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Introductory Note by the Editors-in-Chief

Sten Hagberg | Professor of Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala University
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This issue of *kritisk etnografi – Swedish Journal of Anthropology* addresses a theme connected directly to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, namely the quest for wellbeing in troubled times. An anthropology of wellbeing, by definition itself, promotes the public engagement of anthropology; apropos, the contributors address how anthropology and anthropologists can and should contribute to wellbeing.

The issue themed “*The Anthropology of Wellbeing in Troubled Times*” has been coordinated by Professor Paul Stoller, the Medallist at the 2013 Vega Day, which was based on a symposium on Anthropology of Wellbeing. David Napier, Helena Wulff, and Kirin Narayan were other scholars presenting inspiring papers at the Vega Symposium. The symposium was instrumental in developing thoughts and ideas on starting an anthropological journal that five years later, manifested as *kritisk etnografi – Swedish Journal of Anthropology*.

The issue includes articles by Paul Stoller, David Napier, Alisse Waterston, and Carole McGranahan. Stoller’s opening piece suggests that visual anthropology shows us a powerfully ethical way of practicing slow anthropology in a fast world. Stoller interrogates the work and practices of two visual anthropologists, Jean Rouch and Lisbet Holtedahl, arguing that their research methodologies and filmic strategies have been profoundly influenced by the slow epistemology of the Songhay (Rouch) and Fulani (Holtedahl) peoples of West Africa. As Stoller suggests, their works underscore the intellectual gifts of taking a slow path toward the production of knowledge.

David Napier scrutinises the conflict between the Enlightenment’s concept of human identity based on rationalism, science, and individual achievement, on the one hand, and the recognition of 18th century German Romanticism wherein self-awareness and self-fulfilment were the outcomes of emotion and intuition, and a relationship between personal experience and individual emotion, on the other. The conflict was epitomised in Sturm und Drang where the extreme expression of individual emotional states emerged in response to rationalism’s perceived degradation of emotional life. Yet human wellbeing lost its emotional completeness when reason emerged as the primary source of knowledge. In contrast to these, Napier argues that modern anthropology has shown how emotional rootedness, being the basis of wellbeing, can be recaptured through sustained fieldwork, and in particular, through the extroverted risk that builds emotional rootedness with others.

Alisse Waterston inquires into Eduardo Galeano’s challenge to exercise the right to dream, calling on anthropologists to couple their knowledge with fearless imagination to work on behalf of a liveable future that has yet to come. The current condition of the...
world, marked by the coronavirus pandemic, worship of weapons and militarism, racialised hatred and nationalist fervour, environmental crisis and everyday structural violence, adds urgency to the task of confronting the profound challenges facing humanity, transcending seemingly impossible impasses, and building productive connections and collaborations. Waterston argues for unifying the scholar and the responsible global citizen, going beyond producing scholarship, putting knowledge to work in an effort at sustaining the earth and its living beings.

Carole McGranahan concludes the special issue with the straightforward and yet tricky question: “What are the possibilities for well-being in exile?” She draws on her own ethnographic research in Tibetan communities in Canada, France, India, Nepal, Switzerland, and the USA including research regarding activism in the coronavirus pandemic. The Tibetan community draws on resources including concepts and practices from Tibetan Buddhism and the leadership of the Dalai Lama, its political action and community care forged in the different contexts of lack of citizenship in South Asia, on the one hand, and citizenship in the diaspora outside of it, on the other. Since China’s invasion and colonisation of Tibet, the diaspora has spread around the world while many Tibetans also remain inside Tibet as part of the People’s Republic of China. Notions of care embedded in Tibetan political activism enable possibilities for well-being even in times of loss.

The Bricolage section of kritisk etnografi sets off with an article by Rosa de Jorio, focusing on the activities of women’s organisations, their programs and their regional initiatives during the last period of colonisation of French Sudan (present-day Mali). Women activists and their organisation worked to improve the status of women both within and outside the household. Around the time of national independence in 1960, the ruling party US-RDA was morphing into a monolithic and autocratic machinery, intolerant vis-à-vis independent organisations, such as women's groups. Party leadership resorted to tactics and strategies that divided women’s groups. de Jorio describes women’s efforts at resisting and influencing US-RDA’s gender politics, and investigates some of the reasons behind the demise of those groups. She also reflects on some Malian women’s critical engagement with their activist past in more recent times, as a way to develop a more gender-inclusive narrative of the nation.

The subsequent text comprises a report from the digital panel discussion hosted by the Swedish Anthropological Association (SANT), with four Swedish medical anthropologists on the theme COVID-19: Claudia Merli from Uppsala University, who has studied gendered bodily practices related to reproductive health, ethno-religious conflict in Southern Thailand, and aftermath of the tsunami in 2004; Fredrik Nyman from Durham University, whose dissertation project investigates neoliberal reform within the British health care system, focusing on self-management practices in support groups for elderly people with chronic respiratory diseases; Syna Ouattara from University of Gothenburg, who has conducted research on culture, environment and development in West Africa, focusing on the relevance of indigenous knowledge and has also worked for the World Health Organisation during the Ebola crisis in Guinea in, and in the Democratic Republic of Congo; and Mirko Pasquini from Uppsala University, whose dissertation project departs from fieldwork at an emergency ward in Northern Italy, with a primary focus on triage, overcrowding, violence, mistrust and access to healthcare during the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in spring 2020.
Last but not the least, this issue also contains a list of abstracts of PhD Dissertations in Anthropology defended at Swedish Universities during two academic years, namely 2018-19 and 2019-20.

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The inaugural issue of *kritisk etnografi* dealt with “The Public Presence of Anthropology” (Vol 1, No 1, 2018). The second issue, which was also a double issue was themed “Comparative Municipal Ethnographies” (Vol 2, No 1-2, 2019). This issue inquires into “The Anthropology of Wellbeing in Troubled Times” (Vol 3, No 1, 2020). Our forthcoming issue will be based on “Putting Swedish Anthropology to Work” (Vol 3, No 2, 2020), examining Applied Anthropology with Lisa Åkesson and Maris Boyd Gillette as guest editors. The first issue of 2021 will be a VARIA, that is, an open issue of any research paper in the research fields pertinent to our journal. We look forward to papers from colleagues at Swedish universities and beyond. Spread the word! Aux plumes! Fatta pennan!
The Anthropology of Wellbeing in Troubled Times
Imaging Knowledge: Visual Anthropology, Storytelling and the Slow Path Toward Wisdom

Paul Stoller | Professor of Anthropology, West Chester University, USA

ABSTRACT In this article, I suggest that visual anthropology shows us a powerfully ethical way – through sensuous narrative and shared anthropology – to practice slow anthropology in a fast world. In what follows I examine the work and practices of two great visual anthropologists, Jean Rouch and Lisbet Holtedahl. The research methodology and filmic strategies of these master anthropologists, I suggest, have been profoundly shaped by the slow epistemology of the Songhay (Rouch) and Fulani (Holtedahl) peoples of West Africa. Indeed, the visual narratives and filmic practices of Rouch and Holtedahl demonstrate powerfully the rewards of slowly developed storytelling and image-making. Their works underscore the intellectual gifts of taking a slow path toward the production of knowledge. Their films show us how to move forcefully and ethically into the anthropological future.

Keywords: epistemology, visual anthropology, West Africa

Anduryna kala suuru
“Life is patience” (Songhay proverb)

N’da suuru go ni se, ni fonda ga feri
“If you are patient, your path will open,” (Songhay proverb)

The straight highway lies before us, but we cannot take it because it is permanently
(Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations)

Introduction

Speed and expediency shape much of our contemporary learning. We tend to move quickly from subject to subject. Representations can be rapidly downloaded, scanned, reproduced, perused, edited and reconfigured – all to increase human understanding and connection. But as philosopher Mark Taylor and sociologist Sherry Turkle have suggested the culture of speed, which has positively increased the spread of information, has also brought increases in social disconnection, eroded inter-personal empathy, and limited processes of thinking (Taylor 2014; Turkle 2016). There is no shortage of philosophical works that offer alternative approaches to living in the “culture of speed.” Having long conducted fieldwork in West Africa I believe that one alternative to the “culture of speed” is embodied in the wisdom of people like the Songhay of Niger. But can the wisdom of a non-Western culture offer ways to increase human connection, enhance inter-personal empathy and deepen contemplative thinking?

In this article, I suggest that visual anthropology shows us a powerfully ethical way – through sensuous narrative and shared anthropology – to practice slow anthropology in a fast
world. In what follows I examine the work and practices of two great visual anthropologists, Jean Rouch and Lisbet Holtedahl. The research methodology and filmic strategies of these master anthropologists, I suggest, have been profoundly shaped by the slow epistemology of the Songhay (Rouch) and Fulani (Holtedahl) peoples of West Africa. Indeed, the visual narratives and filmic practices of Rouch and Holtedahl demonstrate powerfully the rewards of slowly developed storytelling and image-making. Their works underscore the intellectual gifts of taking a slow path toward the production of knowledge. Their films show us how to move forcefully and ethically into the anthropological future.

The World According to Jean Rouch

Imagine the following scene. Sometime in the early 1980s you are in Paris. You enter the Musée de l’Homme. You climb a steep flight of marble stairs and turn toward a temporary partition that shields a small opening that leads to Jean Rouch’s Comité du Film Ethnographique office, which is abuzz with activity. Rouch sits behind a cluttered desk, perched on a platform that commands the office. He is somehow simultaneously talking on the phone and debating some bureaucratic detail with his erstwhile associate, Françoise Foucault. Tacked up haphazardly on the wall are countless photos of famous documentarians, filmmakers and actors. There are scores of boxes filled with photographs. Along the stairs that lead up to a second floor, you might stumble upon piles of haphazardly arranged metal cans containing scores of Rouch’s finished and unfinished films.

Amid this organized chaos, Rouch hangs up the phone and asks everyone to climb the stairs to his projection room, a small space with perhaps nine makeshift chairs. Some young documentarians have come to Paris to project their unfinished work to the master. They are nervous.

What will he think?

A film is projected and Rouch asks for commentary. Most people at the screening discuss such things as camera angles, editing issues, sound quality and the texture of establishment shots. In time, Rouch, who, as always, sits in the front row, chimes in:

Where is the story in this film?

How can you fix the story?

What can you do so that the film connects with the audience?

These brief comments cut to heart of Jean Rouch’s project – the art of storytelling, the importance of which he learned from his Songhay mentors in the Republics of Niger and
Mali. For them, deep knowledge is conveyed through narrative, which has the capacity to evoke complexity through the elegant simplicity of stories. The power of the story, Rouch taught me, emerges not just from the tale that is told, but from the more profound context of longstanding friendship and trust – shared anthropology. Jean Rouch’s oeuvre also demonstrates that scholars and filmmakers are the custodians of knowledge. As custodians, the most important obligation is to tell stories that convey this cherished knowledge to the next generation. These principles, which are evoked in Jean Rouch’s films and texts, are the bedrock of Songhay epistemology and the foundation of Songhay wisdom. It takes time and patience for the mind to develop, for practices to be refined, for a person to become a master of her or his work. And once that mastery is achieved, the master’s greatest obligation is to pass the knowledge on to the next generation (See Henley 2009; Feld 2003; Predal, 1982).

The World According to Lisbet Holtedahl

You stand before the entrance to Sultan Issa Maigari’s vast palace, an imposing image. Then you move inside the palace’s dark corridors and find the Sultan, dressed in a splendidly embroidered purple robe, making his way through the dark sinewy corridors of his palace. He sees one of his young toddlers and picks him up. Together they move toward the light of the inner courtyard. In the distance you see a team of women cleaning the compound with whisks fashioned from dried grass. Beyond the women, you see the Sultan’s magnificent horse. Courtiers prepare the stallion for the Sultan, who will ride it into the center of Ngaoundere to meet the Cameroonian Minister of the Interior – the juxtaposition of the traditional and the modern, a sign of irrevocable change. As the Sultan approaches his horse, court musicians, in tribute to their ruler, blow their trumpets. The Sultan mounts his horse. Surrounded by an entourage of courtiers Sultan Issa Maigari slowly makes his way to the center of town, all symbolic of the longstanding religious and political prestige of the royal ruler. This slow take in The Sultan’s Burden (Holtedahl 1995) underscores the slow pace of everyday life – even in the royal enclaves of the Northern Cameroonian Adamawa Sultanate. This scene depicts life as it has been lived in this far-away place – or does it?

By taking us deep into the corridors of Sultan Issa Maigari’s palace viewers get a complex portrait of the Sultan, who is the spiritual and political leader of the Adamawa Province of Northern Cameroon. He is sauntering slowly among his wives, his children, his advisors and his praise-singers. It is an intimate glimpse – the result of years of shared anthropology – into the character of a proud, traditional leader who has the daunting challenge of confronting the irrevocable loss of prestige and power as the Cameroonian state begins the process of secular democratization. The film evokes a profoundly human theme: what are the existential dimensions of love and loss?

In her latest production, Wives, which was filmed between 1992 and 2015, Holtedahl brings her slow and shared anthropology into the compound of an Islamic scholar, Al Hajji Alkali Ibrahim Goni, who was for 45 years a traditional judge in the aforementioned Sultanate of Issa Maigari. The film showcases the uneven textures of relations between Al Hajji and his many wives, some of whom he divorced, some of whom died, and some of whom he divorced and remarried. In Holtedahl’s words, the film describes the ‘various household scenes of everyday life events and interviews. With this, I hope to identify the audio-visual material’s contribution to my understanding of marriage, love and dependency of six of Al Hajji’s wives and their husband.’ At the end of the film Al Hajji Goni, tired and old, is approaching death. From the intimate inside the audience sees the how the spread of
death’s shadow cuts to the core of Al Hajji Goni’s humanity and how it changes deep-seated feelings of love and loss in a household so far removed from our experience. In so doing, Holtedahl makes the strange familiar. In so doing she uses slow and shared anthropology to create emotional and social connections in an increasingly disconnected world. These intimate and deeply human films are the result of Lisbet Holtedahl’s gradually developed shared anthropology. Like Jean Rouch among the Songhay, Holtedahl spent decades of field time among the Fulani of Northern Cameroon. She learned to speak fluent Fulfulde enabling her to cultivate longstanding friendships with a wide variety of people in the region. In time this slow approach enhanced her sensitivity to the human dilemmas of her subjects, which, in turn, has given her films, like those of Rouch, an uncanny tenderness, a seductive informality and no small measure of pathos.

**Figure 2:** Lisbet Holtedahl speaking at the Crossing Paths: A Conference in Celebration of Visual Anthropology and the Work of Professor Lisbet Holtedahl, University of Tromsø, June 02, 2017. Photograph: Trond Waage.

**Shared Anthropology and Situated Practice**

If scholars commit to doing long-term fieldwork, a commitment that spans many decades, they become sensitive to the accountability of their work. How will the people they have described in articles, books and films respond to their professional work? Will they understand it? Will anthropological texts and images misrepresent them? Will they offend them? These issues, of course, have long been of deep anthropological concern – especially so now that social media makes anthropological work so much more accessible to the “represented.” Like physicians, most contemporary anthropologists subscribe to the healer’s oath: do no harm. And yet, despite the best of efforts, medical procedures sometimes inadvertently do a great deal of harm. The same, of course, can be said of anthropological essays, ethnographies, and ethnographic films.

This issue is of particular importance in visual anthropology. Through social media, images travel far and wide. They sometimes unintentionally project scenes that reinforce
primitivist and racist ideologies. In 1992, Wilton Martinez’s essay: “Who constructs anthropological knowledge?” demonstrated the pervasiveness of the misinterpretation of ethnographic visual images. Based upon surveys of ethnographic film audiences, Martinez found that many ethnographic films – even well-known classics – have tended to reinforce primitivist stereotypes, the very worst spectator outcome an anthropologist might experience. Martinez (1992: 132) “found many students decode films in an ‘aberrant’ way (Eco, 1979) with relatively high levels of disinterest, ‘culture shock’ and/or alienation, and with a relatively low level of ‘understanding’ (correspondent with textual and pedagogical intended meanings).” These inconvenient findings mean that scholars, especially image-making anthropologists, need to take care as they come to terms with arenas of negative audience interpretations.

In contemporary anthropology then, representational challenges are monumental. If one is a writer, how does she or he craft a “faithful” and “representative” text in which readers are inspired to “turn the page?” For the filmmaker, how does one lure the audience into a sensuous visual world in a way that does not reinforce destructive stereotypes. For great practitioners like Jean Rouch and Lisbet Holtedahl the answer, which is consistent with Martinez’s findings about the “readability” of narrative films, is deceptively simple: one entices audiences with stories gleaned from slowly developed friendships that are full of love and loss. The texture of an essay or film, then, devolves from the quality of the social connections between the anthropologist and the people he or she attempts to represent.

Taking his cue from the film practices of Robert Flaherty who, in search of collaborative input, showed his unfinished films to his Inuit subjects, Jean Rouch decided early on to make collaborative films among the Songhay and Dogon of Niger and Mali. For more than 30 years, he collaborated with his Nigerien sidekicks – Damoure Zika, Lam Ibrahim and Tallou Mouzarane – to make films that joyously celebrated the often inexplicable complexities of ever-changing social life in West Africa. In a film practice grounded in his longstanding friendships with Nigeriens, Rouch always concerned himself with the audience. He often talked about three audiences. He liked to say: I am the first audience. Does the film work for me? The second audience is comprised of the people in front of the camera. What do the subjects think about the film? Is it faithful to their lived realities? The third group is the broader public. What can the film teach about the human condition? If all three audiences like a work, Rouch would say, the film “will give birth to other films.”

In the early 1950s Jean Rouch had footage of what was to become Bataille sur le grand fleuve (1952), a film about the great hippopotamus hunters of Firgoun, Niger. Rouch brought the unfinished footage of the hippo hunt to Ayoru, a Niger River market town, near Firgoun. He nailed a sheet to a mudbrick wall and, using a portable generator, projected his footage. The Firgoun hippo hunters silently watched the projection. When Rouch asked for comments, the Firgoun hunters, immediately understood the language of film, critiqued what they had seen, objecting to the background stock music that, like an invisible intruder, accompanied the hunters on their quest. They said that noise (cosongo, in Songhay) would spoil the hunt. Accordingly, Rouch removed the background music from his film. (see Henley 2010).

Like Rouch, Holtedahl’s shared anthropology compelled her to become profoundly sensitive to local responses to her work. In their essay on these issues, Arnsten and Holtedahl (2005: 69) wrote:

Our preoccupation with the recipient should be seen mainly as a result of many years’ of preoccupation with the impact on society of research-based knowledge. Our engagement
with film and our attempts to create and disseminate knowledge by use of film as a tool have proved to be very useful for such an appreciation. When analyzing the situatedness of knowledge and focusing on the person who is supposed to “receive” “the knowledge,” it is necessary to differentiate possible positions of the receiver. When anthropologists are in the field interacting with local “informants”, i.e. with their research partners, they have notions about who will be their target groups. They see themselves processing material for future dissemination. The target group persons have qualities and interests. We think that these notions are relevant for the anthropologists’ observations and behavior. But the research partners, too, have their target groups: First of all, they are each other’s audience in the social situations. In addition, they are often conscious of other audiences or target groups with which they are more or less familiar: the future readers of the anthropologists’ book and viewers of his/her film.

Audiences of people who have been in front of the camera, of course, have their own subjective interpretations of what they are seeing. As Arnsten and Holte Dahl suggest, anthropologists should take these issues very seriously – a consequence of slowly developed shared anthropology.

**Vulnerability**

Even if scholars carefully anticipate many of the negative reactions to their works and take care to craft a good story, there is still no guarantee that a text or film will resonate with readers or audiences. There are books and films that hit all the right notes – good stories, sensuous descriptions, breathtaking cinematography, and seamless editing – but somehow remain obscure, unread, unwatched, and uninspiring.

What is missing from these books and films?

One deceptively simple answer is: characters who are vulnerable – imperfect human beings whose life stories compel readers or audiences to connect. In his films Jean Rouch understood this important element of storytelling. In Rouch’s *Jaguar*, the audience meets four young Nigeriens, each with his own set of social problems, meet the challenges of their times – earning wage labor or entrepreneurial profits in the Colonial Gold Coast in order to help their struggling families in Niger. On their epic journey through today’s Burkina Faso, Togo, and Ghana, they stumble here and there. In a variety of tense and funny scenes, they reveal their prejudices and express the wonder of the new. Through extraordinary bricolage, they somehow make their way to Kumasi where they open a small shop, *Petit à petit l’oiseau fait son nid* (Little by little the bird makes its nest). They sell *nyama-nyama* (a little of this and a little of that) and make money. As I have witnessed countless times, audiences in Niger, Europe and North America follow the protagonists with intense interest. Against all odds, they save enough money to bring home the bounty of their exotic mission to the edge of the world. Upon their return they heroically give away all that they had earned. Indeed, in all of his innovative films of ethno-fiction (*Jaguar, La pyramide humaine, Moi – un noir,* not to forget *Chronique d’un été*), Rouch showcases vulnerable characters – men and women, old and young, West Africans, and French. Within and between the frames of these classic films, these vulnerable characters open their being to the world. They invite viewers to enter their complicated worlds. Their poignant stories connect viewers to a different set of insights that are unveiled in a new world. In my experience, audiences tend accept this invitation and learn something new.
It takes time and patient persistence to evoke the complexities of character in a text or film, a lesson well gleaned from Lisbet Holtedahl’s recent film, *Wives* for which Holtedahl brought her slow and shared anthropology into the compound of an Islamic scholar, Al Hajji Alkali Ibrahim Goni, the aforementioned traditional judge in the aforementioned Adamawa Sultanate of Issa Maigari. In Holtedahl’s words, the film describes the “various household scenes of everyday life events and interviews. With this, I hope to identify the audio-visual material’s contribution to my understanding of marriage, love and dependency of six of Al Hajji’s wives and their husband.” At the end of the film Al Hajji Goni, tired and old, is approaching death. He opens himself to the audience. Viewers have shared his triumphs, his disappointments, his pride of craft and his personal remorse. In the face of death his dignity draws the audience to him and compels viewers to remember him – a model for us all.

Embracing vulnerability is a risky proposition. It violates what Mary Louise Pratt (1986), long ago called “conventions of representation.” For his part Rouch invented a new genre, ethno-fiction, to underscore the vulnerabilities of men and women confronting the decay of West African colonialism, the irrevocable change brought on by independence, and the ugly persistence of racism – themes that are still very much with us in the world. For her part, Holtedahl took such time and care in her fieldwork that a Fulani cleric allowed her camera of intimacy to record his most private moments and his most deeply guarded emotions, and this among a people known for their deep reserve and rectitude (Riesman 1977). You could say that Rouch and Holtedahl went “rogue” in their films to depict human vulnerabilities, depictions that move audiences to engage in a powerfully silent Buberian I-Thou dialogue – a powerful way for people to think a new thought or feel a new feeling.

**On the Slow Path Toward Wisdom**

Authors of ethnographic works that remain open to the world try to make sure that that human emotion and vulnerability are foregrounded in the text or showcased within and between the frames of films. Following the epistemological path of wise Songhay and Fulani elders Rouch and Holtedahl practiced slow anthropology well before the invention of the Slow Food Movement, which was initially a protest against the opening of a McDonalds, the icon of fast food establishments, near the Spanish Steps in Rome. In 1986, Carlo Petrini, an Italian activist and journalist, informally organized the slow food movement. In Paris in 1989 Petrini and others formally founded their International movement. Here is their manifesto.

**FOR THE DEFENSE OF AND THE RIGHT TO PLEASURE**

**INTERNATIONAL SLOW FOOD MANIFESTO**

Born and nurtured under the sign of Industrialization, this century first invented the machine and then modelled its lifestyle after it. Speed became our shackles. We fell prey to the same virus: the ‘fast life’ that fractures our customs and assails us even in our own homes, forcing us to ingest ‘fast- food.’ Homo sapiens must regain wisdom and liberate itself from the ‘velocity’ that is propelling it on the road to extinction. Let us defend ourselves against the universal madness of ‘the fast life’ with tranquil material pleasure. Against those – or, rather, the vast majority – who confuse efficiency with frenzy, we propose the vaccine of an adequate portion of sensual gourmandise pleasures, to be taken with slow and prolonged enjoyment. Appropriately, we will start in the kitchen, with Slow Food. To escape the tediousness of
‘fast-food’, let us rediscover the rich varieties and aromas of local cuisines. In the name of productivity, the ‘fast life’ has changed our lifestyle and now threatens our environment and our land (and city) scapes. Slow Food is the alternative, the avant-garde’s riposte. Real culture is here to be found. First of all, we can begin by cultivating taste, rather than impoverishing it, by stimulating progress, by encouraging international exchange programs, by endorsing worthwhile projects, by advocating historical food culture and by defending old-fashioned food traditions. Slow Food assures us of a better quality lifestyle. With a snail purposely chosen as its patron and symbol, it is an idea and a way of life that needs much sure but steady support.

