sudan: The Untold Story From Independence to Civil War*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Kertzer, David and Oker B. B. Madison 1980. African Age-Set Systems and Political Organization: The Latuka of Southern Sudan. *L'uomo Società Tradizione Sviluppo* 4 (1): 85–109. https://rosa.uniroma1.it/rosa03/uomo/article/view/16015.

Krause, Jana 2019. Stabilization and Local Conflicts: Communal and Civil War in South Sudan. *Ethnopolitics* 18 (5): 478–493. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2019.164005.

Kuthurchar, Paulino J. M. 2018. Interview with Radio Miraya, 27 November 2018, Juba, South Sudan.[In file with the authors].

Laudati, Ann 2011. Victims of Discourse: Mobilizing Narratives of Fear and Insecurity in Post-Conflict South Sudan — The Case of Jonglei State. *African Geographical Review* 30 (1): 15–32. https://doi.org/10.1080/19376812.2011.10539133.

Lewis, Bazett A. 1972. *The Murle: Red Chiefs and Black Commoners*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Markó, Ferenc Dávid 2021. Given Names and Lived Closeness. *Social Analysis* 65 (4): 70–89. https://doi.org/10.3167/sa.2021.650404.

Mathew, Sarah 2022. Turkana Warriors' Call to Arms: How an Egalitarian Society Mobilizes for Cattle Raids. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* 377 (1851): 20210144. https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2021.0144.

McCallum, Judith 2013. *Murle Identity in Post-Colonial South Sudan*. Doctoral dissertation. Toronto: York University.

Messerschmidt, James W. and R. W. Connell 2005. Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept. *Gender and Society* 19 (6): 829–859. https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639.

Mfecane, Sakhumzi 2018. Towards African-Centred Theories of Masculinity. *Social Dynamics* 44 (2): 291–305. https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2018.1481683.

Pendle, Naomi 2015. 'They are Now Community Police': Negotiating the Boundaries and Nature of the Government in South Sudan through the Identity of Militarised Cattle-Keepers. *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 22 (3): 410–434. https://doi.org/10.1163/15718115-02203006.

Pendle, Naomi 2021. Competing Authorities and Norms of Restraint: Governing Community-Embedded Armed Groups in South Sudan. *International Interactions* 47 (5): 873–897. https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2021.1918126.

Radio Tamazuj 2022. Sanctioned Businessman Awarded Gold Mining Contract in Jebel Boma. Radio Tamazuj Website, 8 September. https://radiotamazuj.org/en/news/article/sanctioned-businessman-awarded-gold-mining-contract-in-jebel-boma. <Accessed 17 April 2024>

Rands, Richard B. and Matthew LeRiche 2012. *Security Responses in Jonglei State in the Aftermath of Inter-Ethnic Violence*. London: Saferworld. https://www.saferworld-global.org/downloads/pubdocs/2147-saferworld-security-responses-in-jonglei-state.pdf. <Accessed 31 March 2024>

Ratele, Kopano 2014. Currents Against Gender Transformation of South African Men: Relocating Marginality to the Centre of Research and Theory of Masculinities. *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 9 (1): 30–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/18902138.2014.892285.

Ratele, Kopano 2015. Working through Resistance in Engaging Boys and Men towards Gender Equality and Progressive Masculinities. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 17, S2: 144–158. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2015.1048527.

Ratele, Kopano 2018. Concerning Tradition in Studies on Men and Masculinities in Ex-Colonies. In James W. Messerschmidt, Patricia Y. Martin, Michael. A. Messner and Raewyn Connell (eds). *Gender Reckonings: New Social Theory and Research.* New York: New York University Press.

Sankelo, Juhanna and Paulino Jijiyo 2023. In the Belly of the River: Water-Related Traditional Practices and the Moral Authority of Murle Mothers. *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 32 (4): 383–401. https://doi.org/10.53228/njas.v32i4.1038.

Santschi, Martina, Leben Moro, Philip Dau, Rachel Gordon and Daniel Maxwell 2014. *Livelihoods, Access to Services and Perceptions of Governance: An Analysis of Pibor County, South Sudan from the Perspective of Displaced People.* Working Paper 23: 1–36. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium.

Silberschmidt, Margrethe 2005. Poverty, Male Disempowerment, and Male Sexuality: Rethinking Men and Masculinities in Rural and Urban East Africa. In Lahoucine Ouzgane and Robert Morrell (eds). *African Masculinities: Men in Africa from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Present.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Simonse, Simon 1998. Age, Conflict and Power in the Monyomiji Age Systems. In Eisei Kurimoto and Simon Simonse (eds). *Conflict, Age and Power in North East Africa: Age System in Transition*, 51–78. Oxford: James Currey.

Simonse, Simon 2005. Warriors, Hooligans and Mercenaries: Failed Statehood and the Violence of Young Male Pastoralists in the Horn of Africa. In Jon Abbink, and Ineke van Kessel (eds). *Vanguard or Vandals: Youth, Politics and Conflict in Africa.* Leiden: Brill.

Singerman, Diane 2007. *The Economic Imperatives of Marriage: Emerging Practices and Identities Among Youth in the Middle East.* Middle East Youth Initiative Working Paper 6. Washington DC and Dubai: Wolfensohn Centre for Development and Dubai School of Government. http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1087433.

Stewart, Frank H. 1977. *Fundamentals of Age Group Systems.* New York: Academic Press.

The City Review South Sudan 2022. GPAA Suspends Gold Mining in Jebel Boma. The City Review South Sudan Website, 23 August. https://cityreviewss.com/gpaa-suspends-gold-mining-in-jebel-boma/. <Accessed 17 April 2024>

Thomas, Edward 2015. *South Sudan: A Slow Liberation.* London: Zed Books.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2017. *A Study of Statelessness in South Sudan, 2017.* Juba: UNHCR. https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/63857. <Accessed 30 November 2023>

United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (UNOCHA) 2020. South Sudan – Subnational Population Statistics, Sex and Age Disaggregated Population Estimates, 2020. Updated June 11, 2022. https://data.humdata.org/dataset/cod-ps-ssd?. <Accessed 30 November 2023>

United Nations Security Council (UNSC) 2020. Interim Report of the Panel of Experts on South Sudan submitted pursuant to resolution 2521 (2020). UNSC report S/2020/1141, dated 25 November 2020. http://www.undocs.org/S/2020/1141. <Accessed 16 March 2024>

Wild, Hannah, Jok M. Jok and Ronak M. Patel 2018. The Militarization of Cattle Raiding in South Sudan: How a Traditional Practice Became a Tool for Political Violence. *Journal of International Humanitarian Action* 3 (1): 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41018-018-0030-y.

Woodhead, Linda 2011. Five Concepts of Religion. *International Review of Sociology* 21 (1): 121–143. https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2011.544192.

Edwin Hao Chen Jiang

JUSTIFYING MERITOCRACY: CRITERIA OF FAIRNESS IN CHINA'S NATIONAL COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMINATION (*GAOKAO*)

ABSTRACT

The theoretical aim of this paper is to articulate a novel analytical framework that makes sense of our interlocutors' apparently conflicting claims about the reality of meritocracy in China. The theoretical argument is rooted in ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a Chinese high school, where teachers and working-class students live under the shadows of the demanding and high-stakes university entrance exam (the *gaokao*). How is it possible to preserve the outwardly inconsistent positions (1) that the *gaokao* is egalitarian and, thus, fair and (2) that students' much wealthier counterparts have significantly higher probabilities of success when compared to poorer students? This article argues for the possibility of dynamism in epistemic standards, suggesting that belief in structural systems like meritocracy might be founded in cognitive attempts to maintain the aims of ethical life.

Keywords: China, epistemology, ethics, meritocracy, metacognition

In June 2021, I watched as hundreds of teenagers marched toward the gates of a high school near my rented apartment, which had been temporarily transformed into a fortified testing ground. Police cars and motorcycles were parked by the entrance, as officers redirected incoming traffic. In the teenagers' hands were transparent document holders and pencil cases with their identity cards inside. Before entering the grounds, these items were inspected by security guards, who waved handheld metal detectors in search of concealed phones. The LED signs over roads instructed drivers not to honk and to avoid noise. Inside this impenetrable fortress, students were to sit a two-day-long exam under the watchful eye of human invigilators and '360-degree surveillance cameras', as a teacher told me. Indeed, this was the scene of the National College Entrance Exam (NCEE), or *gaokao*, taken across mainland China in near identical testing sites yearly, assessing pupils' knowledge of the high school curriculum. For my young interlocutors, whom I shall introduce shortly, this meant three core subjects—math, English, and Chinese—in addition to either a set of humanities electives (*wenke*) comprising history, geography, and politics, or a set of science electives (*like*), comprising physics, biology, and chemistry.

In this paper, meritocracy is conceptualised as a form of societal organisation where privileges were conferred to individuals based on 'ability' (*cf.* Allen 2011; Young 1994). Under the assumption that everyone had an equal shot at success on the rigorously guarded exam, parents and teachers often reasoned that those who attained actual examination success have done so on the basis of individual 'superior abilities' (*you benshi*) compared to competitors and, thus, deserved the benefits that followed (see Howlett 2022a: 163). While my interlocutors did not use the term 'meritocracy', I employ it as theoretical shorthand to encapsulate their understanding of the *gaokao* and their conflicting claims about the criteria of fairness in China.

In this article, I describe two opposing positions: the abovementioned majority of interlocutors who believed in meritocracy and defended the fairness of the examination system, and the minority who believed it was a sham. Building upon recent research, I observe how some interlocutors upheld both prongs of the dilemma, justifying the reality of meritocracy and the fairness of the *gaokao*, despite acknowledging factors such as the backdoors exploited by the rich and powerful. Contributing to the growing ethnography on the epistemic positions of Chinese citizens, I explore the logics of counterfactual reasoning in a manner that shifts away from the epistemologies of 'chanciness' or probabilistic notions like luck. I argue that, for some, perceptions of *gaokao* fairness were tied to an ethical conception of vocation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TESTING

Since the turn of the century, there has been much scholarly attention on 'education for quality' (*suzhi jiaoyu*) initiatives mandated from above, which emphasised the importance of non-*gaokao* subjects like art and physical education. These initiatives intended to turn Chinese education away from rigorous testing towards holistic assessment in an effort to produce modern citizens at the turn of the century (see Anagnost 2004; Lin 2017; Pang et al. 2020). Nevertheless, in the field, teachers and students openly neglected these efforts, which were mostly for show—a photo opportunity for the school's newsletter to be distributed to parents and 'higher-ups'. As I shall describe, the primary role of non-*gaokao* subjects was to provide a break between *gaokao* subjects.

The neglect of non-*gaokao* subjects was perceived as necessary due to the volume of information students were expected to memorise, which, according to Teresa Kuan (2015: 55), 'is simply unimaginable to anyone who did not come of age in this system'. When I asked students in Chinese secondary schools how they would prepare, everyone replied 'swip[ing] through more questions' (*shuati*). Still, teachers admitted, the knowledge that one accumulated in preparation for the *gaokao* was largely irrelevant to 'real life' despite the tremendous effort students exerted in accruing it. With the exception of Chinese teachers, few adult interlocutors could recite the classical poetry they had all memorised long ago for the *gaokao*, for instance.

More important was the *gaokao* score itself, which students received less than a month after the exam. Adult interlocutors recalled this number with ease and precision even decades later. A single digit point difference might drastically alter the trajectory of the test-taker's life. These days, unlike in other parts of the world like the United States, Chinese students across the country uniformly applied to universities upon completing high school after receiving their *gaokao* score (*cf.* Yamada 2021:

59–60). Unless students had exceptional talents, as exemplified through success on international academic competitions or athletic achievements, for instance, they relied exclusively on this score to enter university. With about 11 million people competing for admission into China's 2000 universities (Gierczyk and Diao 2021), interlocutors were aware that every point mattered. As my landlord in the field put it, 'What difference does one point make? A whole field of people between you and me.'

The transformative powers of a good score were evident to my landlord first-hand. His son had enrolled in a fully funded chemistry PhD programme in the United States after attending one of China's most prestigious universities following a triumphant *gaokao*. Even for interlocutors with no ambitions to study abroad, a good score yielded invaluable benefits. Research into the recruiting practices of elite domestic firms suggests that the prestige of one's *alma mater* far outweighed the minutiae of university transcripts (Ren 2022). For my young interlocutors, this score determined where they would go to university and, consequently, work.

My focus on the urban as opposed to the rural test-takers was contingent upon the type of access I secured. Admittedly, it was a decision made by chance. As others have recently argued, reflective of the increasing inequalities between urban and rural attainment, many rural citizens have become increasingly jaded by the supposed meritocratic nature of the educational system (see Chen 2022: 216; Howlett 2022b: 450). Consequently, it is prudent to qualify my findings as characteristically 'urban'.

In short, the way that entire cities were expected to accommodate the exam across the country reflected the significance that the *gaokao* still held in parts of the Chinese public imagination. Citizens were expected to bear the various inconveniences during the two days for the sake of students' futures. Meanwhile, the security apparatus employed at testing grounds to prevent cheating, with which I opened this article, furthered the impression that the examination's fairness was unimpeachable. Before turning to my arguments, I shall now introduce my field site, and consider some methodological challenges that I encountered during fieldwork.

FIELDWORK IN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL NO. 99

The ethnographic data this article draws upon were collected during the 2020–2021 school year at senior high school no. 99[1] in Hohhot, the capital of the Inner Mongolia region, in the northmost part of China. While Hohhot had an urban population of approximately 3 million people—equivalent to Chicago—students in senior high school no. 99 pejoratively referred to the city as a 'village' (*cun*). More politely, interlocutors described their hometown as 'third-tier' (*sanxian*). Not only was Hohhot peripheral to the metropoles of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, constituting 'tier one', it also lagged behind more developed southern cities where many of my young interlocutors hoped to go for university.

Aside from the limited visual urban hallmarks of Chinese modernity like skyscrapers and extensive subway networks, the perception of the city's backwardness was additionally due to its lack of educational prestige. Everyone cited the absence of '985 Project' universities in the city. This project was introduced by then Party leader Jiang Zemin in 1998 with the ambition of improving the standing of Chinese institutions on the global stage through increased investment (see Zhang et al. 2013: 765). The '985s' were often professed as the best

in the nation, even after the project concluded in 2016. In this context, it is unsurprising why students associated educational success with leaving. In comparison, there were eight Beijing universities included in the '985 Project'. Unfortunately, in the hierarchy of high schools in the city, no. 99 was just 'average' (*yiban*). The majority of no. 99 graduates made it into university, although never the top ones.

As I learned through fieldwork, the meritocratic ideals exemplified by the Chinese exam cut across a deeply hierarchical vision of Chinese society in which one's status depended upon the circumstances of their birth. The vast majority of the student body came from working-class backgrounds, with parents who often worked as cashiers and physical labourers in construction. Meanwhile, the impression that one's future was in one's own hands existed against the backdrop of regional disparities.

Today, China's top universities continue to employ provincial quotas for admissions disadvantaging populous yet poorer provinces (see Hamnett et al. 2019). In 2016, 1.2% of students in Henan, the third-most populated province with nearly 100 million residents, were enrolled in 985 universities, compared to 5.6% from Shanghai (Qin and Buchanan 2021: 885). As my interlocutors acknowledged, due to the low population of Inner Mongolia, *gaokao* competitiveness in Hohhot was much lower than elsewhere; still, students complained they were not conferred privileges like residents of Beijing (Howlett 2022c: 221). However, these provincial disproportions were seldom brought up by interlocutors when assessing the fairness of the exam.

The Chinese system comprises twelve years of schooling, the first nine of which are compulsory. This timeline was based on the student intake, with each stage having its own admissions procedures. Students went through

six years of primary school (*xiaoxue*), followed by three years of junior high (*chuzhong*), hopefully followed by three years of senior high school (*gaozhong*). I say 'hopefully' because it has become difficult to advance from junior to senior high school, as I shall describe below.

In Hohhot, entry into public primary schools was not based on individual performance. The expectation was for students to attend elementary school locally, defined by catchment areas. As expected, the demand for desirable schools outnumbered available places, a nationwide phenomenon exacerbated by parents purchasing homes in catchment areas motivated by gaining admissions into specific schools for the children (e.g., Wu et al. 2016). Consequently, in Hohhot, a lottery system has been introduced to allocate the limited number of admissions slots for the most in-demand schools. Parents within the catchment area who sought admissions for their children registered their candidacy online, and a list of the incoming class is then computer-generated. For 2021 entry, 350 students from 2578 candidates were admitted into the city's most desirable primary school. As one moved up to junior high school, however, the importance of the catchment area decreased. Lottery eligibility for desirable junior high schools were based on much larger 'municipal districts' (*shiqu*). By the time of senior high school, admission was based on tests, much like the *gaokao* itself. According to publicly available admissions data disseminated digitally by local news accounts, for the 2021 admissions cycle, no. 99 was right in the middle in terms of selectivity out of the 42 senior high schools listed in the city.

Consequently, by the time pupils sat for the *gaokao*, they had become well accustomed to the examination regime, having passed the increasingly competitive senior high school entry exam (*zhongkao*), which half failed. This

intensifying competition stemmed from recent policies, which have sought to funnel students into occupational training (e.g., Fan 2020; Ling 2015; Woronov 2016). Compare these statistics to those cited by Andrew Kipnis (2011: 40), whose fieldwork took place in 2005–2006 with updates in 2007 and 2009, when 80% of students would attend senior high school. Despite the intensifying challenges of the senior high school entry exam, however, the *gaokao* remained in the popular imagination a life-changing event in a capacity that *zhongkao* was not (yet). Hence, my focus on the former.

During my time in the field, I conducted sit-down semi-structured interviews with over two dozen students and ten teachers, all on multiple occasions, supplemented by countless 'chats' (*liaotian*) of varying lengths. My interlocutors at no. 99 came from the first year of senior high school, comprising six classes of students, mostly aged 16. This decision was made following the 'suggestion' of Principal Zhu. As he told me, students in the upper years were under stress preparing for the *gaokao*, and I should not 'add more problems for them' (*gei tamen tian mafan*).

On a daily basis, I sat in on lessons from all six classes for Year 1 students, as both a participant observer helping out with lessons, and as a silent observer. Almost always, the *gaokao* classes consisted of silent observation alone. Students in *gaokao* classes were to remain quiet until called upon, making participation impossible. As mentioned, all students were tested on mathematics, Chinese, and English, worth 150 points each; science students completed additional exams on physics, chemistry, and biology, which were worth 300 points in total; and humanities students were tested on politics, geography, and history, also worth 300 points in total. In contrast, during non-*gaokao* classes, I freely interacted with

students. These classes for first-year students included music, computers, psychology, art, and physical education. At no. 99, students decided which track they entered—science or humanities—after first-term examinations in the first year. At this point, they were assigned to a class with a head teacher, who led them for the remainder of their three years in senior high.

Abstractly, the object of ethnographic investigation in this paper is a 'frame of mind'. This required a methodological sensitivity to not only what my interlocutor articulated, but the factors implicit in the background of our interactions, including the context of discussion, as well as an awareness of how claims fit into lived experiences and narratives. Accordingly, I have grounded my ethnographic analysis on the interlocutors with whom I was best acquainted. As shall be clear, this paper heavily discusses the nature of probability and the role it has on subjective perceptions of their social and cultural context. Still, while annual statistics about student results were shared with me at the end of the school year, my access to past attainment results were limited and requests for trends were cordially brushed off. These limitations become particularly salient in my discussion of subjective credence and partial access to hard statistics towards the end of the paper.

Finally, despite its name, Inner Mongolia comprises a Han majority with less than 20% of its 25-million population being ethnically Mongolian.[2] During the summer of 2020, prior to my arrival, the decision to replace Mongolian with Mandarin in 'language and literature', moral education, and history drew opposition from ethnic Mongolians in the region, leading to protests and police crackdowns.[3] Principal Zhu brought up these events, however, only to inform me that no. 99 was entirely unaffected by these upheavals because there were few

Mongolians in the school. I got the sense that he was hinting to me that this was a point of controversy best avoided.

During my fieldwork, a Mongolian presence in the student body was never emphasised by any staff or students. Most ethnic Mongolians in no. 99, although not all, also had sinicised names; thus, it was not possible to identify them through class lists alone. Nevertheless, all Mongolian students at no. 99 were categorised as 'minorities who test Han' (*minkaohan*), meaning they *did not* write the *gaokao* in their Indigenous language (see Yamada 2021: 70–72). Thus, I acknowledge the methodological limitations of my research, which focusses on Han Chinese settlers. Properly speaking, the epistemic framework discussed is from a uniquely Han point of view.