From its very beginning, the Slow Food Movement was less a platform for recipes for sumptuous slow cooking than a sustained cultural critique of life in the fast lane of contemporary society. It has been a critique of the endless array of “tasteless” offerings in fast food restaurants, the widespread anonymity of Facebook “friendships,” the dearth of face-to-face conversations as well as the global corporatization of social relations.

The narrative contours of the films of Jean Rouch and Lisbet Holte Dahl created a context in images for slow professing in the academy. As Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber suggest in their wonderful book, The Slow Professor (2016), the corporatization of higher education has diverted our attention from the principal missions of colleges and universities: (1) supporting scholarship that enhances our comprehension of the world; and (2) training students to think critically and write clearly so they can become engaged and productive citizens. Berg and Seeber in fact, claim that the culture of speed in higher education has created so much tedious “make-work” that professors and students have little time to read, think or write. Berg and Seeber recommend that professors and students slow down to rediscover the essence of higher education and to reconstitute the fundamental and productive bond that emerges in the relationship of professor to student. In the face of widespread bureaucratization, they also offer common-sense suggestions for recapturing the magic of contemplative and creative higher education. For Berg and Seeber, citing Petrini (2007:183) slow professing should not be simply considered as the juxtaposition slow and fast; rather the contrast “between attention and distraction; slowness, in fact, is not so much a question of duration as of an ability to distinguish and evaluate, with the propensity to cultivate pleasure, knowledge, and quality.” As Berg and Seeber (2016: 90-91) write: “Distractedness and fragmentation characterize contemporary academic life; we believe that Slow ideals restore a sense of community and conviviality…. As envisioned in our manifesto, Slow professors act with purpose, cultivating emotional and intellectual resistance to the effects of the corporatization of higher education.”

Enter the discipline of anthropology which is well suited to fit into the ever-expanding matrix of slowness. As the work of Jean Rouch and Lisbet Holte Dahl has demonstrated, anthropology has the particular distinction of being a slow science in a fast world. It takes us many years to develop anthropological insights – years spent listening to the people anthropologists encounter in the field. This slow practice has produced the ethnographic record, an invaluable body of knowledge that underscores the wisdom of “others,” a wisdom that we would be wise to extend to the social, cultural and political infelicities that constitute our contemporary culture of speed.

Slow anthropology, however, is more than “taking your time” to conduct long-term field research and then carefully crafting ethnographic books and film; it is also about the gradual maturation of knowledge. Jean Rouch learned this principle from Songhay elders
in the Republic of Niger who have long understood the power of slowness. In my own
education, these kind and patient elders insisted that as a young man I must first learn
the rudimentary elements of sorcerous knowledge. They forced me to slow down. “That’s
enough talk for now,” they would tell me on my visits to Niger. “Come back next year,” they
would tell me, “to continue to learn.” “But I want to learn more,” I’d tell my teachers with no
small amount of impatience. “You’re not ready yet,” they’d tell me. “Come back next year.”

My apprenticeship with Adamu Jenitongo spanned 17 years. Toward the end of his
life, he told me: “You have lived among us for a long time, but to understand us you must
grow old with us.” When Adamu Jenitongo’s death brought an end to my apprenticeship
in 1988, I thought I had learned a great deal. As time passed by, I realized that despite my
17-year apprenticeship to a Songhay elder, my comprehension of things about Songhay
lacked depth.

It took me more than 25 years and a confrontation with serious illness for me to
understand that sorcery was not simply a competition for power, but a quest for well-
being. Unseasoned sorcerers might unleash lethal “work” to harm or kill an enemy, but
practitioners like Adamu Jenitongo used their mature knowledge and power to promote
harmony, conviviality and health – well-being. Adamu Jenitongo taught me this central
lesson early on in my fieldwork but I did not have the wherewithal – the experience of love
and loss--to “see” what he had been “really” teaching me. Back then, he had planted in me
the seeds of knowledge; it took the passage of time and a confrontation with mortality for
me to finally understand my teacher’s teaching.

In the slow world of Songhay sorcery, illness is a great teacher. It challenges the student
to see himself or herself clearly. It sensitizes a person to the pain and suffering of others. It
compels one to understand that a person’s greatest obligation – as a sorcerer or as a scholar
– is to pass slowly acquired knowledge on to the next generation. In so doing the sorcerers,
scholars, filmmakers and anthropologists, open themselves to the world. In so doing they
are likely to find the resolve to invent a new genre, like Jean Rouch, to make profoundly
intimate films, like Lisbet Holtedahl, or to understand how a confrontation with illness
might compel a person to return to where he or she began and, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot,
know it for the first time (Eliot 1968).

When anthropologists begin a slow T.S. Eliot-style anthropological journey, they may
well eventually come back to the beginning and know the place for the first time. Perhaps
they’ll realize that like all scientific truths, anthropological concepts are fleeting. They have
their initial moments of a bright insight and then fade back into obscurity. During my time
as a linguist and anthropologist so many concepts have appeared as “the next new thing” and
then faded away. Here is a partial list of golden – and not so golden – oldies: transformational
grammar, generative semantics, conversational analysis, discourse analysis, ethno-science,
symbolic anthropology, Marxist anthropology, political economy, French structuralism,
post-structuralism, postmodernism, globalization and multi-sited anthropology, human
rights discourses, the ontological turn. The anthropological writing on these theoretically
varied topics has contributed significantly to our comprehension of the human condition,
but I wonder how much of this writing will be remembered?

Slow ethnographers produce texts and films that are more likely to remain open to
the world – to be read, seen and debated. More than 50 years after they first appeared, Jean
Rouch’s films continue to underscore the fragility of human being. They teach us about
ugliness, of hatred and the courage of the oppressed. Lisbet Holte
dahl’s films evoke profound dignity in the face of love and loss, themes that connect us all.

Beyond the theoretical flavor of the day, our discipline’s great gift to the world is the ethnographic record, which through prose narrative or through film image, can forge memorable bonds between writers and readers, between filmmakers and their audiences. These are Slow Movement bonds that take us a step closer to a more convivial present. Jean Rouch and Lisbet Holte
dahl have walked this slow path toward knowledge. It is a way filled with respect for the lessons of the elders whose paths lead to wisdom. It is path well worth taking.

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Sensuous Scholarship and the Quest for Wellbeing

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ABSTRACT The Enlightenment introduced a concept of human identity based on rationalism, science, and individual achievement. At the same time, German Romanticism of the 18th century recognized that self-awareness and self-fulfilment were the outcomes of emotion and intuition, and the relationship between personal experience and individual emotion. The conflict was epitomized in Sturm und Drang (‘storm and drive’) where the extreme expression of individual emotional states emerged in response to rationalism’s perceived degradation of emotional life. Here by contrast human wellbeing lost its emotional completeness when reason emerged as the primary source of knowledge. As such, wellbeing was something only consciously recognized once lost, because individuation itself limits the kind of social extroversion that is essential for exploring the relevance of the senses for harmonious social embeddedness. By contrast modern anthropology has shown how emotional rootedness, being the basis of wellbeing, can be recaptured through sustained fieldwork, and, in particular, through the extroverted risk that builds emotional rootedness with others.

Keywords: wellbeing, Goethe, Stoller, uncertainty, higher education, creativity, Enlightenment, Romanticism

What is wellbeing?
Back in the 18th century the polymath, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, had a great deal to say about human emotional suffering and perceived wellbeing. Though Goethe lived into his 80s, he did not need a long life to represent the pulse of his time. In fact, he became famous at quite a young age by writing a novel about unrequited love in which the protagonist, Werther, eventually ends his own life.

Born in 1749, Goethe was a mere 24-year-old when he approached the completion of a book that defined for an entire culture what we would now call a ‘best seller’. Following its publication in 1774, the novel soon became wildly popular, even leading many young German men to follow in Werther’s steps by taking their own lives. That’s because The Sorrows of Young Werther was a book for its time. The then-recent rise of the German Enlightenment had left many living with the idea that anything should be possible in life if we set our free intelligence upon achieving it. Indeed, Goethe’s own life was a testament to such success.

But being self-made is a noble thought with a dark conclusion. For if all is possible through clear thinking, failure leaves only the self to blame. Amongst those who fell short of self-fulfillment, not achieving was either the effects of bad luck – a hopeless fate out of one’s hands – or a flaw of character resulting in a squandered opportunity. Under such conditions what could an honourable person do? The no-win situation of failing under rationalism left many, as today, feeling hopeless and without purpose. Hence, Werther’s radical choice became fatally popular.
In reaction to such feelings of failure, German Romanticism emerged – *Sturm und Drang* ("storm and urge/anxiety") – in which the open expression of deep emotional angst would shock readers and theatre audiences into transcending the Enlightenment's deeply flawed presumptions. Paradoxically, Werther stood for Germany of that era, while Goethe himself became perhaps the Enlightenment's most successful intellectual in his own life. Not only did he emerge as the best-known poet author of the late 18th century, he was also a Renaissance polymath.

A successful civil servant, scientist, urban planner, artist, and statesman, Goethe travelled widely, and especially to Italy where he fell in love with Italian art and architecture. He also accumulated a vast collection of fine art, and in his later years was followed around by sycophants who literally recorded every moment of his life, including his habits of toilet. In a sense, he became too well known. Though he tried repeatedly to host soirées at his home in Weimar, neighbours stopped attending because the discussion always seemed to revert to Goethe himself and his ideas. He quite literally became the prisoner of his own success – a fact in itself unremarkable, unless we think about what kind of 'success' the lost love of Werther stood for.

Goethe knew this fact; for in his collected letters he gives hints of the deeper causes of Werther's loss. Though the specific event that drove Werther was unrequited love, the cause that lead to his death in the novel was not only a love he could not consummate: Werther's loss was the loss of wellbeing that becomes apparent only in its absence. Like any of us imagining simpler times, Werther laments for his readers the moment when hope no longer, as Alexander Pope (2016) wrote in his *Essay on Man*, 'springs eternal' – where 'Man never Is, but always To be blest'. To put it simply, Werther to the contrary could not imagine how wellbeing could be regained.

We know this to be true because Goethe said as much. In his writing Goethe claimed that "we experience the fullest sense of wellbeing when we are unaware of our parts and conscious only of the whole itself" (Bell 2016). Wellbeing, in other words, is a thing only known in a kind of belonging and stability that is largely unconscious, and only recognized consciously, therefore, once lost.

Yes, we may say at any given moment that we 'feel good', or that something gives us 'a good feeling'; but, as Goethe well knew, perceived wellbeing carries with it the implicit awareness of an unconscious moment now polluted by conscious thought – as if wellbeing were a part of a past no longer available to us. The more we think about our wellbeing, that is, the more we cling to a memory invaded by the knowledge that consciousness itself can undo our emotional wholeness. To put it another way, the more consciously we describe what we remember, the more in the past we resides, to the point where we wonder if such innocence can ever be regained.

No doubt, Goethe, like other German Romantics of the era, was haunted by this problem – that is, the problem of consciousness. And that downside of conscious awareness, in turn, became a theme that ran through much of Goethe's work, and especially his characterization of Faust.

Unlike Werther, who knows his innocence is lost to the past, Faust actively sells his soul to the devil to 'know' anything and everything rationally, so as consciously to control human destiny. Faust was for Goethe the paragon of self-conscious individual reflection. That's because Faust's flaw was to put himself above emotional life – to prioritize his personal
desires as calculations with the devil; to become an individual loner – a narcissist who placed merit in having things for himself at all cost.

Goethe, thus, sees Faust in direct contrast to Romantic fulfillment, because we need to feel we belong in order to feel whole. And when that belonging is disrupted by our individuality, by the awareness that our sense of belonging has been undermined either by nostalgic feelings about an innocence lost (Werther) or by rational self-interest (Faust), a profound isolation eventually ensues that makes life impossible. As Goethe concluded, “life in its wholeness is expressed as a force not attributable to any individual part of an organism”. Wellbeing, that is to say, cannot be individuated.

**An Anthropology and the Senses**

Were Goethe alive today, he would find many sympathetic souls engaged in studying the anthropology of emotions (Howes and Classen 2014), but probably few as devoted to the senses specifically as Paul Stoller (1989, 1997b 2008). For much of Stoller’s writing has focused on how our sensuous experiences can define new emotional registers through which sensation itself make our lives meaningful.

In particular, Stoller has tried to bring to life the spaces between us (2008) – the places where, to remember Goethe, “wholeness is expressed as a force not attributable to any individual part”. Stoller has, also like Goethe, struggled with how we express those sensations in writing, and, perhaps most challenging of all, how we translate our own inchoate sensations for readers (1989, 1997b).

From early writings as a Songhay sorcerer’s apprentice (1995, 1997a; Stoller and Oalkes 1989), through his work on film and art (1992), to evocative stories of what he calls ‘sensuous scholarship’ (1997b) (including the sensations induced by his own illness experience [2004]), Stoller has never strayed far from the question of how we build emotional meaning by taking risks with the unknown, and with the new and often strange sensation of seeing ‘Oneself as Another’, to recall Paul Ricoeur’s beautiful phrase and book title (1995).

And what has Stoller discovered? In addition to acknowledging the importance of our senses in building social meaning, Stoller, as Goethe once did, acknowledges the compounding effects of incorporating our emotions into our observations of and engagements with others. We need to trust others to feel well ourselves, to build emotional ties with the unknown through sensuous engagement. Here, wellbeing is not only about social stability, but about a sense of emotional rootedness that makes possible a life fully realized. Indeed, it is this sense of being socially embedded to which Paul Stoller alludes when he describes the importance of long-term, engaged fieldwork.

But perhaps that’s where the comparison ends. Because while Goethe did indeed understand the deep need for emotional wholeness, his focus on the effects of its disruption were informed by the intellectual concerns of his day – and perhaps most by Spinoza’s ‘vitalism’ (Bennet 2010). For Spinoza was a rationalist when it came to religious orthodoxy, but a romantic when it came to ontology – even at times a pantheist when describing the immanence of nature and the deindividuation that can allow us to appreciate our emotional rootedness. For Goethe, this rational ‘loss’ made wellbeing part of an innocence lost, a view which by definition places it in the past.

To put it differently, wellbeing for German Romantics was largely something recognized consciously in its emotional absence – either in unselfconscious conviviality,
or in ontological dissociation, or through the way consciousness itself disrupts perceived wellbeing. Because the actual experience of wellbeing is different than our reflections on it.

Wellbeing, to push this line of thought, is about not consciously recognizing anything. It is the feeling of being productively embedded in wholesome social relations – a kind of ‘selective dissociation’ (Napier 1992) where we allow ourselves to exist harmoniously in what my Indonesian friends call ‘the flow of life’ (Fox 1990). For wellbeing implies the ability to count on a coherent world and to rely on those around us to be there when we need them. It is about believing in the enduring nature of things outside us. In short, it is about social trust, and about recognizing the loss we feel when continuity is disrupted through our reflecting on a past now possibly destabilized by the very act of reflecting on it.

Thus, because we by definition can only in hindsight be consciously aware of a lost unconscious belonging, we can neither measure wellbeing as a present condition, nor define it as a conscious reflection on a state of present being. In this sense, wellbeing (for Romantics at least) is a thing named in the present, but belonging to the past; for its recognition involves a form of reflection on a feeling undisturbed by reflection. That’s why there are hundreds of definitions of wellbeing that somehow fail to capture it.

Wellbeing is a thing felt, not thought – a dynamic steady state – and our thinking of wellbeing signals the very insecurity that characterizes a past we now see at risk, a conceptual warning of what we fear losing, a need for others to help create new moments of collective agreement in which hope can again emerge.

For, when life is going well for us, we permit ourselves to take things for granted. It’s only when that which is taken-for-granted turns out to be otherwise – when our inductive assumptions prove wrong – that we simultaneously become aware of our aloneness while remembering the bliss we’ve now lost. Thus, wellbeing is not at all what any of us think, because it is thoughtless – its fullness being known in the belonging we so much feel the need for when belonging suddenly disappears – when lost hope must urgently be replaced by the belief that belonging can be remade.

That, in short, is why addressing the drivers of social trust is critical to understanding wellbeing’s loss; for reflecting on wellbeing sets trust seeking in motion, a coded way of acknowledging our desire to generate trust with others. The many calls today for human wellbeing and sustainable prosperity are, in other words, ways of spawning an awareness that society itself is indeed quite unwell, and that we need to work together to fix it.

The Role of Uncertainty

Yet, while wellbeing may be (quite literally) not what you or I think, it is wrong to believe that ignorance is bliss; for ignorance cannot be recognized without knowing. As a homeless friend once put it, “You don’t know what you don’t know; because not knowing defines ignorance”. The rhetoric of wellbeing, on the other hand, is the result of knowing, a perception of the past that emerges in the past’s absence – that is through knowledge.

By contrast, existentialism (and especially the existential phenomenology that informs the anthropology of Paul Stoller) is not only about rethinking the past as a creatively embodied exercise. It is also, because of this creative possibility, about emotional gain, about taking our sufferings and making not only new meaning, but artful meaning – even if that demands taking a flaw, as the Baroque sculptor, Bernini, once said, and turning it so much into the centerpiece of a new work of art that the new work could not have existed
without it. Indeed, this hope – that wellbeing is also about emotional gain – is what incites anthropologists, like Paul Stoller, to take certain risks with the unknown, and to take them again and again.

In this sense, engaged fieldwork over a lifetime is about the emotional gain we hope for when we acknowledge that fulfillment is not the personal experience we so often make of it in the self-help books that millions read. It's not, that is, just about coming to grips with one's own mortality; it's about embeddedness. For no amount of success can make a person feel well while living in complete isolation.

Were this otherwise, we would not witness so much deep unhappiness in countries where material welfare is secure; nor would we have those who have abundant resources fleeing violent environments for global capitals where they feel they can express their successes under the watchful eyes of every other upwardly mobile person on earth. Wellbeing, in other words, requires the 'Other'.

Indeed, what emerges in Stoller’s view of wellbeing is the importance of experiencing both the unknown and the ineffable that together allow us to witness more creatively what is feasible in our own lives. This need is what brings Stoller to focus on the life-long work of engaged fieldworkers like Jean Rouch and Lisbet Holtedahl. Knowledge of the deep emotionality of how others make meaning is a kind of knowledge that is only gained by taking risks with difference.

Thus, wellbeing is not only a thing recognized in the past – something unfettered by critical thinking – but a human potential. Here, knowledge emerges as the inevitable foundation for remaking ourselves – the foundation for making better rather than poorer meaning; the basis for recreating a fuller life with others. That is why exploring boundaries is critical for social health; because that's how we get new knowledge, create new ideas, and grow emotionally.

Because wellbeing, in this line of thought, is about social trust and the stability that comes of shared awareness, it emerges and reemerges through faith: faith that others will be there for us; faith that they will behave mutually in making meaning when wellbeing is threatened. This faith is not only the foundation of wellbeing, but the foundation of society itself – a belief in goodness and its potential. This faith is not only what allows anthropologists to become deeply, and at times even dangerously, involved in the lived experience of other, but the link that allowed Rouch, Holtedahl, and Stoller himself to remain engaged with the very things that otherwise might have undone them.

Faith being central, risk-taking becomes critical. Because faith in others is the outcome of many experiences that collectively lead us to feel we can, even against the odds, create harmony with the world we inhabit. Because counting on others means having the faith that stability can be built. Because feeling life's continuities gives us the strength to cope with the instabilities that are what life is. And because our many experience of the same event produce, as Aristotle once argued, "the effect of a single experience" (Clark 1975). In other words, wellbeing is about wanting inductive certainty as much as it is about a paradise lost – about the belief that mutual social relations can have similarly good outcomes in the future because they have done so in the past.

However, induction itself deserves critical unpacking; because when things turn out to be not what we think, we question ourselves. We ask what went enough wrong to undo our perceived wellbeing. Because when what we learn does not lead to new knowledge, when
our many experience do not allow us to make the right decision at any given moment, the whole enterprise of learning from others is put at risk.

And this is why it is important to listen to what creative anthropologists tell us about the importance of risk-taking in understanding the emotional lives of others. Having known what can be learned from long-term exposure to difference, it becomes our individual responsibility to help safeguard environments that remain open to free thinking when social insecurity strikes.

Human wellbeing, in summary, is as fragile as it is perceived: a healthy nation or globe may be measured by a decline in the impact of a devastating disease; but even a quite healthy population may feel very unwell (Napier et al. 2014). Though societies can gauge themselves against various measures of mortality and morbidity, even the highest of scores on any given measure of physical health will not abate a culture of complaint in which a sense of unhappiness and a divisive mistrust prevail.

Indeed, a nation may be wholly equipped to solve a threat to public health, while still being quite convinced that things are not well at all. At such times, those working to tackle a critical social problem affecting us all may get more meaning from scaring us about the future than from doing something about it.

The persistence of that disjunction – between health and wellbeing – is, therefore, precisely why human wellbeing must now become an educational priority.

**Education and Future Wellbeing**

Throughout the academic world there is an ongoing conversation about how our moral obligations to the future affect the ways in which we define our disciplines and our professional and personal relationships to them. How do we protect the ‘social contract’ as defined by Locke and Rousseau against Adam Smith’s self-interested formulation, in which the reciprocity of mercantile activities themselves are thought to constitute a social contract that is both binding and reliable?

In my multicultural and very urban university, and in educational setting across the globe, such challenges now coalesce around the areas of intercultural interactions, sustainable environments, global health, and human wellbeing – each reflecting, as it were, both a ‘grand challenge’ to our skill sets across disciplines, as well as an ethical obligation to make things better.

Of these four broad areas, it is surely the last – human wellbeing – that is, as we now recognize, the most difficult to define and to locate in any given field of expertise. What, we may ask, is being measured when the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan promotes a policy of Gross National Happiness? What may be understood in the claim that the citizens of Denmark are Europe’s happiest people? A ‘gross national’ anything is a condition thought to be measurable; yet an expression of happiness may to the contrary express something ineffable. What is more, human wellbeing is defined quite variably. So what actually is being measured?

Unlike ‘health’, ‘survival’, or ‘sustainability’, wellbeing is largely a perceived state, a sense that one’s efforts, even one’s suffering, can have an instrumental and beneficial impact that is widespread. Human wellbeing, in this sense, is a social construct. It is (regardless of how we try to define or assess it) about an individually perceived trust in the social contract; about the welfare that emerges out of collective investment; about the empathic sensibility that each of us cultivates in the particular social place we inhabit.
Because of these complexities, measuring wellbeing often does not lead where it should – namely, to an acceptance of the social dimensions of perceived goodness. This in itself is surprising. Because, in spite of how exquisite a psychologically controlled measure may appear, the final test of wellbeing always stands outside of what can be experimentally controlled, precisely because it is so profoundly social and experientially negotiated.

This idea is easily demonstrated. Imagine we are in the controlled environment of a hospital ward. As in a lab experiment, we have exacting conditions: two patients side by side with precisely the same bone fracture, the same levels of care, and the same expressions of concern and empathy from caregivers. What might be the social conditions that could give rise to a divergent manifestation of perceived wellbeing?

Think basic concepts; for the issue is about the simple perception of wellness. One of our two patients broke his leg pushing a child out of the way of an oncoming car; the other experienced the same fracture after sliding down an icy staircase left unattended to by a greedy landlord. What we see before us are identical fractures, modes of treatment, and (hopefully) clinical outcomes; however, how wellbeing is understood at the level of perception could not be more different.

Here is another example. Twins live in identical apartments, work identical jobs, and make identical wages. Both flats are directly above a noisy underground station. Both must respond to the repetitive noxious stimulant of the rumbling trains beneath their floors. Both remain in their flats the exact same number of hours, exposed identically to the irritation of train noise and vibration, but one has a summer cottage that, even though never visited, exists as an escape destination. Yet again, the perception of wellbeing of the two could not be more different.

Wellbeing, in other words, is exceedingly difficult to measure, and statements about feeling well or not well cannot in themselves be taken as conclusive proof that all is actually okay. Cultures vary significantly in what is considered to be appropriate expressions of wellness or its absence. Many say they are ‘fine’ on the very day they harm themselves. Saying one is fine can even indicate its opposite, as so many ‘stiff upper lips’ make clear.

There is an inescapable conclusion here. This being that social wellbeing is difficult to measure (World Health Organization 2015), and not just because it is individually perceived, subject to constant variation, and so often unquantifiable (in spite of what statisticians may claim). Indeed, we know about its resistance to measurement by the very proliferation of research tools that exist to measure it. If one looks at indicators of so-called ‘social capital’ – for example, measures of a society’s willingness to contribute to social wellbeing – one can uncover several hundred definitions, each offering a somewhat different view of what is or is not an indicator of citizen wellbeing.

Such proliferation exists – and let’s register this – not because we need so many instruments, but because social empathy, like wellbeing, is equally challenging to measure. For our feelings, like human wellbeing itself, so often have less to do with understanding ‘health’ in the strict sense, than with understanding our ability to trust or not trust one another over time.

How do we know that perceived social continuity, and long-term creative engagement with an ‘Other’, are more important to human wellbeing than trying to quantify it? The answer is simple: while it may be time very well spent to refine our indicators of human happiness, the fact remains that perceiving wellbeing – that is, sensing its existence and value – is, as we now recognize, a cumulative endeavor.
No doubt, wellbeing can be expressed or felt in single events; but feelings are authenticated through repetition. We cannot describe a society as feeling ‘well’ if its sense of wellbeing is put repeatedly in doubt. Because of this need to transcend doubt, wellbeing has less to do with singular expressions of fidelity – of what we faithfully claim in specific statements about our relations with others – than it does with the belief both that sociality itself is durable, and that one can create and sustain it with an ‘Other’.

Human wellbeing, then, is built on social redundancy and its creative potential – that is, on being evidenced repeatedly in various and diverse settings. Its reality is by definition social, because its durability is known when witnessed diversely. It is through repetition – when “we are what we repeatedly do” – that, to again quote Aristotle, excellence emerges as “not an act but a habit”.

Thus, while any government can claim to work in the interest of its citizens, only those that consistently support the growth of social capital may be said to enhance human wellbeing. Indeed, when governments fail in this obligation it is usually churches or families that must take up the task, to the extent that a state’s failure to promote wellbeing may be in direct proportion to the degree to which it projects, as so many conservative governments do, such obligations into the religious and private spheres.

This being so, any culture or state that supports high levels of social capital is, by extension, attempting to provide the opportunity – the space – for nourishing collective wellbeing and the belief that a better future is an important social aspiration. But when states (or religions, or families) fail in this obligation, other institutions must take up the task – hence today the increasing importance of our schools and universities, which now, as a final target of blame for social unrest, are equally held accountable for not instilling confidence in the future by producing better citizens.

But why, we may ask, should our universities, as places of higher learning, be today especially singled out for this task? There are many reasons, but four that are especially important.

The first reason is that without perceived wellbeing we have no choice but to attend to personal survival, retreating into what simple things we believe can allow us to persevere. Hardship can require new forms of collaboration and even on occasion enhance creativity (as the lives of so many artists amply demonstrate). But when people are made accountable to neo-liberal values (impacts, benchmarks, and deliverables) they retreat into their core disciplinary strengths as a survival strategy, and in so doing limit their creative potential.

Increased accountability means that funders and investors now demand in advance and up front an assessment of outcomes before the insecure investor becomes capable of showing any kind of trust or generosity. In business models, it is the spontaneous and explicit ‘elevator pitch’ (the ability to convey a message to a superior between floors while riding a lift) that is held up as desirable, admirable, and efficient. There is little time here for the expression of anything other than what one can say with complete certainty. Under such conditions, there is absolutely no ‘use’ for social redundancy, and no space for exploration of mutuality.

But redundancy is precisely the stuff of creativity. Indeed, Thomas Edison once famously said that “to invent you need a good imagination and a pile of junk”. What he understood intimately was that true inventiveness requires multiple failures, many experiments on and around that pile of junk. Edison had little respect for innovation – the reverse engineering, the rebuilding and refining of an existing thing, even as he built on the ideas of others.
Innovation, however, is very responsive to benchmarks and deliverable: is this new thing a better mousetrap? But invention is a wholly different matter. Influential minds of the 19th-century all thought that our most pressing public problem in the 20th-century would involve the disposal of horse manure in the face of exponential population growth. Nobody could imagine a fossil-fuel breathing motor car, let alone a light bulb, a phone, or a computer. For the innovatively obsessed neo-liberal, the pile of junk is only ‘wasteful’, ‘useless’, and ‘redundant’; not ‘potential’, ‘creative’ and ‘possible’.

The point here – and it must be emphasized – is that real change is the outcome of trial and error – lots of error in fact. Creativity (understood as the process of finding something new) is, like Edison’s pile of junk, a very messy activity. Any inventor will tell you this. Invention require lots of imaginative superimposing of unlikely things – a real meditation on what the pile of junk might become, making the new art form out of the flaw, to the degree that the flaw becomes the new work’s centerpiece. True invention does not, cannot, never did, and never will respond to the neo-liberal business obsession for benchmarks, deliverables, and immediate returns on investment. Innovation is a process driven by efficiency and a refinement of what is already known; it is not generous. Invention is a wholly different activity.

By analogy, a healthy society is one that is confident about its wellbeing. It is by definition socially generous. If society refuses to be generous at the level of welfare, we will all individually suffer as we retreat into whatever strategy of survival fits our personal need. We will drop our expectations and hopes for a better world and replace those hopes with simple greed. Bankers are best at this; indeed, in the aftermath of the last great financial collapse, the top 1,000 employees of financial markets in London awarded themselves on average £70,000 in bonuses while so many of their faithful investors of only the previous year stood by in financial ruin. We are all, in other words, infected when wellbeing is openly undermined by a dragon’s den mentality now occupied by self-centered achievers.

The second reason has to do with failure of government. Though there is more than a strong argument for the claim that neo-liberalism is built on fear of the unknown, the second reason why educators must support the study of social wellbeing now is because if they don’t, who will?

In his book on John Maynard Keynes Lord Skidelsky (2010), emeritus professor of political economy at the University of Warwick, argued that political clamoring about the need for financial cuts emphasizes the degree to which governments (as instruments of the people) have been replaced across the globe by financial markets (as an instrument of business). Citing Chicago economists who claim that austerity fails to restore public trust in markets, Skidelsky reminds us of Keynes’s famous view.

What Keynes argued strongly (and in our financial panic we have forgotten), is that when the economy slows and demand falls short of supply governments (and now in their neo-liberal absence, universities) should increase, not reduce, their deficits (their investments in ‘welfare’) to make up for the lack of investment from the private sector. It is what, Skidelsky reminds us, Keynes called the ‘paradox of thrift’ in which we destroy our own opportunities for social reciprocity, for exchange, for invention, and, finally, for growth. If the welfare state does not, for instance, support the imaginative arts (literary or technical), who will – especially if the private sector won’t? It is here where scholars like Paul Stoller can play
an essential role in shaping the future. Because if we don’t take risk with redundancy and failure, who will?

The third reason is that when society cannot protect creativity, someone must. When the state fails in its welfare responsibilities (as it clearly has, for instance, in the United Kingdom as well as in the United States) there is no one outside of the university to take the risks necessary for creativity to be encouraged. In hard times, not only do individuals panic about protecting their personal territories, but because creativity has a very low conversion rate, businesses that once funded research (either through intellectual property cartels or through now-vanishing indirect costs on funded research) come to see no obvious profit margin in high-risk climates. We know this for many reasons, but one compelling example has to do with invention and creativity.

Awarded patents are a telling place to look at creativity in its most applied configurations. To be awarded a patent, any individual or corporation (defined legally as an individual) must demonstrate to an experienced examiner (like the once-employed Albert Einstein) that the proposed idea is new, useful, and non-obvious to any user of the craft in question. No patent in other words can be granted unless the idea presented is unique, has a clear application, and would not have been thought up by a practitioner of a given art in the normal course of his or her work.

Yet despite the clear emphasis of this process on the encouragement of producing things that appear to an experienced examiner to meet these criteria, only 3 percent of all patents actually get enough taken up by society to the extent that they produce a business profit. It must be emphasized here that we are not even talking about a majority of simply bad ideas; we are referring to ideas that experienced people find new and useful. In short, with only 3 percent of all “new and useful” things producing profit, few bonus driven companies would rightly today take the risk of supporting invention. Businesses cannot be expected under such terms to step forward. If neo-liberal governments also by definition will not, universities must.

The fourth, and final, reason why it is now the university’s task to build confidence in the future by promoting social wellbeing is because retreating from the social contract (i.e., cutting back) erodes and eventually destroys our confidence, our willingness to accept that new problems require new ways of engaging one another as social subjects looking for creative solutions.

When we cut back, the social environments that sustain our collective sense of common good disappear; human welfare and wellbeing suffer; we destroy creativity itself. In Beyond Good and Evil (1886), Nietzsche once said that “in times of peace the war-like man attacks himself”. But Nietzsche also argued that inequality produces anxiety, and anxiety new thinking.

Being tough on others, this argument goes, makes them think outside the box. But the toll of innovation under duress is staggering. Moreover, the haunting predictive value of social capital enhancing creativity cannot be ignored.

High social capital states are also high welfare states; for welfare states embrace the idea that wellbeing is as much if not more social than personal in nature. High welfare states are founded on the belief that once basic needs are met; human variation can proliferate – if not perhaps in the draconian manner Nietzsche imagined. Argue as we may over the impact of
anxiety and inequality on creativity, the fact remains that as wellbeing becomes less social our ability to see our morals and ethics as social in nature is also eroded, and sometimes seriously.

Though this argument may seem purely ethical, it is also biological. Every time we nod affirmatively and in good faith to one another we promote human wellbeing; because our welfare is confirmed redundantly in the hundreds of times a day we look at one another and agree. It is biology’s way of affirming basic human contract. Neurobiology has shown this to be the case: social agreement affirms collective wellbeing, and the neural growth that sociality makes possible is indisputable. This fact alone brings a new and powerful dimension to the common Scandinavian assertion that it is impolite not to look others in the eye when speaking with them.

Because of this biological fact, when we limit – for political or financial reasons – our ability to make meaning socially, we also limit our ability to believe in collective wellbeing. What is worse, we also enhance our fear that betrayal proliferates; for betrayal is that opposite kind of nodding where perceived agreement is false.

Today, by example, I cannot read a single tabloid on my way to work in London that does not contain at least one article about corruption – about the political betrayal of voters by their elected officials. For betrayal is quite literally a misreading of that affirmative nodding. To say one has been betrayed by another, is to say that one misread what one took for social trust. Betrayal not only dislodges us socially, but it makes us shy about making social investments because we not only mistrust another, but also our own ability to make accurate judgments. Here, the past is not filled with wellbeing, but with the experiences that eroded it.

And what this suggests is important. When we limit, undermine, or destroy our ability to meet eye-to-eye in welfare enhancing social activity – when we, that is, lose our desire for sensuous engagement – we undermine also the very skill through which such forms of trust have been cultivated and nurtured over time.

This is why trust is so hard to build and so easy to destroy. If we as educators do not build it, who today will? Certainly not short-term, outcome obsessed institutions, whether they be business-focused, or governmental, or alas the very universities that claim to protect the life of the mind. For each and every time we fail to see our morals and ethics as fundamentally social in nature – that is to say, as part of our sensuous engagements – we not only voluntarily limit our own welfare, but also limit our capacity to recognize what is lost when we forget what can be gained through being with one another and witnessing both life’s joys and its tribulations.

In short, when we lose faith in the social contract, we settle for lesser meaning. We accept bad meaning rather than no meaning because human wellbeing has been undone and we need meaning no matter what.

Why, then, are open expressions by welfare states of that social support which rebukes thrift so important to human wellbeing? Because without showing how welfare states enhance our opportunities to believe in one another, there can be no argument for investing so heavily in our collective wellbeing. More importantly, perhaps, there can be no argument – as Paul Stoller’s entire career has shown – for understanding the social spaces between us where our sensuous abilities can flourish if only given the chance.
References


Imagining World Solidarities for a Livable Future

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ABSTRACT  In this article, I refer to Eduardo Galeano’s challenge to exercise the right to dream and call on anthropologists to couple their knowledge with fearless imagination to work on behalf of a livable future that has yet to come. Galeano’s primer for the “looking-glass world” in his book *Upside Down* resonates with anthropological understanding of the historical role of difference as ideological infection and on the political economic forces that reproduce the violences that make world solidarities seem so impossible. The current condition of the world, marked by a lethal pandemic, worship of weapons and militarism, racialized hatred and nationalist fervor, environmental crisis and everyday structural violence, adds urgency to the multidimensional task to confront the profound challenges facing humanity, transcend seemingly impossible impasses, and build productive connection and collaboration. Invoking an example from my life and work, I argue for synthesis as Gina Ulysse puts it, bringing together the scholar and the responsible global citizen who goes beyond producing scholarship to putting knowledge to work in an effort at sustaining the earth and its living beings.

Keywords: Eduardo Galeano, violence, pandemic, imagination, solidarity

Prelude in context of the Pandemic of 2020

New York, May 18: When in early February 2019, Paul Stoller invited me to contribute an article to this special collection on “The Anthropology of Wellbeing in Troubled Times,” I took the opportunity from my vantage point as an anthropologist trained and working in the U.S. academy, to offer my understanding of the state of the world, consider the stakes at hand, and call on anthropologists to couple their knowledge with fearless imagination to work on behalf of a livable future that has yet to come. As a person on this earth for nearly seven decades and immersed in anthropology for well over half my life, I recognize the need for conversation across multiple borders – lines that have potential to divide and conquer or that may be crossed, making possible deeper cooperation and collaboration towards the common good. The article that follows was submitted to the journal in December 2019 just as COVID-19 was making its way across the globe, soon to land in my hometown in New York where as of this morning, twenty-two thousand six hundred and nineteen (22,619) human beings are reported dead, and eighty-nine thousand, nine hundred and thirty two (89,932) people are reported dead so far in the United States, where the unemployment rate is now at levels not seen since the Great Depression. In the past two months and with written and photographic reports from the front lines, participant-observers (nurses, physicians, reporters) have been offering readers and viewers the gift of documentation and witness to the violence of this pandemic, the extent of which was – and is – preventable. The immediate
situation is horrific, and the short-term future is grim. It was also predicted. Among others, the American science journalist Laurie Garrett (1994) saw it coming as did anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom (2009) whose concept of “global fractures” captures the fragility and unsustainability of the world where no one is invulnerable to the quakes along the lines, now broken wide open. The article I offer here remains essentially the same as I composed it prior to the pandemic, reflecting my understanding of the vulnerable local and global fractures on which we have been standing for way too long. Without being prescriptive, this article is a call for the unleashing of imagination and taking creative action in the interest of “life in the one world we all inhabit” (Ingold 2017: 22).

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The first word in the title of this article is “imagining,” which is the process of forming an image of something in the mind, something akin to dreaming, visualizing, thinking, supposing. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “imagining” as to conceive in the mind as a thing to be performed; to devise, plot, plan. To imagine is to form a mental image of something, perhaps a goal, an end to which one yearns to arrive, an achievement not yet actualized. Each of us as anthropologists, I dare say, puts our imaginations to work whenever we dream up a research or writing project, a course syllabus to teach, and on a more quotidian level, a meal we might prepare to serve or a friendship to cultivate.

As I’ve worked to prepare this article, the word “imagine” or the idea of “imagining” is suddenly front and center in my sights. I turn on the radio and there’s John Lennon:

Imagine there’s no countries
It isn’t hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for…

I walk through an art gallery exhibit in Manhattan, and see an excerpt of a conversation between the novelist and social critic James Baldwin and anthropologist Margaret Mead. Baldwin shares, “I used to tell my mother, when I was little, ‘When I grow up I’m going to do this or do that. I’m going to be a great writer and buy you this and buy you that.’ And she would say, very calmly, very dryly, ‘It’s more than a notion’” (David Zwirner Gallery 2019). I read The Pursuit of Happiness by anthropologist Bianca Williams (2018), and come upon this, a core theme in her book about Black women and diasporic dreams: “While memories of slavery and discrimination definitely inform these women’s constructions of Blackness and Black identities, their experiences of pleasure and leisure also ground their imaginings of diasporic community” (2018: 9). And in my own recent publication, I include the words “anthropological imagination” in the title of a scholarly article centered in memory and history (Waterston 2019a).

For this article, I set myself up for a large task of the imagination: Imagining World Solidarities for a Livable Future. I do so in keeping with the quest for well-being in a troubled world.

I begin with an inspiration. On the last pages of Upside Down: A Primer for the Looking-Glass World (2000), a work with which I will be in dialogue throughout this article, the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano dares readers to exercise the right to dream. “Suppose we rave a bit?” he asks, and he offers a long list of possibilities for an alternative world. In December 2018 as I’ve done at the close of other semesters, I asked my undergraduate
students at a public university in New York City to rave a bit, writing out on a slip of paper one thing they would change to make for an alternative world. With their individual responses collated, the world they imagine would have no poverty, people would not be hungry, Black people would not be demonized, hierarchies would be eliminated as would all the “isms” — racism, sexism and so forth; also gone would be weapons, military weapons and the militarism that goes along with them. People would have the food they need to eat, the water they need to drink, and the shelter they need in which to dwell. Nature would be honored and respected. Love would replace hate. Schools would provide all children the opportunity to love learning, love themselves, and love what their future looks like.

You may say they are dreamers. But they’re not the only ones. They articulate a vision of the kind of world that thinking people also yearn for. The vision expresses a way people could relate to one another as “giving together,” which anthropologist Tim Ingold defines as the meaning of “community” as from the Latin *com* (‘together’) plus *munus* (‘gift’) (2018: 47).

The world we are in is not the world of such vision. From the vantage point of the late 20th century, Galeano describes “A desolate, de-souled world that practices the superstitious worship of machines and the idolatry of arms, an upside-down world with its left on its right, its belly button on its backside, and its head where its feet should be” (2000: 307). “The world economy is the most efficient expression of organized crime,” Galeano asserts (2000: 6). He explains:

The worst violators of nature and human rights never go to jail. They hold the keys. In the world as it is, the looking-glass world, the countries that guard the peace also make and sell the most weapons. The most prestigious banks… harbor the most stolen cash. The most successful industries are the most poisonous for the planet… Those who kill the most people in the shortest time win immunity and praise, as do those who destroy the most nature at the lowest cost… Whoever is not a prisoner of necessity is a prisoner of fear, deprived of sleep by anxiety over the things he lacks or by terror of losing the things he has. The looking-glass world trains us to view our neighbor as a threat, not a promise. It condemns us to solitude and consoles us with chemical drugs and cybernetic friends. We are sentenced to die of hunger, fear, or boredom — that is, if a stray bullet doesn’t do the job first. (2000: 6-7)

It is dystopian, this dog-eat-dog world. A far cry from the image I have of a just world, the world of well-being I want, a livable future.

It gets worse. Typing notes, I write the word “dystopia,” which springs to mind *Parable of the Sower*, the novel by science fiction writer Octavia Butler. Published in 1993, *Parable of the Sower* takes place in a city outside of Los Angeles and the story begins in July of 2024, only a few years from my writing these words. The world has disintegrated. Water costs a pretty penny, a resource made scarce by climate disaster and the profit motive. Fires are ubiquitous. Total fear pervades. People live behind gates in neighborhoods cordoned off by walls. Outside, the dangerous hordes are ready to pounce, save the guns — an old Smith & Wesson .38 revolver, a nine millimeter submachine gun, a Llama automatic — designed to keep the riff-raff away. On the other side of the gates, dead bodies pile up — dead children, dead adults. They are just the outsiders, explains Lauren, the teenage Black girl who narrates the story, except when someone shoots wrong, killing one of their own. The novel and its sequel, *Parable of the Talents* also feature presidents of the United States of America. One named Christopher Charles Morpeth Donner will “suspend ‘overly restrictive’ minimum wage, environmental and worker protection laws” (1998: 24). His successor, Andrew Steele
Jarret, has plans to “revive the country.” The people don’t see him as the fascist that he is but think, “This is just what America needs.” In the years between 2015 and 2019 so the story goes, Jarret frightened, divided and bullied people, burned them alive, and covered it up with denials, threats, terror, and pay offs. In my country in 2019, the U.S. President Donald John Trump unleashed the agents of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to raid, round up, arrest, imprison and deport immigrants in Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Chicago and other major cities across the country, one among his many draconian directives. In my country in spring of 2020, this U.S. President calls COVID-19 the “Chinese virus,” tweeting this demonizing, racist label to his followers, and he suggests people inject themselves with disinfectant to cure the virus while repeatedly refusing to take “any responsibility at all” for the death and destruction on his watch.

In a New Yorker article titled “Octavia Butler’s Prescient Vision of a Zealot Elected to ‘Make America Great Again,’” writer Abby Aguirre says Butler saw the Parables as a cautionary tale not a prophecy, and yet she could not see her plan through to write four more books in the Parable series because “the story is too depressing” (2017).

Butler’s cautionary tale rings too true for comfort in this most intense period for the world considering the material, environmental, and political conditions of life in these times. Today, the resurgence of ever more hateful ethnonationalism and the foul rhetoric that goes along with it, not least xenophobia and racialized hatred, is spreading like the wildfires wrought by climate change across the globe. Social, political, and economic inequities are expanding; people are suffering “stupid deaths” to borrow Paul Farmer’s expression (2011) while private, concentrated wealth continues to expand under global capitalism, a system that maintains conditions of scarcity and insecurity through a politics of fear and fragmentation, draconian policies, and practices that do more harm than good.

Further, Ingold writes “The world remains in the grip of a system of production, distribution and consumption that, while grotesquely enriching a few, has not only left countless millions of people surplus to requirements condemned to chronic insecurity, poverty and disease, but also wreaked environmental destruction on an unprecedented scale, rendering many regions uninhabitable and clogging lands and oceans with indestructible and hazardous waste” (2018: 5).

Any system that leaves millions of people “surplus to requirements” is evil. In Hannah Arendt’s terms, the power that makes human beings superfluous, that transforms them into something less than human, is by her definition “radical evil,” which is rooted in particular systems (Hannah Arendt 1994). “Never has the world been so scandalously unjust,” Galeano asserted in 2000 (28). Little did he know how bad it would get. The twin evils of capitalism and imperialism that Galeano says are referred to euphemistically and respectively as the market economy and globalization, “manufactures poor people and outlaws poverty” (2000: 13). He writes:

The number of poor children who work… is uncountable. And the rest? Many are superfluous. The market doesn’t need them, nor will it ever. They aren’t profitable, they never will be. Ever more poor children are ‘born with a tendency toward crime,’ according to the specialists. They are the most dangerous category of the ‘surplus population.’ From the point of view of the established order, they begin by stealing the air we breathe and soon steal anything they can lay their hands on. Hunger or bullets tend to shorten their voyage from crib to grave. The system fears the young; childhood is a threat. (2000: 17-18)
In such a world “power sweats violence through every pore,” (2000: 271) Galeano observed. In such a brutal, structurally violent system, how can individuals overcome the barriers to fulfill their potential, and arrive at my student’s dream “for all children to love learning, love themselves, and love what their future looks like”?

The omnipresent, oppressive darkness is exhausting. It depletes, it’s almost paralyzing – but not entirely. Reading *The Creative Spark* by biocultural anthropologist Agustin Fuentes, helped me to re-invigorate. Fuentes writes, what makes humans distinctive is “our ability to dream things up and to make them happen” (2017: 271). Invoking Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, Fuentes believes that King’s words resonate with so many people because “it draws on our shared capacities to imagine and create a better world…a capacity the human lineage developed over the last 2 million years” (2017: 271-272). “[Dreaming] makes us the creative species,” Fuentes proclaims, and he adds, “The initial condition of any creative act is collaboration” (2017: 272; 2).

There are thousands of anthropologists from all over the world who are or can work in solidarity across artificial or insignificant divides assuming they share the common value that there is inherent “goodness” to life and the living, and that they want, as an objective, that this earth and the living things in it to be sustained, to enjoy well-being, to flourish.

Recently, anthropologist Roger Lancaster issued a call for “universal liberation,” (2017) which is what the world needs now in order to move past the horrors wrought by radical evil and its companion, radical deception, which goes beyond the deliberate lie to add “a new variation to the old art of lying – that of lying the truth, the deliberate conversion of a lie into a reality” (Birmingham 2007: 32; Birmingham 2010: 74; Arendt 1994: 111). This form of deception, Hannah Arendt observed, “opens the door to the possibility of a ‘lying world order’ and [even][…] the threat of totalitarianism” (quoted in Birmingham 2007: 32).

Galeano asks, “Is the freedom to choose among [the] unfortunate ends, the only freedom left to us? The looking-glass school,” he says, “teaches us to suffer reality, not change it; to forget the past, not learn from it; to accept the future, not invent it. In its halls of criminal learning, impotence, amnesia, and resignation are required courses. Yet perhaps there can be no disgrace without grace, no sign without a countersign, and no school that does not beget its counterschool” (2000: 8).

There is no need to settle for the looking glass. Let us enter it instead, and unleash our individual and collective imaginations to explore the possibilities for an alternative world and how we might get there. Galeano gives us permission: “If we can’t imagine what’s coming, at least we have the right to imagine the future we want” (2000: 334). On this note, it is worthwhile to keep in mind an observation offered by economist and legal scholar Marcie Smith. In an interview in *Jacobin*, Smith notes that too often, progressives fail to be specific about “what kind of world we want, what kinds of productive relations we want, and what would it actually take to achieve them in the face of extremely powerful opposition” (Marcetic and Smith 2019).