RELEVANCE TO CHINESE LIFE AND BEYOND: BETWEEN 'LYING FLAT' AND 'THE GOOD LIFE'

To recap, the theoretical focus of this article is on probabilistic and non-probabilistic reasoning, and how these cognitive notions related to people's conceptions of ethical life. Probabilistic and non-probabilistic reasoning are not issues front and centre in the anthropological mainstream. Nevertheless, I propose that they are essential if we hope to better understand the broader social trends that have developed in China in recent years, particularly the rise of nihilistic tendencies that have captured the public imagination.

Consider 'lying flat' (*tangping*), for example—a term coined by netizens in spring 2021. The term is somewhat self-explanatory: the favouring of a life of leisure over a life of labour. Toward the end of May 2021, Luo Huazhong, an unemployed blogger, published

a post with the title 'Lying Flat Is Justice'. In it, he recounted his experiences as a factory worker and praised his subsequent decision to do nothing as cathartic, attracting the attention of censors (see Lin and Gullotta 2022). Chinese netizens have predominately sought to connect 'lying flat' to 'involution' (*neijuan*) mostly in terms of career advancement. Amongst them, the anthropological concept of 'involution' was applied (*cf.* Geertz 1963: 82) by anthropologist Biao Xiang to the intensifying competition individuals faced in academic admissions and employment, marked by increasing demands for ever-higher qualifications.[4] To netizens, lying flat was conceived of as a passive response to the burdens of increased activity.

In recognising these social trends, this article aims to also lay the theoretical groundwork necessary for future research by presenting the epistemic realm of high school students' lives as one possible avenue for exploring the genesis of such nihilistic social trends. Why do some continue to work toward the aims of a perceived good life despite numerous setbacks? And why do others give up, lie flat, and adopt nihilistic attitudes? The philosophers Jennifer Morton and Sarah Paul have anticipated many of the conceptual issues that I examine in this paper through their discussion of individual capacities for perseverance, what they call 'grit'. They argue that equally rational thinkers might 'differ in the policies that govern their evidential thresholds', which result in the divergent behaviours (Morton and Paul 2018: 191). In this respect, the purpose of this paper is to investigate ethnographically the various policies that my interlocutors employed when it came to governing evidential thresholds in reflexive assessment. In plainer language, taking the *gaokao* as the primary ethnographic focus, I discuss why different individuals making identical observations about the test come to

nonidentical conclusions, and the implications of such conclusions in their lives.

As I shall argue, for my young working-class interlocutors and the adults around them, the prospects of attaining the aims of their conceived good life both affect and, in turn, are affected by the mode of reasoning that they embrace. Expectedly, the conceived possibility and probability of living the good life is a function of the relational complex between abstract epistemic tenets and concrete observations regarding the world. The ethnographic work undertaken here reveals the specific operations of this nebulous relationship, which I insist offers insight into more prominent general trends in contemporary China.

FAIR OR NOT

In the cold of February, I sat in on a non-*gaokao* 'art class' (*meishu ban*) taught by Teacher Fang, a man in his 40s, who alone constituted the fine art department at no. 99. As the sun began to set in the late afternoon, some dozed off. Others scrambled to finish their Chinese or English homework. I sat in the back, watching Teacher Fang talk with seemingly at nobody about his slideshow of artworks. These pupils composed Year 1–Class 5, the top science class of the year. However, their behaviour during this lesson was nothing like their behaviour in, for instance, physics, where they all sat upright with their books out. The lack of disciplinary action undertaken by teachers in these classes was equally surprising. 'Did these non-*gaokao* teachers just not care?', I thought to myself.

After class, I stopped Teacher Fang for an interview. He took me next door to the studio, a dimly lit room with concrete floors and easels. He seemed to have anticipated my questions. Teacher Fang said he was not at all offended by those napping. Despite being an 'art teacher',

he was aware that his job was not 'to teach art'. He implied that the points allocation on the *gaokao* was indeed an appropriate standard to rank the value of classes. For Year 1–Class 5, art was worth zero points. One could hardly expect students to treat it in the same way as, say, mathematics, worth 150 points. According to him, those subjects like math and physics on the *gaokao* were more important. A significant part of the reason why they were so important was that they contributed to the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to compete with wealthier students on an even playing field, writing the same exam.

Although there was an 'art' pathway in the *gaokao* for students wishing to obtain a Bachelor of Fine Arts, Teacher Fang informed me that admission into prestigious destinations like Tsinghua or the Central Academy—both in Beijing—demanded training outside of school from private tutors inaccessible to most. He explained how becoming an artist required cultivating an appreciation of artworks by seeing art, which also required money. In contrast, Teacher Fang said that, 'even if your dad was a high ranking official', there were no privileges when it came to the traditional *gaokao*-assessed subjects. The *gaokao*—excluding athletes and artists—was, thus, 'absolutely fair'.

Working in the Chinese context, I would be remiss not to consider the behind-the-scenes discourse of Chinese life vis-à-vis what is presented to the researcher. As Zachary Howlett (2021: 199) recognised in his fieldwork also on meritocracy in Chinese education, at low-performing schools, higher-ups sometimes admitted outside official contexts that the examination performance of students in these schools was 'inconsequential' to their futures, while upholding the orthodox meritocratic position elsewhere. Could it be that Teacher Fang was simply justifying his inability to control his class thorough the logic of

a supposedly meritocratic *gaokao*? Anticipating my argument concerning the relationship between vocation and the criteria of fairness, I want to compare Teacher Fang's understanding of the *gaokao* and his role as a teacher to some of his even more experienced colleagues.

Given the limitations of fieldwork, I could not track teacher-interlocutors over the course of their careers with regards to how their vocational aims developed over time. However, I did observe that older and more experienced teachers towards the tail-end of their careers often did not place as much emphasis on *gaokao* success as their more junior counterparts. Consider Teacher Tang, a woman in her 60s who was no longer teaching any classes at no. 99, having been relegated to an administrative role to make room for younger newcomers. As a former Chinese teacher, although the subject she taught was one of the 'big three' subjects, Teacher Tang admitted to me in private that neither she nor her students defined their time together retrospectively by *gaokao* scores. According to Teacher Tang, when she was a head teacher, at the end of each three-year cycle, students would often write her letters thanking her, not for her abilities as a Chinese teacher, but, rather, the work she did to help them 'be a person' (*zuoren*) (see Yan 2017).

In my view, Teacher Tang exemplified a case of what Erving Goffman (1990) has called 'role distance', where expectations of one's role and the performance of it become disjointed. Goffman (1990: 103) cites two different means of establishing role distance: first, one might isolate himself from the situation, projecting a sense of reluctance or necessity; or, second, one could withdraw from the scenario through satire or childishness. Here, we might add yet another case where one does not seek to disengage from the role, but, rather, to reinterpret it in light of the success and feasibility of the aims of the

role, challenging the expectations of the role itself. Unlike Teacher Fang, she did not mention anything about scores or student attainment, perhaps due to the limited success of her students on the *gaokao*. Here is a possibility for what Robert Merton's (1957: 112) conceived as role-conflict. This is understood not as the comparatively simple idea that people embrace multiple roles with normative expectations that might come into contradiction, but, rather, that with particular roles, 'there is always a *potential* for differing and sometimes conflicting expectations of the conduct appropriate to a status occupant (…)'. Not coincidentally, the example Merton gives is the teacher whose own expectations might differ from others in the education system.

In this vein, similar to Teacher Tang, it is conceivable that Teacher Fang might one day accept and recognise a 'role distance' between his day-to-day job and his professed vocational aims. Thus, one possibility is that Teacher Fang might ostensibly change his mind regarding the meritocratic nature of the exam, which he upheld externally to me at the time. Another possibility is that Teacher Fang had already come to recognise the various backdoors within the system, but was unwilling to concede to me, the much younger and foreign ethnographer, perhaps fearing a 'loss of face' (*diulian*), unable to maintain his authority over his class (see, e.g., Hu 1944).[5]

Whatever the case might have been, my point here is not to speculate about Teacher Fang's psychology, but, rather, to emphasise how, even amongst my interlocutors who defend the existence of meritocracy, their judgments on the matter could be other than apodictic. In other words, it is conceivable that Teacher Fang might endorse his claims about the meritocratic nature of the system, *not* because of his accumulation of justifying empirical evidence in support of

his belief—indeed, as we shall see the evidence is stacked against him. Instead, he endorses those claims because it would be better for him if *it were true*, a realisation possibly providing motivation for his defence of the position. Looking ahead, this idea—that one's beliefs might be affected by one's practical goals in life—shall be greatly expanded in the sections below. Still, in contrast to the potential motivations behind Teacher Fang's promotion of the orthodox position, many of my student-interlocutors at no. 99 dissented by citing first-person experiences and direct knowledge of the corruptions that persist. As I now describe, for many student-interlocutors, the fraudulence of meritocracy was proven by the impurities of the system and the backdoors available.

Consider Laolang, a student from Year 1–Class 5, the top humanities class, who earned praise from his head teacher at the end-of-year parent-teacher meeting for being a 'virtuous child' (*haohaizi*). He was a flag bearer at assemblies and intent on joining the Party as an adult. Although he was probably the best English speaker in the year, attributing his talents to his love of American videogames and films, he was lacklustre in the English exercises of the *gaokao*. Unfortunately, having underperformed in the mock *gaokaos* in the early summer, his grades dropped to the bottom quartile. Finding me in the hallways during the afternoon recess, as he often did to practice English, he expressed his frustration with the system to me for the first time. He complained that, despite the government's efforts, backdoors remained. While nobody denied that the test was 'fair' in the sense that everyone wrote the same one, students were aware of the advantages conferred to the wealthy when it came to laying the groundwork for success.

Most prominently, Laolang complained how top public high schools in China kept a separate class for the 'international' pathway. He called out no. 102, which was the best senior high school in Hohhot, measured by both the sheer number and proportion of graduates who attend top universities. In addition to consistently producing Inner Mongolia's top scorers on the *gaokao* each year, the school also maintained a fee-charging international division, which nominally prepared students to take foreign examinations.

The problem, Laolang implied, was that not everyone in the international division anticipated going abroad. He insinuated that some enrolled in these divisions because the bar for fee-payers in international classes was much lower compared to regular students. Notably, the school's *zhongkao* cut-off score did not apply to the international division. Laolang lamented that students could buy their way into the best schools with the best teachers, equipment, and learning environments, and then outperform students like himself on the *gaokao*—even if they similarly failed to get into the best high schools through the examination three years previously. I initially suspected that Laolang was exaggerating the prevalence of this phenomenon; nonetheless, there is ethnographic evidence that, in some regions of the country, only half of 'study abroad' classes actually attend foreign universities with the other half taking the *gaokao* as usual (Howlett 2021: 113).

Perhaps one could imagine Laolang being in no. 102 if his parents had more money; however, Laolang's father was a truck driver and his mother was a cashier, neither of whom had gone to university. He told me the price tag was out of reach for 'average families' (*putong jiating*) like his. As some scholars have argued, these international divisions described by Laolang are, in many ways, a 'privatisation' of Chinese public education, since international division tuition fees typically ranged from 60 000 to 120 000

RMB [about US$8000 to US$16 000] a year (Liu 2018: 204–205). Laolang was irritated that this back door remained, despite the crackdown in recent years on bribes and donations for admissions under Xi Jinping's rule (*cf.* Ruan 2017: 11–35).

FAIRNESS AND THE LIMITS OF CRITIQUE

Teacher Fang and Laolang's explicit positions map two distinctive ideas of fairness that Howlett recently described in his analysis on the meritocratic ideals of Chinese education: procedural and structural fairness. As he explains, procedural fairness referred to how '[the *gaokao*] result is determined by individual merit front stage', in the sense that the score is determined by the number of questions answered correctly with everyone answering the same questions; meanwhile, structural fairness referred to 'equality of opportunity (…) to cultivate the qualities needed to succeed' (Howlett 2021: 82). In juxtaposing Teacher Fang next to Laolang, I first develop a point pertaining to the limits of social critique regarding the Chinese education system. Expanding Howlett's analysis, I suggest that even Laolang's complaints preserve the crux of meritocracy, thereby demonstrating yet another way 'individual merit' remained all-pervasive in Chinese epistemic life. This forms the basis for my analysis of my third interlocutor, a teacher who held both Teacher Fang and Laolang's positions in tandem.

On the one hand, since a uniform criterion was used to measure one's academic capacities, Teacher Fang implied that the unprivileged and privileged were indistinguishable when it came to the test, and, thus, the test was fair. On the other hand, Laolang denied the exam's *structural* fairness, emphasising how the wealthy were afforded opportunities to improve their chances

of success on the *gaokao* within the education system leading up to the exam.

This jargon of fairness derives from liberal philosophy, specifically John Rawls' idea of procedural justice in *A Theory of Justice*, §14 (2005: 83–90). There, the Rawlsian distinction between the different types of procedural justice—perfect, impure, and pure—is drawn. Understanding this distinction helps connect Howlett's analysis to my ethnographic data. In the perfect case, there is an independent and substantive account of what justice or fairness looks like, and an actionable procedure to attain that result with certainty. The example Rawls (2005: 85) gives is cutting a cake. We wish to divide the cake evenly and assign to the person cutting it the last piece. The implication here is that, since the cutter ideally wants to have as much cake as possible, he is incentivised to follow the 'fair' procedure of ensuring each piece is the same size. If he were to cut them 'unfairly' (i.e., into different sizes), the bigger pieces would be eaten first by others selecting before him, leaving him worse off. In the impure case, by contrast, Rawls (2005: 85–86) cites the example of the criminal justice system. The independent criterion is that those who commit crimes are found guilty; however, the legal procedures of the system leave open the possibility of a miscarriage of justice. Simply put, judges and juries are just humans, and humans make mistakes. Although everyone would agree that it would be a gross injustice for an innocent person to be found guilty, nobody can put forward procedures to ensure that such mistaken results do not occur, unlike with the cake example. And, finally, in the pure case, there is no independently substantive account of the right result at all. Any conception of such justice cannot be disentangled from the procedures that led to it (Rawls 2005: 86–87). One example might be roulettes. So long as nobody cheated,

the results are fair. More bluntly, it does not make sense here to say of the winner who played by the rules that he ought not to have won. If one does insist that the legitimate winner did not deserve it, these complaints would have to be made from criteria external to the activity itself, such as, he is evil, already rich, or that we simply dislike him.

Howlett (2021: 83) argues that the distinction between what he calls structural fairness and procedural fairness is a heuristic that breaks down, since it is not possible to adjudicate what one deserved at an individual level, since 'individual merit always involves structural biases'. I take this line further, suggesting that one analytic advantage of Howlett's framework lies in its ability to recognise how Laolang's critique remained limited in its attribution of injustice. To be sure, Laolang's complaints are nothing like Howlett's.

Reframing Howlett's analysis through Rawls, we might say Laolang differed from Teacher Fang, but only insofar as Laolang took the *gaokao* to be an *impure* case of procedural justice, whereas Teacher Fang took it to be *pure*. To echo the point, in the pure case, merit was conferred exclusively based on the procedure, that is, the test. One deserved it if one fared well, and did not deserve it if otherwise. This is what Laolang denied when he considered the preparation leading up to the exam, which could be gamed by the privileged.

As Rawls iterates, the impure case of procedural justice depended upon the existence of a criterion to adjudicate fairness that could be conceived externally to the procedure. According to Laolang, the more 'meritorious', in the sense of more hardworking, more talented or whatever, *ought* to be conferred the privileges of society via the procedure. This is a belief he *shared* with Teacher Fang. Their disagreement comes only from Laolang opening up the possibility for the

procedure to misfire. Laolang never stopped to interrogate the notion of 'ability' itself. Rather, Laolang's primary complaint was about those he perceived to have neither worked as hard as he did, nor have been as talented as he was, reaping the benefits he did not. Thus, even in his critique, Laolang perpetuated basic tenets of the same myth as Teacher Fang.

CHANCES OF SUCCESS

Recognising deeply entrenched beliefs concerning individual merit, the next step is to inquire into their origins. Recent attempts have focussed on the perceived indeterminacy of perceived life-changing events like the *gaokao*, which present to individuals higher-than-actual possibilities of success. Consider again Howlett (2022a: 154), who described the exam as 'consequential', that is, life-changing, and 'chancy', that is, undetermined. As Howlett's (2022a: 160) research conveys, in cases of perceived indeterminacy, differences in results were conceived of as a function of personal virtues or even as divine intervention (e.g., Howlett 2022b: 453). Such a conception circularly reinforced perceptions of indeterminacy by giving test takers a sense that they might change their prospects through cultivating such virtues or seeking transcendental assistance. This myopic focus on individuals consequently ignores structural issues like access inequality.

While I am largely sympathetic to this explanation, as much of it cohered with my ethnographic data, I suggest Howlett's employment of 'chanciness' can be extended through a discussion of 'credence'. The relevance of credence becomes clearer once we consider the origins of Howlett's term. In anticipation of my argument below, I note that 'chanciness' is also derived from Goffman (2006: 227), who

in 'Where the Action Is' defines the pursuit of an activity as 'chancy' if and only if the actor 'is in a position (or forced into one) to let go of his hold and control on the situation'. Both 'credence' and 'chanciness' are derived from the context of gambling, and the importance of this context is thoroughly relevant when grasping the difference between my third interlocutor and the previous two.

Remarkably, at the time of my fieldwork, Laolang had not written the *gaokao* yet. Nor did his fee-paying peer admitted into the better school. So why did Laolang assume that he was getting short-changed? My emphasis here is on what Goffman (2006: 228) calls the 'determination phase' of the chancy action. Unlike with flipping a coin or other betting games, the actor in most contexts of life involving chanciness does not get to perceive the outcome nearly instantaneously (Goffman 2006: 229). This gives time to the actor to speculate on the outcome.

From my perspective, no actual injustice had been committed. The wealthier peer had not received a higher *gaokao* (yet). Moreover, the performance of higher-ranked high school the wealthier peer bought his way into could have been attributed less to the teaching environment and more to the higher entry requirements, which created a self-selecting group of overachievers in the regular student body. To me, nothing seemed to guarantee that the rich fraudulent international student would succeed simply by attending the better school.

Suggesting this to Laolang was unlikely to assuage his frustrations, however. Laolang's implication had been that his peer's chances of success have increased relative to his own, probabilistically. Since there were a limited number of places available, Laolang viewed the *gaokao* as a zero-sum game of losers and winners (see Kajanus 2019). In principle, I understood Laolang's probabilistic reasoning to be a case

of when the reasoner decides between two alternatives by assigning a credence value (the likelihood of m happening in n times, m/n) to the varied outcomes. In this respect, Laolang reasoned that attending a better school increased the likelihood of getting a good *gaokao* score. Grasping what a credence value is, or more specifically does, is straightforward, even if calculating a precise credence value can be difficult.

The clearest and most concise exposition of credence is by Frank Ramsey. In 'Truth and Probability', Ramsey (2001: 170) explains that what I am calling credence values track 'how far we should act on these beliefs'. Ramsey (2001: 174) then goes on to suggest that our beliefs are governed by some type of mathematical expectation. He continues:

> (…) [I]f p is a proposition about which he is doubtful, any goods or bads for whose realisation p is in his view a necessary and sufficient condition enter into his calculations multiplied by the same fraction, which is called the 'degree of his belief in p'(…)

As alluded to above, Ramsey's novelty here is that assigning credence values is, to a large extent, just like betting. This might seem unexciting, but its originality lies in the fact that it ties the probabilistic reasoning to our practical agency and not to some idealised standard by the light of reason itself. Ethnographically, Laolang is placing a higher credence value of him succeeding had he gone to the better ranked school than that of no. 99. But, as we have seen already with regards to Goffman's (2006: 228) point about the extended determination phase of the chancy action, such credence is made on the basis of some undetermined future that has yet to occur.

Ramsey's distinction has garnered renewed attention within Anglophone philosophy. Recently, philosophers have divided claims of probability into objective-chance propositions, which purportedly assigns some probabilistic fact to an object in the world, and epistemic–chance propositions, which does not treat probability as the function of some objective 'chance mechanism', but of 'the relationship between one's evidence and the world' (Buchak 2014: 286). As we have already seen with Goffman, while it is easy to objectively determine the probability of a coin landing on either side, the determination of the probability of some life event is seldom straightforward, making us dependent on *subjective* credence values. These considerations render Ramsey's (2001) 'Truth and Probability' organically amenable to ethnographic application.