How to begin? If we are in an “Upside Down” world, how do we put things “Right Side Up”? In the world I want, radical good replaces radical evil. That would require organizing society in its political-economic and social structures such that each human being is valued, not rendered superfluous. The social contract would require that each person be provided the means by which their potential may be fulfilled, enabled by prioritizing human needs over rapacious interests. In imagining what kind of world I want radical honesty replaces radical deception. The new normal would be a clear separation between factual truth and opinion,
and there would be consistent, honest confrontation of “interests” no matter how hard these may be to admit. In the world I would want for all the children and the children’s children to inhabit, difference would not be ideological infection but celebrated. In such a world, memory and history would replace what is today’s pervasive “obligatory amnesia” (Galeano 2000: 201). You may say I’m a dreamer. I say this is the start, an outline of core principles.

It occurs to me that anthropologists have at their fingertips access to necessary if insufficient ingredients for changing reality, for remembering the past, for inventing the future. Ingold propounds a kind ofanthropology I believe is the norm in the field today, or at least it seems to be becoming so, which is “to share in [other people’s] presence, to learn from their experiments in living…” (2018: 8). He writes, “…anthropologists [have] an ethic of care… We care by bringing people into presence, so that they can converse with us, and we can learn from them” (2018: 131). In a world that suffers from “imposed homogeneity” to use Agustin Fuentes’s words (2017: 174) or “compulsory equalization” as Galeano put it (2000: 25), anthropology for much, if not most of its history, has advocated on behalf of diversity. We may not have achieved the goal Ruth Benedict purportedly claimed for anthropology, which is “to make the world safe for human differences” but it is a value most of us cherish (Haviland et al 2014: 142).

About compulsory homogeneity, Galeano says that it “works against the finest trait of the human species, the fact that we recognize ourselves in our differences and build links based on them” (2000: 25). When he writes, “The best of the world lies in the many worlds the world contains, the different melodies of life, their pains and strains: the thousand and one ways of living and speaking, thinking and creating, eating, working, dancing, playing, loving, suffering, and celebrating that we have discovered over so many thousands of years” (2000: 25-26) – when he writes this, I see what anthropologists do, day in and day out, to bring the best of the world to the forefront.

It also strikes me that anthropologists don’t recognize adequately the strengths they possess. Too readily, they buy into an idea that what anthropologists do is marginal and what they know is not all that important. Too often, they fail to acknowledge to themselves how much anthropologists have to contribute – how much they already do contribute – as allies in the global struggle for justice and equity. Of course, it is incumbent upon anthropologists to engage a process of reassessing the purpose and practices of what they do and thus, the purposes and practices of the discipline and the institutions that enable it. At the same time, they need to appreciate more than they do now that anthropology and anthropologists are pretty constant and persistent in connecting those parts of the past that are responsible for shaping the present and in exposing power by means of evidence, argument, and narrative. More anthropologists than ever before are not afraid to “get proximate” (Stevenson 2015: 17) to human suffering, which means getting up close and personal because seeing things only from a distance leaves out important perspectives.1 Critically applied and politically

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1 This is evidenced by the increasing amount of publically engaged scholarship appearing in peer-reviewed journals, books, and other outlets such as blogs, podcasts, news articles and op-eds, including but not limited to the following titles sampled primarily from US anthropology: Collaborating for Change by Susan D. Greenbaum et al (2020); Cultural Anthropology: Contemporary, Public, and Critical Readings by Keri Vacanti Brondo (2020); Engaged Anthropology: Politics Beyond the Text by Stuart Kirsch (2018); “Public Anthropology in 2015” by Angelique Haugerud in American Anthropologist (2016); Feminist Ethnography by Dana-Ain Davis and Christa Craven (2016), “The Power of Public Scholarship” by Paul Stoller in The Huffington Post (2016); Media, Anthropology, and Public Engagement edited by Simone Abram and Sarah Pink (2015); Public Anthropology in a Borderless World edited by Sam Beck and Carl A. Maida (2015); “Laying the Body on the Line: Activist Anthropology and the Deportation of the Undocumented” by Daniel Goldstein in American Anthropologist (2014); and the many articles appearing in Anthropology News, Anthropology Now, Anthropology Today, and Sapiens. These works build on classics that include: Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further toward an Anthropology for Liberation by Faye V. Harrison (1991); Engaging Anthropology: The Case for a Public Presence by Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2006); and Engaged Observer: Anthropology, Advocacy, and Activism edited by Victoria Sanford and Asale Angel-Ajana (2006).
engaged anthropologists recognize social injustice, which motivates them to study the causes and consequences of inequity. Those schooled in historical political economy and the comparative approach are trained to be present, to grapple with the horrors as well as the beauties of the world. Engaged scholarship reflects understanding that “detachment” constitutes a form of action. To pretend otherwise is to ignore the fact that distance and distancing are not at all neutral but have consequences, a form of complicity with those policies, practices and ideologies that harm those who are most vulnerable and that which is most vulnerable. Engagement means working with an eye toward ameliorating the problems and the suffering. Anthropologists who are engaged ask, “What can I as a person and what can my discipline offer the world in order to address a wide range of issues of profound public importance?”

To even imagine the “Right Side Up” world requires knowing what is amiss in the “Upside Down” one and why it is so. Anthropologists are knowledge experts who too often dismiss what they know as unimportant or irrelevant perhaps because they may think everyone knows it. Those of us who are educators and any one of us who has conversed with family members or acquaintances likely recognize that what anthropologists know is not common knowledge. Let us not forget that “the ideologues of fog, the pontificators of obscurantism” (2000: 308), Galeano’s phrases, have been and continue to be very successful in blanketing consciousness and confusing people. The pontificators, Galeano explains, “tell us that reality can’t be deciphered, which really means reality can’t be changed” (2000: 308).

Not true, engaged anthropologists push back on the pontificators. Yet it is not enough to be knowledge experts. In my view, anthropologists need to take that knowledge and put it to work. Here I return to my earlier assertion, which is that anthropologists too often fail to acknowledge to their own selves the ways they are putting that knowledge to work. The anthropologist-artist-poet and activist Gina Ulysse argues for synthesis, that she defines as the “untapped potential [we have] yet to access” (2013, 2017).

Anthropologists need synthesis because for too long they have suffered the dangers of the split, such as the schism between the scholar and the responsible global citizen or between the artist in us and the anthropologist or between the artistic and the scholarly in representing what they have come to learn.

I suggest that anthropologists and the institutions within which they operate make a small shift that will have a big effect in moving towards the “Right Side Up” world. That move is a shift in perception about what counts as anthropology, which must go beyond producing scholarship to how we put knowledge to work. Let me illustrate with an example of an activity with which I am recently engaged and which, informed by Ulysse’s call for synthesis, I have come to recognize as engaging world solidarities in the quest for well-being and a livable future. The example is not about a study I am conducting or a book I am writing though I do see those activities as essential to making sense of the world and of knowing it.

Instead, this is a very local story. By that I mean it takes place where I live, which is a multi-ethnic city of 80,000 people just 30 kilometers (about 20 miles) north of Manhattan, New York. Two years ago, there was a murder in the city – one public high school student stabbed another to death – a Black girl killed a white girl. Underneath the incident of interpersonal violence is a story of how structural inequity, structural violence, and institutional racism produce trauma and destruction that only beget more traumas, more destruction. I come in as a 30-year resident of that city who supports public education, which is constantly under attack across the U.S. I responded to a call for what was billed as a collaborative effort to
“reduce the violence in the lives of children and youth,” the name of a task force to which I became a member. Over the course of the previous two+ years, my involvement deepened in part because I could see the parts of the “Upside Down” world in action – the forces of radical evil in play, the operations of radical deception churning, how difference was turned into ideological infection for the purpose of criminalizing poor black and brown children, and how memory and history were obliterated. All of these actions were in the interest of developing and implementing a hyper-punishment school policy guaranteed to reproduce radical evil. The proposed policy was to place armed police, euphemistically referred to as School Resources Officers, inside the schools. The practice of placing SROs in schools is documented by independent, scholarly research and by the federal government to result in the criminalization of young students for minor offenses by funneling them into the criminal justice system, a pattern that disproportionately injures Black/African American and Latinx students as well as students with disabilities (Waterston 2019b).

In contrast to what my college students imagined for an alternative world, the dynamics in my home community reflected the release of more racism, more demonization, more hierarchy, heightened securitization with weaponry that would benefit only rapacious interests, and the viewing of neighbors as a threat, not a promise. The situation was becoming ever more alarming as my local school system moved further from my own students’ vision of what schools ought to provide all the children.

Recognizing it was not enough to stop at analysis, I saw clearly how I might put such knowledge to work using scholarly skills I have too often taken for granted: how to identify what information to gather and how to get it; how to read and translate data; how to distinguish fact from opinion and knowing how and when to demonstrate the distinction; how to identify specific pernicious or rapacious interests and knowing what evidence would reveal them; and how to work collaboratively in community. Remarkably, the effort began to have positive effect; there was a shift in how people started to see the proposed draconian policy. Voices of hate and divisiveness though loud were revealed to be the few while people of good will proved to be the many.

At a crucial moment, the school board voted 8-1 against a draconian policy that would have placed those armed police inside the schools. As a result of this hard-won decision, some children’s lives may be spared. They have a better chance, now, to fulfill their potentials rather than be swept into the dustbin as waste.

This experience illustrates the value of “Think Global, Act Local,” despite the cliché that phrase has become. Like other social movements, this one was slow and steady not stunning or spectacular. That is where and how it happens, Galeano observed. “Without making a fuss,” he wrote, “these [local social movements] shoulder the task of reconceiving democracy, nourishing it with popular participation and revising the battered traditions of tolerance, mutual assistance, and communion” (2000: 32).

I have come to recognize that this is anthropology, an example of synthesizing the split self between the scholar and the responsible global citizen. This is not the first time I have been thus engaged. Where before I siloed such activity as community volunteerism or activism, this is the first time I have come to see it as central to the anthropological project. With that shift in my perspective, I have become more clear-eyed about how and what I can contribute in very specific ways. Liberated from old disciplinary expectations – for I no longer consider these activities as unfitting to anthropology – I now enter this space as an
anthropologist in solidarity with others to seek well-being and to craft a more livable future, one step at a time, one issue at a time, one struggle at a time. Having identified the kind of world I want, the kind of productive relations I want, I can see what in small steps it takes to achieve them even in the face of powerful opposition.

I have no illusions about what people of good will are up against in the “Upside Down World.” Reflecting on past attempts to build societies based on solidarity, Galeano declares them “shipwrecked, leaving us to suffer a universal crisis of faith in the human capacity to change history” (2000: 312). He cries, “Stop the world, I want to get off!” (2000: 312).

We cannot get off and we should not because collectively anthropologists are a powerful creative force. They need to claim the positive contribution they make, the struggle of which they are a part, and the legacy they intend to leave. Imagine the power of the combined contributions already made by every anthropologist across the globe in putting upright the “Upside Down” world. Should we think of our influence not in individual terms but as collective impact, I am certain anthropologists would be amazed and newly invigorated to keep at it. As they do, let them now praise imagination and be fearless in unleashing it. Let them dare to exercise the right to dream and together devise, plot, plan for the “Right Side Up” world, an achievement not yet actualized. More than a notion, the “Right Side Up” world is an end to which the world might yet arrive.

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Activism as Care: Kathmandu, Paris, Toronto, New York City

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ABSTRACT What are the possibilities for well-being in exile? If one is displaced, and in a constant struggle for what has been lost, can you be “well”? An individual's answer to these questions might change on a day-to-day basis, or over the course of one's lifetime. A definition of well-being is useful here: “the balance point between an individual's resource pool and the challenges faced.” Resources the Tibetan community draws on include concepts and practices from Tibetan Buddhism, the leadership of the Dalai Lama, and political action and community care forged in the different contexts of lack of citizenship in South Asia and citizenship in the diaspora outside of it. China's invasion and colonization of Tibet in the 1950s led to Tibetans fleeing south to India for refuge. In the six decades since then, the diaspora has spread around the world while many Tibetans also remain inside Tibet as part of the People's Republic of China. In this article, I draw on ethnographic research in Tibetan communities in Canada, France, India, Nepal, Switzerland, and the USA from 1994 through 2020, including activism in the current Covid-19 pandemic. Notions of care embedded in Tibetan political activism enable possibilities for well-being even in times of loss. The idea of activism as care is the key.

Keywords: Tibet. Activism. Care. Citizenship. Refugees.

Introduction

There is no choice to opt-out. Being in exile, being a refugee, means one has a political cause. It means a commitment to something bigger than one's own self, family, and everyday life. Exile includes a commitment to a community. This community might be organized on political lines or ethnic ones or geographic connections or any number of shared histories, beliefs, and practices. For Tibetans in exile, politics and religion jointly ground the community. Buddhist ideas and institutions frame Tibetan worlds, even for those few Tibetans who are not Buddhist, but are instead Muslim, Christian, or atheist. In exile, political activism is a community activity centred around the loss of country and home, around the shared project of restoring Tibet to Tibetan rule. Whether annual protests on March 10/Tibetan Uprising Day, solidarity with hunger strikers or self-immolators, sharing news about activist events over social media, or one's own religious practice and prayers, there is no choice to fully opt-out of political activism on behalf of Tibet. Activism dedicated to regaining political sovereignty in Tibet is a community project in which all generations participate. It is a form of community self-care. That is, in the Tibetan exile community, to be an activist is to express care. Activism is care.

What are the possibilities for well-being in exile? If one is displaced, and in a constant struggle for what has been lost, can you be “well”? An individual's answer to these questions might change on a day-to-day basis, or over the course of one's lifetime. In general, though, the answer is yes. And in the specific case of the Tibetan exile community, I argue the
answer is also yes. A definition of well-being is useful here: “the balance point between an individual’s resource pool and the challenges faced” (Dodge et al. 2012). Resources the Tibetan community draws on include concepts and practices from Tibetan Buddhism, the leadership of the Dalai Lama, and political action and community care forged in the different contexts of lack of citizenship in South Asia and citizenship in the diaspora outside of it. China’s invasion and colonization of Tibet in the 1950s led to Tibetans fleeing south to India for refuge. In the decades since then, the diaspora has spread around the world while many Tibetans also remain inside Tibet as part of the People’s Republic of China. My ethnographic and historical research with this community began in 1994 in Kathmandu, and over the years has expanded to include Tibetan communities in Canada, France, India, Switzerland, and the USA. In this article, I draw on research in each of these communities from 1994 through 2020, including activism in the current Covid-19 pandemic. Notions of care embedded in Tibetan political activism enable possibilities for well-being even in times of loss.

Activists operate outside of the political mainstream. They challenge existing systems, demanding improvement or change or both. Activists are key to the formation of new political subjects (Rancière 1999, 2010). Refusing the probable in favour of the possible, activists open new and different possibilities for things deemed faulty, insufficient, or unjust (McGranahan 2016; Simpson 2014). Within anthropology, there are several strands of literature on activism, including anthropology as activism (Sanford and Angel-Anjali 2006; Willow and Yotebieng 2020) as well as of activism (Brosius 1999; Dave 2012, 2013; Edelman 2001; Gellner and Karki 2010; Ginsburg 1998; Haugerud 2013; Kunreuther 2018; Lee 2016; Pratt 2003; Shah and Shneiderman 2013; Weiss 2014; Zia 2019). As the study of activism, anthropologists have focused on “when, why, how, and with what effects a sense of injustice or grievance or other critique is converted to public protest or other displays of commitment to change” (Haugerud 2018: 8). Activism may include indirect political action such as petitioning legislatures or public marches, or direct action such as a Free Tibet protest at Mount Everest. For Tibetans in exile, activism is both direct and indirect, and is so in an expansive sense. The Tibetan political cause is one situated outside the political mainstream. No country in the world publicly supports the Tibetan exile government in their political struggle with the People’s Republic of China. Activism is political, but its framing is cultural. This is where care comes in.

To care is to help, to be concerned with, to feel for someone or something. Care is labour, tied to class, gender, race, and other markers of difference, and often requiring performances of happiness, innocence, and compliance while masking issues of power, inequality, and violence (Jones 2004; Parreñas 2018; Stevenson 2014; Stoler 2002). Care may be about or for; it may be affect or action. Caregiving can reveal symmetry between these as much as disjuncture. A rich body of scholarship on caregiving in institutional settings shows the moral components of care, including moments of disregard or abandonment (Biehl 2012; Buch 2013; Fassin 2008; Mol 2008; O’Neill 2019). Generating care about something, getting people to care, developing sympathy for others, is a common topic or problem in some communities, and is analysed as such within academia (Edmiston 2020; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Rutherford 2009; Schrader 2015). Care, it is suggested, should not be taken for granted. Instead, we need to collectively figure out “how” to care or what “good” care is or can be.
These are indispensable questions, ones that need to be asked and answered. But they are not universal. For the Tibetan community in exile, the premise of a lack of care that needs to be cultivated is absent. Instead, in the form of compassion/snying rje (“nying jey”), care is the central framing concept of community (Childs 2004; Lewis 2019; McGranahan 2012; Yeh 2002). To live a good life requires holding and practicing compassion for all sentient beings, that is, for creatures with the capacity to feel suffering. All creatures that have not achieved enlightenment exist in a state of suffering. Tibetan notions of care and compassion have thus long included non-human worlds. Well-being comes from working to help all sentient beings be free from suffering. What does this work look like? Prayer. Cultivating compassion. Caring for animals. Making offerings to the deities in the morning. Supporting monks, and also nuns, in their dedication to alleviating suffering through spiritual study and practice. These actions are not abstractions. Instead they are practices that are culturally embedded in ideas of a good person, a good life, and the right motivations needed for each. This is both a “mode of practical engagement” with the world as well as a moral sense of “obligation and responsibility to the more-than-human” (Gagne 2018: 7; Lewis 2019). Snying rje in this Tibetan Buddhist sense is deeper in meaning than its translation into the English word “compassion” suggests (Yeh 2002: 236). As such, while cultivating snying rje includes public acts of religious merit-making, it is best explained as a “daily lifelong practice” (Yeh 2002: 236). As snying rje, compassion is (ideally) something you do, something you have, and something you are.

Care’s relationship to activism comes via compassion. The Tibetan cultural mandate to commit oneself to relieving suffering for all sentient beings is not an individual decision one makes. Some individuals choose to become nurses (a highly popular occupation for Tibetans in exile), others might go into government service, and others still are leaders in political activism. Such occupational paths are linked to personal practices of compassion, but follow from the community-wide embodiment and practice of snying rje. All people, regardless of their gender or age or occupation or income level or so on, are understood to be in the realm of suffering and thus to need to cultivate snying rje. Right now, for Tibetans in exile, practices of care extend to include political activism, especially the need to alleviate suffering in relation to the loss of sovereignty. Suffering gives rise to compassion, and in the Tibetan context enables “agency in the face of structural violence” (Lewis 2019: 23). As anthropologist Sara Lewis argues (2019), the Tibetan community is skilled in the development of equanimity (btang snyom/“tang nyom”) and spacious mind (sems pa chen po/“sempa chenpo”) in relation to crisis.

If care and activism are in part about securing individual and community well-being, home is a key part of this well-being. Home is a sense of being grounded in the world. To be grounded is not just an individual phenomenon, but one experienced collectively in community. As such, feeling at home, feeling one has a home and a place in the world, may be considered a measure of well-being (El-Shaarawi 2015; Said 2000). In troubled times, well-being suffers. What happens, however, when troubled times are indefinite and extend across both decades and generations? This is the Tibetan experience. Multiple generations of refugees share in this loss of home, some who were born in Tibet and others who were born in exile, each of who possess individual and collective memories of Tibet even if they have never been there in person. For this community, well-being necessarily involves the securing of Tibetan political sovereignty. This is a collective rather than individual endeavour, a form
of community self-care as shared political commitment. This commitment is grounded in cultural resources such as Buddhist thought and practice, as well as in material efforts to provide for and protect the community through improving economic standards, education, and health. Based in Dharamsala, India, the Tibetan exile government is the centre of these cultural, material, and political efforts (Ardley 2003; Lokyitsang 2016; McConnell 2016). But, ideas of care in the community are not only about being cared for by the government, but caring for each other including with longstanding practices of mutual aid. Everyday mutual aid practices are amplified in times of individual and community crisis, such as the current Covid-19 pandemic. Care is activism is care.

**Sharing Joys and Sorrows: Mutual Aid, Connection, and Compassion**

I first learned about *skyid sdug* (“kyidu”) as I lay on a pharmacy floor. Holding me up, Kesang had walked me there from her home close to the Boudha stupa in Kathmandu. I was woozy, very sick with gastrointestinal distress, and we needed medicine. The effort to get to the pharmacy exhausted me and I fainted on the floor right in front of Kesang, the pharmacists, and all the other patients. Pharmacies in Nepal can be crowded places, and luckily for me, there were two people there who Kesang knew—a husband and wife. The man was *pha yul gcig pa* (“phayul chigpa”) with Kesang’s husband. This connection to the same district, or *pha yul* (“father land”), in Tibet came with a series of connections and obligations. That day in the pharmacy, I was barely conscious and unable to walk. The man fetched his car, and Kesang and his wife somehow got me into the car, and he brought us home. In the midst of all the chaos, Kesang also managed to collect my medicine. The next day when I was feeling better, she told me what happened, and also why. This was my introduction to Tibetan concepts of connection and compassion.

“We were lucky he was there,” Kesang explained. *Pha yul gcig pa mi* are people who help you when you need it. “This is what we do for people from our same district. They [the same couple] helped me before when I was pregnant. And we help people from our district when they arrive here from Tibet.” Over the next five years, I would witness this again and again in situations of need and friendship. *If pha yul gcig pa* was an informal mutual aid relationship, then *skyid sdug* was a formal one. “We also have groups for each *pha yul*,” Kesang explained. “They are called skyid sdug. They have lots of parties.” She laughed, sharing some of the more colourful details of a recent party, and then continued as I asked questions. “You pay to be a member of the *skyid sdug*, and give the money you can. Rich people have to give more. Then when someone needs the money, if they have a baby or if someone dies, then the skyid sdug gives money. They help out in person too, making food and taking care of people.” And then she turned back to the pharmacy. *Nga tsho dpe bsdod sde chen po red*, she said again. “We were so lucky. T. Tashi was also at the pharmacy, and he is connected to Lobsang Tinley [her husband] because they are both from Lithang. He is someone we can ask for help.” This happened in June 1994, my very first summer of preliminary fieldwork with the Tibetan refugee community in Nepal. Fast forward eighteen years, to the summer of 2012 and once again I was at Kesang’s house. But this time it was in Toronto, not Kathmandu.

Lunch that day was at an Indian restaurant. I was with two activists from the Students for Free Tibet-Canada office, and we had an animated conversation about politics and citizenship and asylum. We talked about their work and my research, and shared stories about people we realized we all knew. My respect for these young activists and the work
they were doing was immense. When I returned to Kesang’s house after lunch, I shared my excitement with her. She listened, then asked, “The man, what was his family name?” I didn’t know off the top of my head, but reached into my bag to get his business card. I said his full name out loud. Her face changed with a knowing smile of recognition. “I thought so!” she said. “Did you know who he was?” I said no, I knew him only as a young activist I had just met. “His father is the one who rescued you,” she said. “T. Tashi. That day in the pharmacy. He drove us home.” Almost two decades later, on another continent, these two families and me, the anthropologist, were still connected.

Mutual aid practices are important for refugees. Yet, practices such as skyid sdug predate the Chinese invasion, and were used by Tibetans in earlier times both inside and outside Tibet. Written in 1956, anthropologist Beatrice Miller’s description of “kidu” in Darjeeling is still accurate today: “The kidu is designed to function as a source of aid and comfort during the life crises or major prolonged illnesses of its members. In these circumstances, the kidu contributes as a unit toward the expenses incurred by its members” (160). Skyid sdug have elected leaders and also treasurers and sometimes other officers. Embodying the culturally-valued idea of connection as “sharing joys and sorrows,” mutual aid groups such as skyid sdug are a “peculiarly Tibetan” phenomenon (Miller 1956: 157), and remain vital in the exile community (McGranahan 2010: 64-65). For my earlier research with Tibetan resistance army veterans, most of whom were elderly men originally from the eastern Tibetan region of Kham, skyid sdug and pha yul gcig pa connections were invaluable. They provided social outlets as well as economic security and a sense of belonging, especially for those men whose families had remained in Tibet. In Kalimpong in the mid-1990s, three decades after Miller’s research in neighbouring Darjeeling, I quickly learned that I had to schedule my visits to people’s homes around skyid sdug parties, as well as to avoid scheduling interviews for the morning after a party. However, if mutual aid organizations are an important part of exile life, they are not a substitute for what has been lost. It is always, it seems, part of the conversation that we are refugees, we are in exile, we are not in Tibet.