The distinction drawn here brings us back to Howlett's discussion. For starters, we can nuance Howlett's (2021: 209) point that various instances of gambling are of sociocultural importance to his Chinese interlocutors 'not in winning prizes, but, rather, in what those prizes signify: good or bad luck in one's life more generally'. We might say that one's credence value regarding life events can be disturbed by other probabilistic activities, whether ordinary like card games or extraordinary in the sense of transcendental divination (see Howlett 2021: 213). This clarifies why Howlett's (2022b: 447) interlocutors were affectively disordered by the perception of bad luck on games of chance ostensibly irrelevant to other arenas of everyday life without attributing to these interlocutors an alternative mode of rationality or even irrationality.

More importantly, credence might also help us better theorise the epistemic consequences of the top–down gatekeeping of examination statistics. To be sure, parents were not entirely oblivious to the inequalities of the *gaokao*. For example, when a 2016 policy change resulted in hypercompetitive *gaokao* provinces like Hubei and Jiangsu increasing quotas for nonlocal students, despite no changes to cities like Beijing, protests erupted, with parents congregating outside official offices in cities like Nanjing (Qin and Buchanan 2021: 894). Nevertheless, for most parents, their awareness of inequalities was imperfect. Although disparities might be acknowledged at the provincial level, there was, to be sure, a lack of hard and precise statistics based on crucial factors like income and level of parents' educational attainment. This imperfect scenario, thus, left 'wiggle room', reflecting parents' probabilistic beliefs about their children's success, bolstered by anecdotes from friends, relatives or online about 'dark horse' (*heima)* candidates who overcome impossible odds (Howlett 2022a: 155).

To be specific, in Hohhot, teachers flouted orders from the higher-ups to keep student test scores confidential without consequence. At no. 99 due to the effects of the COVID-19 anti-contagion policies, which restricted movement in and out of residential estates (*xiaoqu*), home visits were not possible and parent–teacher interactions increasingly became online-first—namely, via WeChat, the popular social networking mega-app, a mixture of Twitter, Instagram, and PayPal among others. Individuals shared videos and photos of school events and high-scoring pupils to their private friends' lists; but, in my experience, these lists were not closely guarded, and people tended to add any acquaintance. Despite online censorship, it was increasingly difficult for the relevant authorities to monitor parent–teacher interactions. After the 2021 *gaokao*, multiple teachers at no. 99 disclosed the achievements of the school to their contacts on their personal WeChat accounts, including the parents of

students at no. 99, via their 'Moments' feed (*pengyouquan*). These posts were accessible to anyone on the poster's contacts list, and people often checked the 'Moments' of their friends to keep tabs on their daily lives. In one shared post by teachers at no. 99, the school administration bragged about its pupils by name: the top science student, an ethnic Mongolian student named Khulan, received 557 points, whereas the top humanities student, a Han Chinese named Zhang, received 549.

In comparison, these top two scores from no. 99, while high enough for admissions to a first-tier university, were inadequate compared with the attainment of no. 102, which, surprising to me, the teachers at no. 99 also broadcast on their accounts in similar ways. The top humanities student at no. 102 that year received 668 points; the top science student, 693.5. Both were the autonomous region's 'top scholar' (*zhuangyuan*) for their respective streams. Since the early days of my fieldwork, my interlocutors never failed to speak highly of no. 102. However, it was not until the end of the 2021 *gaokao* season that I realised just how big the difference between no. 99 and no. 102 really was. At no. 99, not a single student that year came close to 600 points. At no. 102, 96 humanities test-takers passed that threshold, and 262 did so in the sciences.

These cases, where results were shared by word-of-mouth or digitally, to my surprise, did not alter people's perception of the *gaokao* fairness or their belief in meritocracy. Rather, it seemed to reinforce cultural perceptions that students at better schools were more hard-working, or that students within no. 99 who did well possess better study habits compared to their peers. Instead of spurring some awareness of structural inequity, some students were motivated in a 'if they could do it, so could I' manner. Since only scores and names were revealed, what remained hidden were a slew of socioeconomic factors that might have determined *gaokao* success. As Howlett (2021) also notes, it is not merely that people were kept in the dark. Rather, that which has been revealed to our Chinese interlocutors about the probabilities of *gaokao* success seemingly reinforced epistemic–chance propositions at a subjective level that they might not have otherwise endorsed had they had access to objective statistics. It is in this context that I think, we ought to understand Howlett's employment of 'chanciness'.

BEYOND PROBABILITY AND CHANCE

My positive proposal, however, is that ethnographic investigations into probabilistic reasoning using credence reveal a rigidly non-probabilistic corner of epistemic life featuring some interlocutors. I suggest that it is necessary to expand the discussion to consider what happens when 'chanciness' is increasingly taken to its limits, specifically as the likelihood of some event approaches zero.

The intuitive criterion for my interlocutors of judging fairness probabilistically thus far implied that the more determined the results—the less chancy the exam was—the less fair it was. Recall Laolang's frustrations about the rich 'unfairly' increasing one's chances of success by maximising the perceived probability of success using money. Fairness, thus, depended on an equal likelihood of success for him. However, this was not necessarily how others reasoned. For one key interlocutor, Teacher Jing, so long as there was the *possibility* of success (i.e., a nonzero chance), the 'procedural' fairness of the examination was justified. That the rich could increase their probability of *gaokao* success through wealth was largely irrelevant. Why did she justify the exam this way, and how should we make sense of this epistemic position?

Towards the conclusion of the school year at the time of mock and real exams, I watched the Year 3 students, with whom I was not allowed to interact, do problem sets on repeat through the windows of their classrooms. It was difficult to imagine what they thought about the fairness of the exam, and, of course, I could not ask. That day, however, I had my first candid conversation with Teacher Jing about what she thought of the *gaokao*. The encounter was serendipitous. Her office door, located near the stairwell to the Year 3 classes, was open, and I found her grading in silence. In my earlier discussions with Teacher Jing, she gave me generic responses, stating that it was impossible to do holistic admissions in China with its massive population or deferring to more senior teachers citing her lack of teaching experience. That day, she was much more forthcoming.

Teacher Jing was a newcomer to no. 99. She received her first teaching assignment after the Spring Festival break in February 2021, despite having arrived at the school in December 2020. As the school's most recent hire, Teacher Jing was also its youngest faculty member. She earned her undergraduate degree in 2018. She was, like most of the people at no. 99, a native of Hohhot. She was appointed to teach Chinese, a core subject worth 150 points. Teacher Jing was the staff member closest to me in age, having been born in the same year, 1995. Teacher Jing was the only staff member with whom I regularly interacted who referred to me as Teacher Jiang, mostly as a courtesy since I did no teaching, as opposed to 'Little Jiang' (*xiao jiang*), suggesting our status as peers.

What was most surprising to me was the ease with which Teacher Jing openly admitted that the rich were able to bypass the need for schooling to succeed in life, which the poor could not do. She explicitly said that the big bosses did not need to put their children

through the rather torturous 'swiping through questions'. Nor did these affluent pupils ever feel a pressure to 'eat bitterness', the Chinese term for 'bearing hardships' highly valued by the Chinese working class since the post-Mao reforms (see, e.g., Loyalka 2013). As Teacher Jing put it, life was easy for the rich kid: the worst-case scenario was 'to work for his own family'. Much as Laolang recognised above, Teacher Jing, too, accepted that navigating the education system in China looked very different based on how much money your father had.

Despite the limits of Laolang's critique, he was nevertheless able to recognise how the putatively just procedures of the *gaokao* could be gamed by the privileged, which rendered the system less than ideally fair to his mind. By contrast, Teacher Jing seemed careful to avoid any suggestion that richer people had an advantage on the *gaokao* through their wealth altogether. What made Teacher Jing like Teacher Fang was that they shared an unwavering belief that the *gaokao* was procedurally fair. However, they too differed in terms of how Teacher Jing openly accepted that there were many advantages for the rich when it came to these tests, something that Teacher Fang seemed to have denied outwardly in his comparison of art versus traditional *gaokao*.

In defending her position, Teacher Jing never claimed that these things that money can buy did not increase one's chances of success nor that poor children had it harder. As she admitted, the pressures of having to support one's family financially while still in school would be detrimental. Such an obligation would mean diverting students' energy and time from their studies. Meanwhile, the lack of a comfortable material environment at home—such as a noisy bedroom shared with many occupants—would predictably disturb students writing their homework. Nevertheless, what mattered to her

was that, despite all these burdens that came with being poor, 'It is still possible for the poor kid to do better.' She continued as follows:

> Aside from things like art students or athletes, if we are just talking about regular students, the *gaokao* provides a uniform standard for all: the connection between wealth and success on this exam is not a necessary one.

Although Teacher Jing also based her argument on a procedural justice, I suggest she was unique in that she refused to entertain the explanatory powers of statistical likelihood entirely. As she asserted, even if wealthy students were born with silver spoons in their mouth and received the best education that money could buy, they might still fail the *gaokao*. However unlikely it was for this to happen was for her irrelevant: 'Even if a student, who is much richer than the other, does better than another student in the same classroom, the *gaokao* is still fair.' This is because that rich student could have failed. And, this conceptual possibility of the *counterfactual* made it fair. In sum, she did not view fairness as a function of statistical probability. Rather, her image of meritocracy was based on possible scenarios she imagined—however unlikely they were to be actualised.

It was not as if Teacher Jing never reasoned probabilistically, in the sense of positing how various factors from one's environment would help or harm the likelihood of attaining one's goals. In fact, she made it clear this was how she reasoned in her personal life. Many of the students at no. 99 talked about their aspirations to leave Inner Mongolia, hopefully never to return. Once upon a time, Teacher Jing was no different, having shared the same dreams of mobility to more affluent or central regions. Having attended public schools in the city for

both her own primary and secondary education, she headed off to university in another province closer to the capital. She moved to Hebei to study Chinese at a university in Shijiazhuang, a city of 11 million people, a population nearly four times that of Hohhot. Upon graduation, however, her life quickly diverged from the imagined life trajectories of the young aspirants she would end up teaching—the ones who hoped to make it to the bigger places and remain there. After a period of working as a 'trainee' teacher in Hebei post-graduation, for motives that were at first unclear to me, Teacher Jing returned to Hohhot, even after she 'made it out'. As she explained:

> After I left, I thought I shouldn't come back. I had already made it out. But I had to calculate and compare the different environments. As the saying goes, 'calculate 100 steps for every step you take'. I realised Hebei was too competitive [in terms of the *gaokao* for students]. Students started independent study at 5:00 am every day, and you had to be there with them [stressful factors related to the job she hoped to avoid in Hohhot].

In the place of her duty or obligation to her family, Teacher Jing justified her decision to return based on the likelihood of achieving her own goals. The work environment in Hebei where she trained was too intense compared with Inner Mongolia. She aimed to teach in a more 'comfortable' location. It was not as if the students in Hebei were simply more ambitious than those elsewhere or just demanded more out of their teachers. Rather, the competition at the high school level in Hebei was driven by the much larger population of the province, which could not be accommodated by the disproportionately limited number of

university places available to Hebei students at China's top institutions. In Hebei, there was a higher demand for a low supply of university acceptances, which she believed would make her life harder as a teacher.

For her, the return also made financial sense. She was an only child and had moved back in with her parents, resuming life in her childhood bedroom, effectively living without expenses—eating at home and paying no rent. Jing told me she planned to stay put until marriage. At that point, she would move in with her future husband, although she was single at that time. In response to this, I asked if she would leave Hohhot if her husband wanted to go elsewhere in search of better career opportunities. She was not opposed to the idea, but insisted that she would need to do a cost-benefit analysis, probabilistically based on what I have called her epistemic-chance propositions. What was most likely to give her the life she wanted? 'What were the schools like where she was going [for her child]? How far would I be from my family? How were the jobs there?', she asked rhetorically.

EPISTEMIC STANDARDS AND PRACTICAL IDENTITY

Why did Teacher Jing go from a probabilistic mode of reasoning in her personal life to a non-probabilistic one in her vocational life? I argue that the switch was a metacognitive strategy to preserve the perceived fairness of the *gaokao* and the reality of meritocracy, upon which her practical identity depends. Anthropologists of ethics have long been interested in how individuals exercised their freedom to organise their *practical* lives in pursuit of the good life (Laidlaw 2002: 327). Far fewer have sought to investigate ethnographically how one's practical ideals, values, models, practices, relationships,

and institutions—one's idea of the good life—yields profound effects on one's *epistemic* lives.

As Jonathan Mair (2018) has suggested in a comparative examination between Inner Mongolian Buddhists and 'post-truth' Euro-American media consumption, the beliefs generated in both ethnographic contexts, from practitioners of a religion, on the one hand, and sceptics and consumers of fringe media, on the other, both result from a self-conscious recognition of one's own uncertainty and the practical demands of obtaining truth and certainty in one's lifetime, despite their obvious differences. Neither the Buddhists' dependency on the teachings of some enlightened authority nor the post-truther's appeal to the authoritative status of charismatic conspiratorial figures can be treated merely as passive responses to structural forces (*cf.* Sangren 1995), but rather as active efforts in search of truth and certainty albeit in a manner that deviates widely from, say, the epistemologies of the 'scientific method'. Teacher Jing behaves analogously.

When I asked Teacher Jing if her life was fulfilling, even without any financial compensation for the moment, she told me, in a rather matter-of-fact way, that 'There are two types of fulfilment [for me].' What were they? 'Long-term,' she said, '[fulfilment] is when students do well on their exams. Short-term, when students can memorise their classical Chinese passages properly, as an example.' When I asked if there was anything else, she paused, staring at me blankly. The division between her so-called 'two types' seemed only temporal. From my perspective, these two types of fulfilment pertained to the same goal: that of being a good teacher. She seemed to agree. 'A sense of fulfilment for teachers has to be tied to the students' academic success obviously', she said.

The role of the 'teacher' in Chinese society has garnered much attention within anthropology and beyond. Andrew Kipnis (1997) notes that, in rural northern China during the reform era, the term 'teacher' still functioned in Chinese society as a kinship term akin to 'uncle'. The term designated a particular role in the relational fabric of society. As one villager said to Kipnis (1997: 32), 'Once they teach you, you call them *laoshi* for their whole life'. In this case, the moral relationship between the teacher and the student was characterised by the personal connection between the two individuals, which has arguably been the groundwork for Chinese moral life. In Fei Xiaotong's (1992: 75–76) classic work on Chinese morality, he argues that all 'traditional' Chinese moral discourses are confined to particularistic relationships, as exemplified by the Confucian emphasis on 'filial piety, fraternal duty, loyalty, and sincerity'. While it would be difficult to demonstrate that China remains deeply 'Confucian' in morality (*cf.* Bai 2019; Bell 2010), Teacher Jing evidently saw her ethical duties as a teacher in such particularistic terms: to help her students navigate the complex system of schooling leading up to the *gaokao* as the student aspired to change the circumstances of their life. Reciprocally, I observed students honouring the teacher with a sense of veneration. I think this is the key to understanding Teacher Jing's maintaining that the *gaokao* was all-things-considered fair.

A valuable comparison can be made to the wealth of post-socialist ethnographies, particularly the last generation of Soviets. As Alexei Yurchak (2006) has described, many Soviets' faith in socialism was motivated by their aspirations to live a good life in the USSR *pragmatically* in the face of the material realities in which they found themselves. As one of Yurchak's (2006: 97) interlocutors put it

retrospectively after the collapse of the USSR:

[He first describes all his grievances against the Party] (…) And, yet, despite all this, I had always had a strong conviction, perhaps since I was kindergarten age, that socialism and communism were good and right (…)

Even if Yurchak's interlocutors seemed aware of the corruptions of the socialist state itself, their belief in 'socialism' in the abstract remained unshaken, because without it, the ends of their ethical lives became increasingly obscured.

Notably, just as students may find motivation to continue to strive on the *gaokao* owing to an inflated credence in the possibility of success, the inverse is also true. When the perceived possibility of success hit zero, individuals began to abandon past aims and seek out alternatives. Consider Doudou, another 16-year-old interlocutor in Year 1–Class 6, who most closely approximates the nihilistic case of 'lying flat' or 'letting rot', which I discussed at the beginning of this paper. Although Doudou had placed into the top humanities class earlier that year, she had consistently ranked in the bottom on mock *gaokao* since then. Doudou described herself as the daughter of 'coolies' (*kuli*), and did not share any details of her parents beyond that. After yet another round of disappointing mock *gaokao*, she suggested, while wandering around aimlessly during physical education, that she was hoping to drop out at the end of the school year. Unlike any of her other peers, she denied that doing well on the *gaokao* meant worldly success beyond university. As she told me, her aunt had a Master's degree in English from Nanjing University and still failed to get her dream job teaching at no. 102 in Hohhot. So, what were the chances for someone like her, who could not get into such a prestigious school

in the first place? In her view, it was better to get some practical work experience as soon as possible. Here, the myth of meritocracy has been eroded seemingly beyond repair, whereby Doudou has been forced to pick up the pieces to construct a new aim for the good life.

On the flip side, as someone who evidently valued her job so much, whose identity was so closely tied to her role as a teacher—to a vocation whose own *raison d'etre* was to help students navigate the education system leading up to the exam of their lives—did Teacher Jing ever feel limited in how much she could do when it came down to helping these young aspirants? Imagine a student who excelled in classical Chinese, but whose parents were also classical Chinese scholars. Imagine another student who did well on their *gaokao*, but only because they skipped all public-school classes and simply went to the best cram classes money could buy. To what extent would Teacher Jing attribute the success of these students to the teachers of the school?

Ultimately, I suggest Teacher Jing tied her own teleology as an ethical self with that of her vocation, whereby the normative criteria used in assessing the success and failures of 'being a teacher' influenced her choice of epistemic standards. The reason that Teacher Jing did not want to make socioeconomic factors over-determinant—occasionally invoking highly improbable counterfactuals to justify her point—was to uphold her own sense of identity, to see her in the way that she wants to be seen and that she sees herself. If socioeconomic factors were over-determinant, then her endeavours as a teacher in the public education system start to look inconsequential. The idea of meritocratic fairness preserves the cognitive possibility of her vocation.

But, as the comparison earlier between Teachers Fang and Tang—between their seemingly different vocational aims as teachers—illustrates, while academic success has long been a normative criterion of evaluation in Chinese schooling from a young age (Xu 2019), it is not the only one. In the face of a lack of academic success, some teachers clearly retreated into alternative discourses to maintain the value of their vocation, as Teacher Tang seemed to have done. Nevertheless, Teacher Tang's turning away from academics was not shared openly and was comparatively rare. By contrast, the various teachers and officials of no. 99, despite recognising the uninspiring *gaokao* scores of their graduates, insisted that the school remained academically successful as an institution. To justify their claims, they sought out some unconventional standards of their own, citing how their graduates received a higher score on the *gaokao* than they did on the *zhongkao*, an entirely different test, three years prior. It felt to me, however, as if they were comparing apples to oranges.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite anthropological attention in recent years on the ethical life and the teleological cultivation of selves in both transcendental and 'ordinary' contexts (e.g., Das 2020; Laidlaw 2014; Lambek 2010), I suggest that more work needs to be done in investigating how the possibility and probability of attaining the good life are cognitively affected by individuals' attempts to understand the world in which they find themselves. For China specialists, these issues are pertinent as the country faces increasing youth unemployment after decades of radical economic and political change, marked by sustained regional inequalities as demonstrated by the rise of nihilistic tendencies. But, for anthropologists with other regional interests, the ethnographic themes explored in this paper

remain equally relevant, especially with regards to articulating higher-order concerns about the relationship between individual striving and structural limitations.

The implications of this paper extend beyond Hohhot or Inner Mongolia. One pronounced effect of economic reform and development has been the rapid rise of the urban population, which today outnumbers the rural. Throughout the first two decades of this century, China was responsible for nearly half of the world's total urban expansion (Sun et al. 2020: 7). Today, China's third-tier cities still far outnumber the country's megacities of international renown. In this respect, the research presented in this paper has offered a glimpse of what 'average' life looks like for China's 'average' youth. However, the possibility of realising that the myth of meritocracy has been just a *myth* all along, as one comes of age and enters into adulthood and forms a family of one's own, looms over this generation of my student-interlocutors. The effects of such potential realisations remain to be seen.