**Without Rights: Political Protest as Community Self-Care**

What does political activism look like without rights? If you do not have the rights to free speech or political opinion or even to gather in public, then what forms of political activity are available to you? Answering these questions requires dislodging the citizen as the unmarked or presumed subject in the world. To be a citizen is to have rights. But to be a citizen is not a given, not all peoples in the world hold citizenship, and thus not all individuals have rights. This is not about taking rights for granted, or acknowledging that rights can be distributed unequally and unjustly among peoples who should possess them without discrimination. Instead, it is to acknowledge that some individuals in the world are not citizens, and thus do not necessarily have rights at all. Some might have been citizens in one country, but are now living in another country where they are not citizens. Whether or not such undocumented people have rights, and what those rights are, is determined inconsistently across countries. Others have never been citizens in the first place. This is the situation for many Tibetans: not possessing citizenship, including from birth, is a normative condition for Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal.

By definition, to be in exile is to be away from home. However, exile is not a singular category. Exile in South Asia rests on a different set of histories and possibilities than does
exile elsewhere in the world. Each region, each country, has its own logics and rules for foreigners. Foreigners are, of course, also not a singular category. There are tourists and expats and migrants and refugees and traders and missionaries and diplomats and mercenaries and pilgrims and students and scholars and more. Some borders between communities and countries are open; others are not. Different rules exist for how long one may stay in a foreign country, including the possibility of no real rules at all. This is the case in South Asia, the only region in the world where not a single country has signed on to any of the UN conventions on refugees.

Tibetans have no state-guaranteed rights in India and Nepal, nor a path to citizenship in either country even if they were born there. They cannot vote, own property, qualify for certain jobs, or have bank accounts. Within the community, there are some groups of Tibetans in each country who have found ways to work around the system to secure certain rights ranging from property ownership all the way up to citizenship. A partial list includes Tibetans who were resident in India prior to 1959, some individuals who allied with the Nepali king in the early 1970s, the community of Majnu ka Tilla in Delhi (Balasubramaniam and Gupta 2019), and a handful of intrepid individuals who have pursued citizenship in the high courts of India (Gupta 2019; McGranahan 2018). Protest is something Tibetans also do not have a right to do, and yet political protest is a ubiquitous activity in exile. Protest in exile is linked to protest inside Tibet which, while rarer, is also at much higher risk in terms of the lethal power used by Chinese security forces (Barnett and Akiner 1994). In addition, therefore, to the ongoing, even everyday political activism of those in exile, Tibetans outside Tibet also publicly support and communicate to the world activism by Tibetans inside Tibet. In the last decade, this has been most striking in response to the self-immolations conducted in part as a form of political opposition to Chinese rule (Buffetrille and Robin 2012; McGranahan and Litzinger 2012; Woeser 2016). Of the 165 self-immolators, 154 were individuals inside Tibet who also did not have the right to protest.

Activism without rights is a form of refusal. It is to insist on the validity and truth of one’s cause. It is to claim a public voice regardless of whether or not it has been granted by governmental authorities. Refusal can be a form of wellness, and wellness involves both caring and being cared for (De Michelis 2020). Refusing citizenship means that care of the Tibetan refugee community in institutional form is in the hands of the exile Tibetan government, led by the 14th Dalai Lama until he retired from political leadership in 2011. The Dalai Lama is a figure, a person, an institution distinct in the world. He is a bodhisattva, an enlightened being who chose to come back to earth in human form to aid others on their path to enlightenment. Tibetans understand the Dalai Lama to be the embodiment of wisdom and compassion, an individual who while here on earth as a human being is also much more than that. In 1642, the Dalai Lama lineage began spiritual and political rule over Tibet, a period of governance that lasted until 1959 with various periods of disruption and displacement. Fleeing into exile in 1959, the Dalai Lama’s role as caretaker of the Tibetan people was amplified in a new way. He is spiritual teacher, root guru for many Tibetans, who place their faith and trust in him, and in exile has also taken on new secular caretaking aspects via the building and safeguarding of the refugee community. In turn, “service” to the exile government is seen as not just civil service, but also as respect to and care for the Dalai Lama.
Service is intricately tied to cultural notions of right behaviour and motivation. To serve matters deeply. It should not be self-serving, however. As with activists elsewhere, including among youth political activists in Nepal, people differentiate between politics as opportunity and politics as service (Snellinger 2018: 58). The qualities of others’ political service is debated—who is most sincere, most devoted to His Holiness [the Dalai Lama], and most accomplished. Accomplishments hinge on two things: if it benefits His Holiness, and/or if it benefits Tibet. Broadly speaking, benefiting Tibet is to work toward regaining sovereignty. Sovereignty will return the Dalai Lama to Tibet and reunite the community, including the many families who have been separated since 1959. Political activism on behalf of Tibet has been part of Tibetan public life in South Asia since the early years of exile. Protests were often cultural events and family affairs, involving monks and prayer, school children performing “traditional” songs and dances while parents and grandparents looked on appreciatively, and politicians and activists made speeches. Over time, things have changed for Tibetans in India and Nepal. Political protests and even cultural events that were once allowed are now policed in severe ways or even banned altogether.

Tibetans who protest against the Chinese government, or who have gathered for the sole purpose of celebrating the Dalai Lama’s birthday, are sometimes beaten by police officers. Sometimes they are also arrested or detained, and physically and verbally abused, including being told to “go home to Tibet.” What does one do in such a situation? Some continue to protest, as with the well-known activist and writer Tenzin Tsundue, as well as activist groups such as Tibetan Youth Congress and Students for Free Tibet. Others choose to stop joining public protests, and find other ways to commit themselves to sovereignty. And still others choose to leave India and Nepal, traveling to countries outside of South Asia for safety, for work, and sometimes for rights and citizenship. Police abuse and the inability to publicly protest against the Chinese government is sometimes considered a legitimate reason for receiving political asylum elsewhere. A lack of rights to freedom of expression may be interpreted as a form of political persecution. Receiving political asylum puts one on a path to citizenship including rights long denied to multiple generations of Tibetan refugees in South Asia. In the diaspora, people have quickly learned that rights extend well beyond the ability to protest against the Chinese government. Rights are also about establishing and asserting one’s place in the world.

Kathmandu: Exile Dreams of Home

“I don’t dream about this place.” Nyarong Gyurme said this as he looked around the room in which we sat talking in a Tibetan refugee camp in Nepal. “Before I used to dream about Tibet, about my village. Now I don’t even have those dreams often.” His sentiment was echoed by other Tibetan elders with whom I’ve spoken over the years. They don’t dream of the Jorpati or Jampaling camps in Nepal or of the Majnu ka Tilla settlement in Old Delhi. Instead, home is somewhere else. After decades in exile, the referent for home is not India or Nepal. Instead, they figuratively and literally dream of home in and as Tibet. This is about sovereignty as much as nostalgia. Tibetans are refugees because the People’s Republic of China (PRC) invaded and took over their country. Under the leadership of Mao Zedong, Tibet was colonized by China, becoming a formal part of the PRC and thus losing its sovereignty. In 1959, after Tibet’s leader the Dalai Lama escaped into exile in India,
thousands of Tibetans followed him. Many left behind their families, their animals, and other belongings; all left behind their homes. Six decades later, what are the possibilities for home? In exile, community dispossession in the loss of country is met with a continuing political struggle to regain it. Actions to regain home inside Tibet are paired with refusals and reproductions of the status quo outside Tibet. This is not necessarily a contradiction, but instead a reflection of political possibility in the contemporary world. Fighting for home requires shifting relationships to the possible, including the possibility of making home elsewhere prior to regaining sovereignty.

For many decades in South Asia, home in exile was only ever elsewhere. Home was Tibet to which refugees did not have access. They could not go home, nor could they communicate with family members inside Tibet. From 1959 through the mid-1980s, no contact was possible between individuals inside and outside Tibet. People had no way of knowing what the status was of their parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, and other relatives left behind. Following the death of Mao in 1976, the Chinese government introduced liberalization policies in Tibet. In the 1980s, small numbers of people began to legally move across the border to Nepal and on to India, and large numbers began to clandestinely escape from Tibet to life in exile. This erratic movement of people was accompanied by an informal communication and courier service. At the time, postal mail and phone services did not exist between South Asia and Tibet. Informal personal couriering was therefore crucial once the border opened. Packages of clothing and sturdy shoes containing secret stashes of money hidden in them were sent from India and Nepal, while packages of special dried mushrooms, yak meat, and other local delicacies were sent from Tibet. Transiting both ways were letters, photographs, and self-recorded cassette tapes.

Oral recordings are one way to connect to home. In the 1990s, generations met for the first time over cassette tapes; reunions took place; once again people heard the voices of their loved ones. Such cassette recordings provided occasion for a wide range of emotions: tears, joy, hope, fear. Usually recorded over cheaply available music tapes—of Bollywood hits, of Tracy Chapman albums, of the Titanic soundtrack, of Nepali folk music—the preferred genre to record was song rather than spoken message. All types of songs were sung: village songs, ritual songs, songs for courtship, and popular contemporary songs in a range of languages. In exile, these tapes were played endlessly, especially during Losar, the Tibetan New Year. The exchange of songs between families split by the Chinese invasion of Tibet bridged the gap between home and exile. Such meaningful moments are generative of affective ties as well as of dreams.

One morning in 1998, Kesang told me of a dream she had the night before. In it she dreamt that her brother from Tibet appeared unexpectedly at her home in Kathmandu. In the dream she saw her family members, her mother, both fathers, and brothers as well as her village, their house, and the land surrounding it. She told me that it was just like seeing her family and her home in person. “I rarely dream about Tibet,” she said, “even though I try to when I go to sleep.” The day before she had listened repeatedly to a cassette tape of her mother and brothers singing songs. Amidst her excitement was an element of sadness. Dreams, she explained, are not real. They are about real things, but fall short of the experience she truly wants which is to be home in Tibet with her family and with the Tibetan government back in place. Her dream is a momentary respite from being here rather than there. The distance between “this place” and “home” is far. The exile community
organizes itself around the distance, but does not always adhere to a singular geographic or
temporal notion of home. For Kesang, both shift, as has she from Tibet to Kathmandu and
then to Toronto via New York. Technology has also shifted. Cassette tapes are relics of the
past now, and instead people connect on social media.

Another morning, this time in 2016, Kesang and I sat in her kitchen talking. She
said to me in Tibetan, “People in Toronto aren’t as busy as they are in New York.” Then
switching to English, this fifty-something woman who never had the opportunity to attend
school before the English classes provided to new immigrants by the Canadian government,
proclaimed, “In Toronto, we are too happy.” After growing up in Tibet under the colonial
Chinese government, then living in Nepal as a refugee for 25 years, she is now happy in
Canada. She pulled out her iPad and checked in on WeChat with family members and
friends from her hometown in eastern Tibet. We listened to their voices, and to recorded
messages of the sort one exchanges with beloved relatives who are far away—How are you?
We are fine. And so on. We watched videos of dances and listened to songs performed in
Tibet, and then the mood changed. We watched with horror the execution of a Tibetan
man in Lhasa by Chinese security forces. We scoured the internet for information about
the killing which had supposedly happened earlier that day. We found none. We did not
know what to do.

Paris: Asylum, Shared Experience, and Helping Others

It was cold and raining as we approached the camp. For as far as one can see there was a line
of tents running alongside the edge of a forest. As my husband and I walked up, two men
rode past on a bike and a group of three young men walked by giggling; each said “Bonjour”
to us, which we said too as a reply. Outside one of the first tents we walked by was a baby
stroller. Flying high above several tents were Tibetan flags. As it began to rain harder, a man
and woman walked up to us; they had been expecting us and invited us into their communal
tent where we sat down around an open fire. Quickly a pot was put on the fire; into the
pot went milk and water, tea and sugar. Others came to see who we were and to join the
conversation. Several took out their phones, opening them to either Facebook or WhatsApp,
and then showing me photos of myself giving public lectures or messages I had sent as part
of coordinating this preliminary visit. “This is you, right?” they asked me in Tibetan. “Yes,” I
said as we watched the tea come to a boil and began the work of situating ourselves in each
other’s worlds.

In November 2019 in the French town of Achères, 30 kilometres north of Paris, there
were 600 Tibetans (and it was rumoured, other Himalayan people) living in the camp. This
was not the first location for the camp. Over the years, the location of the camp shifted from
the banks of the Seine to the edge of the forest, including living on boats as well as in tents, in
the towns of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine and Achères. The camp was informal, not officially
approved, and the French government would occasionally dismantle it. Local residents and
municipalities aided the asylum seekers in individual and official ways, providing meals,
supplies, clothes, and sometimes private homes in which to stay. On December 2, four days
after my visit to the camp, the municipality of Achères moved all of the asylum seekers inside
for the winter. The day I was there was the day this plan was announced, and there was a lot
of talk of it. What will it be like? Will I get to stay with my brother? Will they separate men
and women? At that point, much was still unknown. We finished our tea and stood. It was
now fully dark outside. The only light came from the glow of people’s phone screens. We said our goodbyes, and walked with our host to the kitchen tent where a huge fire roared, and several naked lightbulbs also helped to illuminate things for the kitchen volunteers. They cooked under a kha btsags (“khata”) or prayer flag-wrapped image of the Dalai Lama (Image 1). That night they were making thukpa, noodle soup (Image 2).

More tea was made, and introductions too. This tent was clearly an organizational centre of the camp, and an important source of warmth on a cold night. There were some French volunteers here as well, men who had been helping with supplies and construction and French translation and with whatever, it seemed, was needed. Other volunteers who helped at the camp were Tibetan. Some were already resident in the Paris area, and some were based in Zurich. Switzerland has one of the oldest and largest Tibetan communities in Europe.

“The Swiss Tibetans just came here to help us,” a man offered. “They brought jackets and warm clothes and things for the kitchen.” Others also told me about the visit of Swiss Tibetans. It had clearly been a morale boost for camp residents. It was also a new form of aid, of care, in the Tibetan community. Not bound by the limits of skyid idug or pha yul gcig pa communities, in this new space of exile outside of the jurisdiction of the Tibetan exile government, and in a context where many individuals had Swiss citizenship by either birth or naturalization, possibilities for care expanded.

I knew about the Swiss operation before going to the camp. Two months earlier I had been in Zurich. While there, I met with young activists and learned about Shenpen, a Tibetan organization dedicated to helping Tibetans in Switzerland with translation needs, letter writing, and navigating governmental bureaucracies. Back home in Colorado in October, I and many others followed along on Facebook as the Shenpen (“helping others”) organization coordinated a relief effort for the refugees in Achères. On October 26, they held a clothing drive for the asylum seekers in Paris. They collected enough to fill two vans, and set off for Paris on November 1. Shenpen organizers documented this all on Facebook,
sharing photos and messages to the community (Image 3). On November 5, they shared their experience with a detailed public report and message of thanks to the community (Image 4):

Their post captures the sentiment expressed across the community—by friends in the Zurich area who were grateful to contribute, by activists in Paris who helped with unloading and distribution, as well as the broader community in diaspora, some of who were in similar asylum situations at earlier periods in their own lives. This last part is important: this is a shared experience that is distributed across time and generation. That is, the exiled diaspora consists of people who came out of Tibet at different times (or their parents or grandparents did), who were born in different countries, and whose experiences of exile, of asylum, of escape, of protest have certain shared but also dissimilar elements. Elements of luck as well as karma are attributed to this, to one's position in the world right now, of needing care or being in a position from which to offer care. Compassion underlies this activism, and citizenship and rights make it possible in new ways.

**Toronto: Citizenship and the Right to Have Rights**

Citizenship is the right to have rights. Hannah Arendt offered this famous critique of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 in her essay “The Rights of Man: What Are They?” Her argument was this: in claiming that all people had human rights, but in making states the guarantor of these rights, then stateless people were excluded from the right to rights. Instead, rights were only for citizens. This is the Tibetan situation. Without a path
to citizenship in South Asia, Tibetans have lived for six decades without the rights that many people take for granted. While small groups of Tibetans did move out of South Asia in earlier periods—especially in official programs to the UK and Switzerland in the 1960s, and to Canada in the 1970s—there was not serious Tibetan immigration out of South Asia until the enactment of Section 134 of the US Immigration Act of 1990.

In the mid-1990s, 1,000 Tibetans from India and Nepal were selected for official resettlement in the USA. This official program inspired other Tibetans to unofficially immigrate to North America. Some were able to secure citizenship there, whereas others travelled to Canada where they overwhelmingly applied for and received political asylum and citizenship. As time went on, still more began to migrate to European countries such as France in the hopes of receiving asylum there. Prior to the US resettlement program, there had not been mass immigration out of South Asia. It is not so much that the idea was unthinkable, as some Tibetans did live abroad, and this fact was widely known. It was more that this was something for elites, not necessarily a possibility for ordinary people in the refugee community. The US resettlement project changed that. What followed from this was not simply a change in location for roughly 50 percent of the exile population, and also new ideas about citizenship, and thus rights (Hess 2006, 2009; McGranahan 2018). As one man in Toronto expressed to me in 2012, “Here in Canada you can make something of yourself. In India, you couldn't even own a car.” The right to have rights, even with the criticisms and problems of the current state system acknowledged, can genuinely make a difference. It might especially make a difference for a community in which multiple generations of individuals have not held any rights, including for some, from birth to death.

Rights in the workplace, for example, matter. In Canada, these rights are part of a series of rights granted to individuals who receive asylum. In comparison with the USA, where some Tibetans live without documentation, Tibetans in Canada can work decent jobs. Good jobs, better jobs than are available to workers without papers. As one woman in Toronto who works for a job placement office told me as we discussed the differences between the USA and Canada, “Tibetans can get better jobs here in Toronto. The jobs they could work in New York City are all under the table. Here Tibetans can't do those jobs. You can't be a nanny if you can't call 911 and speak English. It wouldn't be safe.” Her job is to place Tibetans in jobs with benefits and unions, decent pay, and good safety protocols. Among some employers who are her clients, Tibetans are known as reliable, hard workers. Over the last decade, one employer’s workforce grew to over 50% Tibetan. However, not all Tibetans end up working for such good employers.

In the fall of 2015, upon learning their wages were less than those of non-immigrant workers, Tibetan workers at Fresh Taste Produce joined Teamsters Local 419, and began efforts to bargain with management (Badheytsang 2016; Wangkhang 2016). With no progress after five months, they went on strike in April 2016. After eleven days on strike, an agreement was reached with the company and the Tibetan community’s first collective action was successful. Other immigrant workers and unions throughout Toronto supported the Tibetans’ strike. As one Tibetan striker explained, this solidarity mattered deeply in the beginning: “We're not as educated. We're humble and hardworking. I want to get back to work as soon as possible. But once you know something like this (he gestures to the picket line), you become aware of your rights. You feel how your dignity is being kicked around, and it eats at your heart. You can't allow them to continue treating you like this, because they'll do the same to others too” (Badheytsang 2016).
Being aware of your rights changes things. In several countries, Tibetans serve in elected offices: among them are Bhutila Karpoche in Canada, Aftab Pureval in the USA, and Jigme Shitsettsang in Switzerland. Political protest on behalf of Tibetan sovereignty continues. March 10 protests continue, as do marches to the Chinese embassy, and year-round protests tied to annual events such as the day in 1995 that Chinese security forces kidnapped the 11th Panchen Lama, who was then a six-year-old boy, or sporadic events such as when someone self-immolates. Activism online, over social media, also proliferates, both with and without the vibrancy of in-person activism depending on the size and energy of the local community. Social media also enables activists to organize, advertise, and share actions such as housing rights protests in the Parkdale neighborhood of Toronto where many Tibetans live, or a recent Students for Free Tibet protest against Queens Public Library in NYC in which a Chinese Consulate exhibit about Tibet was presented as fact rather than propaganda.

Activism also continues in ways consonant with skyid sduug and pha yul gzig pa obligations: volunteer tutoring programs for school children, the Pocket Money Project to raise money to support underprivileged Tibetan students in India, and all manners of projects to raise funds or offer in-person assistance to community members in need, whether in one’s current community or former homes in India, Nepal, or Tibet. Kesang sends as much money as she can to her pha yul gzig pa community, mostly for elders and school children, and as needed in times of crisis like the 2015 earthquakes in Nepal. In this, she is in good company; her actions are shared across the community; this is snying rje, compassion, in action. “Sometimes,” Kesang says as we walk past a Sri Lankan grocery store in Parkdale, “I buy some $3 scratch lottery tickets in there. I hope that I will win $50,000 and then I will send it all to Nepal.” She laughs, I laugh, and we keep on walking.

**New York City: Momos and Practices of Care in a Pandemic**

Elmhurst, a neighbourhood in Queens, New York City was the initial centre of the Covid-19 pandemic in the USA. Elmhurst and the surrounding neighbourhoods of Jackson Heights, Sunnyside, and Woodside is also the centre of the Tibetan community in the USA. This is an immigrant neighbourhood, an historic first US home for people from around the world. It is a low-income area, full of workers newly designated as “essential.” The community reflects those of the diaspora elsewhere—individuals who were born in the USA or who came here as small children, individuals born in India or Nepal or elsewhere in diaspora, and those born in Tibet, and of all ages from babies to elders. It is a community in which someone is always arriving, from Dharamsala, from Kham, from Boston. And it is a community which has responded in both an extraordinary and an unsurprising way to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Activism as care defines the Tibetan response. Care about the community; care for the community. And care about and for frontline workers. Many frontline workers are Tibetans. They are nurses and doctors and public health workers; they are caregivers of all sorts, public and private, as well as gig economy workers. The Tibetan Nurses Association (TNA) estimates that there are 400-500 Tibetan nurses working in New York City. Together with the Tibetan Association of New York and New Jersey (TCNYNJ), the TNA has raised funds and committed themselves to community service as well as professional service during the pandemic. Their efforts stretched beyond the Tibetan community to include other Himalayan people as well, including Bhutanese and Sherpa. They established a Tibetan and
Nepali-language phone hotline for Covid-19 information where callers could speak with nurses, psychiatrists, and other specialists. Tibetan language material about Covid-19 in print and video was created, as it had been by Tibetans inside Tibet in January and February when the pandemic hit there. These organizations circulated lists of Tibetan nurses and doctors, including their names, qualifications, and phone numbers for at least nine hospitals in New York City, including Bellevue, Elmhurst, Jamaica, Long Island Jewish, Mount Sinai Manhattan, Mount Sinai Queens, NYP Weill Cornell, Queens, and Queens Presbyterian. These health workers are also able to be there in person when someone from the community is in the hospital and dying, allowing family members to speak with their loved one over the phone, and also facilitating Buddhist last rites by monks via FaceTime.

A young man in Queens, newly arrived from India, once told me that he took the Dalai Lama as his moral compass. This was instilled in him by his parents. “My father,” he said, “always talked about giving back.” These sentiments are embodied in the concept of snying rje, and are being put into action on a daily basis (as I write this sentence in May 2020) by his community in New York City. Each day on Facebook, there are posts about donations of PPE (personal protective equipment such as N95 masks) to hospital workers, and also of volunteers sewing and donating masks. But the one thing that stands out in Tibetan pandemic activism is food. The community is cooking food for frontline workers, preparing homemade, nourishing food, including momos, Tibetan dumplings, and delivering it to hospitals. Tibetans are skilled at cooking for crowds; this is surely related to centuries of monastery cooking, as well as the huge meals that always accompany skyid sdug and other community parties. Photos of people cooking, of meals ready to be delivered, of messages of thanks and support, including prayers from the Dalai Lama, and also of delivery flood my Facebook timeline from many different Tibetan groups—Chushi Gangdruk, Tibetan Youth Congress, and more (Images 5 & 6).

Generosity might be one of the few universally-valued cultural traits. For the Tibetan community, this moment has been one of service and generosity.

Tsampa, it turns out, can be as hard to get during a pandemic as toilet paper. Roasted barley flour or tsampa is
a staple of the Tibetan diet. It is especially appreciated by elders in the community whose needs have been a priority throughout the pandemic. The Queens-based Himalayan Elders Project delivers tsampa and other groceries to elders. There is a newly-created Tibetan radio app as well as Barkhor TV providing ongoing recorded programming for elders, as well as live music programs one can Zoom (that is, video conference) into to enjoy. Online storytelling for children occurs regularly, as do community programs. The online Himalayan Covid-19 Task Force shares important medical information and resources with the community. Students for Free Tibet host live conversations with community members who have stories to tell or needed information to share: a nurse who has Covid-19, a lawyer who can help community members navigate confusing legal issues in this time, practitioners trained in different self-care modalities. Machik is similarly hosting online “kora” sessions addressing issues such as mental health, domestic violence, and reimagining elder care. In Toronto (Etobicoke), the Tibetan Canadian Cultural Centre/Gangjong Choedenling is active with food and mask donation programs, as well as live online sgor gshas (“gorshey”) dancing classes every Wednesday. Sgor gshas, a type of circle dance, is not just an art form. In exile it is also a form of community solidarity and protest.