Retrospectively, though one might have expected the increased competition of the examination regime to have heightened antipathy amongst the student body, the opposite seemed to be the case in my field site. That students voiced their hushed complaints to me, an outsider, perhaps revealed the limited reach of such counter-narratives amongst peers and teachers, many of whom straightforwardly told me that they did not accept deterministic notions like 'losing at the starting line' (*shuzai qipao xian*), a phrase which referred to the structural limitations associated with one's circumstances of birth.

As Kipnis observed not too long ago, rigorous testing works to filter out 'resentful' and 'anti-school' pupils (2001: 481). Notably, aside from the occasional quiet critique of the exam,

other forms of resistance that Kipnis mentioned, like disrespecting teachers and ostracising other academic peers, were wholly absent at no. 99. Meanwhile, technological advancements, as I stated earlier, made cheating nearly impossible. One hypothesis is that the increased rigour and competition on the *zhongkao* has only filtered out more students than previously. An alternative epistemic explanation might be that, when social and physical mobility has become so tethered to examination results, most of my interlocutors, whether student or teacher, were simply unwilling to forfeit the cognitive possibility of success. To be resentful or actively anti-school, or to adopt a nihilistic position such as Doudou's, seemed to involve acceptance of the futility of one's own aspirations toward one's previously held life goals—no doubt a difficult pill to swallow.

Finally, this paper has offered a glimpse of what might be conceived as the 'fringes' of ethical life, revealing an ethnographic flash of the possibility of agentive failure, usually overlooked in the literature of self-cultivation. This point might be made by revisiting the analytic assumptions of the anthropology of ethics. Consider James Faubion (2012: 37), who declares that 'the subject is, by analytical fiat, "free"'; 'If a subject is incapable of anything that could be identified as the exercise of his or her or its work or activity or agency or responsibility (…) then it falls—by analytic fiat—outside of the ethical domain'. Such a claim might be understood trivially in the sense that ethical life could not be conceptualised in merely causal terms, hence the necessity of noncausal concepts like self-determined work, activity, agency, and responsibility. In that case, this reading would need to be supplemented by, say, James Laidlaw's (2002: 323) further point that the exercise of freedom is not merely the absence of constraints to make choices, but activities

that are historically contextualised within arrangements of social institutions that might not have been freely chosen by its participants. But, while anthropologists of ethics have rightfully challenged the one-sided conceptions of a freely lived life as typified by resistance against the binding powers of structural forces, from my ethnographically informed perspective, what is missing in their frameworks is how self-conscious reflection about structural forces and social institutions might render ethical life impossible.

Along this vein, the phenomena mentioned in this paper, such as 'lying flat' and 'letting rot', illustrate the ways in which agency appear obstructed and perhaps even destroyed in cases of unexpected but cognitively acknowledged structural injustice. Specifically, the nihilistic realisations of failed navigators of the system like Doudou illustrate how first-person acceptance of one's own futility as a result of 'unfair' institutions come to reveal how previously acknowledged activities of freedom were ersatz exercises all along. Thus, in realising the importance of cognitively holding onto a possible picture of the world to one's ethical life, as exemplified in this paper by my interlocutors' insistence that meritocracy is real, we also realise the consequences of the negation of such a picture. These nihilistic and less-than-ideal cases all seem to be 'outside the ethical domain' as defined by Faubion above. Nevertheless, as I hope to have shown in this paper, they are hardly irrelevant to ethical life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

EDWIN HAO CHEN JIANG
(INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR)
edwinjiang1995@gmail.com

NOTES

1 Following anthropological convention, the name of this institution, as well as of individual inter-locutors, have all been replaced by pseudonyms.
2 For a history of the region, see Bulag (2004)
3 For an account of the protests, see Bulag (2020).
4 For a historical discussion of involution in the Chinese context, see Duara (1987).
5 I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for pushing me to consider these possibilities.

REFERENCES

Allen, Ansgar 2011. Michael Young's the Rise of the Meritocracy: A Philosophical Critique. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 59 (4): 367–382. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2011.582852.

Anagnost, Ann 2004. The Corporeal Politics of Quality (*Suzhi*). *Public Culture* 16 (2): 189–208. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-16-2-189.

Bai, Tongdong 2019. *Against Political Equality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Bell, Daniel 2010. *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Buchak, Laura 2014. Belief, Credence, and Norms. *Philosophical Studies* 169: 285–311. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-013-0182-y.

Bulag, Uradyn Erden 2004. Inner Mongolia. In M. Rossabi (ed). *Governing China's Multiethnic Frontiers.* Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Bulag, Uradyn Erden 2020. Dying for the Mother Tongue: Why Have People in Inner Mongolia Recently Taken their Lives? *Index on Censorship* 49 (4): 49–51. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306422020981275.

Chen, Jiexiu 2022. Rural Students' Evolving Educational Aspirations and the Sense of 'Fit' in the Changing Context of China's Higher Education: A Life History Approach. *Asia Pacific Education Review* 23: 211–220. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-021-09722-9.

Das, Veena 2020. *Textures of the Ordinary: Doing Anthropology After Wittgenstein*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Duara, Prasenjit 1987. State Involution: A Study of Local Finances in North China, 1911–1935. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29 (1): 132–161. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417500014389.

Fan, Xiaoxiao 2020. Policy-Driven Development and the Strategic Initiative of One-Million Enrollment Expansion in China's Higher Vocational Education. *ECNU Review of Education* 3 (1): 179–186. https://doi.org/10.1177/2096531120903879.

Faubion, James 2012. *An Anthropology of Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fei, Xiaotong 1992. *From the Soil, the Foundations of Chinese Society.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Geertz, Clifford 1963. *Agricultural Involution: The Process of Ecological Change in Indonesia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Giercyk, Marcin and Rui Diao 2021. Socio-Educational Contexts of Gāokǎo Exam: A Qualitative Retrospective Study of How Gāokǎo Is Perceived by Successful Exam-Takers. *International Journal of Chinese Education* 10 (2): 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/22125868211035802.

Goffman, Erving 1990. Role Distance. In Charles Edgley and Dennis Brissett (eds). *Life as Theater* (2nd edition). London: Routledge.

Goffman, Erving 2006. Where the Action Is. In J. Cosgrave (ed). *The Sociology of Risk and Gambling Reader.* London: Routledge.

Hamnett, Chris, Shen Hua, and Liang Bingjie 2019. The Reproduction of Regional Inequality through University Access: The Gaokao in China. *Area Development and Policy* 4 (3): 252–270. https://doi.org/10.1080/23792949.2018.1559703.

Howlett, Zachary Moss 2021. *Meritocracy and Its Discontents: Anxiety and the National College Entrance Exam in China.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Howlett, Zachary Moss 2022a. Fateful Rite of Passage: Charismatic Ratification of Elite Merit in China's National College Entrance Exam. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 12 (1): 154–169. https://doi.org/10.1086/719267.

Howlett, Zachary Moss 2022b. Performative Secularism: School-Sponsored Prayer in China's National College Entrance Exam. *Critical Asian Studies* 54 (2): 441–469. https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2022.2099439.

Howlett, Zachary Moss 2022c. The National College Entrance Examination and the Myth of Meritocracy in Post-Mao China. In Tarun Khanna and Michael Szonyi (eds). *Making Meritocracy Lessons: From China and India, From Antiquity to the Present.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Hu, Hsien Chin 1944. The Chinese Concepts of 'Face'. *American Anthropologist* 46 (1): 45–64. https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1944.46.1.02a00040.

Kajanus, Anni 2019. Mutualistic vs. Zero-Sum Modes of Competition – A Comparative Study of Children's Competitive Motivations and Behaviours in China. *Social Anthropology* 27 (1): 67–83. https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12578.

Kipnis, Andrew 1997. *Producing Guanxi: Sentiment, Self, and Subculture in a North China Village.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Kipnis, Andrew 2001. Articulating School Counter-cultures. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 32 (4): 472–492. https://doi.org/10.1525/aeq.2001.32.4.472.

Kipnis, Andrew 2011. *Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kuan, Teresa 2015. *Love's Uncertainty: The Politics and Ethics of Child Rearing in Contemporary China.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Laidlaw, James 2002. For an Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 8: 311–332. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.00110.

Laidlaw, James 2014. *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom. Cambridge: Cambridge* University Press.

Lambek, Michael (ed) 2010. *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Lin, Delia 2017. *Civilising Citizens in Post-Mao China: Understanding the Rhetoric of Suzhi.* London: Routledge.

Lin, Lili and Diego Gullotta 2022. Disarticulating Qingnian. *Made in China Journal.* https://madeinchinajournal.com/2022/03/06/disarticulating-qingnian. <Accessed 23 August 2024>.

Ling, Minhua. 2015. 'Bad Students Go to Vocational Schools!' Education, Social Reproduction and Migrant Youth in Urban China. *The China Journal* 73: 108–131. https://doi.org/10.1086/679271.

Liu, Shuning 2018. Neoliberal global assemblages: The Emergence of "Public" International High-School Curriculum Programs in China. *Curriculum Inquiry* 48 (2): 203–219. https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2018.1435977.

Loyalka, Michelle 2013. *Eating Bitterness: Stories from the Front Lines of China's Great Urban Migration.* Berkeley: University Of California Press.

Mair, Jonathan 2018. Metacognitive variety, from Inner Mongolian Buddhism to Post-Truth. In Joëlle Proust and Martin Fortier (eds). *Metacognitive Diversity: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Merton, Robert 1957. The Role-Set: Problem in Sociological Theory. *British Journal of Sociology* 8 (2): 106–120. https://doi.org/10.2307/587363.

Morton, Jennifer and Sarah Paul 2018. Grit. *Ethics* 129 (2): 175–203. https://doi.org/10.1086/700029.

Pang, Haishao, Meiling Cheng, Jing Yu, and Jingjing Wu 2020. *Suzhi* Education and General Education in China. *ECNU Review of Education* 3 (2): 380–395. https://doi.org/10.1177/2096531120913171.

Qin, Xiaolei and Ross Buchanan 2021. Policy and Public Preferences Regarding the University Enrollment Quotas System across Chinese Provinces. *Higher Education Policy* 34: 881–901. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-019-00170-0.

Ramsey, Frank 2001. *The Foundations of Mathematics and Other Logical Essays.* London: Routledge.

Rawls, John 2005. *A Theory of Justice: Original Edition.* Cambridge: Belknap Press.

Ren, Ran 2022. Educational Success in Transitional China: The Gaokao and Learning Capital in Elite Professional Service Firms. *The China Quarterly* 252: 1277–1298. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741022000856.

Ruan, Ji 2017. *Guanxi, Social Capital and School Choice in China: The Rise of Ritual Capital*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sangren, Paul Steven 1995. 'Power' Against Ideology: A Critique of Foucaultian Usage. *Cultural Anthropology* 10 (1): 3–40. https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1995.10.1.02a00010.

Sun, Liqun, Ji Chen, Qinglan Li, and Dian Huang 2020. Dramatic Uneven Urbanization of Large Cities throughout the World in Recent Decades. *Nature Communications* 11: 5366. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-020-19158-1.

Woronov, Terry 2016. *Class Work: Vocational Schools and China's Urban Youth*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Wu, Qiyan, Xiaoling Zhang, and Paul Waley 2016. Jiaoyufication: When Gentrification Goes to School in the Chinese Inner City. *Urban Studies* 53 (16): 3510–3526. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098015613234.

Xu, Jing 2019. Learning "Merit" in a Chinese Preschool: Bringing the Anthropological Perspective to Understanding Moral Development. *American Anthropologist* 121 (3): 655–666. https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13269.

Yamada, Naomi 2021. *Preferential Education Policies in Multi-Ethnic China: National Rhetoric, Local Realities*. New York: Routledge.

Yan, Yunxiang 2017. Doing Personhood in Chinese Culture: The Desiring Individual, Moralist Self and Relational Person. *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 35 (2): 1–17. https://doi.org/10.3167/cja.2017.350202.

Young, Michael 1994. *The Rise of Meritocracy*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Yurchak, Alexei 2006. *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Zhang, Han, Donald Patton, and Martin Kenney 2013. Building Global-Class Universities: Assessing the Impact of the 985 Project. *Research Policy* 42 (3): 765–775. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2012.10.003.

Laur Kiik

ENCOUNTER: A BASIC CONCEPT FOR ANTHROPOLOGY

This essay belongs to the essay series "The Anthropologist's Toolkit: Reflections on ethnographic methodology". In this series, authors peer into the anthropologist's toolkit to reflect on what ethnographic methodology constitutes in all its multimodal forms.

ABSTRACT

Anthropologists often talk about 'encounters,' but what do they actually mean? This term—'encounter'—shows up everywhere across ethnographic writing and practice, but is itself rarely defined or discussed. 'Ethnographies of encounters,' too, are increasingly common, but are rarely treated as a distinct type of ethnography. In this short essay, I recommend approaching the concept of encountering more consciously, but also defining it in a relatively basic and expansive way. Encounters across difference are open-ended: they can lead to collaboration, conflict, negotiation or an awkward disconnect, to name a few. Encounters are many-sided: much beyond a single studied group of people, beyond the ethnographer's home society, and more than human. Assuming that encounters are very open-ended and many-sided brings new methodological and ethical challenges. Yet, it helps expand our attention and care in fieldwork and analysis, while postponing our judgements.

Keywords: ethnographies of encounter, alterity, relationality, world-making, definitions

'Encounters' are both a classic theme and a universal metaphor in social-cultural anthropology. Anthropologists have long emphasised that groups of people live in unique and disparate social worlds and, thus, can meet each other only across differences. Meeting a cultural 'Other' or a way of being 'otherwise' has remained at the heart of the discipline—as a topic of study, as an ideological proposition, and as the very method of ethnographic fieldwork. Alongside cross-cultural encounters, anthropologists have investigated colonial encounters, 'first contacts,' missionary encounters, knowledge encounters, medical encounters, development encounters, urban encounters, and anthropological or ethnographic encounters, amongst many more. Unsurprisingly, countless anthropological books, theses, articles, films, and research projects feature titles with variations of 'encounter' and 'encountering.' A colleague told me that this word—'encounter'—is attractive exactly because it is not tied to any particular theoretical literature; it feels somehow neutral, but also so familiar.

Yet, what do anthropologists actually mean by 'encounters'? What goes into an 'ethnography of encounters'? This short essay contributes to the anthropological discussion by exploring

a concept that is everywhere in ethnographic writing and practice, but is itself rarely discussed or explicitly theorised. In this essay, I make the case for using this concept more consciously and for defining it in a relatively basic and expansive way. Encounters across differences are *open-ended* and *many-sided*. Approaching encounters as highly open-ended and many-sided helps expand our attention and care in fieldwork and analysis.

***

What might be called 'ethnographies of encounter' are dispersed across social-cultural anthropology, human geography, and related fields of research, yet are usually not viewed as a distinct type of ethnography. Reviewing such literature in anthropology, Faier and Rofel (2014) found a few disparate clusters of ethnographies that have emerged in the last few decades. They also found that, because these disparate ethnographies all emphasise how cultural worlds emerge from interactions—rather than existing as autonomous bounded units—one can trace their shared roots to Boasian cultural diffusionism and to Barthian approaches to ethnicity as relational.

Faier and Rofel build their literature review in a way that shows how earlier studies of colonial encounters inspired the more recent ethnographies of encounter. Those earlier studies—often literary and historical studies of European colonialism—helped anthropologists think about power, culture-making, and inequality 'as involving processes of negotiation, resistance, awkward resonance, misunderstanding, and unexpected convergence' (Faier and Rofel 2014: 365). Faier and Rofel noted that several now-classic studies introduced a range of concepts—such as transculturation, contact zone, middle ground, mirror of production, and colonial

intimacy—that 'paved the way for growing attention in anthropology to how contemporary cultural forms are the outcome of encounter'. For example, one influential study has been Pratt's (1992: 4) book on the 'contact zone', that is, 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination', where subordinated people not only adapt to, but also actively shape the dominant metropolitan cultures.

The rise of encounters as a frame across disparate fields of study resonates with recent anthropological debates, which have revived the discipline's foundational questions about culture and cultural difference—or, about radical alterity or different ontologies. As a foundational characteristic of the discipline, anthropologists have often been exploring, showing the internal logic of, defending, and promoting 'other' cultures. They have specifically done so in relation to the nonmodern or the traditional, such as indigenous animism, including in its encounters with governments, the natural sciences, and industrial economies.

West (2016: 111) summarises the return to themes of alterity—and, consequently, of encounter—as follows:

An old and fundamental anthropological question has been challenged of late. That question has three parts. The first part asks, *How do people live their world?* How do they see, smell, taste, hear, feel, sense, move through, make meaning out of, find meaning in, represent, narrate, know, perceive, think about, remember, imagine, desire, and empathize with all that they experience as surrounding them? The second part asks, *How do different ways of living-in-their-world affect how people understand, engage with, and act toward*

others? The third, *What happens to people's modes of living their worlds when people living their worlds in radically different ways interact?*

This question of encounter—what happens when people who live their worlds in very different ways meet each other—is *open-ended*, thus making it a helpful starting point for ethnography. This is especially so if one approaches ethnography as a method of learning about people, while actively postponing judgment.

<center>***</center>

So, it remains: What is an 'encounter'? For Faier and Rofel (2014: 363–364), cited above, 'encounter' refers to 'everyday engagements across difference': 'a chance meeting, a sensory exchange, an extended confrontation, a passionate tryst'. This is a fine, yet limiting definition. It highlights everyday and affective engagements, but also limits itself by excluding the overtly political or instances of rupture. It also limits itself to actual engagements, thereby excluding encounters that result in an awkward disconnect, acts of ignoring or passing-by. For the purposes of this essay, Wilson's (2017: 464) simpler definition suits us better, because it keeps the notion of encounters at a more broad, open-ended, and basic level: 'encounters are meetings where difference is somehow noteworthy'.

What are ethnographies of encounters? Faier and Rofel (2014: 365) offer a helpful, specific framing when outlining the criteria for how they selected ethnographies for their literature review:

> [W]e have selected (…) studies that (a) explicitly and consistently move between the voices and perspectives of members of different groups of people or things

and (b) demonstrate how new cultural meanings and worlds emerge through their encounter.

Again, I suggest defining 'encounters'—and ethnographies of encounters—in a more open-ended and expansive way: ethnographies can also show how encounters happen, but new meanings and worlds do *not* emerge. Encounters can lead to historic precedents, yet may not change much amid a more generally disconnected or distrustful co-presence of groups of people.

This open-endedness is why 'encounter' differs from concepts such as clash, dialogue, exchange, mutual imaginary, translation, cosmopolitics, relationship, and convergence, amongst others. While all these other concepts have their own strengths, the more elementary term of 'encounter' offers the greatest level of openness—it can encompass the most diverse pathways and the largest diversity of participants. It brings attention to how something unfolded, rather than focusing on why an outcome might be important, good or bad. It can highlight the role played by indirect, fleeting, and vague connections, extending beyond clashes and collaborations. Even if an ethnography of encounters takes a public controversy as the starting point for storytelling, it can then move from clash or collaboration to the ambiguous, disconnected, non-climatic, messy, parallel, awkward, and less noticed.

Such an approach to encounters prevents assuming that a place's various actors, with their cosmoses or world-makings, will actively engage with each other, especially in conscious political discourse. The notion of encounter also allows us to refrain from assuming that interactions between disparate world-making projects must always produce conflict, contestation or oppression. We can, thus, remain open to

noticing how encounters may result in alliance, symbiosis, collaboration, and negotiation—or in lasting disconnect, disjuncture, and awkward co-existence, for instance. Relations may be not made at all; interaction may remain minimal. The 'contact zone' may remain quiet; histories run parallel without intertwining. We, then, remain open to fundamental questions about, for example, how disparate world-makings fit alongside each other, scrape at each other's edges without going to war, and build worlds on the same landscapes in a long-standing disconnect.

This approach resonates with how Haraway (2007) and Tsing (2005) emphasise that encounters are not predestined to lead to conflict, to good or bad, but only to involve 'grappling'. Discussing the encounters and companionship between humans and other animal species, Haraway (2007: 15) writes:

> A great deal is at stake in such meetings, and outcomes are not guaranteed. There is no assured happy or unhappy ending—socially, ecologically, or scientifically. There is only the chance for getting on together with some grace.

Thus, encounters sometimes lead to clash and oppression, sometimes to cooperation, sometimes to productive 'friction' (Tsing 2005), and, as I have found in my own field research, sometimes to awkward gaps and silent co-presence. Faier and Rofel (2014: 364) note that encounters 'prompt unexpected responses and improvised actions, as well as long-term negotiations with unforeseen outcomes, including both violence and love'. An ethnography of encounters could attend not only to interaction, but also to disconnect and ignoring; not only love or hate, but also apathy and not caring; not only knowledge, but also ignorance.

In my research—focusing on encounters between people from diverse ethnic groups and from diverse foreign countries in the Asian highlands of Burma (Myanmar)—I have seen people from disparate social worlds ignore each other, even when living side-by-side on the same street or in the same village. They do physically or socially 'meet' each other—by living in the same place—yet no major transformation happens, ideas are not exchanged, concepts are not grappled with. Indeed, sometimes people meet new ideas and conclude, 'There is nothing that I can do with that.' One could argue that this is not a real 'encounter', but merely brushing up against each other; it is merely a possibility of an encounter. In my view, such continuous disconnect is a possible pathway of encounters.

Finally, encounters seem open-ended not only in terms of their pathways but also of time: When does an encounter begin and end? When does it stop being an encounter? This all remains undefined and rather loose. Encounters could be brief or constant, forced or voluntary, peaceful or violent, planned or unnoticed, mind-changing or forgettable.

***

Having defined encounters as open-ended, let us now consider encounters as *many-sided*. Ethnographers, historians, and other researchers usually frame encounters as happening between just two broad groups of people, but encounters tend to involve more participants, sides, and levels. In my own field research—amidst an ethnopolitical war and vast natural-resource grabbing—interethnic encounters have continuously appeared many-sided, for example, in the sense of involving several ethnic groups or nationalist movements, and—if we move beyond humans alone—also wild animals, forests, rivers, landscapes, and minerals and so on.

Because many-sided encounters evoke boundless comparisons, they help reassert that *everyone* is particular—and that no one is the default. For example, both in everyday speaking and in academic writing, certain actors tend to be represented as if they are 'non-ethnic' or beyond cultural identity politics, such as a country's ethnic majority, a transnational company or urban professionals. All the larger established traditions of social-cultural anthropology, ethnology, and ethnography in the world have tended to refer to their own-language intellectual circles and countries or regions as the default 'we'—in the West, including in the English-speaking countries (Chua and Mathur 2018), as well as in China, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, and many other contexts. Thinking of encounters as happening among many sides can help us move beyond two-sided narratives of 'us' meeting 'them'. Indeed, showing the many-sidedness of encounters helps measure the role of the ethnographer's home society or world region more accurately, perhaps as less central or less influential in the studied encounters.

In terms of species, the term 'encounter'—as in a cultural, ontological, material, and inter-species encounter—underscores the roles of wildlife, nonhuman nature, physical space, and things. This framing of encounters allows for wilder and more-than-human ethnography. Yet, it comes with a methodological challenge, as Wilson (2017: 454) puts it, of 'how we might better grasp encounters that might be "elusive" to the social researcher'—beyond researching 'warm-blooded animals in "airy spaces" where animals are easily encountered'. This leads Wilson (2017: 459) to more broadly discuss ethnographies that move beyond face-to-face physical contacts and toward 'non-proximal encounters'.

Attempting an ethnography of such many-sided, sometimes indirect, and more-than-human encounters brings along analytical and ethical dilemmas regarding how to represent complex conflicts, many damning accusations, and ecological destruction. My response has been to try not to merely present 'competing discourses' or 'incommensurable worlds', but to put contradictory voices into dialogue, and both to contextualise and to evaluate their claims. In the case of nature and nonhumans, no 'voices' or nonhuman interviewees can be quoted. Thus, for both analytical and ethical reasons, ethnographic writing would need to assess more-than-human realities, such as a human activity's environmental impacts or the decline of local wildlife. To better express nature's value and 'voices', ethnographies of encounters might draw upon diverse natural sciences, descriptive natural history, the environmental humanities, ethnobiology, multispecies ethnography, and/or interdisciplinary nature conservation science (Kiik 2018).

Focusing on many-sided encounters has both pluses and minuses. One minus is that, when telling stories of encounters—especially of many-sided, indirect or ambiguous encounters—the exploration of any particular side might lose some depth and immersion. As a plus, the ethnography may gain in dynamism, diversity of voices, and relationality. Another benefit is that encounters tend to reveal unexpected contrasts, comparisons, and parallels, which then reflect back upon and help better understand the involved people. Yet, each story, perspective, and claim that someone provides about someone else raises challenges when trying to represent disparate actors and their contradictory perspectives truthfully, contextually, and fairly.

Foregrounding many-sided and more-than-human encounters leads to the challenge of expanding ethnographic attention—for diverse humans and others. Attention—both

in fieldwork and in writing—needs to move beyond a single studied group of people, toward disparate and perhaps conflicting sides of encounters. Such a task can find guidance and example from certain persons who themselves are connecting the different sides in the encounters studied. Namely, at the heart of intergroup encounters tend to lie key mediating persons who connect otherwise mutually distrustful or warring people or nonhuman worlds. For example, in my research, I found that just a few persons were key to creating encounters between ethnic Bamar (Burmese) and ethnic Kachin people who—amid and despite decades of war—fought together against a widely opposed mega-project (Kiik 2020).

***

Ethnographies of encounters foreground relationality. Everything becomes 'inter-'. Worlds are never made alone; opposition and clashes, too, are relational; nonhumans participate; landscapes connect and separate. Different groups of people may envision creating secure, autonomous worlds, yet their world-makings depend on and are impacted by what and whom they meet.

Starting stories from the very basic notion of 'encounter' can help ethnographers postpone judgments beyond a few of social-cultural anthropology's deepest original assumptions. Namely, groups of people live their worlds differently. When they meet each other, they always cross mutual difference. Such meetings unfold in countless ways.

REFERENCES

Chua, Liana and Nayanika Mathur 2018. Who Are 'We'? In Liana Chua and Nayanika Mathur (eds.) *Who Are 'We'?: Reimagining Alterity and Affinity in Anthropology*. New York: Berghahn Books.

Faier, Lieba and Lisa Rofel 2014. Ethnographies of Encounter. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43: 363–377. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102313-030210

Haraway, Donna J. 2007. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Kiik, Laur 2018. Wild-Ing the Ethnography of Conservation: Writing Nature's Value and Agency In. *Anthropological Forum* 28 (3): 217–235. https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2018.1476222.

Kiik, Laur 2020. Confluences amid Conflict: How Resisting China's Myitsone Dam Project Linked Kachin and Bamar Nationalisms in War-Torn Burma. *Journal of Burma Studies* 24 (2): 229–273. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jbs.2020.0010.

Pratt, Marie Louise 1992. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturalism*. New York and Oxon: Routledge.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

West, Paige 2016. *Dispossession and the Environment: Rhetoric and Inequality in Papua New Guinea*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Wilson, Helen F. 2017. On Geography and Encounter: Bodies, Borders, and Difference. *Progress in Human Geography* 41 (4): 451–471. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132516645958.

LAUR KIIK
POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCH FELLOW
TOKYO COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF TOKYO
kiik.laur@gmail.com

Samuli Lähteenaho

LECTIO PRAECURSORIA

A Beach Multiple: An ethnography of environmentalism
on the Lebanese Coastline

18 May 2024

Honoured Custos, Honoured Opponent, members of the audience,

According to a well-known old slogan from the French new left, 'under the cobblestones, there lies a beach' (Wark 2011: 149-150). The implications of this slogan for the political imagination are simple, but effective: if you dig up the cobblestones and throw them at the authorities, you will encounter a leisurely beach under them.

What if we start, not from the cobblestones, but the beach? The beach, which is an over-fantasised and reified place in capitalist modernity (Taussig 2000)? Can we still find some proverbial cobblestones? Ones that, as in this old slogan, refer both to societal infrastructure and antagonistic politics? Can a place of leisure provide the key to understanding urban and environmental politics?

My dissertation describes the ways in which a coastline was definitively political. On the white sands of Beirut's only public beach, Ramlet al-Bayda, many objects, ideas, and structures were indeed mixed. They were burrowed into the subterranean and glittered superficially on the surface. Perhaps not literal cobblestones, the processes, desires, and conflicts I documented on the sands of Ramlet al-Bayda certainly opened a view to political, social, and environmental changes in Lebanon. These developments, in turn, speak to wider global dynamics of environmental ruination in late capitalism and to anthropological questions of space and environment.

It was the late summer of 2019, on the eastern banks of the Mediterranean Sea below the peak of Mount Lebanon in the shadow of the city's skyscrapers on a public beach between urban expansion and the waves. While leisurely crowds enjoyed their Saturday morning in the blazing sun, a bulldozer rolled down the sands. It crushed, dismantled, and demolished makeshift buildings used by the environmental group that managed the beach. That bulldozer was commissioned by the Beirut municipality. Agitated, environmental activists shuffled around and argued with the municipal police. There was an air of chaos, with the environmentalists wearing mixed expressions of resignation and indignation on their faces.

What was going on? At least two different versions of the events existed. According to the municipality, the environmental group did not have the appropriate permits for their activity, and their work had to be stopped and cleared out. According to the environmentalists, however, the municipality was acting on behalf of private capital interests, punishing them and ignoring the permits they actually did possess. This was because the group opposed the privatisation of the coast, a century-long process with renewed speed since the 1990s.

These events were unfolding on Ramlet al-Bayda—or the 'White Sands' in English. As the only public beach left on the coastline of Beirut, it marks one of the few locations on the city's coastline where one can enter and relax without paying fees. Now, this access was threatened by bulldozers. That morning with the bulldozers was one of the more dramatic moments of my fieldwork. It encapsulated how the coastline is more than simply a place for leisure and recreation—it is also a place of crucial change in politics and the political economy.

My dissertation seeks to disentangle political contestations over the meaning, value, and use of the Lebanese coastline. I wanted to understand the interplay between political, social, historical, economic, legal, and discursive elements in disputes over meaning and control over the coast. To this end, I relied on participant observation with a number of environmental groups working on the coastline for one year in 2018 and 2019. In doing so, I documented the lead up to a societal and economic collapse and popular uprising in late 2019. Later, these were added to, resulting from the catastrophic explosion of Beirut's port in August 2020, which ravaged entire neighbourhoods.

I got to know many volunteers, workers, and activists among the environmentalists. Rana, for instance, was from a well-known Beiruti family. She had a background in engineering and two decades of experience as a civil society figure. Dina, on the other hand, was a marine ecologist in her 30s. She headed a new nongovernmental organisation (NGO) that worked on marine pedagogy. Mahmoud was a law student in his late 20s and volunteered in oppositional electoral campaigns and coastal cleanups. Their names, like those of all my other interlocutors, are pseudonymous.

Rana, Dina, and Mahmoud were all committed participants in environmental work on the coastline. They organised cleanups, opposed the privatisation of public beaches, educated others about coastal nature, and campaigned against invasive fish species, to name just a few of their activities.

I consider ethnographic fieldwork a pedagogical process rather than a 'method' for gathering 'data'. Ethnography is a long-term process of the ethnographer's co-presence in the lives of their interlocutors (Chua 2015). This means not simply analysing the actions of my interlocutors, but thinking alongside them.

I followed the multiple contestations, configurations, and characteristics that defined the Ramlet al-Bayda beach, which served as a good place to document the transformations the Lebanese coastline was experiencing. The resulting fieldnotes, interviews, and observations formed the basis for my description of the Lebanese coastline and the beach as multiply located through its many relations. Building upon this fieldwork, my dissertation presents an ethnography of environmentalist work on the Lebanese coastline and contributes to the anthropological scholarship on space, environment, and grassroots politics.

Traditionally, ethnographers are rather lonesome creatures, who do much of their thinking by themselves. Instead, since the beginning of my PhD project, I had the opportunity to be a part of a collaborative research project, called the 'Crosslocations', headed by Professor Sarah Green. Together with a group of anthropologists, we developed concepts allowing us to rethink issues of spatial relationality—most importantly to my own work, the concept of relative location (see Green et al. 2024).

Relative location refers to how places, as well as people and objects, are positioned relative to each other. This includes not just how far or close they are situated based on geographic distance, but all the other kinds of connections and disconnections between them, and the forces that calibrate these relations.

This concept of relative location was central to my analysis of the actions and ideas of environmentalists, and the processes they encountered. Given its importance, I offer a simple example: whether a beach is public or private means that it is open to different kinds of users. Through this, different beaches are connected to different lifeworlds or spaces situated much further away.

A public beach might have regular visitors from working class neighbourhoods, whereas a private luxury resort might draw in rich tourists from abroad. This quite obvious point is, however, conceptually meaningful. Any location has multiple connections or disconnections to other places. Therefore, a single beach, or any other place, in fact, has many locations at once. This means that, where it is, relatively speaking, can be known in many different ways.

The idea that any place has multiple, overlapping locations, as developed in our research collective, was foundational to my analysis of environmentalism on the public beach in Beirut. Ramlet al-Bayda was a place located in many different ways. It was multiple in the ways in which it was known. Hence, 'The Beach Multiple' as the title of my dissertation.

But what of the cobblestones I suggested we can find in the public beach of Beirut? In this case, I mean cobblestones as the bits and pieces that help understand the changes occurring on the Lebanese coastline as exemplary of late neoliberal processes. And, as bits and pieces that help unpack spatial multiplicity through relative location.

When the civil war ended in 1990, Lebanon entered a period of heightened neoliberal economic expansion. Clientelist networks played a central role, former warlords were propelled to important positions, and political leaders and business elites were entangled. The country's economy relied on the banking industry, the construction sector, and tourism. In a country where the landscape is dominated by the mountains and the sea, beach resorts were a key element of neoliberal spatial expansion.

Historically, these processes were not completely new. They stretched to the early twentieth century and intensified and took various new forms since the 1990s in the context of the post-war political economy. Scholars such as Hannes Baumann (2017: 4) have called the Lebanese system actually existing neoliberalism, with 'liberal talk and [an] illiberal walk'. In essence, Lebanese neoliberalism is a mix of hefty liberal ideals with a rather illiberal reality. Rima Majed (2022) describes it as a system of sectarian neoliberalism, where neoliberal doctrine fuses with power-sharing between political heads of Lebanon's many religious communities.

In this context, lands considered public continued and are still continuing to be privatised and enclosed by the mixed forces of political power and private capital. I witnessed this process at Ramlet al-Bayda, where a new hotel project enclosed a large chunk of the beach. It did this by stretching the limits of zoning laws and defying opposition from protestors. My interlocutor Rana suspected that it was the hotel that was the ultimate force beyond the destructive bulldozer that so dramatically challenged their guardianship. In other words, the hotel, and, ultimately, the bulldozer were symbols of neoliberal enclosure.

Sectarian neoliberalism was also a key cause of intensifying environmental degradation. In the late 2010s, for instance, a crisis of waste infrastructure emerged. This was also visible on Beirut's beach, where combined storm sewage outlets flowed on the sands and waves washed in solid waste from overflowing coastal dump sites. At the same time, environmental consciousness grew among Lebanon's middle classes, and the environmental movement expanded (Kingston 2001; Makdisi 2012).

My interlocutors were environmentalists, and, thus, part of civil society. Civil society, in its local form, was a central way in which many organised to oppose the current situation. This was the case even as many criticised the depoliticising effect of the spread of NGOs.

This process is familiar across the globe. Famously, James Ferguson's (1994) argument on development as an antipolitics machine has been applied to describe the NGO sector (Fisher 1997). NGOisation refers to a move away from politics into the supposedly nonpolitical form of civil society (Salloukh et al. 2015: Ch. 3). This was one crucial context for my research.

To consider this wider context of coastal neoliberalism, NGOisation, and environmental consciousness together with the concept of relative location, I applied the idea of the poetics of space. Developed by anthropologist Rupert Stasch (2013), the poetics of space refers to how spaces become reflexive repositories of larger cultural or societal fields.

This stands for the ways in which people think through wider issues of social importance through relational space. As a simple example, consider if living in the city centre or a distant suburb makes a difference beyond a geographic difference. The relation between these two spaces is rich with meaning, including, for example, about class or urban politics.

I developed this concept to the poetics of relative location in order to describe how my interlocutors understood the different relative locations of coastal places in Lebanon. Each of these locations carried larger cultural, societal or political meaning. As an example, the enclosure of a public beach would be understood as representative of neoliberal sectarianism in Lebanon or, in technical terms, as a metonym of it.

The six ethnographic chapters in my dissertation each unpack the poetics of relative location from distinct perspectives, thereby uncovering the cobblestones of the politics of the Lebanese coastline. In the language of relative location, the chapters describe the layers in the multiple locations the beach took and the logics that calibrated them.

In Chapter 2. The Beach, I provide an ethnographic and historical overview of the Ramlet al-Bayda public beach. I suggest that, in the late 2010s, the beach was a precarious space, since its continued existence was threatened by privatisation. It was also a place for prefigurative politics (e.g., Graeber 2015: 2). For my interlocutors, whatever happened at the beach foreshadowed how change across the coastline might unfold.

Chapter 3. The Land Registry follows activists hunting for a lost cadastral map from historical survey work to prove that what was rightly public had been illegally privatised. A land registry reform carried out by the French in the 1920s during their colonial rule still haunted Beirut's urban politics in the late 2010s. I show how this was a matter of bureaucratic knowledge and a spatial logic embedded in the colonial mapping of the land registry.

Chapter 4. The Sand centres the substance forming the beach and asks: What is the relationship between materiality and knowledge?

I describe how the beach sand became a troublesome mixed matter. The sand grounded the politics of the coastline by infusing environmentalist and bureaucratic knowledge systems, human emotions, and other materials.

In Chapter 5. Waste, I examine garbage and sewage on the coastline. For volunteers removing garbage from the coast, this seemingly nonpolitical work was not just a matter of cleaning up waste. Instead, it hinted at a desire for wider cleanups in the political system. The circulation of waste worked as a metonymy for the political order in Lebanon, so that working against waste was working for social change.

Chapter 6. The Public Space describes how the term 'public space' circulated in various articulations: as a nostalgic idea, as a critical social scientific concept, and as a liberal property logic. This underscores the role played by the conceptual imagination on the coastline. In particular, public space as a term in Beirut was contested and multiple in its meanings.

Finally, Chapter 7. The Ocean follows marine environmental advocacy. This chapter examines how one group sought to educate the Lebanese of their marine and coastal nature. The pedagogical work of teaching the Lebanese to know their sea was one key way in which environmentalists sought to safeguard the country's coastline, which was, as the chapters cumulatively show, multiply located.

From these chapters, three broad themes emerge: late neoliberalism, NGOisation, and environmentalism. I develop these themes throughout my dissertation as crucial contexts for understanding the multiple locations of the beach.

Firstly, neoliberalism refers to the grassroots realities of Lebanon's ailing sectarian neoliberal political economy as it actualises in coastal privatisation, the breakdown of waste infrastructures, and coastal real estate businesses.

Neoliberalism is also connected to a late liberal oppositional subjectivity as it emerged in the form of civil society and NGOs aimed at protecting coastal spatial and environmental commons.

Secondly, NGOisation is opened up to the ethnographic examination of the political and nonpolitical. My interlocutors negotiated the limits of these terms. As such, they saw their work as nonpolitical, because they thought politics was a corrupt and sectarian matter. This nonpolitical frame provided both a safe haven and a limitation for environmental and progressive ideas.

Finally, I offer a description of grassroots environmentalism in Lebanon as a part of the wider rise of environmental movements and issues both in the Arab-speaking region and conceptually in anthropological scholarship.

So, in the end, what proverbial 'cobblestones' did I uncover from the old sands of the Ramlet al-Bayda beach? And what did I learn of the, to use the words of Munira Khayyat, 'well-intentioned, if doomed, environmental action ongoing in a place of neoliberal ruination?'[1]

Approaching the Lebanese coastline through the poetics of relative location, I argue that, where the Ramlet al-Bayda beach stood is not reducible to a single perspective or master narrative. Instead, it is a multiplicity of tangential, overlapping, conflicting or co-existing processes.

Thus, relative location allowed me to unearth and sieve from the sands those key processes that affected Lebanon in the years before the 2019 uprising and collapse.

I show that the coastline was a multiply located political line, a threshold for ongoing changes in the country's neoliberal twilight.

Overall, this dissertation uncovers new ways to think of the relationality of space and grassroots political work on issues of

environment and urban space. It is my wish that this work has also valued the political imagination and the possibility for change, additional cobblestones buried in the beach in our troubled planetary era.