When the pandemic started, Kesang was working for a company that was allowed to stay open. But, she says, they weren’t keeping the workers safe. There were too many people there and not enough protection. She said something about this to her bosses and they threatened to fire her, so she quit. This did not surprise me. Kesang is a woman of unusually strong character. Her co-workers felt differently. They were worried about being fired, so stayed on the job. Two weeks after Kesang quit, a former co-worker called her. Two people at the company had just tested positive for Covid-19.

Meanwhile, north of Paris, the tented camp has been reassembled along the river in Conflans Sainte-Honorine. Springtime is here, the weather is warm enough, but now there is a pandemic. They are in their tents, but in quarantine; they are not supposed to leave. The local municipality helped to find shelter for some of the asylum seekers, for 18 women and 47 men, but others were left behind. They now try to social distance, relying mostly on food donations, while waiting for their chance at asylum, and waiting like everyone else for the pandemic to be over.

Kora: Care as Activism

To care is an active verb. To be cared for is passive. These may go together. Any gratitude that is not coerced is an example of this. Gratitude for one’s caretaker, gratitude at being able to offer care. Refusal to see care as delinked from political struggle. Insistence that compassion is a political keyword. Each of these commitments is how the struggle for sovereignty is practiced in the Tibetan exile diaspora. We see this in the early days of political struggle and socioeconomic efforts to gain community sustainability without the rights of citizenship, and also in current activist work aimed at relieving suffering for fellow asylum seekers or aiding frontline medical workers in a pandemic. This is care as activism. While having rights enables new forms of care, activism and compassion are possible without citizen-based rights. To care, to help others, to work toward alleviating suffering is, as Hannah Arendt might argue, the domain of the human, of the stateless as well as the citizen.

Many families in New York City, in Toronto or Minneapolis or Zurich, or any other hub in the diaspora outside of South Asia are multigenerational. Many elders have made this shift, which is yet another massive journey and displacement in their life experiences.
Not all do, though. In Jackson Heights one summer day, talking with an old friend from Jorpati in Kathmandu, he told me he had given up trying to get his mother to come live with him here in New York. “She won’t come,” he said. “There are no monasteries. There is nowhere for her to do kora.” Kora (skor ba) is the Buddhist practice of circumambulation as a form of walking prayer. One circumambulates a religious building such as a chorten or monastery, while saying prayers and also possibly turning prayer beads. How many circumambulations one does depends on the size of the kora circuit, as well as the time one has; elders often do many, having been released from the workday obligations of younger adults. In Dharamsala, the centre of the exile community, the kora path circles the Dalai Lama’s residence and temple.

A week after I spoke with my friend whose mother would not come to New York, I heard a different story from another person. His friend’s elderly mother had come. She also was concerned about the lack of a place to do kora. But she got creative. She learned all of the buildings in her Queens neighbourhood in which Tibetan families lived. Knowing that each of those families would have an altar in their home, and that each altar would include a photograph of the Dalai Lama, she decided she would walk a kora route encircling each of these apartment buildings. Her kora is thus consecrated as a form of daily prayer and activism. This is one way to remain well in this world, to balance the resources available to you with the challenges faced. Far from home, when you have lost your country and are fighting for sovereignty, there are ways to carry with you the practices, concepts, and convictions that allow you to remain well in the fight. To be well does not mean to be without pain or without suffering. Instead, in this context of a refugee diaspora, it is to be in community, to feel you are cared for, and to be able to act with care.

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Bricolage
Of Rumors and Transfers: The Short Life of Western-Educated Women’s Associations in French Sudan (1955–1960)

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ABSTRACT This article focuses on the activities of independent organizations of women, their programs, and their regional initiatives during the last period of colonization of French Sudan (now Mali). As colonial territories were increasingly gaining autonomy and self-representation, women’s activists and their organizations worked to improve the status of women both within and outside the household. As independence approached, the independence party US-RDA was progressively morphing into a monolithic and autocratic machinery, intolerant vis-à-vis independent organizations (including women’s groups). The US-RDA party leadership resorted to a series of tactics and strategies that divided women’s groups and belittled their leadership, ultimately managing to dismantle their organizations and quell any resistance to US-RDA’s dominance. This article chronicles women’s effort to resist and influence US-RDA’s gender politics, and some of the reasons behind the demise of those groups. It also reflects on some Malian women’s more recent critical engagement with their activist past in an effort to develop a more gender-inclusive narrative of the nation. More broadly, this article elucidates some of the social divisions and political practices that continue to affect the work of Malian women’s organizations even today.

Keywords: French Sudan/Mali; Late colonial period; Western-educated women; women’s independent associations; women’s rights agenda; abolition of polygyny; repression of women’s independent movements; US-RDA gender conservative agenda.

Introduction

In a 1955 report on the status of women, politician, women’s activist, and author Aoua Keita criticized the Western-educated women of French Sudan (today’s Mali) for their limited participation in politics. Keita asserted that the women elite “cannot and [do] not seem to...”

1 The present manuscript has been long in the making. It is a heavily updated revision of parts of my 1997 doctoral dissertation, Female Elites, Women’s Formal Associations, and Political Practices in Mali (West Africa). Since then many more resources have become available via the publication of fundamental work by African women (e.g., more recent work by Ba Konaré 1999; Diop 1999, 2007; Sanankoua 2004, 2005, 2007, 1990); the recent work of scholars of the region (e.g., Rillon 2016, 2018; Barthélémy 2010a, 2010b; Pauthier 2018); new memoirs (e.g., Dore-Audibert 1999; Condé 2012; Cissé 2009), and the digitization of documents formerly difficult to access.

2 In the 1950s and 1960s many women, especially the wives of prominent party members, were known as “Mme [husband’s name].” Thus the first wife of Modibo Keita, Mariam Travélé, was most often referred to as Mme Modibo Keita. Current practice is to precede a woman’s name by her husband’s last name, followed by her first name and her family name. However, there is much variation; some of the best-known leaders are known either by their family names (e.g., Aoua Keita) or by their husband’s names (e.g., Sira Diop). In this text I follow prevailing naming practices and provide further details about the women’s names in notes.
want to play either the role of leaders or of emancipators which one might have the right to expect of it” (cited in Morgenthau 1964: 287). She viewed nonliterate women (which she estimated to make up 95 percent of French Sudan’s female population) as much more willing than Western-educated women to sacrifice time and energy to participate in parties’ activities and struggles for their country’s independence (Morgenthau 1964: 277).

This was not the only time that Keita expressed such a negative assessment of Western-educated women, a group to which she herself belonged. Keita had graduated in 1931 from one of the few secondary schools that admitted women during the French colonial period (L’Ecole de Medecine de Dakar) and had successfully practiced one of the few professions then available to women (midwifery). Like many other Western-educated women in French Sudan at the time, she had married men (twice, actually) who shared her socioeconomic status – that is, Western-educated men who were also often employed by the colonial government and constituted a new emerging elite (Barthélemy 2010a; 2010b: 115). She had no children of her own (a fact several of her party comrades regularly brought up when talking to me about her) but saw her childlessness as an asset: she said she could see all Malians as her own children – that is, she was free to pursue the interests of all people without personal favoritism (Ouattara 1996: 16). During Mali’s first republic (1960–1968) Keita became the only woman representative at the national level. She sat on the National Political Bureau of the independence party, the Union soudanaise-Rassemblement démocratique africain (US-RDA). She also served as the only woman deputy in the national assembly until Namissa Touré joined her in 1964. Keita was a Western-educated woman and the most successful woman politician of her time. Why then, was she so critical of her peers’ political participation? And what historical responsibilities were Western-educated women unwilling to assume?

In this article, I examine what Aoua Keita described as Western-educated women’s reluctance to engage in party politics as the result of a series of experiences they had accumulated during the last years of French colonization (1946–1960). I argue that some Western-educated women’s hesitancy to participate reflected a conscious political position; that is, their discomfort with (if not opposition to) the conservative gender politics pursued by the US-RDA. Some of them had attempted to pursue a women-centered agenda and influence the US-RDAs’s gender politics, but their efforts had ultimately resulted in the party’s firm opposition, which led to their disenchantment with politics. My overall aim is to contribute to an understanding of some of the strategies and techniques of power (Bennett 1995 and 2006; de Jorio 2016) that gender-conservative segments of Malian society (a majority of the population within the time frame under consideration) deployed to oppose the Western-educated women’s agenda and create disunity among the women. The US-RDA political leadership of the time, building on oppressive colonial practices, ultimately

3 “Western-educated women” refers here to the few women (1 woman per 100,000; see Barthelemy 2010a: 15) who attained post-primary education during the French colonial period. They attended vocational schools and found employment in the French administration as midwives, visiting nurses, and teachers (that is, the few jobs that were open to women at that time). “Nonliterate women” refers simply to the women who had not attended French colonial schools. Nonliterate women were differentiated by marked differences (based on family status and individual resourcefulness among others) that are beyond the scope of this article. Some of them were extremely influential socially, and their support was sought after by the educated leaders of women’s independent organizations.

4 E.g., see interviews with Aoua Keita on March 6 and October 30, 1961, published in L’Essor.
resorted to circulating divisive rumors and transferring politically influential women away from Bamako, the capital and the primary center of power. Such power plays and political tactics eventually eroded the women activists’ relationship with their base (leveraging the disruptive power of emerging new social hierarchies) and discredited their public image. They will continue to be deployed throughout the Malian post-colony often jeopardizing women’s ability to implement their gender programs (see de Jong 1997, 2010 and 2016).

The events described here are located within the last colonial period – that is, since the 1944 Brazzaville conference that opened a phase of increasing autonomy and self-government on the part of the colonial territories. This was a period of intense political activism that included the creation of independent African parties, African leaders’ explorations of federal solutions to the problem of autonomy, and then (once the federal dreams failed) the pursuit of national independence. Women were also active participants in these epochal transformations. They participated in various capacities in the political parties of the time: nonliterate women were particularly active in the work of campaigning and recruiting new adherents, and Western-educated women attended political meetings early on, often in the company of their own Western-educated husbands. However, some of the women elite chose instead to concentrate their efforts on the improvement of women’s socio-economic conditions, an area that the French administration had been very reluctant to address for fear of antagonizing important local constituencies and in which it had initiated very limited reforms in marriage laws as a result (Burrill 2015).

In the last year of French colonization, a number of women’s groups emerged in French Sudan. They resulted from unexpected collaborations that developed in late-colonial institutional settings such as Social Services and certain Catholic milieus, but also in international women’s organizations. Women activists quickly realized that their participation in male-dominated political parties would not enable them to advance their gender agenda, in part because at that time women were often discouraged from speaking up in the presence of men, although women’s opinions were consistently sought within the more private boundaries of their own homes (Diop 1959, 1960; A. Keita 2014, 297-8; de Jong 2010; see Ammann 2020). Moreover, French colonization had created new gender-based divisions and solidified men’s prerogatives, such as providing men with greater educational and employment opportunities than women (Diop 1999; de Benoist 1987; Rodet 2009). The creation of independent women’s organizations was key to enabling women to self-organize and develop their gender-specific agendas. Of course, there were additional reasons for the establishment of those groups, such as avoiding retaliation from colonial administrators and uniting women beyond political divisions (e.g., Sow Dia 1995). But the pursuit of solutions to women’s specific problems was their main motivation and built on a well-established tradition of gender-based associationism in the region.

Despite their participatory efforts and emancipatory goals, women’s independent organizations had a very short existence in Sudan. As the prospect of Mali’s independence

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1 Namissa Touré, Segou personal communication 1994.
3 Women’s organizations and their leaders were experiencing a similar fate in the region; for Senegal see Sow Dia (1995) and Cissé (2009). Women were more integrated in Sekou Touré’s Guinea, but they were mostly represented in the lower echelons of the party infrastructure (see Pauthier 2018 and Schmidt 2005).
began to materialize, the US-RDA leadership, convinced that only they could represent people's interests and ambitions, hardened their position and dissolved all independent organizations (Simonis 1995; Ba Konaré 1991, 1993, 1999; Diop 1999, 2007). They believed that women's independent organizations (and all interest-specific organizations) were potentially divisive and as such were obstacles to the territory's increased autonomy. Through these actions the US-RDA leadership also accommodated the wills of large segments of the population (as well as much of the party's leadership itself), which opposed any changes that would transform the organization of the household and its internal hierarchies. The US-RDA did not embrace the activist agenda of Western-educated women. Instead, for most of the 1950s and 1960s it celebrated "the woman" as the mother, the child's primary educator, the considerate and economizing wife, and the nonliterate militant with no political ambition for herself yet ready to sacrifice even her meager financial resources for the success of the party and the country. The redefined women's agenda was to be pursued only within the framework of the party program.

However, the repression of women's organizations was the result of a complex and at times uncertain progression of events. Most of all, some of the women activists were determined to play a leading role in the gender policy of the emergent nation and attempted to resist their marginalization by the US-RDA party. In this article I follow the rise of women's initiatives, the development of their emancipatory agenda, and their efforts to resist the US-RDA's development into a monolithic party that was increasingly intolerant of any form of opposition. First I describe women's organizations shortly before independence, highlighting the institutional milieus in which they emerged, some of their activities, and aspects of their leadership. Next I discuss the first West African women's congress (held in July 1959 in Bamako) and its revolutionary agenda, which included the abolition of polygyny by 1960. In the third section I examine some of the reasons and strategies that led to the dismantling of women's organizations right before independence and point out some of those groups' more enduring legacies. I conclude by highlighting the experiences of some Western-educated women and how they adapted to those turbulent and rapidly changing times.

In this work I draw on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews with women leaders, and analysis of primary documents to provide a women-centered account of these organizations at the twilight of French colonization. In particular, I build on an analysis of a Catholic women's journal, *Rencontres africaines*, published from 1958 to 1964 by the association of the same name. At first the journal covered only the activities and goals of the *Rencontres africaines* association, but it soon widened its scope to include developments within youth organizations and especially women's organizations. Some of the most outspoken and influential leaders of the time, such as Sira Diop but also the less known but very eloquent

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9 Polygamy (marriage of one person with two or more people of the opposite sex) is the term most often used in the literature of the time, but I prefer to use polygyny here, because it specifically describes the marriage of one man with two or more women.

10 *Rencontres africaines* was published from January 1958 (issue 1) to March 1960 (issue 23). When the organization *Rencontres africaines* was dissolved along with all other independent women's groups, the journal changed its name to *Rencontres*, which was used from issue 23 onward. Sister Jean Bernard continued to be the editor until June 1960 (issue 26). Sister E. Bellais replaced her from 1960 (issue 27) to 1964 (issue 54), when the journal ceased to exist. Many of the articles in *Rencontres africaines* have no author listed; those that do not have listed authors are identified here solely by issue, year, and page number.
Henriette Kouyaté Carvalho D’Alvarengo11 (who was the wife of one of the leaders of the US-RDA, Seydou Badian Kouyaté), published in the journal articles and informational material about their associations’ initiatives. My own interviews with some of the most active and influential women of the time complement archival data to document and analyze the early history of the Malian women’s movement and some of the early obstacles that some African women activists faced as they approached independence.

The Women’s Movement in French Sudan (1946–1959)

Women became increasingly active within political parties created from 1945 onward, after more legislative changes enabling Africans’ political participation were adopted in the wake of the 1944 Brazzaville Conference. Many women joined the US-RDA at its inception in 1946 (Ba Konaré 1993). Nonliterate women composed songs, dressed in imaginative clothing covered with expressions of their party affiliations, facilitated party events by hosting political delegations, and enthusiastically campaigned (often at their own expense) to disseminate the party’s messages and recruit new party members. Since the early 1990s, as Mali’s turn to democracy led to a commitment to unearth and reexamine often traumatic chapters of Malian history, scholarly literature has increasingly recognized nonliterate women’s participation in party life (Ba Konaré 1993; Sow 2010; de Jorio 2016). Since the founding of the US-RDA, nonliterate women were key in campaigning for and recruitment of party members. For example, in 1951 Fado, a nonliterate woman from Gao, voted for the US-RDA just minutes before giving birth to her son, whom she named after Mamadou Konaté, the party’s president at that time. Following the birth, Fado’s comrades composed a song to celebrate her dedication and also to invite other women to join the party (A. Keita 2014; Ba Konaré 1993: 289; Rillon 2016). Similarly, on the occasion of the 1956 elections, Badayouma Coulibaly “traveled around the city of Bamako, her body covered in pictures of President Mamadou Konaté” to drum up support for the US-RDA (Ba Konaré 1993: 335; Rillon 2016). Also, after their demonstration against the victory of Fily Dabo Sissoko in the 1945 elections, some of the women of Mamadou Konaté’s electoral committee (the precursor of the US-RDA) were briefly imprisoned by the French colonial administration, which supported Sissoko’s party.12

Elite women too, had been present in the US-RDA early on. Schmidt reports that when one Guinean RDA militant (Léon Maka) and his wife (Mira Baldé) attended the first congress of the Sudanese party in 1949, they were surprised by the extent of Sudanese “elite women’s active involvement in party activities and the fact that they all wore national, as opposed to Western, dress. In Guinea [...] educated women – the teachers and midwives – distinguished themselves from the masses of women by imitating European fashions” (2005: 115).13 On the other hand, women seemed to have been less active within the Parti progressiste soudanais (PSP), the rival party of the “traditional” elites and favorite of the colonial administration. Ba Konaré’s impressive coverage of Malian women’s achievements

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11 Henriette Kouyaté Carvalho D’Alvarengo (1936–2016) was the first Malian woman to obtain a doctorate in medicine with a specialization in gynecology. For her work in the field of women’s health, and particularly for the development of family planning and her work against female genital cutting, she was one of the 1000 women proposed for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005 (see word.world-citizenship.org/wp-archive/2377).

12 The women imprisoned included Fankele Diarra, Yama Diallo, and Djenebou Dagnon (Ba Konaré 1993).

13 Thanks to Sekou Toure’s initiatives, women’s involvement in national politics rapidly increased in Guinea. By 1954, Guinean women’s participation in the RDA party had grown so much that a Guinean trade unionist, Abdoulaye Diallo, remarked that “while the RDA was strong in the French Sudan, ‘the women were not as well organized as in Guinea’ — a marked contrast to the Maka’s observations in 1949” (Schmidt 2005: 126).
in a variety of domains from politics to sport lists only one woman (Dyodo Yattassaye of Kayes) as a PSP militant (Ba Konaré 1993: 274).

In addition to their militancy in mostly male-dominated party organizations, some Western-educated women also founded a few apolitical organizations broadly concerned with “women’s emancipation.” One such organization was the Comité des femmes travailleuses created in 1956 by Aoua Keita and Sow Assitan Coulibaly, two active members of the USRDA.14 Its membership comprised some of the most dynamic and politically active women of the time. In addition to the association’s founders, members included Sira Diop and Rokiatou Sow, as well as other future leaders of the national women’s organization (the Union nationale des femmes du Mali, UNFM) under the dictatorship of Moussa Traoré. Informed by “the quest for equality with French standards” (Cooper 2002: 78) of the time, the Comité des femmes travailleuses strived to improve the working and living conditions of women wage workers. Its demands included salary raises, the creation of nurseries and kindergartens, and the allocation of child benefits. Its leaders were well connected internationally and participated in a number of women’s meetings in Africa and abroad (Ba Konaré 1993: 54). According to Aoua Keita, the organization was initially well received by wage-earning women, and in a few months most of them (90 percent) joined the union. However, such support did not last long: some men waged a disparaging campaign against the organization, which ended up dividing the women (Turritin 1993). Some of them leveraged the susceptibility of their women and accused wage-earning women of showing no regard for the work of nonsalaried women, thus sowing mistrust and creating disunity among women. Other men directly impeded their wives’ participation, arguing that it interfered with their domestic responsibilities. Although the Comité des femmes travailleuses continued to exist until the end of 1959, it never recovered its initial membership numbers.

The other independent women’s organizations reflected more closely the rapidly evolving and mixed contexts of the semi-independent state in which they emerged and had a marked orientation toward education and women’s development. This is in particular the case of Diemangué,15 an organization that was created in 1955 as an extension of Social Services to strengthen its development-oriented messages, but also to promote mutual aid and a greater understanding between Western-educated women and nonliterate women. Social Services was first established in French Sudan in 1953, a time when the colonies were becoming increasingly independent from the metropole and depended almost exclusively on their own territorial budgets for their operations (see Dore-Audibert 1999; Cooper 2014). Key members of Diemangué included Andrée Dore-Audibert, the founder of Social Services in French Sudan, social worker, writer, and wife of a colonial administrator; and Fanta Thiam Diallo, a teacher and president of the association.16 Although a few French women also joined the organization, the great majority of its members were Sudanese women.

14 The organization will become the Inter syndicat des femmes travailleuses in 1958 (Diop 1999: 57; Keita 2014: 340–41; Turritin 1993).
15 Diemangué also published a journal by the same name. Its first issue can be found at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Subsequent issues are held in private collections (Diop 1999). Further information on the journal can be found in Dore-Audibert (1999).
16 Dore-Audibert’s work was carried out in collaboration with Renée Cissé (see Dore-Audibert 1999: 348).
As the first independent women’s organization, Diemanguelé provided women with formative experiences that they would build on in their subsequent work for women’s movements. It sought to “modernize” the organization of the African family and women’s work, but also to create new opportunities for women’s socialization across new and old social divisions (e.g., education, but also race and ethnicity). Diemanguelé was the most popular of these formal associations because of its practical orientation and attention to problems of interest to most women, and also because it received some support from the French administration (Dore-Audibert 1999). Moreover, although most of the leadership was formally educated, a large portion of Diemanguelé’s membership consisted of nonliterate women whom the organization sought to expose to “modern” childrearing and household practices as well as to bourgeois ideas about family and the role of women. Women remembered Diemanguelé fondly because of its attention to the social dimensions of women’s life and because it provided women with opportunities to get together and support one another at family celebrations (naming ceremonies, weddings, etc.).

The last of the three associations of this period, Rencontres africaines was funded at the White Fathers headquarters in Bamako in January 1958 and had distinct educational goals (Rencontres africaines 1/1958). The idea had emerged in the course of several parents’ meetings on the topic of young women’s education in which men and women “of all social classes and political and religious convictions participated” (Rencontres africaines 1/1958: 3). The organization aimed “to complete the female and African education of young girls outside the school system” (ibid.). It was created in response to criticism from numerous parents that Western education was alienating young women from their environment because it lacked programs to prepare women for their roles as wives and mothers and focused solely on Western culture (e.g., the history of France). The activities of Rencontres africaines included conferences, study trips, excursions, and correspondence with other youth organizations in an effort to internationalize its membership. Sister Jean Bernard (whose preordination name was Odette Pégard), a leading figure of the organization, was also editor in chief of its journal (also called Rencontres africaines) and later completed a doctorate in France on the Bissa of present-day Burkina Faso (Pégard 1966). Other prominent members of the organization were Assa Diallo and Pauline Diarra, both of whom would later participate in the national women’s organization under Moussa Traoré (Ba Konaré 1993: 54). Though not as widespread in the region as Diemanguelé, branches of Rencontres africaines were also created outside of Bamako. Additionally, the editorial team of Rencontres africaines facilitated conversations around legislative changes that, if implemented, would have improved the legal status of women in French Sudan. Most of all, Rencontres africaines provided a forum for Western-educated women to participate in public debates about the status of women in French Sudan and to develop their activist agenda.

Both Diemanguelé and Rencontres africaines intended to complement Western education and make up for some of its shortcomings. There were insufficient schools to cover the population’s needs, and the curriculum was not adapted to African realities and created anxieties and tensions surrounding the young women’s futures. Very few girls were

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17 Diarra Jagossa Sidibé, personal communication, 1994; Sissoko Travélé, personal communication, 1994; see de Jorio (1997).
18 See letter by Aoua Keita and Sow Assitan Coulibaly in Diemanguelé 1, 15.
able to attend school, and a large percentage never completed their studies. For instance, at the end of the school year 1957–1958, only 18 girls out of 47 completed 8th grade, and only 7 out of 12 completed high school in French Sudan (Diop 1999: 79). Thus, besides offering preparatory courses for marriage, Rencontres africaines aimed to ensure that girls could achieve “100 percent success at the [school] exams” (Diop 1999: 61). Both Rencontres africaines and Diemanguelé published educational journals and held informative conferences on themes of interest to women.