I now call upon you, Professor Ghassan Hage, as the Opponent appointed by the Faculty of Social Sciences, to present your critical comments on my dissertation.

SAMULI LÄHTEENAHO
RESEARCHER
FINNISH INSTITUTE IN THE MIDDLE EAST
samuli.lahteenaho@helsinki.fi

NOTES

1   Personal communication.

REFERENCES

Baumann, Hannes 2017. *Citizen Hariri*. London: Hurst Publishers.

Chua, Liana 2015. Troubled Landscapes, Troubling Anthropology: Co-Presence, Necessity, and the Making of Ethnographic Knowledge: Troubled Landscapes, Troubling Anthropology. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21 (3): 641–659. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12254.

Ferguson, James 1994. *The Anti-Politics Machine: 'Development,' Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Fisher, William F. 1997. Doing Good? The Politics and Antipolitics of NGO Practices. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26 (1): 439–464. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.26.1.439.

Graeber, David 2015. *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*. Melville House.

Green, Sarah, Samuli Lähteenaho, Phaedra Douzina-Bakalaki, Carl Rommel, Joseph J. Viscomi, Laia Soto Bermant and Patricia Scalco 2024. *An Anthropology of Crosslocations*. Helsinki University Press. https://doi.org/10.33134/HUP-23.

Kingston, Paul 2001. Patrons, Clients and Civil Society: A Case Study of Environmental Politics in Postwar Lebanon. *Arab Studies Quarterly* 23 (1): 55–72. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41858365

Majed, Rima 2022. 'Sectarian Neoliberalism' and the 2019 Uprisings in Lebanon and Iraq. In Jeffrey G. Karam and Rima Majed (eds). *The Lebanon Uprising of 2019: Voices from the Revolution*. London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi, Sydney: I.B. Tauris.

Makdisi, Karim 2012. The Rise and Decline of Environmentalism in Lebanon. In Alan Mikhail (ed.). *Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Salloukh, Bassel F., Rabie Barakat, Jinan S. Al-Habbal, Lara W. Khattab and Shoghig Mikaelian 2015. *Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon*. London: Pluto Press.

Stasch, Rupert 2013. The Poetics of Village Space When Villages Are New: Settlement Form as History Making in Papua, Indonesia. *American Ethnologist* 40 (3): 555–570. https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12039.

Taussig, Michael 2000. The Beach (A Fantasy). *Critical Inquiry* 26 (2): 249–278. https://doi.org/10.1086/448966

Wark, McKenzie 2011. *The Beach Beneath the Street: The Everyday Life and Glorious Times of the Situationist International*. London and New York: Verso.

Sanna Vellava

LECTIO PRÆCURSORIA

On the Trail with a Disease Detection Dog: Collaborations at the Edges of Medical Research

23 February 2024, University of Helsinki

Honoured Custos, honoured Opponent, members of the audience,

Many of you here today likely have a dog or you have had a dog at some point in your life. Or, if you have not had your own dog, you probably know a friend who does. Many of you with a dog in your life might have encountered an intriguing phenomenon. For example, you have a knee ache or a sore toe or a wound on your skin. For some reason, your dog begins to show a peculiar interest in that specific area of your body, smelling it, perhaps trying to lick it insistently despite you trying to stop them from doing so.

In 1989, two British doctors (Williams and Pembroke 1989) wrote to the prestigious medical journal *The Lancet* about their patient. She arrived at the clinic describing how her pet dog had shown a recurrent interest in a lesion on her leg, repeatedly licking it. The lesion on the owner's leg turned out to be skin cancer (Williams and Pembroke 1989). This, and similar anecdotes since then, gave rise to an emerging research field that explores the use of dogs in detecting different types of diseases, such as cancers, bacterial infections, and, most recently, COVID-19. In more recent times, a growing number of research articles has, thus, suggested that dogs can detect diseases through their olfactory sense—that is, through their sense of smell. This led to considerations about

the potential of using disease detection dogs as part of medical scientific research, diagnostics, and clinical health care.

The thesis that I defend here today, titled 'On the Trail with a Disease Detection Dog: Collaborations at the Edges of Medical Research', explores the use of scent detection dogs in medical research and diagnostics. In my thesis, I ask the following: How are dogs made into medical devices? How is medical knowledge produced about, through, and with disease detection dogs? And, what kinds of networks are created around and through dogs to introduce them to the context of medical research? To answer these questions, I followed one particular research project here in Helsinki which focused on training dogs to smell different types of cancer and, later, COVID-19. Some of you might remember the 'corona dogs' at the Helsinki-Vantaa Airport at the beginning of the pandemic. These dogs smelled COVID-19 infections in passengers arriving to Finland as a part of the health security measures. I return to this experimental diagnostic service later in this lectio.

Throughout my thesis, I bring forth the argument that harnessing the olfactory skills of dogs for use in medical research and diagnostics is a complex process that requires bringing together many different kinds of actors, entities, and practices. Rather than concentrating on the dog as a particular kind

---

of organism, I emphasise the importance of analysing the surroundings and structures through which medical knowledge about and with disease detection dogs becomes possible and is produced. In this process, it is important to establish collaborations and work across differences—whether epistemological, methodological, institutional, personal or between species. Despite the popular narratives of dogs as 'naturally' suitable for scent work, making dogs into medical devices requires infrastructural support, development, and maintenance across institutional divides.

Let me go back for a moment and recount the first steps in my research process.

It was summer 2018, and I was at a party, casually conversing with someone who mentioned a research project in which they were training dogs to smell cancer. This instantly piqued my curiosity and I asked more about the project to which he was referring. The initial moment of my surprise indicated that there might be something interesting going on here, although it was difficult to pinpoint exactly what it was.

Quite soon after, I found myself standing in a parking lot in front of a commercial office space, waiting to meet the project leaders, ready to hear more about the phenomenon. As I stood there, a white van pulled up next to me. A woman in her late 40s jumped from the driver's seat and let a mixed-breed greyhound out from the passenger side door. The woman came towards me, shook my hand, and introduced herself as Leena. Then, she said, gesturing towards the dog, 'don't mind that one' (*älä välitä tuosta*), as the dog squirrelled around the parking lot. The two of them went for a short walk to the nearby trees; when they returned, Leena explained how her dog, Kössi, needed to 'scan' people first before he became acquainted with them. Soon, Kössi approached

me, coming close and pressing himself against my legs. I had read about him in the news and knew that he had already been trained as a cancer detection dog as a part of the research project Leena was coordinating. I wondered what he might smell or sense from me. I had just had a benign tumour surgically removed a week earlier, and I thought he might not be able to smell it. Regardless, it seemed that we had already become friends.

Meeting Kössi in that parking lot that summer was the first time I encountered a disease detection dog. Before that meeting, I had browsed through the website of Pro-Sniff, the association that was doing research with disease detection dogs and of which Kössi was a part as well. The website presented stylish photos of dogs sniffing laboratory test tubes with colourful liquids against a white background, conveying the idea that the dogs were already working in the medical setting, although they were, obviously, dogs, and, thus, lacked the characteristics of a typical medical instrument. These photos defied the obvious boundaries or analytical categories, such as nature versus culture or biology versus technology, raising questions about how this kind of research might be possible considering the strict methodological and technological standards seemingly characterising the world of medicine.

The owner of Kössi and the scientific leader of the dog research project generously welcomed me to start my PhD journey with them and, as Bruno Latour (1987) would say, 'follow them in action'—that is, following how the research around disease detection dogs was conducted at the grass-roots level. I began taking part in the everyday life of the dog training facility, where Kössi and many other dogs were being trained. I learnt the intricate details of disease detection with dogs, its requirements and methods, and

the joys of succeeding as well as frustrations when things did not always go as planned.

Kössi became the primary dog protagonist in my thesis as I followed him in the laboratory, in media representations, and, finally, at the Helsinki-Vantaa Airport during the pandemic. However, my thesis is more than a love story between me and Kössi. As Donna Haraway (2012) argues, encounters between individual members of species can work as a starting point for tracing associations across scales and kinds, across time and geographic sites. That is, Kössi worked as an entry point to understand the wider circumstances enabling disease detection dog work and research. I was interested, not just in the dogs themselves, but the project around them. My premise was that research or technological development, as theorised in the anthropology of science and in science and technology studies, involves bringing together a variety of actors and entities, not all of which are 'scientific'. Rather, research happens in a variety of locations, not just inside a lab, but extending beyond it, thereby blurring the boundary between science and society.

Thus, rather than focusing on understanding the intimate relationship between individual dogs and humans, I was interested in how the emerging research field surrounding disease detection dogs is constructed, what it requires, and what possible challenges might emerge along the way.

During my research process, I have often been asked if dogs can really smell diseases or whether they should be used in diagnostics. I have not aimed to make such judgments. Rather, I have looked at the processes and practices that were assembled around the dogs, the social and material dimensions, and structures that formed a web of connections and, at times, were also kept apart.

As you know, dogs have previously been used in many scent detection jobs, such as bomb or drug detection to mention just a few examples. We are already accustomed to the idea that dogs work alongside humans in different settings and perform important societal work. Against this background, disease detection in medical research does not seem that different. It has, however, its own particularities.

Let me briefly explain more about the material and technical dimensions entailed.

Contrary to what my first intuitive reaction to Kössi would suggest, the disease detection dogs I am talking about here today are not trained to smell tumours or other diseases directly in people. Instead, they are trained using biological samples, such as urine or sweat. Healthy and diseased samples are presented to the dog and, when sniffing the diseased samples, the dog is rewarded. When this is done repeatedly, the dog is supposed to learn the odour of the disease and discriminate between healthy and diseased samples. The goal is that the dog generalises the odour of the disease from the samples with which they are presented. In order to be successful, training dogs requires collecting a lot of samples from many different individuals. Otherwise, instead of learning the disease odour, the dog might learn the smell of specific individuals.

Unlike drugs, for example, the smell of a disease is not known to humans. Thus, in order to avoid accidentally teaching the dog the 'wrong thing', a variety of measures is needed. As I mentioned, one central issue is collecting a large number of training samples. Another is that samples should be handled in such a way so as to avoid systemic bias. If diseased and healthy samples have some kind of systemic difference between them, the dog might learn that difference. For example, if diseased samples are collected from a hospital setting and healthy samples from elsewhere, the dog might pick

up the odour of the hospital. Such a systemic bias could lead to the illusion that the dog has learnt the odour of the disease, when, in fact, they have learnt some other characteristic from the samples. Therefore, much care and planning go into building the necessary olfactory infrastructure for training disease detection with dogs.

Therefore, even if in theory it might be easy and fast to use dogs to detect diseases once they are trained, building a research project around them is a slow process. Moreover, disease detection dog research seems to challenge the idea of who contributes to medical research and how. For instance, the role of nonacademic actors is central to this area of research, and this was the case also in the project I followed. Although led by a veterinary scientist, the daily life of the laboratory was largely managed by the association that had been founded by lay dog handlers. However, it was important to find medical doctors with whom to collaborate so that research on human biological samples could be conducted officially and the results could be published in academic journals. Connections to established medical institutions could also offer access to biological samples, crucial to training dogs. Finding such connections was not always straight forward, thereby resulting in visible challenges to establishing new lines of research within mainstream research infrastructures.

When I first started my own research project, dogs had hardly been used in large-scale, real-life experiments. It was more like a future imaginary. Instead, dogs were imagined as working best alongside medical scientists in the labs, since it seemed unlikely that dogs would be welcomed in clinical settings anytime soon.

However, in spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic started. Just as the urgency of the pandemic accelerated medical research to find new diagnostic methods to curtail the spread of the virus, it also provided new opportunities

for disease detection dog research projects, including the one I had been following. Suddenly, Kössi appeared in the news, which reported that he had learnt to smell COVID-19. Soon after, a new experimental pilot study with COVID-19 detection dogs was planned. Only a few months later, in September 2020, a pilot programme was launched at the Helsinki-Vantaa Airport, where dogs were employed to sniff passengers arriving to Finland. A special metal booth was built in the airport and passengers could volunteer to take a dog test. You would walk into a small booth, wipe your neck and wrists with a tissue, and, then, through a small window, hand it over to the dog and their handler. About 30 seconds later, you would receive a paper with your test result. I took the test, and I received a paper back, saying, 'The dog thinks you do not have COVID-19.' Although this was not an official diagnostic test, I must say this information was relieving.

The dog service proved to be a success, attracting media attention globally. Although research with disease detection dogs had been conducted by different groups in many countries already, the pilot programme at the airport was one of the first to employ dogs as screening devices to curtail the COVID-19 pandemic. Four dogs working at the airport received the annual 'hero dogs' of the year award from The Finnish Kennel Club. On social media, the pilot programme was hyped as well as debated. Some were critical of how fast the dogs were operationalised and doubted the reliability of dogs in screening situations, whereas others argued that dogs should be included in the updated law on infectious diseases.

One of the first imageries evoked by the concept of 'disease detection dog', for me as well as for many others I talked with in the course of writing this thesis, was that, as one strolls down the street, sniffer dogs might begin

spontaneously alerting strangers that they have cancer. This uncanny vision evokes feelings of intuitive amusement as well as an uneasiness, a sense of ambivalence, and challenging norms of privacy and personal boundaries. One source of this ambivalence might be the fact that the device is an animate being with partial autonomy resisting human control. Through the dog, dog owners might learn about intimate aspects of their fellow humans without them even knowing. Once a dog is trained to smell a disease, how would that ability be contained? A dog as a medical device thus feeds our imagination in many ways. However, the wildest scenarios of dogs alerting us to diseases in random people on the street may prove to be more of a canine version of a techno-dystopian/utopian science fiction future rather than actually becoming reality any time soon.

To conclude, making dogs part of medical research is not a question that remained isolated within the lab or what is called the 'world of science'. Instead, various groups and experts, including scientists from different research areas, medical companies, stakeholder groups such as patient organisations and professional dog trainers, and funding agencies all took part in the collaborative network that made research with dogs possible and shaped it in different ways. In attempting to attract resources and partnerships for the project, Kössi often played the role of the charismatic star dog, evoking both criticism and admiration. Indeed, his figure was at times also controversial, but I have refrained from making definitive judgments about the 'true' Kössi, his feelings or abilities. Instead, controversies and uncertainties around Kössi and his abilities resonate with the more general dynamics in any emerging research area in which questions of what counts as 'true' knowledge or appropriate methods are still debated and have yet to be stabilised. Given this dynamic, it is not uncommon that the status

of the research field itself is uncertain, and it remains to be seen, how the research field continues to develop. Here in Finland as well as elsewhere, research with disease detection dogs continues, although Kössi has since retired from detection work, while new dogs and their handlers continue the work.

I have, thus, shed light on the *more-than-canine* issues shaping working relations and processes of medical knowledge production with, through, and about disease detection dogs, arguing that making disease detection dogs 'work' requires attention to conditions and structures in which such work becomes possible. This thesis itself might be considered a kind of counternarrative to the popular narratives and assumptions about dogs as 'natural noses', arguing instead that dogs are 'made' into devices rather than born as such. In a way, celebratory narratives surrounding disease detection dogs are like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they offer justification for doing and investing in dog research so that it might solve challenges in diagnostics and public health care, struggling with rising costs as well as causing suffering for individual patients, either due to misdiagnosis or the invasiveness of a diagnostic procedure. On the other hand, the narrative about dogs as easy, fast, and cheap might undermine the justification for continuous investments in new kinds of infrastructures that are nonetheless crucial for dog training and research. This might be a kind of paradox. Or just business as usual.

Honoured Opponent, I now call upon you to present your critical comments on my dissertation.

SANNA VELLAVA
POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCHER
CENTRE FOR CONSUMER SOCIETY
RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
FINLAND
sanna.vellava@helsinki.fi

REFERENCES

Haraway, Donna 2012. Awash in Urine: DES and Premarin in Multispecies Response-ability. *Women's Studies Quarterly* 40 (1/2): 301–316. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23333460

Latour, Bruno 1987. *Science in Action*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Williams, Hywel and Andreas Pembroke 1989. Sniffer Dogs in the Melanoma Clinic? *The Lancet* 333 (8640): 734. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(89)92257-5

Kristina Leppälä

LECTIO PRÆCURSORIA

*Practices in Medical Device Innovation:
Navigation and Enactment as Social Practice Trades*

<u>17 June 2022, University of Eastern Finland</u>

When I was a young girl growing up in the US Midwest, my father worked for a large corporation. He worked in an exciting department where they used computers, which at the time were strange and foreign things. Working as an engineer since the 1950s, he thought it would be great for me to learn how to use a computer and signed me up for a class specifically designed for the children of employees at that large corporation. I was so excited! When I got there, I was the only girl in a group of about 20 kids. The teacher noted this; everyone noted this. The teacher then told me I could go sit in the back of the room, while he and the boys worked on coding in BASIC. For a few lessons, I sat in the back, struggling to hear, but following along. Then, at the third or fourth lesson, I started to look around the huge, hall-like space we were in—full of desks and chairs and huge computers—all lined up. I remember wondering, not about BASIC, but about what they did there, these people. I wondered how they worked, what they worked on—were they talkative, were they friends outside of work? I turned on the computer sitting on the desk where I sat, and tapped away, pretending to work. After some avid tapping, the green letters on the screen told me the computer had locked up. I moved on to the next desk and did the same thing. And, again … and again. This was my first real encounter with engineering, and I remember thinking to myself how much cooler it would have been if my father had been an anthropologist or a pilot.

Many years later, I was working in an engineering department, still not an engineer, but working within and leading projects. But, something had changed: I did not take the time to wonder, as I had when I was a young girl; I just worked and went home. This changed with my PhD studies, because then, the wonder returned. I looked around my workplace and at my co-workers, all engaged in work or not—and wondered to myself what was going on under the blanket of work. It was this wonder, this question, which directed my research and data analysis (Mantere and Ketokivi 2013; McAuliffe 2015). You may ask: Researching daily life, how is that done? Can it be relevant? The answer is, **yes**, it is relevant, even interesting, and theory-rich, and it can be accomplished using a practice theoretical approach (e.g., Schatzki et al. 2001; Orlikowski 2010; Engeström 2000; Feldman and Orlikowski 2011).

To look at everyday life as it unfolds, as things happen over and over again in ways both expected and unexpected during the interwoven lifeworlds of people is the subject of interest for practice researchers (e.g., Schatzki et al. 2001; Nicolini 2017; Orlikowski 2000; Schatzki 2017; Blunden 2010; Bourdieu 1977; de Certeau 1984 [1980]; Feldman and Worline 2016). Philosopher Theodore Schatzki (2002: 87) defined practice as 'a temporally evolving,

open-ended set of doings and saying linked by practical understandings, rules, teleo-affective structure (meaning the doings and sayings)—the meanings and motivations, and general understandings' at a site (see also Loscher et al. 2019). Practices are further described as embodied interactions and interspaces between subjects and their mental, emotional, and physical states (Küpers 2013). Shared practices are lived experiences, involving learned or acquired knowledge (Barnes 2000) and the creation of a collection of accomplishments. Social practices are comprised of both activities and participants. As such, stories from and of working life increase understanding, even subjective understandings, of visible and invisible organizational realities, assumptions, and tensions (e.g., Orlikowski and Scott 2008; Orlikowski 2010; Tsoukas and Chia 2011: 1–21; Räsänen and Trux 2012; Buch and Andersen 2013, 2015; Clegg et al. 2018). Practices, therefore, can be examined at the level of what is said and done, as investigations of routines or through the establishment of what occurs at some level of life as it happens in daily life (Miettinen et al. 2009; Loscher et al. 2019). Since pre-Aristotelian times, people have looked at exactly these things. These happenings in and of life can be as simple as the personal phenomenology of eating an apple—the texture and taste, the feel of the apple, the freshness, the tart juices hitting your tongue (van Manen 2007)—to the almost dancelike movements construction workers make as they lower their heads to avoid a passing beam announced only by another crewman's whistle (Gherardi and Nicolini 2002). In the early 2000s, academics came together and called for a turn to practice (Schatzki et al. 2001). This turn was more of a formal call to examine the what and the why of the world. The call to examine practices was embraced by scholars, and this official turn to

practice served as a goal post for practice theory formalisation. Yet, both before and indeed after this turn, no one practice theory or one set of methodologies, vocabularies or analyses emerged for those examining practices using a practice theory lens. However, there are mature as well as developing practice theories, and all practice researchers look at the social in their examinations, not just actions, because if one looks only at the actions, the social—the root of practice theory—is lost. Historic pluralities offer a richness for the study of practices, in part to be defined by the researcher.

Thus, while practice theory and practice researchers are 'new' in the grand timeline of things, practices have been embraced by academics interested in why and how of social—the intertwined tornado of events occurring at all times—represent the nexus of practices (Schatzki 2005). There are more scripted and defined ways to study practices. For instance, Engeström's (2000) activity theory is complete with guiding schematics. In addition, practice theorists such as Wanda Orlikowski (e.g., 2007, 2008), who graciously follows practitioners in the field, pays attention not only to her subjects and data, but also to herself as a researcher without ever naming herself as a practice theorist per se.

One thing all practice researchers agree upon is that to examine reality as it happens the researcher must 'be there' in the moment. That is, the researcher must be where events unfold. Ethnography (Bate 1997; Fetterman 2009; Barron 2013; Davies 2002; van Maanen 2011) is a common method for researching practices, accompanied by the need for long-term engagement with and in the field. This requires time (Ricoeur 1976; Schatzki 2012: 13–26). As a method, ethnography also has drawbacks (e.g., Fine 1993), because the researcher is present in an environment from which they are

usually absent—that is, a foreign arena, such as the construction sites Silvia Gherardi and Davide Nicolini (2002) studied. Not only was Gherardi not a construction worker, but she had to learn the basics from the ground up, remaining an outsider. I have often thought of this: if a researcher came to our house to watch our family, I would always be aware of their presence. I would have the same awareness of a researcher observing me at my workplace.

My research interest was closer to me than a construction site. I turned to study the practices of my own workplace (Doloriert and Sambrook 2012; Fine et al. 2011; Kemmis 2009; Räsänen and Trux 2012; Aarnikoivu 2016). Can this be done? Yes, it can, and it is a research area of interest: researching your own profession. Academics, especially academics in the Nordics, have examined their own workplaces, the hallowed halls of academia during moments of change, during the personal development of becoming academics, and during the day-to-day life of work in a higher institution of learning (e.g., Järventie-Thesleff et al. 2016; Räsänen 2009). I worked in a research and development (R&D) unit within a company for years in various departments and in various projects— not as an engineer, but as a specialist and as a team leader (see Blomquist et al. 2010 and Buch and Andersen 2015 for similar examples). During my PhD studies, I learned about practice theory, ethnography, and embeddedness as a researcher, and to study from within, to be a native studying the familiar as an insider, while reaching for the level of outsider as well. This nativeness has its challenges (van Maanen 2011; Anteby 2013; Davies 2002; Cunliffe 2016): but, through reflection and reflexiveness (Yanow and Tsoukas 2009; Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009; Alvesson 2009), the road becomes clearer. As an insider researcher, ethnography becomes what some call at-home ethnography

(Järventie-Thesleff et al. 2016)—you are in the familiar and you have tacit knowledge, enjoy the advantages of pre-knowledge, and spend less time familiarising yourself with the site, your familiar 'home' (Järventie-Thesleff et al. 2016). However, the researcher must then also review these elements, and constantly 'check' oneself against these considerations throughout all steps of the research project (Anteby 2013; Zahavi 2007, 2019 [2018]). Engineers and engineering work is fraught with external assumptions and, given the closed nature of a corporate-centred R&D (e.g., Buch and Andersen 2013, 2015; Buch 2016; Cicmil et al. 2006; *cf.* Vojak et al. 2006), access for most would be difficult. I was granted permission by the company to conduct my research so long as I did not share any company technology secrets. No one really understood qualitative research— that is, research without numbers, variables, variances, and repeatability. However, it turned out that my coworkers were quite interested to talk with me and discuss their work and work life. So, there I was, a PhD student at work and researching my own workplace: R&D. We were a newly formed team tasked with creating a wireless patient monitor for hospital use. The team was cross-functional, mostly comprised of men and mostly engineers or mathematicians and physicists.

My study took place not only in the office spaces, but also in the clinical setting in the hospital, where engineers from the team would go to learn about clinical work hoping to add further understanding to their engineering work. The engineer makes and the clinician uses; but, how do these two vastly different professions work together to create something? I was able to visit the hospital during concept discussions, to shadow staff and to ask questions. As I stepped into my researcher shoes, I was filled with questions—I did not focus on managerial issues

or thoughts, but solely on the workers (Räsänen and Trux 2012). I took time to look, to listen; I took pictures (Quattrone et al. 2021), I walked around and listened some more. Eventually, I became increasingly interested in how the team would focus on customers, or try to focus on customers, and sometimes even wonder who those customers were—assumptions regarding understandings dominated many facets of the work (e.g., Savolainen and Hyysalo 2021; Sjögren et al. 2018; Smith et al. 2019). After some time, I began interviewing, observing more, and interacting, all the while keeping very detailed diaries. I had one diary I called, 'My Diary of Unusual Things', things which struck me as an insider as unusual. These things eventually became additional points of interest for me. I identified with what Swedish professor Mats Alvesson (2009) had said, that, through insider ethnography, you are like a radar and always on. Even while performed the work tasks I was responsible for within the company, I had a notebook or post-its with me to record events. I was always scanning, always ready, document-ing life as it unfolded in the workplace (Revsbæk and Tanggaard 2015).

After mapping out a story of the everyday, I turned to my coworkers and talked with them in relation to learning, their work, and their understandings of their work and our work life. We discussed co-creation, innovation, blocks to their work, how they work, and how they understand the product they are creating amongst many other things. I went on visits with the team as a part of the team to discuss with clinicians what they want in patient monitoring, how they use monitors, describing any stumbling blocks they may know of, and the needs they could identify. We also repeatedly went to the hospital to visit closed spaces otherwise only available to staff, such as operating theatres and intensive care units. All the while, I kept

my notebook close, took pictures when I could, drew sketches when I could not take pictures, and found myself iteratively examining the sites and myself. I reminded myself to remain in the moment, to exist in the moment, and to engage with the moment as a researcher and as a worker. I continued to collect stories of work and what happens during it in addition to completing my assigned work.

I created an ethnography (Leppälä 2022) of this little-known arena and of the time of innovation within a corporation and during co-creation sessions. From this ethnography, I identified three large organizational themes which are, you could say, ruling or dominating the site. These three large organizational themes are knowledge, time, and dissonance, under which the site practices fall—think of them as an umbrella. I then returned to the data and examined the stories, particularly focusing on things which were surprising or not directly work-related—things did not unfold as expected. Now, it was time for a deeper dive, a reflexive and reflective journey into why or how things happened, as well as the forces controlling them (Cunliffe 2016). I thought of the philosopher de Certeau (1984) [1980], who wrote of practices and examining them through metaphor. He described the examination of practices as looking down from a high skyscraper at the world below—looking at the mass of activity— then swooping down and being *in* the activity, in the world, and then swooping up to the top of the skyscraper. This same type of positioning and repositioning is what Nicolini (2009, 2012) describes as zooming in and out. Near. Far. Together. Apart.

I regarded the research data through the framework of practice theory, whereby I had to simultaneously step back and remain immersed. Where do the practices come from in general in these creative and knowledgeable people?
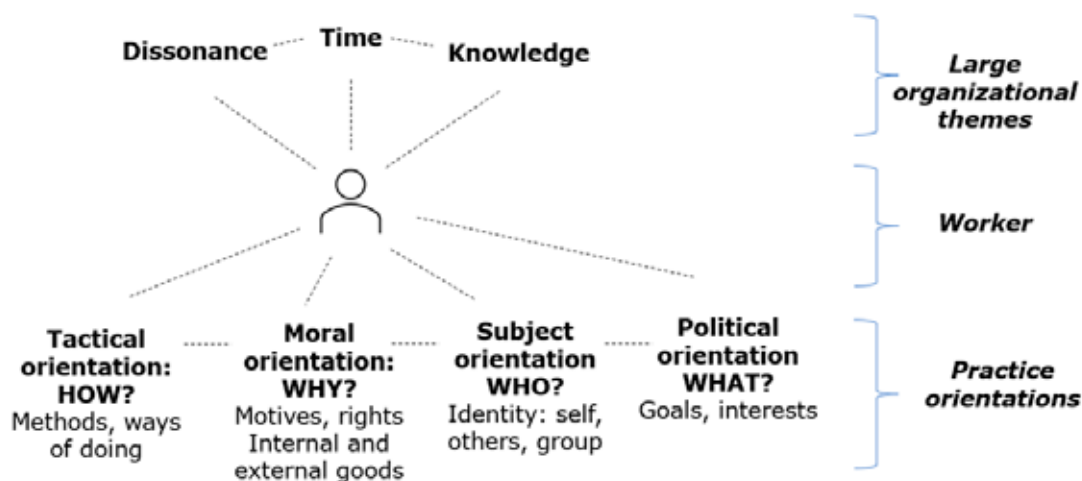
Figure 1. Relationship of large organizational themes and practice orientations (Leppälä 2022).

I thought of the three large organizational themes—the umbrella—which gave way to a skyscraper view, a zoomed-out view. I then zoomed in, to get close. I examined the data from quite nearby—at the street level, so to speak—through four philosophical lenses, or nuances which are innate stances in all humans—in you and in me. We all have moral, tactical, subject (identity), and political stances (Räsänen and Trux 2012; Räsänen 2015). All four of these stances, these practice orientations, are within all of us simultaneously. Normally, one dominates, rarely in equilibrium with one another (Räsänen 2015). Scholars have examined one stance or practice orientation, such as political stances, as power within organizations (e.g., Salovaara and Bathurst 2018; Fleming and Spicer 2014; Gottwald et al. 2018). I retained all four and combined them with the three umbrellaed stances—the large organizational themes—so as to consider an expansion of the nexus of activities from Schatzki's (2001, 2017) practice theory. This allowed me to also create a nexus of practices at the large organizational theme level and at the personal practice orientation level. In doing so, I established a movement between these macro- and micro-level phenomena, a negotiation which is ongoing, which we all used to validate ourselves as actors in the site (Figure 1). I combined these three large organizational themes—knowledge, time, and dissonance—with four innate practice orientations into a matrixed combination to examine the details.

I interconnected the themes, finding 12 combinations of ways to regard each event about which I wrote (Table 1). Ultimately, I created a map of phenomena, with each large organizational theme of knowledge, time, and dissonance individually connected to the four practice orientations—those we all have—of moral, tactical, subject, and political stances (Räsänen 2015; Räsänen and Trux 2012). I created a three-by-four combination map to connect the dots, to view it from above. By doing this, I could then separate the phenomena, see which combinations dominated, and identify the changes from the initial position of 'working as expected' through the sayings and doings that occurred. I found that there was a lot more to work, work as expected by managers and assumptions regarding what happened during work.

	Case:	Time as a practice theme	Knowledge as a practice theme	Dissonance as a practice theme
Practice orientation	Political			
	Moral			
	Subject			
	Tactical			

Table 1. Table assessment tool (Leppälä 2022).

My study revealed that co-creation did not occur as theory suggests, that patient area applications of innovation were not always embraced. As work unfolded, so did drama, tensions, and dramatic episodes, all contained at the work level of employees. Through the combinations of the large organizational themes and practice orientations, through the practice lens, through the immersion, and following the staff at two sites, the reflexive journey as an insider and outsider, an understanding emerged regarding the why behind the events which did not unfold as expected. I found that practitioners navigated and enacted social practices at work as acts of trade—they traded, they exchanged their own personal practice orientations and the large organizational themes when tensions arose to challenge their knowledge-worker identity. All these things made them turn their attention away from work tasks, initiating navigation through the field of large organizational themes and practice orientations. Through the mapping, I was able to track and follow movement within the nexus, and analyse the steps taken to enactment by a worker to achieve an equilibrium. Equilibrium was achieved through acts of social practice trade, a term I created for my dissertation.

This form of ethnography, being an insider 'at home' in my natural work environment represented a rather deep commitment, a highly personal commitment, and a surprisingly difficult commitment. During my research, I also worked on my own tasks as an employee. It was, however, an excellent deep dive for me to see what was really going on—to open my mind, not as a blank canvas, but as a canvas upon which I was aware of presumptions and biases, the 'I know' mentality. It was an organizational ethnography (e.g., Voyer and Trondman 2017; Watson 2012), during which I was engaged, deeply reflexive, and with my eyes and ears open. This involved zooming not only in and out, but also moving from side-to-side and into myself as a worker, a person, and a human. My dissertation includes short essays from my diary entries, offering my own thoughts and attempts at coming to terms with surprising things such as my own mortality while visiting the hospital as an engineering team member. The very last words in my dissertation are from my interview prompts for myself, ending with, 'Be quiet and listen'. The sensitivity required to zoom in, out, and sideways comes from listening to what you hear, but also from those quiet moments in your head. These were rather immersive dives into the data, theory, and self.

Traditional ethnography is normally a story by a non-native about a strange and distant culture (van Maanen 2011 [1988]): writing and analysing yourself and about your own—if possible—can bring deep insights and understandings (van Maanen 2011). This research, with its practice theory approach, examined the practices and phenomena of an engineering cross-functional team

from the inside during early medical device innovation. Through the novel combination of the large organizational themes and practice orientations, and their mapping of even closer-knit combinations, I was able to see how the organizational actors navigated through these phenomena and enacted new or adapted practices—as acts of social practice change. The things which puzzled me in the data became clear through this framing, through a practice lens, and through the assessment based on large organizational themes and innate practice orientations. Qualitative research (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2016) focuses on developing what might be, and that is the case with this research. These findings are advances in practice theory, in ethnography, and in understanding early medical device innovation within a corporate innovation programme. Yet, I extended the concept of a nexus of practices through the intertwining of large organizational themes and real-world personal practice orientations, and by combining these two dimensions into a tool for the assessment and examination of ethnographic material, making visible the unseen nexus of within, to shine a light on it, then noting how people navigate through themes and orientations. This resulted in a personal journey, enacting social practice trades as they attempted to find an equilibrium during social practices in work and work life.

This journey was longer than the years it took me to complete the actual research, most likely starting with that computer class I enrolled in long ago which started my wondering. Through this research, I learned what happens at the worker level within R&D at this site, what co-creation during early medical device was like at this site, what the day-to-day work and work life was at this site, and also how the worker existed in that lifeworld. I learned how they understood what they were making and how they understood or not the clinical field for which they were making the devices. I found stories that interwove and made the area much richer than just that within which we all simply worked on assigned tasks (Weick 2007). Although, at one site, practice research then allows for comparisons to other sites, even to other practices. The research tells us about daily work and work life and offers us an understanding of how workers at all levels understand themselves better, work to understand social practices and social practice trades, and how they navigate and enact social practices at work and in work life during early-stage medical device innovation in a corporate R&D unit.

KRISTINA LEPPÄLÄ
POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCHER
UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN FINLAND
kristina.leppala@uef.fi

REFERENCES

Aarnikoivu, Melina 2016. "Not in my Backyard But in my Front Room": A Review of Insider Ethnography. *Tiedepolitiikka* 41 (3): 47–56.

Alvesson, Mats 2009. At-Home Ethnography: Struggling with Closeness and Closure. In Sierk Ybema, Dvora Yanow, Harry Wels, and Frans H. Kamsteeg (eds). *Organizational Ethnography: Studying the Complexity of Everyday Life*. London: Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446278925.

Alvesson, Mats and Kjell Sköldberg 2009. *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research* (2nd ed). London: Sage.

Anteby, Michel 2013. Relaxing the Taboo on Telling Our Own Stories: Upholding Professional Distance and Personal Involvement. *Organization Science* 24 (4): 1277–1290.
https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1120.0797.

Barnes, Barry 2000. Practice as Collective Action. In T.R. Schatzki, K. Knorr-Cetina, and E. von Savigny (eds). *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203977453.

Barron, Ian 2013. The Potential and Challenges of Critical Realist Ethnography. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education* 36 (2): 117–130. https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2012.683634.

Bate, S.P. 1997. Whatever Happened to Organizational Anthropology? A Review of The Field of Organizational Ethnography and Anthropological Studies. *Human Relations* 5 (9): 1147–1175. https://doi.org/10.1177/001872679705000905.

Blomquist, Tomas, Markus Hällgren, Andreas Nilsson and Anders Söderholm 2010. Project-As-Practice: In Search of Project Management Research That Matters. *Project Management Journal* 41 (1): 5–16. https://doi.org/10.1002/pmj.20159.

Blunden, Andy 2010. *An Interdisciplinary Theory of Activity*. Leiden: Haymarket Books.

Bourdieu, Pierre 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812507.

Buch, Anders and Vibeke Andersen 2013. Destabilizing Self-Identities in Professional Work. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies* 3 (3): 155–172. https://doi.org/10.19154/njwls.v3i3.3016.

Buch, Anders and Vibeke Andersen 2015. Team and Project Work in Engineering Practices. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies* 5 (3a): 27–46. https://doi.org/10.19154/njwls.v5i3a.4832.

Buch, Anders 2016. Ideas of Holistic Engineering Meet Engineering Work Practices. *Engineering Studies* 8 (2): 140–161. https://doi.org/10.1080/19378629.2016.1197227.

Cicmil, Svetlana, Williams, Terry, Thomas, Janice and Hodgson, Damian 2006. Rethinking Project Management: Researching the Actuality of Projects. *International Journal of Project Management* 24 (8): 675–686. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2006.08.006.

Clegg, Stuart, Catherine P. Killen, Christopher Biesenthal and Shankar Sankaran 2018. Practices, Projects and Portfolios: Current Research Trends and New Directions. *International Journal of Project Management* 36 (5): 762–772. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijproman.2018.03.008.

Cunliffe, Anne L. 2016. "On Becoming a Critically Reflexive Practitioner" Redux: What Does it Mean to be Reflexive? *Journal of Management Education* 40 (6): 740–746. https://doi.org/10.1177/1052562916668919.

Davies, Charlotte Aull 2002. *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203069370.

de Certeau, Michel 1984 [1980]. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: The University of California Press. Translated by Steven Rendall. Orig.: L'invention du quotidien. Vol. 1, Arts de faire.

Doloriert, Claire and Sally Sambrook 2012. Organisational Autoethnography. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* 1 (1): 83–95. https://doi.org/10.1108/20466741211220688.

Engeström, Yrjö 2000. Activity Theory as a Framework for Analyzing and Redesigning Work. *Ergonomics* 43 (7): 960–974. https://doi.org/10.1080/001401300409143.

Eriksson, Päivi and Anne Kovalainen 2016 [2008]. *Qualitative Methods in Business Research* (2nd ed.). London: Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857028044.

Feldman, Martha S. and Wanda J. Orlikowski 2011. Theorizing Practice and Practicing Theory. *Organization Science* 22(5): 1240–1253. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1100.0628.

Feldman, Martha and Monica Worline 2016. The Practicality of Practice Theory. *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 15 (2): 304–324. https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2014.0356.

Fetterman, David M. 2009. Ethnography. In Debra J. Rog and Leonard Bickman (eds). *The SAGE Handbook of Applied Social Research* (2nd Ed). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483348858.

Fine, Gary A. 1993. Ten Lies of Ethnography: Moral Dilemmas in Field Research. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 22 (3): 267–294. https://doi.org/10.1177/089124193022003001.

Fine, G.A., Morrill, C. & Surianarain, S. 2011. Ethnography in organizational settings. In D.A. Buchanan and A. Bryman (eds). *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Research Methods*. London: Sage Publications Limited.

Fleming, Peter and André Spicer 2014. Power in Management and Organization Science. Academy of Management Annals 8 (1): 237–298. https://doi.org/10.1080/19416520.2014.875671.

Gherardi, Sylvia and Davide Nicolini 2002. Learning the Trade: A Culture of Safety in Practice. *Organization* 9 (2): 191–223. https://doi.org/10.1177/1350508402009002264.

Gottwald, Markus, Frank Sowa, and Ronald Staples 2018. "Walking the Line": An At-home Ethnography of Bureaucracy. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* 7 (1): 87–102. https://doi.org/10.1108/JOE-10-2016-0021.

Järventie-Thesleff, Rita, Minna Logemann, Rebecca Piekkari, and Janne Tienari 2016. Roles and Identity Work in "At-Home" Ethnography. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* 5 (3): 235–257. https://doi.org/10.1108/JOE-07-2016-0015.

Kemmis, Stephen 2009. Understanding Professional Practice: A Synoptic Framework. In Bill Green (ed). *Understanding and Researching Professional Practice*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Küpers, Wendelin 2013. Between the Visible and the Invisible in Organisations. In Emma Bell, Samantha Warren and Jonathan E. Schroeder (eds). *The Routledge Companion to Visual Organization*. Oxon: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203725610.