In November 1958 the Union of Sudanese Women (Union des femmes du Soudan, UFS), which included the three independent organizations discussed above, was created on the initiative of some of the women of the Comité des femmes travailleuses. The UFS’s goal was to discuss and identify solutions to women’s issues (“questions féminines”) (Rencontres africaines 9/1958: 17; Diop 1999). Sira Diop was nominated to be the organization’s president. UFS rejected all party affiliation and prohibited political discussions at the meetings – an important move that reflected women’s efforts to maintain some independence from male-dominated party politics but also prevented party-line divisions among women (see also Sow Dia 1995). As the country was approaching independence, Western-educated women resolved to act as catalysts of major changes that were to ameliorate women’s conditions and opportunities. The improvement of women’s rights had been mostly neglected by European colonization (apart from the emergence of unexpected alliances at certain interstices), an enterprise that was firmly rooted in race- and gender-based distinctions and promoted pervasive forms of discrimination and exclusion.19

**Women’s Unions and Pan-African Orientations**

A major objective of the Union of Sudanese Women was the development of a West African women’s network to foster unity and facilitate the exchange of experiences among African women. UFS leaders put extraordinary effort into organizing the founding congress of the Union of West African Women (Union des femmes de l’Ouest africain, UFOA) in 1959. During this era of semi-independence and the search for federal solutions to the problems of independence and African unity (Cooper 2014), leaders of the UFS and other such groups throughout French West Africa were determined to identify pan-African solutions to women’s issues. The women of French Sudan were at the forefront of this movement, positioning that was partly facilitated by the support they received (at least until that point) from their predominantly male political leaders, but also strengthened by their participation in international organizations. At a meeting of the Mali Federation that year, Modibo Keita (then president of the leading party, the US-RDA; later president of the short-lived Mali Federation during 1959-1960 and president of the independent Republic of Mali during 1960–1968), did address the issue of women’s participation in the process of African independence. In his speech, Modibo Keita did encourage women to further collaborate with men for the self-determination and empowerment of the African people: “The woman must also be associated to the party’s action . . . Women must be convinced of the importance of their role in the conquest of the African personality” (cited in Voltolina 2007: 159). However, the idea of the women’s congress seems to have originally emerged in the course of conversations among the African women representatives who attended

19 See classic work by McClintock (1995); Stoler (2002) among others.
the congress of the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF) in Vienna in 1958, a meeting dedicated to the themes of decolonization and peace. Later that year West African women met again and furthered the organization of their congress at the 1958 Youth Festival in Bamako (Diop 1999). As part of the careful planning for the Bamako congress, Sira Diop had developed a questionnaire to assess women’s conditions in variety of contexts (e.g., family, education, work, politics). Distributed in French Sudan as well as in other countries participating in the festival, this questionnaire sought to provide the empirical basis for the assessment of the issues at stake and the identification of common strategies for action.

Held as planned during July 20–23, 1959, the congress of the Union des femmes de l’Ouest africain (UFOA) opened with women delegates from Dahomey (today’s Benin), Senegal, and Guinea, in addition to French Sudan; four delegates from Haute Volta (today’s Burkina Faso) arrived a day late (Rencontres africaines 17/1959: 11). The initiative had the full support of the Sudanese government, and Modibo Keita himself attended the last day of the conference. Radio-Soudan reported that “almost a thousand women gathered this afternoon at the Technical College for the opening of the first congress of the West African Women’s Union” (ibid.). A similar number was also recorded by Rencontres africaines for the last day of the conference, when the commissions presented their analyses of women’s conditions and programs for women’s emancipation to the wider audience for discussion (ibid.). These records confirm that the conference reached a much broader audience than often acknowledged.

Some of the most important political leaders and key figures of French Sudan attended the opening day of the congress. Sira Diop, who presided over the congress, delivered the welcoming speech in which she stressed upon the importance of African women’s unity in the resolution of common issues (Diop 1959). African women, she added, were determined not just to act as mothers and wives but also “to take an interest in all social, cultural, and political activities” (Diop 1959: 4), to analyze their own problems and identify possible solutions, and to “fight for the construction of the African Nation” (1959: 3). She maintained that “the evolution of a country cannot be done without women” (1959: 4). Diop also expanded on Western-educated women’s historical responsibilities in the project of national construction. In particular, they were to act as “guides for their illiterate sisters” and work together with them to improve women’s conditions within and outside

20 Dembele Bassata Djiré gave a short presentation on the status of women in French Sudan (WIDF 1958: 66–67; Ba Konaré 1993: 378; Diop 1999: 66). Jeanne Martin Cissé attended as a representative of the Union of Senegalese Women. Cissé (then married Touré) resided in Senegal until after the referendum of 1958, when she returned to her native Guinea. (For more on the WIDF Vienna congress, see Gradskova 2020: 276).

21 The summary of the questionnaire’s results can be found in Diop (1999: 75-80). The specific questions were not included in Diop’s 1999 publication.

22 Women representatives from Niger had completed the questionnaire but ultimately did not attend the UFOA congress. UFS members who participated in the congress included Diop Sira Sisoko (Sira Diop), Sow Assitan Coulibaly (wife of US-RDA leader and union activist Lamine Sow), Kouyaté Henriette Carvalho D’Alvarengo (wife of US-RDA leader and writer Seydou Badian Kouyaté), Keita Nankoria Kourouma (wife of US-RDA leader Madeira Keita; see Mann 2013), Sow Rokiatou Sow, Dembelé Bassata Djiré, and Sister Jean Bernard. Keita Aoua Thiero also represented the UFS section of Bafoulabé, thus suggesting that women’s participation extended beyond the 20 formally appointed women delegates.

23 Of the approximately 1,000 women gathered at the conference, most were nonliterate women who were there to support their leaders.
the household (Diop 1959: 4; see Gologo 1960). Following Diop, N’Douré Hamaciré, the representative of the Sudanese government, stated the importance of the congress for the improvement of women’s conditions and for “the rehabilitation of the African personality and African independence” (Anonymous 1959: 5; Dagenais 2005). Camara Loffo, the head of the Guinean women delegation, emphasized the great steps forward that women had taken since gaining independence in 1958 under the leadership of Sekou Touré (Pauthier 2018). Guinean women were represented at every level of the state administration, and their rights had much improved since the adoption of a family code that had radically transformed gender relationships (e.g., prohibiting marriage between minors, requiring the celebration of civil marriage before religious marriage and prioritizing the former).

The officially appointed delegates, around 20 women, were for the most part Western-educated, but a few (10 percent) were housewives, the occupation most often attributed to nonliterate women. Most of the female delegates were young women between 18 and 39 years old (with an average age of 29). They had attended the few prestigious French colonial schools open to women at the time (Barthélemy 2010a) and were employed in one of the few professions then available to them: teaching, midwifery, and secretarial work. Most (67 percent) were married with at least three children. Furthermore, 57 percent of them had celebrated the civil marriage, a practice encouraged by decrees passed by the French colonial administration and limited to the elites of the time (Rencontres africaines 17/1959: 11). These delegates represented some of the most politically engaged women among the tiny group of elite women at that time.

After the opening day ceremonies, the following two days were devoted to the work of the commissions. The session was opened by Henriette Kouyaté, who presented an in-depth analysis of the results of the pre-congress questionnaire, which served as the basis for the final reports and recommendations. The women were then divided into three commissions, each charged with examining particular dimensions of women’s lives: family, schooling, and women’s living conditions (including the laws available to protect women’s and children’s rights). Each commission was tasked with an analysis of the causes of women’s oppression and the identification of remedies to effectively address them. Their results would be discussed, amended and eventually approved on the fourth and final day of the congress.

There is little record of the debates that ensued during the commissions’ work. In her speech accepting the presidency of the UFOA, Leonida Adjano of Dahomey, alluded to some tensions but did not identify their causes; instead she foregrounded women’s ability to ultimately come together and find constructive solutions (Rencontres africaines 17/1959: 18). The only newspaper coverage of some of the controversies that emerged at the conference was a New York Times article written by Emil Lengyel (1960), a New York University history professor of Hungarian origin who noted that the subject of polygyny had provoked heated debates. Women (from several religious backgrounds) who favored polygyny had used references to the Old Testament, the Quran, and “natural law” to justify what they viewed as the polygynous propensity of men. The pro-monogamy faction had persuasively argued that polygyny lay at the root of women’s devaluation and fostered rivalry between women and should therefore be abolished. The latter group appeared, at least within the space of 24 Radio Soudan followed the event and reported that the delegates were mostly teachers (52 percent), midwives (21 percent), secretaries (10 percent), housewives (10 percent) and students (5 percent) made up the rest.

25 I would like to thank Bruce Whitehouse for generously sharing with me this news article.
the conference, to have won the argument: the elimination of polygyny was included in the conference’s final resolutions.

The conference ended with a series of motions that reflected the meeting of multiple sensibilities and often-dissonant viewpoints (see also Soares 2009; de Jorio 2010). Some of the leaders were active in progressive international women’s movements (such as the WIDF) and demanded equal civil and political rights. But their views were also informed by other frames of reference, including their cultural milieus, religious affiliations, bourgeois colonial values, and Western educations. Women’s political demands therefore reflected some of these conflicting viewpoints and included objectives that were difficult to reconcile, such as opposition to women’s abandonment of their marital residences (an action that was often a woman’s last resort to escape spousal abuse), support for measures to create greater stability within the household, discouragement of divorce and men’s repudiation of women, and attempts to dissuade women from engaging in certain conduct they saw as questionable (wearing “inappropriate” clothing, being “sexually promiscuous,” spending excessively on life-cycle celebrations). They also looked for ways to strengthen parental authority, even suggesting that fines be imposed on parents whose children were not home by 10 p.m. Conference attendees also espoused a conservative conception of the family in which the man should act as the primary provider; they argued that expecting women to make substantial contributions to household expenses in the absence of reliable sources of revenues would put women in a position of vulnerability and may lead them to what the women delegates euphemistically called “misconduct” – in other words, to “fall prey” to the attentions of men of means (Rencontres africaines 17/1959: 13).

The women identified multiple causes of their subordination, including traditional customs, religion, and French colonization. In particular French colonization, in favoring the education of men over the education of women, had greatly restricted women’s access to modern employment opportunities. Without questioning their roles as spouses and mothers, women demanded an improvement in their everyday lives as well as a widening of their fields of action. Their primary objective was the transformation of marriage into an institution that would guarantee them more stability and rights. They demanded the institution of civil marriage (with spousal rights and duties precisely defined), the abolition of early marriage, the right to choose their spouses, the imposition of a cap to the dowry (whose commodification had led to its exponential growth), and the establishment of a woman’s right to inherit and to have custody of her children. They also stressed the importance of a closer and more supportive relationship with their husbands and hoped to strengthen fathers’ participation in the education of their children, a task that fell predominantly on women (particularly in a polygynous environment). But the changes they sought were not limited to the institution of marriage. Women wanted more schools, more vocational training opportunities, equal working conditions, and a more developed infrastructure (including the modernization of domestic work) that would free them from at least part of their domestic responsibilities.

Among the many resolutions the women adopted at the 1959 UFOA congress, the one that received by far the most attention was the one on polygyny, an institution the attendees identified as one of the major sources of women’s oppression. Polygyny had been a typical target of the colonial propaganda (and missionaries’ writings), but had been de facto left...
untouched by the French colonial administration, which mostly tended not to interfere with “les coutumes indigènes” (although in their efforts to standardize “the local customs,” colonial administrators proceeded to codify and transform them; see for instance, de Benoist 1987; Rodet 2007). UFOA delegates boldly demanded the eradication of polygyny by January 1960. They also urged radical changes in households that were already polygynous. In particular, they demanded that all co-wives be treated equally, referencing the Quran as an additional legitimizing reference.27

The response of the political leadership of the time was positive, if overall noncommittal. Delivering one of the last speeches at the congress, Modibo Keita praised women for their selfless sacrifice for the independence of the country. In recognition of the congress’s ambitious resolutions, he wished participants the unity and strength to overcome the “inertia” as well as the “opposing forces” on their path to emancipation. He expressed hope that the Western-educated women would be successful in forming bonds of solidarity and trust with nonliterate women, a necessary condition for their success (Anonymous 1959: 5). Keita must have already sensed the mounting dissatisfaction that some of the congress’s resolutions had generated among nonliterate women and large strata of the population, including within his own party’s leadership. His speech, while supportive of women’s aspirations, remained rather vague. Stating “your resolutions will be carefully examined,” he promised to grant future consideration to the women’s agenda but prudently avoided committing to it.

Just a few months later (November 1959), the US-RDA proceeded to dissolve women’s independent organizations, claiming that the groups’ revolutionary agenda – in particular, their stand on polygyny – did not reflect the wills and aspirations of the women of those groups. The party leadership also questioned the apolitical position of the women’s independent movement, demanding that all forces rally behind the party in its struggle for increased autonomy. The events that followed the congress caused a profound rift among the women and compromised the realization of many of the issues in the women’s agenda.28

27 At the end of the conference the women also issued a set of motions via which they manifested their engagement with a number of international political issues of the time (perhaps to avoid the charge of representing exclusively special group interests). They opposed the nuclear tests France was then conducting in the Sahara, expressed their hopes for a peaceful resolution of the Algerian war, and denounced the mistreatment of African students in France (Rencontres africaines 17/1959: 16).

28 The UFOA would cease to exist, but it nonetheless inspired the creation of subsequent pan-African women’s organizations (Barthélémy 2010b).
and economic security from those practices.29 Fear surrounding the abolition of polygyny was nothing new, though. Rumors of its possible eradication had already circulated after the 1944 Brazzaville conference, where the fate of the French empire was discussed, and new reforms were planned to widen Africans’ political and civil rights (Joly 2006: 570). At that time, too, large segments of the Sudanese population had opposed such drastic changes to their social and familial order.

Resorting to tactics conservative men had already deployed to hinder the initiatives of the women’s union headed by Aoua Keita in 1957, some men helped spread rumors that sowed divisions and mistrust among the women (A. Keita 2014; Turrittin 1993). They escalated latent dissent that was rooted in part in the rapid socioeconomic changes and the new inequalities that the French colonial system had introduced. In particular, these men accused elite women of harboring feelings of superiority and of looking down upon their nonliterate sisters whose mobilization had been essential for the success of the party. According to one influential woman activist of the time, men were key to the propagation of divisive tactics, such as exacerbating the opposition between “pretentious intellectual women” and “illiterate women” (Diop 1999: 69). The party was thus simultaneously embracing and contributing to the propagation of the image of the (mostly nonliterate) selfless woman militant willing to sacrifice her meager means for the success of the party and for the independence of her country (Diop 1999, 2007).

In fomenting disunity among the women, some of the men were quick to point out Western-educated women’s “superiority complex,” as evidenced by some women activists’ language choices. Politician and writer Mamadou El Béchir Gologo, in a much advertised and discussed 1960 contribution titled “Women’s role in the national construction” (to which I shall return later), critically alluded to elite women’s framing of their relationship with their nonliterate sisters. For instance, in her opening speech at the 1959 Women’s Congress, Sira Diop had described Western-educated women as “guides for their sisters” (July 20, 1959). Criticizing such an elitist disposition, Gologo suggested that instead of presenting themselves as informed guides, Western-educated women should learn to collaborate with their nonliterate sisters as equals (Gologo 1960: 5; personal communication 2004).30 French colonization had brought dramatic social and economic transformations to local societies. Education and modern employment had opened some new opportunities for people of lower socio-economic status and introduced new criteria for social distinction and new divisions. Since women in particular had to a large extent been unable to benefit from modern education and the new emerging employment opportunities (Diop 1999; Barthelemy 2010a), marriage remained one of the few venues open to women and their extended families to negotiate economic security and advancement.

In fact, the abolition of polygyny divided not only women and men but also created profound divisions among the women themselves. Aoua Thiero, then a delegate from Bafoulabé at the UFOA congress, remembered how, at the news of the possible abolition of polygyny, nonliterate women had taken to the streets and protested against the resolutions

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29 Shortly after the 1959 congress, female activists dismissed the abolition of polygyny as an unattainable goal. They believed that in time the institution would ultimately die a natural death (Diop 1999; Sissoko Travélè, personal communication, 1994).

30 Like Gologo, Aoua Keita believed that women’s contributions were first and foremost at the household level. Most of all, she thought that the promotion of a women’s agenda was premature and that all efforts should first be devoted to the attainment of independence from France (Ba Konaré 1993).
of the women’s 1959 congress, accusing their proponents of being “selfish.” Often married to Western-educated men with regular salaries, Western-educated women were seen as restricting nonliterate (and particularly, but not exclusively, poorer nonliterate women) women’s access to better economic conditions (Aoua Thiero, personal communication 1994, 2005; de Jorio 1997; Barthelemy 2010a). In their opposition to the abolition of polygyny, nonliterate women were also resisting their potential socioeconomic marginalization and mobilizing for the preservation of marriage options that increased their economic mobility.

That news of the women’s agenda had led to popular unrest finds further evidence in an interview Aoua Keita released to L’Essor, shortly after returning from a women’s seminar held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, during December 12–23, 1960. While at the seminar, Aoua Keita (who was unable to attend the 1959 UFOA congress because she had been overseas at that time31) was asked to speak of her government’s position vis-à-vis the UFOA women’s resolutions, particularly regarding the women’s demand to abolish the institution of polygyny. She was clearly very annoyed by this and other questions, partly because they had originated from some of the European women in attendance, some of whom were looking for some kind of public statement recognizing France’s role in improving African women’s condition.32 Keita characterized these questions as ill-informed or disingenuous given the French colonial state’s poor record of accomplishments in the domain of women’s education and women’s rights. She then firmly defended her government’s commitment to meet what she called “women’s legitimate demands.” In regard to the congress’s request to abolish the practice of polygyny, she clarified that this demand did not reflect the aspirations of the majority of the population but only those of a minority of Western-educated women. This particular proposition had in fact resulted in major popular protests that the government had had a hard time controlling.

As soon as the [1959 congress] resolutions were known and translated, our sisters, who represent 95 percent of the women masses, spoke out against [the proposition to ban polygyny]. Since their participation in the national liberation struggle has always been decisive, our party and government, taking into account the situation, considered it necessary to postpone this issue. I would even say that it took many efforts and numerous interventions on the part of President Modibo Keita to appease their protests. (interview with Aoua Keita, Anonymous 1961)

Women’s divisions were strategically amplified and used by some of the US-RDA leadership to question Western-educated women’s ability to represent all women’s concerns or establish collaborative relations with their nonliterate sisters. Elite women were represented as primarily occupied with the preservation of their privileges and unable to take the problems of ordinary women to heart.33 The protests undoubtedly made the party leadership less receptive to the

31 Aoua Keita sent a telegram from Paris in which she expressed her regrets for being unable to attend the congress and wished the UFS full success with its program (Rencontres africaines 17/1959: 9).
32 Marie-Hélène Lefaucheux (1904–1964) was one of the women in attendance at the December 1960 meeting. She was a key leader of the women’s movement in France and had represented her country at the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Lefaucheux and Aoua Keita had numerous heated exchanges in Addis Ababa, no doubt due in part to Lefaucheux’ overall positive views of France’s role in Africa and her (imperialist) take on feminism.
33 See also Sira Diop’s letter from Mopti, published in April 1960. Diop’s letter refers briefly to some misunderstandings and tensions among the women: “If we had a difficult phase in Bamako, this is not a good reason to lose faith in the movement. There are lots of women in Sudan who do not ask anything else but to be in a position to follow the women who can enlighten them” (Rencontres 24/1960: 27; my translation and emphasis).
demands of Western-educated women and also reinforced its view that politics was the exclusive domain of the party, which had no room for other potentially divisive movements (Simonis 1995). By November 1959, the party had summoned the leaders of the women’s organizations and demanded the dissolution of those groups. Women activists were also asked to integrate with the US-RDA (Rencontres africaines 19/1959). Sister Jean Bernard—the only Westerner to have been invited to the 1959 congress and already a member of the UFS—commented on these political measures as a clear indication of men’s fears vis-à-vis this “team of lucid, intrepid women” who were not afraid to denounce the injustices to which women were subjected (Rencontres africaines 19/1959; see also Diop 1999: 69).

**Resistance and Accommodation**

At first, UFS women resisted the dismantling of their association and tried rebuilding their relationship with the public and with the US-RDA leadership. A series of UFS’s letters, press releases, and updates show some of the tactics women resorted to in an effort to keep their organization alive (up to April 27, 1960).34 Women redefined their position in relation to the rapidly changing historical context and, in particular, to their country’s approaching independence. Reconsidering their apolitical option, the leadership of the women’s movement indicated that they were ready to collaborate with the US-RDA in the construction of an African nation. They remained, however, firm in their commitment to fight against the double oppression of women: colonialism’s and men’s exploitation (e.g., Rencontres africaines 19/1959: 2, 4; see also Rencontres africaines 17/1959: 12). Women even went so far as to agree to integrate with the party but declared that they would not desist from executing their agenda for women’s liberation.35

The UFS continued to work on some of its most pressing agendas. It completed the first draft of a family code (modeled after similar codes in Tunisia and Romania) and deposited it at the legislatures of French Sudan and the Mali Federation by the end of 1959. Although it was not implemented at the time, this draft code later constituted the basis of a marriage code that was passed after independence. The 1962 Marriage Code (as it came to be known) is still celebrated as the US-RDA’s major contribution to the improvement of women’s conditions, even though its various components were never fully implemented (see Diop 1999: 68; Sanankoua 1990; Ba Konaré 1993). For instance, most marriages continued not to be celebrated at the town hall, and the religious marriage usually preceded and did not follow the civil marriage as otherwise established by the code. UFS women also laid the foundations for a women’s national union, a project they hoped to finalize after independence.36 They even accepted that the US-RDA would select new leadership for their movement (though no information exists as to whether the change in leadership was ever executed and, if it was, who was the newly appointed head of the UFS).

34 The documents were published in Rencontres africaines 19/1959 and Rencontres 24/1960. Despite the ephemeral existence of those organizations, some of the Western-educated women continued to identify themselves as members of Djemanguelé and of the Inter-syndicat des femmes travailleuses in international women’s meetings, even when they were the wives of prominent US-RDA representatives, perhaps in an effort to extend the lives of their associations in at least supranational contexts.

35 In their press release of November 1, 1959, Djeimanguelé, Rencontres africaines, and the Inter-syndicat des femmes travailleuses communicated their decision to integrate with the US-RDA but also restated their commitment to work for “woman’s rapid development (promotion)” (Rencontres africaines 19/1959: 5).

36 The goal of building a women’s union (UNFM) was not be achieved until 1974, and then only under the challenging conditions of Moussa Traoré’s dictatorship.
Despite women's efforts at appeasement, the US-RDA was determined to dismantle all independent organizations and worked to do so by making threats, carrying out disparaging campaigns, belittling the women's agenda, fomenting disunion, and encouraging the forced dissolution of those organizations (Simonis 1995; Diop 1999: 69). Resorting to colonial tactics, the party leadership also transferred to outside of the capital some of the most determined and vocal members of the women's movement: they sent Sira Diop to Mopti with her husband in mid-November 1959, Bassata Djiré to Bougouni, and Rokiatou Sow to Ségou (Ba Konaré 1993: 55). Assitan Coulibaly avoided being transferred and stayed in Bamako only because her husband, Lamine Sow, was then a prominent member of the party (ibid.). Despite the US-RDA's repressive practices, seventy women from the UFS gathered at Bamako’s Cultural Center a few days before Sira Diop’s departure for Mopti to celebrate her extraordinary work as the president of the UFS and promised to keep the UFS agenda alive.

Even after being sent to Mopti, Diop continued for a few months to work for the UFS, though no longer as its president. Although the UFS stopped its activities in Bamako, it remained active in the regions. In April 1960, UFS members from Mopti and Kayes communicated their readiness to resume their activities. They even discussed holding a new UFS meeting in July 1960 and had identified Koutiala as a possible location for it (Rencontres 24/1960: 28, 30). Diop sent letters to assess the feasibility of the meeting. She also contacted at least one government representative to renew the UFS’s commitment to support the US-RDA’s programs, particularly in the much-advertised human-investment field (that is, voluntary work for the development of the country) but received no answer (1960). From April 1960 onward the organization stopped all activities, and no further communication by the UFS is to be found in Rencontres. Eventually, women’s groups were dismantled and assimilated within the party infrastructure, and some of their leaders integrated into the party ranks.

With the women’s opposition quelled, the party asked a male politician, Mamadou El Béchir Gologo, to speak on the role of Sudanese women in national construction as the country’s independence approached (22 September 1960). The choice of Gologo was significant, because there were certainly women (such as Diop and Kouyaté) who could have been asked to deliver a speech on women’s role at independence (Rencontres 25/1960: 3). Gologo’s speech was given great coverage: Radio Soudan broadcast it in Bamana three times within a week, and the newspaper L’Essor published it in French shortly afterward (Gologo 1960). According to Gologo, whose speech made numerous references to oral literature, Sudanese women were key to the recovery of African dignity and the attainment of independence. He praised their spirit of sacrifice, their ability to motivate men when they were discouraged or unmotivated, and their fierce courage in defense of their families when no other hope was in sight. On these foundations, Gologo argued, women’s role for the good of the nation was to be primarily situated at the household level: to support men’s actions and to educate the future generations of Malian citizens.