Leppälä, Kristina 2022. Practices in Medical Device Innovation: Navigation and Enactment as Social Practice Trades. Ph.D. Thesis. Joensuu: The University of Eastern Finland. https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-61-4531-0.

Loscher, Georg, Violeta Splitter, and David Seidl 2019. Theodore Schatzki's Practice Theory and Its Implications for Organization Studies. In Stuart Clegg and Miguel P. Cunha (eds). *Management, Organizations and Contemporary Social Theory*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429279591.

Mantere, Saku and Mikko Ketokivi 2013. Reasoning in Organization Science. *Academy of Management Review* 38 (1): 70–89. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2011.0188.

McAuliffe, William H.B. 2015. How Did Abduction Get Confused with Inference to the Best Explanation? *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 51 (3): 300–319. https://doi.org/10.2979/trancharpeirsoc.51.3.300.

Miettinen, Reijo, Dalvir Samra-Fredericks, and Dvora Yanow 2009. Re-turn to Practice: An Introductory Essay. *Organization Studies*, 30 (12): 1309–1327. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840609349860.

Nicolini, Davide 2009. Zooming In and Zooming Out: Studying Practices by Switching Theoretical Lenses and Trailing Connections. *Organization Studies*, 30 (12): 1391–1418. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840609349875.

Nicolini, Davide 2012. *Practice Theory, Work, & Organization: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nicolini, Davide 2017. Practice Theory as a Package of Theory, Method, and Vocabulary: Affordances and Limitations. In Micheal Jonas, Beate Littig and Angela Wroblewski (eds). *Methodological Reflections on Practice Oriented Theories*. Springer International Publishing AG, 19–34. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-52897-7_2.

Orlikowski, Wanda J. 2000. Using Technology and Constituting Structures: A Practice Lens for Studying Technology Organizations. *Organization Science*, 11 (4): 404–428. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.11.4.404.14600.

Orlikowski, Wanda J. 2007. Sociomaterial Practices: Exploring Technology at Work. *Organization Studies*, 28 (9): 1435–1448. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840607081138.

Orlikowski, Wanda J. and Susan V. Scott 2008. Sociomateriality: Challenging the Separation of Technology, Work and Organization. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 2 (1): 433–474. https://doi.org/10.1080/19416520802211644.

Orlikowski, Wanda J. 2010. Practice in Research: Phenomenon, Perspective, and Philosophy. In Damon Golsorkhi, Linda Rouleau, David Seidl, and Eero Vaara (eds). *The Cambridge Handbook of Strategy*

as a Practice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511777882.002.

Quattrone, Paolo, Matteo Ronzani, Dennis Jancsary and Markus A. Höllerer 2021. Beyond the Visible, the Material, and the Performative: Shifting Perspectives on the Visual in Organization Studies. *Organization Studies* 42 (8): 1197–1218. https://doi.org/10.1177/01708406211033678.

Räsänen, Keijo 2009. Understanding Academic Work as a Practical Activity and Preparing (Business-School) Academics for Praxis? *International Journal for Academic Development* 14 (3): 185–195. https://doi.org/10.1080/13601440903106502.

Räsänen, Keijo and Marja-Liisa Trux 2012. *Työkirja. Ammattilaisen Paluu (transl: Workbook. The Return of the Professional)*. Helsinki: Kansanvalistusseura.

Räsänen, Keijo 2015. Fire and Water Combined: Understanding the Relevance of Working Life Studies Through a Concept of Practical Activity. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, 5 (3a): 47–62. https://doi.org/10.19154/njwls.v5i3a.4833.

Revsbæk, Line and Lene Tanggaard 2015. Analyzing in the Present. *Qualitative Inquiry* 21 (4): 376–387. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800414563806.

Ricoeur, Paul 1976. *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*. Fort Worth: TCU Press.

Salovaara, Perttu and Ralph Bathurst 2018. Power-with Leadership Practices: An Unfinished Business. *Leadership* 14 (2): 179–202. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715016652932.

Savolainen, Kaisa and Sampsa Hyysalo 2021. User Representations as a Design Resource: Achieving Accountable Design Without Access to Users. *Science & Technology Studies* 34 (2): 25–45. https://doi.org/10.23987/STS.84598.

Schatzki, Theodore R. 2001. Introduction: Practice Theory. In Theodore R. Schatzki, Karin Knorr-Cetina, and Eike von Savigny, (eds). *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203977453.

Schatzki, Theodore R., Karin Knorr-Cetina, and Eike von Savigny 2001. *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203977453.

Schatzki, Theodore R. 2002. *The Site of the Social: A Philosophical Account of the Constitution of Social Life and Change*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press. https://doi.org/10.5325/j.ctv1rnpjpt.

Schatzki, Theodore R. 2005. The Sites of Organizations. *Organization Studies* 26 (3): 465–484. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840605050877.

Schatzki, Theodore R. 2012. A Primer on Practices. In Joy Higgs, Ronald Barnett, Stephen Billett, Maggie Hutchings, Franziska Tred (eds). *Practice, Education, Work and Society: Practice-Based Education: Perspectives and Strategies*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6209-128-3.

Schatzki, Theodore 2017. Practices and people. *Teoria e Prática em Administração*, 1 (Jan-Jun): 26–53. https://doi.org/10.21714/2238-104X2017v7i1-32735.

Sjögren, Peter, Björn Fagerström, Martin Kurdve and Magnus Callavik 2018. Managing Emergent Changes: Ad Hoc Teams' Praxis and Practices. *International Journal of Managing Projects in Business* 11 (4): 1086–1104. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMPB-12-2017-0163.

Smith, Vinayak, Ritesh Warty, Amrish Nair, Sathya Krishnan, Joel Arun Sursas, Fabricio da Silva Costa, Beverley Vollenhoven and Euan Morrison Wallace 2019. Defining the Clinician's Role in Early Health Technology Assessment During Medical Device Innovation—A Systematic Review. *BMC Health Services Research* 19 (1): article 514. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-019-4305-9.

Tsoukas, Haridimos and Robert Chia 2011. Introduction: Why Philosophy Matters to Organization Theory. In Haridimos Tsoukas and Robert Chia (eds). *Philosophy and Organization Theory, Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Vol. 32*. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/S0733-558X(2011)32.

van Maanen, John 2011 [1988]. *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (2nd edition). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

van Maanen, Jan 2011. Ethnography as Work: Some Rules of Engagement. *Journal of Management Studies* 48 (1): 218–234. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2010.00950.x.

van Manen, Max 2007. *Phenomenology of Practice.* Phenomenology & Practice 1 (1): 11–30. https://doi.org/10.29173/pandpr19803.

Vojak, Bruce A., Abbie Griffin, Raymond L. Price, and Konstantin Perlov 2006. Characteristics of Technical Visionaries as Perceived by American and British Industrial Physicists. *R&D Management* 36 (1): 17–26. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9310.2005.00412.x.

Voyer, Andrea and Mats Trondman 2017. Between Theory and Social Reality: Ethnography and Interpretation and Social Knowledge. *Ethnography* 18 (1): 3–9. https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138115592415.

Watson, Tony J. 2012. Making Organizational Ethnography. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* 1 (1): 15–22. https://doi.org/10.1108/20466741211220615.

Weick, Karl 2007. The Generative Properties of Richness. *Academy of Management Journal* 50 (1): 14–19. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2007.24160637.

Yanow, Dvora and Haridimos Tsoukas 2009. What is Reflection-In-Action: A Phenomenological Account. *Journal of Management Studies* 46 (8): 1339–1364. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2009.00848.x.

Zahavi, Dan 2007. Self and Other: The Limits of Narrative Understanding. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 60 (5): 179–201. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246107000094.

Zahavi, Dan 2019 [2018]. *Phenomenology: The Basics*. Oxon: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315441603.

Ioana Țîștea

LECTIO PRAECURSORIA.

Creolising Nordic Migration Research: Entangled Knowledges, Migratisations, and Reflexivities

5 April 2024, Tampere University

Honoured Custos, honoured Opponent, dear audience members,

A recent media article in *Helsingin Sanomat* (2024) lamented the lack of English subtitles to popular Finnish television series like '*Siskonpeti*'. Given that these series exude Finnish customs, values, and traditions, they would help migrants integrate into society if only they were able to follow the shows. The article referred to Finnish values as white values which one should adopt, while erasing the diversity of Finland's population, such as the Sami Indigenous people, the Roma national minority or migrants and their descendants, many of whom are Finnish citizens. The article, however, did not lament the scarcity of television shows by and for minorities, migrants, and Indigenous people.

The discourse of integration seems to dominate migration policies, practices, and discussions in the Nordic context. The assumption that migrants must adapt to the norms of the dominant society in order to be included is often taken for granted. Recent critical research, however, such as the 2024 PhD study by Ameera Masoud, titled *Constructing the Integrateable Refugee and Immigrant through Integration Policies and Practices in Finland,* challenges this assumption. Such studies reveal hidden realities behind official integration policies. That is, policies focus on 'fixing' individuals instead of addressing structural barriers that restrict migrants' access to most economic, social, cultural, educational, and political spheres.

While Nordic integration policies are built upon the discourse of equal opportunities and inclusiveness, equality is out of reach for many migrants and their descendants, especially those racialised as 'other'. It becomes important to envision alternative and more just practices of and beyond integration. According to the 2023 book *Rethinking Integration: Challenging Oppressive Practices and Pointing to Ways Forward*, co-edited by Zeinab Karimi and colleagues, a first step would be flipping the script by turning the gaze around. Instead of focusing on a particular group as the 'other' who needs 'fixing' in order to fit in, we should turn our gaze to the rigid societal structures and their reproduction of multiple inequalities at the intersection of race, class, citizenship, and gender amongst others.

Rethinking integration by turning the gaze around shifts the terms of the conversation regarding what integration is or should be. This can open up ways forward towards creating and sustaining more just ways of living together. Yet, this is only the first step. The next step relies on imagining what those alternative ways of living together could look like. How can we imagine those possible convivial worlds? And, how can we address ongoing inequalities that cannot be erased? Addressing these questions requires not only changing the terms of the conversation,

but having altogether different conversations. Such conversations have already started taking place at the margins, between people unequally positioned by migration systems and discourses.

Beyond debates about integration, such conversations focus on rethinking what it means to live together in the context of growing diversity *and* rising inequalities. My doctoral dissertation contributes to ongoing debates on rethinking co-existence from the margins, while also addressing power relations and inequalities. I focus on the contact zones between multiple unequal experiences of migration, and on what such interrelations may produce in terms of imagining alternative just worlds. There are multiple types of migration experiences at the intersection of citizenship, ethnicity, race, class, and the visa or residence permit regime one is subjected to amongst other issues. These various experiences come into contact with one another in creative and unexpected ways. Rather than focusing on relations or 'incompatibilities' between migrants and locals, which reproduce the foreigner versus native binary, I focus instead on relations and tensions between differently positioned migrants. Drawing from the 2018 study by Alyosxa Tudor, titled *Cross-fadings of Racialisation and Migratisation: The Postcolonial Turn in Western European Gender and Migration Studies*, I take into account that someone who crossed borders may be constructed as 'at home', while a citizen may be constructed as a migrant depending on distances from or proximities to Nordic whiteness. Alternatively, some migrants experience racism, whereas others do not. Moreover, someone may be constructed as a privileged migrant with access to social mobility, whereas someone else may be subjected to strict immigration controls or denied access to certain residence permits.

Through autoethnographic research in Finland, I followed three entry points that led me to contact zones between multiple unequal migrations: a migrant integration training programme in an adult education centre, which I attended during 2015–2016 as an unemployed jobseeker and Romanian migrant; a reception centre for asylum seekers, where I completed my job practice in 2016 as part of my integration training; and an emergency accommodation centre for Roma migrants, where I worked in 2021 as a non-Roma mediator between Roma women working as cleaners and their Finnish clients. I explored how the interrelations between the differently positioned migrants in those locations may contribute to imagining alternative ways of living together which go beyond the limitations imposed by those institutions. Yet, there may be obstacles in creating convivial worlds, such as ongoing inequalities that cannot be erased. There are tensions. But that is where the key lies in terms of how to create something new from those tensions. I apply the concept of entangled migrations, coined by Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez in her 2021 paper *Entangled Migrations. The Coloniality of Migration and Creolizing Conviviality*, to highlight conflictual moments between the potential of living together across inequalities, of creating possible alternative worlds, and the blocking of that potential through the structural forces of domination. By entangling more or less privileged experiences of migration, I analyse the intersubjective processes where unequal power relations are constantly renegotiated in unexpected ways.

The reception centre for asylum seekers and the emergency accommodation centre for Roma migrants revealed intersecting entanglements. In the reception centre, asylum seekers racialised as 'other' lived and cleaned; people employed as mediators, who share socio-cultural and linguistic characteristics with the

asylum seekers, taught, translated, and offered social assistance; and I did my job practice as part of an 'integration' plan drafted with the unemployment office. In the accommodation centre, Roma migrants lived and Roma workers cleaned; in addition, non-Roma Romanian and Bulgarian workers, myself included, supervised, mediated, translated, trained, and offered social assistance. In the reception centre, the roles of the more privileged subjects depended upon the presence of people constructed as asylum seekers. Many of the managers, social workers, and teachers working in the centre had been unemployed before reception centres throughout the country were reopened in 2015 following the arrival of individuals seeking asylum. Similarly, the existence of the accommodation centre depended on the housing discrimination experienced by Roma migrants. The more privileged jobs of the non-Roma workers depended on the hard labour of the Roma workers, which the former supervised. Yet, both the asylum seekers and the Roma migrants creatively navigated those oppressive settings and influenced important outcomes and decisions. They do so through transgressive means possibly misunderstood or invisible from a hegemonic perspective. They tactically employed various strategies for addressing various subjugations. They creatively defied norms that subdued them by asserting multiple creative ways of being and living together, which cannot be classified or managed through dominant meanings.

Overall, entangling multiple unequal migrations turns seeming paradoxes into relational solidarities. Importantly, they also constitute entangled knowledges shared between the differently positioned migrants, which generate shifts and transformations into each other's perceptions and understandings.

I explored such entangled knowledges through collaborative art-based methods with participants—namely, theatre-based methods, storytelling, and creative writing. Through art-based methods I highlight everyday knowledges which are usually not considered scientific enough to be viewed as knowledge. In doing so, I aimed to reinscribe previously ignored or misunderstood knowledges and realities into migration research. I did not theorise based on those knowledges, but treated them as theories in themselves. As a result, I bring them into conversation with other existing theories and blur the boundaries between academic and nonacademic, researcher and participant, fact and fiction, science and art.

Central to my aim of extending research to plural knowers and knowledges is rethinking research ethics. Ethics is central both as my topic of research as well as a meta-methodological approach. At the meta level, following Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez, in my thesis, I argue for an ethical premise to living together and creating knowledge together on mutually beneficial terms across highly unequal positions, an ethics of interrelational transversality driven by the unexpected toward possibilities of just worlds. This counterbalances modern colonial systems of social and epistemic reproduction. As a research topic, my thesis reflects on the dilemmas of current research ethics in relation to people perceived as vulnerable. Here, I have been inspired by a rather recently emerging strand in Romani studies in which an academic and a nonacademic write ethnography together, while analysing the collaborative process itself. This emerging approach has been strongly guided by the pioneering work of Paloma Gay y Blasco and Liria Hernández, a Roma researcher and a non-Roma co-researcher who wrote about each other and analysed each other's

lives, research relations, and friendship spanning many years in their 2020 co-authored book, *Writing Friendship, A Reciprocal Ethnography*.

In order for disadvantaged collaborators to be considered epistemic partners, it is necessary to disregard normative notions of 'expertise', value alternative knowledges by people with the least power in society, and make practical adjustments to working methods recognising the analytical contributions of interlocutors who might not be formally educated. Interpersonal affinities and commonalities beyond the hierarchical research relationship, embracing uncertainty and failure, and becoming vulnerable to each other have been helpful strategies in my collaboration with co-researchers perceived as vulnerable. Still, following Martin Fotta and Paloma Gay y Blasco (2024), the legitimation of alternative know-how as valid knowledge relies on the privileged researcher's channels, resources, and mediations within established institutional patterns, making clear the deep inequalities upon which such projects are built. This demonstrates the importance of what Anna Tsing (2005: 264) calls 'collaboration with friction at its heart', where co-researchers do not necessarily share similarities, affinities, understandings of research goals and problems, hopes or agendas.

Friction and tensions are fruitful for imagining and enacting new subjectivities and research possibilities, yet also reinforce existing hierarchies and inequalities or produce new ones. To negotiate communicative friction with the participants in my research, the strategy of *complex communication* developed in 2006 by Maria Lugones proved helpful. Through complex communication, people who are differently positioned through relations of power can create new coalitional possibilities by learning how to see each other beyond what they may be within a given structure of power. They learn how to decipher each other's words and gestures in new and unexpected ways. The strategy of complex communication is particularly relevant to the aim I mentioned at the beginning, of not only shifting the terms of the conversation, but in creating new conversations altogether, which imagine alternative and more just practices that go beyond integration. As these conversations take place between people unequally positioned by power relations, complex communication can enable new relational ways of being and knowing beyond structural, dominant meanings. In my thesis, I reflect on more or less successful *and* failed attempts of enacting such intersubjective transformations beyond dominant meanings with the participants.

These can be viewed as unconventional academic research approaches. They do not strive to come up with concrete conclusions and measurable results; they are not fixed to the speed of research and do not operate according to the objectivity and verifiability attached to the hard sciences, which have taken over all of research. In this thesis, I introduce new criteria for the ethics and the quality of migration research. I argue for complex, nuanced, and open-ended research aims and outcomes at the intersection of migratism, racism, exclusion, the dilemmas of whiteness, self-awareness, subjectivation, worlding, and the difficulties of transversal coalitions amongst various others. Furthermore, in this thesis, I explore what the realisation of these mechanisms and paths does for potentially making the world a better place and for relearning to hear each other and think together for the sake of refuturing. These gains are hard to measure and even harder to articulate in a results-oriented way, and they are highly important not just for academia, but for society at large.

I now ask you, honoured Professor Suvi Keskinen, as the Opponent appointed by the Faculty of Education and Culture, to present your critical comments on my dissertation.

IOANA ȚÎȘTEA, PHD
INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR
FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND CULTURE
TAMPERE UNIVERSITY
tistea.ioana@gmail.com

REFERENCES

Fotta, Martin and Paloma Gay y Blasco 2024. *Ethnographic Methods in Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Research: Lessons from a Time of Crisis*. Bristol: Bristol University Press. https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529231878.

Gay y Blasco, Paloma and Liria Hernández 2020. *Writing Friendship, A Reciprocal Ethnography*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-26542-7.

Gutiérrez Rodríguez, Encarnación 2021. Entangled Migrations. The Coloniality of Migration and Creolizing Conviviality. *Mecila Working Paper Series, No. 35*. São Paulo: The Maria Sibylla Merian International Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences Conviviality-Inequality in Latin America. https://mecila.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/WP-35-Gutierrez-Rodriguez-Online.pdf. <Accessed 20 August 2024>

Helsingin Sanomat 2024. Siskonpeti olisi loistavaa kotouttamista, mutta valitettavasti moni maahanmuuttaja ei pysty sitä seuraamaan, March 30. https://www.hs.fi/hyvinvointi/art-2000010319460.html. <Accessed 22 August 2024>

Karimi, Zeinab, Johanna Ennser-Kananen, Sepideh Sadatizarrini (Rahaa), Maria Petäjäniemi, Ilkhom Khalimzoda, and Ameera Masoud 2023. *Rethinking Integration: Challenging Oppressive Practises and Pointing To Ways Forward*. Migration Institute of Finland. https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-7399-38-5.

Lugones, Maria 2006. On Complex Communication. *Hypatia* 21 (3): 75–85. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2006.tb01114.x.

Masoud, Ameera 2024. *Constructing the Integrateable Refugee and Immigrant Through Integration Policies and Practices in Finland*. Ph.D. Thesis. Helsinki: University of Helsinki. https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-51-9997-3.

Tsing, Anna 2005. *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7s1xk.

Tudor, Alyosxa 2018. Cross-Fadings of Racialisation and Migratisation: The Postcolonial Turn in Western European Gender and Migration Studies. *Gender, Place & Culture* 25 (7): 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369x.2018.1441141.