37 See also Rencontres africaines 19/1959: 6–7; Diop (2007).

38 In 1959 – only one year before the Gologo’s article was published – Henriette Kouyaté Carvalho D’Alvareng had published an article on a similar topic: “Rôle de la femme dans l’émancipation de l’Afrique” (Kouyaté 1959). Although Kouyaté foregrounded the importance of women’s roles as mothers and wives, she demanded a much more active role for women in the public sphere: “women should have access to public life in order to be able to make their full contribution to the country’s development” (1959: 17).
We particularly count on you, dear MOTHERS and SISTERS, on your good qualities *(qualités de cœur)*, your mighty influence on us, the men (your sons, brothers, husbands) to assist us in facing the challenges to our honor . . . Independence is a delicate child, and you are responsible for his vitality, his education, and his reputation. Your mission is without any doubt the most difficult. Never forget it. (1960: 8 and 9)

Gologo’s speech marks the end of the early phase of women’s associationism in which elite women had played a dynamic role. Integrated within the US-RDA, several women activists left politics (though some would eventually return to the political sphere in more prominent roles). But the spaces for women’s action had been dramatically reduced. As the party entered independence under less-than-ideal conditions following the collapse of the Mali Federation (and separation from the wealthier Senegal), the party had other priorities (Ba Konaré 1993; see also Diop 1999:71; Sanankoua 2004: 147). The women’s agenda would occupy a very limited place in the political programs of Modibo Keita’s first Republic (see Ba Konaré 1994; de Jorio 1997; Diop 1999; Rillon 2018).

**Conclusion**

As independence approached in the 1950s, a vocal segment of the tiny population of educated elite women became very active in women’s independent associations. This dynamic group created a number of national organizations and even a regional organization (UFOA) to work together in pursuit of a shared women’s agenda. Some of the leaders were aware that women's double exploitation (colonization and sexism) could be addressed only within the context of women’s groups and that political parties, dominated by men, would stifle their agenda. While always foregrounding women’s specificities as mothers and wives, the organizations’ programs included a number of reforms that would have significantly transformed gender relationships and the organization of the household. These women activists also asserted their determination to play a greater role in the public sphere, where they sought to fully engage as citizens of an independent nation.

Shortly before independence, the US-RDA used rumors, intimidation, and personnel transfers to dismantle the women’s organizations. Rumors in particular, created irreparable divides among the women, amplifying many women’s anxieties surrounding rapid socio-economic transformations and the emergence of new (schooled) elites, that ultimately weakened the women’s agenda. The US-RDA blocked the Western-educated women's agenda on the ground that it promoted those women’s personal interests. The work of those women was seen as dangerously outside the perimeters of party politics and therefore a source of disunion among the people. Some of the women activists attempted to counter the party’s decisions but eventually had to dissolve their organizations and integrate with the party ranks. Once in the party, some eventually recovered positions of responsibility, whereas others disengaged (at least temporarily) from party politics. However, once those women were in the party, their programs and initiatives were significantly reduced and largely defined by the US-RDA leadership.

The defeat of pre-independence women’s organizations had long-lasting consequences. After independence, the US-RDA’s record on women’s political and civil rights continued

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39 Gologo’s and Diop’s debates in the pages of *Rencontres* reveal some of the profound ideological differences between Western-educated women and large segments of the US-RDA at the end of the 1950s.
to be rather modest. Its major realizations included the creation of a Social Commission (Commission sociale) in charge of women's affairs, and the passage of a marriage code in 1962 (Ba Konaré 1993; Diop 1999; Sanankoua 2004). The Commission sociale though, was not a women's wing of the party, but rather, just a committee with little latitude for political action and a limited agenda (Ba Konaré 1993: 55-56; Bazin-Tardieu 1975: 116).

Aoua Keita, who had originally expressed such critical views of the agenda of Western-educated women and facilitated the integration of women's forces within the US-RDA party, eventually opened up to the idea of pursuing a moderate women's agenda from the early 1960s onward. She was instrumental in the adoption of the 1962 Marriage Code and the creation of the Commission sociale (Ba Konaré 1993: 346). Keita worked to mend some of the rifts between women activists and to bring some of their estranged leaders (e.g., Sira Diop) back into the Commission. She herself was eventually sidelined during the 1967 revolution: rumor has it that it was once again men's political maneuvering and women's disunion – in this case, the profound dislike that Mariam Travélé, Modibo Keita's wife, felt for Aoua Keita – to put an end to Aoua Keita's political career (A. Keita 2014: 378).

Despite her moderate women's-rights agenda and her acceptance of the US-RDA's largely male leadership's objectives and political practices, Aoua Keita is today considered one of the most influential early leaders of the Malian women's movement. She became a crucial reference for women activists during Mali's turn to democracy in 1991, and women activists have ever since acknowledged and celebrated Aoua Keita as a founder of the Malian women's movement (e.g., Siré Diakité 1996). Ultimately, contemporary women activists have reclaimed her legacy as an indispensable step for the recovery and reevaluation of Mali's anti-colonial struggle and early years of independence in more gender-inclusive terms (Sow 2010; de Jorio 2003, 2016).

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40 However, women were present at every level of the US-RDA—there were women’s committees at the level of villages, neighborhoods, arrondissements and cercles. One woman representative always sat in the various male-dominated political bureaus that oversaw the work of their committees. Most activities were framed by the Bamako-based party leadership, which then used this capillary infrastructure to spread party messages and instructions. The US-RDA infrastructure sought to erase educational differences among the women and force the Western-educated women and nonliterate women to work side by side (Diop 1999: 100). Women had thus been reduced primarily to work in the service of the party.

41 The Commission sociale’s agenda included welcoming political delegations and facilitating US-RDA events and folkloristic performances. The commission also spearheaded a number of initiatives in the fields of public health, civil and moral education, and general education (Diop 1999: 111–12).
References


Corona: Anthropology About a Pandemic
Panel Discussion of the Swedish Anthropological Association (SANT)

Tova Höjdestrand | Senior Lecturer of Social Anthropology, Lund University

On 8 May 2020, in connection with its annual meeting, the Swedish Anthropological Association (SANT) arranged a digital panel discussion with some Swedish medical anthropologists on the theme COVID-19, to jointly reflect on anthropological contributions and insights to understand the ongoing corona virus-pandemic.

The discussion preceded the digital annual General Assembly of SANT. These two events should be viewed as a temporary replacement for the annual Swedish anthropological conference at which the meeting usually takes place. The conference should have been held at Lund University on the theme “Danger”, but had to be postponed along with everything else as the world became increasingly dangerous during the early spring of 2020. The Lund conference on Danger will take place in the spring of 2021 instead.

Four speakers were invited to speak at the digital panel discussion on COVID-19:

- Associate Professor Claudia Merli, Uppsala University, has studied gendered bodily practices related to reproductive health, ethno-religious conflict in Southern Thailand, and the aftermath of the tsunami in 2004. She is also investigating issues related to fertility, population growth, and demographic statistics in Thai politics, and is currently working on a cross-disciplinary project on hazard and respiratory health related to volcanic ash, funded by Research for Health in Humanitarian Crises (R2HC), and has conducted fieldwork in Japan.

- PhD-Student Fredrik Nyman, Durham University, whose dissertation project investigates neoliberal reform within the British health care system, focusing on self-management practices in support groups for elderly people with chronic respiratory diseases. The project investigates how the somatic symptom breathlessness fosters community and social cohesion, and is included in the interdisciplinary research program Life of Breath, financed by Wellcome Trust between 2015 and 2020.

- Dr. Syna Ouattara, University of Gothenburg, has conducted research on culture, environment and development in West Africa, with a particular focus on the relevance of indigenous knowledge for development and modernization. He worked as an anthropologist for the World Health Organization during the Ebola crisis in Guinea in 2015, and in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2018, among other thing researching the mistrust of native population towards foreign aid interventions against the epidemic.

- PhD-Student Mirko Pasquini, Uppsala University, is part of the decade-long
interdisciplinary program “Engaging Vulnerability” financed by the Swedish Research Council. His dissertation project departs from fieldwork at an emergency ward in Northern Italy, with a primary focus on triage, overcrowding, violence, mistrust and access to healthcare. During the outbreak of the corona virus pandemic in spring 2020, he initiated a collective project aiming to gather the experiences and strategies of Italian primary health care workers in relation to the pandemic.

Dr. Tova Höjdestrand, Lund University, SANT board-member, chaired the panel discussion.

First, all the speakers gave a brief introduction to their research and their respective perspectives on the ongoing corona-pandemic, after which a general discussion followed for an hour and a half.

Claudia Merli talked about governments and stories, and how during two months of self-isolation she has reflected upon the narrative dimensions of the crisis. Which are the stories to be told about corona, as there are lots of stories going on, internationally and nationally. Various and perpetually transforming stories emerge, attempting to articulate the essence of the disease as well as of populations and states. She particularly emphasized on how statistics are being deployed as a seemingly universal and undisputable measure to gauge the pandemic. As the specific science of the nation state, the technology used to define the nature of the state and the population, statistics are produced and then recognized and identified by others as truth in spite of apparent differences in the ways they are used in different countries. At times, statistics produced by larger comparative studies and supranational health agencies are rebutted when they do not fit the national internal image. In the same way, the statistical discourses of different public authorities within one single country, such as Sweden, may be at odds with each other, so it is vital to look at the producers of these statistical discourses and their relationship to the citizens. Claudia Merli also pointed out that trust and transparency are not the same thing. Discussions about the virus are affected by issues of sovereignty, symbolically and by all the neologisms attached, as mutations of new concepts – which in itself is a good story.

Mirko Pasquini discussed how triage and notions of urgency, survival, risk, needs, and chances, expand far beyond medical clinics, as governments akin to primary health care workers, attempt making sense of the emerging picture to forecast future outcomes, thereby making the best possible choices. Decades of neoliberal economies with financial cuts in public healthcare have undermined the very notion of ‘best possible choice’, resulting in ‘life boat ethics’ which try to portend who and what are believed to be worthy of a future. State policies of quarantine and social distancing are essentially cultural arguments defining national identity, but they are designed exclusively for the middle class while ignoring the options and needs of the working poor, the lonely and elderly, and socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods. However, anthropologists do not escape triage either – everyone has to make choices having an impact on the future, and now more than ever, we need to engage critical thinking, advocacy for minorities, and unveiling injustice.

Syna Ouattara talked about the violent resistance that aid workers faced in the interventions against Ebola in Guinea and Democratic Republic of Congo. Although most of those who were killed were nationals from the respective countries, aid-workers were
perceived as foreigners working for the health ministries, and as associates of the deeply distrusted governments in these countries. Rumors proliferated that the state was using Ebola to wangle money from international funds, and that health professionals were complicit in this 'Ebola business'. Medical corporations were said to have created the virus to make money on their own vaccines, and there were also speculations about organs being stolen and sold in the international market. Such narratives proliferated because of a general lack of transparency about isolation of infected patients. The governments declared that owing to a 'mystical disease' without cure or vaccine, people were required to go to ‘isolation centers’, without explaining why or what needed to be done. Rumors were exacerbated by the fact that people were not allowed to see their dead relatives or know how or where they were buried.

Fredrik Nyman emphasized that breathing and breathlessness are somatic symptoms affected by historical, cultural, and existential conditions habitually ignored in clinical practice. Neoliberal changes to respiratory care encourage self-care behavior above recurring visits to the clinic. As a result patients often turn to autonomous support groups for a sense of social and community support, otherwise inaccessible. Through the logic ‘no rights without responsibility’, patients are educated to avoid emergency care by embracing responsibility for medication and individual wellbeing through, for example, emergency packages in the home which contain antibiotics and steroids. There is thus a tension between neoliberal management and global human rights, by which individual citizens' rights are limited to the extent state institutions fulfil their roles. In the same way, current strategies against the coronavirus emphasize individual responsibility through self-monitoring one's symptoms, while simultaneously ignoring asymptomatic individuals who nonetheless may be infected. Respiratory diseases differ from each other and are difficult to compare, but they do share the quality of being branded a 'burden' to healthcare systems with patients rarely leaving the hospital on the same day as admission. The effects are dire, particularly for emergency and intensive care, as the healthcare system in Great Britain is overburdened with insufficient resources and increasing demand. Throughout the past decade fears of drastically overburdening the system have been enunciated – the theoretical effects can now be observed practically.

The general discussion involved questions to the speakers about their specific projects and effects of the pandemic on societies where they are currently working. General themes such as death were discussed, given that death is no longer possible to ignore or obscure as everyday realities as was usually being done in presumably wealthy societies. Cultural conceptions about dignified handling of death were also touched upon, which are now being challenged by sheer numbers of the deceased, by the necessity to isolate dying patients, and by seeking to circumscribe traditional routines and rituals by suitable options to replace these.

The middle-class bias of most state recommendations or orders were brought up, as large cohorts of citizens in all affected countries have few if any practical options to self-isolate or work from home. This topic is closely related to trust, community engagement, and the relationship between citizens and the state, which also came up frequently during the discussion along with blame, scapegoating, and ‘othering’. Finally, the implications of the pandemic on anthropology was obviously brought up – although this is something we
share with all social scientists (and probably many others too) as COVID-19 is, as someone said during this discussion, a ‘defining moment’ similar to 9/11 that will define for decades to come the conceptualization of ‘before’ and ‘after’.

In the spring, 23-25 April 2021, the SANT Conference will be organised at Lund University on the theme ‘Danger’. More information will soon be available at the web site: https://sverigesantropolgforbund.org/
Swedish PhD Dissertations in Anthropology and related disciplines 2018-2020

Four Swedish universities have PhD-programmes in Social or Cultural Anthropology: Gothenburg, Lund, Stockholm, and Uppsala. In addition, anthropologically oriented dissertations are produced within inter-disciplinary PhD-programmes at Linköping, Uppsala, Malmö, as well as Swedish University for Agricultural Sciences (SLU).

In the following list, we have included PhD Dissertations in Social and Cultural Anthropology defended in Sweden during the academic years of 2018-19 and 2019-20. To some extent, we have added anthropological theses defended at other Swedish universities. The list is established in chronological order.

For a complete list of PhD Dissertations in Anthropology at Swedish universities the last 20 years, we also refer to Sveriges Antropologförbund (SANT) – the Swedish Anthropological Association – that compiles all PhD dissertations at its website.

2018


Since the early 2000s, large-scale agricultural investment has experienced a revival on the agenda for rural development in Africa, purported to bring, for instance, efficient agricultural production, reduced import expenditures and poverty alleviation. This new wave of large-scale agricultural investment has been described as more extensive in scale than previous attempts to promote such large farms. However, closer scrutiny reveals that in many countries, the expected flood of investments has so far been only a trickle. So far, few studies have been conducted to investigate this trend of failure.

The overarching aim of this thesis is to contribute to the knowledge about how and why this new wave of large-scale agricultural investment failed to deliver proposed outcomes. This is done by exploring the empirical trajectories of, and the reasons behind, the failure of a planned public private partnership, a large scale sugar-cane investment in Tanzania, to deliver promised outcomes.

In interviews with project proponents and rural residents targeted by investment, the thesis shows how project proponents simplified complex contexts in order to ‘sell’ narratives of imminent success. Such simplifications interacted with context to produce delays in project implementation and subsequent failure of the project to materialise. Importantly, these delays had severe negative impacts on local communities. Despite delay being a common feature in development projects, it has been little discussed. Combined, these
findings suggest that delay is an important, but overlooked, factor when understanding development failure, and that delay should not be conceived as inevitable and innocent.

Through discourse analysis and drawing on the concept ‘resilient narratives’, I analyse discursive practices used by proponents to sustain the image of success, in the face of contradicting narratives and materialities.

Mainly drawing on post-development and post-colonial theory, I then position my findings in debates on development narratives and development failure, and advance some reflections on the influence of close collaboration with a private actor in development assistance in relation to these findings.

While the context of the case study is highly complex and to a certain extent unpredictable, I argue that proponents have a responsibility to understand this context, and address it in their policies and projects. Finally, I argue that more attention must be paid to the impacts of delayed or non-materialised projects in both academia and policy debates.


Over the past decade, the Ghanaian government has tried to include and accommodate the many people working in the so-called informal economy. This formalization process is in line with a global market-driven development discourse. The small-scale traders selling their goods from marketplaces and along the streets in major cities have been of particular interest.

While the Ghanaian government defines these actors as working in an “informal sector” and thus beyond the formal political and economic system, it simultaneously targets them with welfare services and various policies with the purpose of including them in the creation of a modern welfare state and shaping them into moral and entrepreneurial citizens.

In Tamale in northern Ghana, years of political neglect, violence, and structural adjustment have led to small-scale traders taking over streets, sidewalks, and infrastructure, which has created a boundless and dynamic marketspace that far exceeds the delimited and politically defined marketplaces. For the state, therefore, much of the formalization process is about restoring the control and power of public space through evictions and relocations of traders. In conjunction with the inclusive welfare services, this demonstrates the contradictions entailed in the politics of informality.

The study is based on an ethnographic fieldwork among small-scale traders in northern Ghana with a specific interest in the events that occur at the intersection where state, market, and citizenship meet. By asking what it means to be a trader in this contradictory process of formalization, the dissertation aims to understand this transformative moment in Ghana’s political and economic history.

In this study the emic notion of small-small is used to frame the norms of gradual progress and letting others in that define the moral economy of small-scale trade. Norms, values, and obligations generate trust and solidarity within the marketspace. But more than that, small-small produces a form of politics against an obstructive and unreliable state and it guides traders into the future by shaping dreams, aspirations, and possibilities. Situated in traders’ daily lives, work, and relationships, and through the small-small lens, this thesis investigates the underlying moralities of formalization. It describes the politics of the
Ghanaian state, which in its attempt to create an inclusive welfare society, struggles to both protect the moral dynamics of small-scale trade while adhering to the norms and standards of an open liberalized economy.


The Holocaust is an event that lives on in societies’ consciousness in the form of memorial monuments and museums, and is processed by research institutions and authorities. My own journey began when meeting upper secondary students who denied the Holocaust, and I soon came in contact with a group who identify themselves as Third Generation Survivors; grandchildren of those who survived the Holocaust. The purpose of this study is to investigate the third generation’s identity and how it is shaped by the memory of the Holocaust, by contemporary antisemitism and by the influence of Jewish institutions.

The ethnographic survey, focusing on interviews and observations, revealed that there is a pronounced will to remember the Holocaust. For some, it is important to remember in a private context while others consider that the more public commemoration ceremonies meet the need. At the same time, the grandchildren live in a time of both manifest and latent antisemitism, which influences the formation of their identity and their autobiography. However, their identity is not only shaped by past and present antisemitism but also by the Jewish institutions, the Jewish calendar as well as cultural and social guidelines. In the conclusions of the study, it can be seen that the Third Generation’s remembrance of the Holocaust is largely based on a generational transfer of memory that has taken place during the participants’ lives through interaction with the survival generation. The results also show that they have strategies to deal with contemporary alongside historical antisemitism experienced by the survivors. This together constitutes one of the fundaments of both their individual and their collective identity. The results also show that the third generation chooses to live a Jewish life, within the framework of the Jewish congregation in Stockholm, based on individual choices and decisions.

2019


Swedish society has been described as both modern, liberal democratic and deeply humanitarian; and as more or less premodern, semi-authoritarian and potentially abusive of groups with weak political representation. In this dissertation, this Swedish dilemma is explored in an anthropology of law tradition, with disputing practices as an inroad to an understanding of law as culture.

Detailed data on twenty appeals of denials of sickness cash benefits between 2005 to 2008 and 2015 to 2018 are contextualised with 20th century history, previous research, government oversight reports, media coverage, and interviews with jurists across the field. The theoretical framing is Geertz’s semiotic concept of law as culture, Charles Taylor’s social imaginaries of modernity and premodernity, the theoretical content of previous research about Sweden with a similar framing and objective, and John Borneman’s anthropological
concept of rule of law. Based on Anglo-Saxon scholarship about administrative law and social insurance adjudication, I also develop a practice-based and more anthropological theory of modern Western rule of law in relation to sickness benefits.

This study identifies recurrent constructions of meaning, animating ideals, legal sensibilities and models of society. They are: the prerogatives of the state, corporatism, consensus lost, far-reaching administrative discretion, priority given to low costs, and conflictual paternalism. It also suggests that these aspects of Swedish administrative legal culture are made possible by weak elite accountability, weak legalistic awareness in the press, a priori trust in the state, and various forms of political and bureaucratic foul play, such as extra-legal regulations, arbitrary formalism, and government agencies and tribunals which respond to political demands.

Taken as a whole, the findings of this study suggest a form of unstable pseudo-rule by law, and even a fundamentally different basis for the Swedish political order. State prerogatives and conflictual paternalism seem to be more important than modern Western rule of law. Causal explanations in the social sciences are difficult, but the results nonetheless suggest that Sweden has had less influence from modern Western notions of natural law and individual rights because of a greater continuity from some version of a Lutheran-Orthodox Prussian Machtstaate and other premodern social imaginaries.


This thesis focuses on the dynamics of care in the transnational lives of Ecuadorian migrant women in Spain. It is concerned with the various forms of care that take shape and are sustained in the workplace, between friends, and among family members in Ecuador and Spain. Ultimately, it sheds light on how care is mobilised to sustain ideals of solidarity at work as well as togetherness in transnational life. The thesis is set against the background of the economic and political crisis in Ecuador of the late 1990s and early 2000s, which resulted not only in the dollarization of the economy and the removal of the country’s president, but in a dramatic shift of traditional male migration from the southern highlands to the United States, to a new wave of largely middle class female migration to Western Europe, especially Spain. Women from across the country left their children, spouses and elderly parents behind to work in domestic and care jobs abroad. In Ecuador, this disturbed the dominant cultural imaginary of the co-habitating and united family, centred on the presence of the woman as mother and wife. In light of this, the thesis engages with women’s dilemmas in giving and receiving care during years of absence, the role of family members, friends and domestic workers in this process, and the development of long-term goals focused on remittances, reunification, return, and the ultimate goal of creating a better future. Most generally, while challenging a series of dichotomies between love and money, home and work, gift and commodity—which have structured academic discussions concerning the feminization of international migration—the thesis describes the intimate relationship between women’s participation in the gift economy and a global labour market through the lens of care relationships.

This thesis explores the individual and household-level factors that determine households’ responses to and ability to cope with chronic illness of adults, as well as with the stresses from the wider environment, in a rural Ugandan context. Over a period of one year, in 2009/2010, monthly visits were made to 22 households that were part of a cohort that accessed free healthcare from the Medical Research Council of Uganda. Data was collected through in-depth interviews including life histories and observations. The material was continuously analysed and data collection refined over the course of the year, and later the three most important themes arising from the material were developed into papers.

The three major findings were; 1) the lifecycle-stage of a household influenced response strategies and outcomes during chronic illness, and households headed by the elderly (those with household heads over the age of 60) were an especially vulnerable group, 2) Social relations and broader social protection is key for minimising financial hardships in households with chronically ill individuals, even with free healthcare, as locally prevailing factors such as poor transportation services, food shortages and droughts still cause economic loss during ill health, and 3) the elderly are in an especially vulnerable situation due to their shrinking asset base as well as due to trends in the wider environment, such as increased schooling of children and out-migration of young people, which means they risk being left in rural areas with inadequate access to care and support.

Addressing the needs of individuals and households with chronic conditions requires health systems to focus on both medical factors and the broader context-specific social determinants of health. The unique case of a population accessing free healthcare made it possible to observe the factors that could still hinder access to the available care, and the needs, aside from purely medical concerns, that had to be met in order to cope with illness. The highlights from the thesis help to fill gaps in knowledge on how health systems could improve and maintain health outcomes during chronic illness in similar low-income settings. It must also be acknowledged that households are all different, and that solutions that are successful at one point might prove less suitable in a changing context that demands continuous attention and flexible policies.


Since 2006, Rwanda has been implementing policies to modernize the agricultural sector, with the aim of moving from small-scale subsistence farming to modern, market-oriented farming. Under these policies, small-scale farmers have been compelled to abandon their traditional farming practices and adapt to monocropping of state-approved crops on consolidated land.

This dissertation, based on 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork in a Rwandan village, describes how agricultural modernization policies have been implemented and the farmers’ reactions to it. Although policies are implemented in a top-down manner, and although the state-imposed monocropping has resulted in poor yields and increased hunger,
my informants did not show any overt, or even covert resistance to these policies. This dissertation aims at understanding why.

Looking beyond James Scott’s theory of ‘hidden resistance’ and ‘hidden transcripts’, I have found that rather than evading or resisting state policies, villagers endeavoured to be included in the modernization plans. My argument is that the societal hierarchy, in combination with the prevailing norms to aspire not to be poor and to strive to develop, can help us to understand this ambition to be part of a project that made their lives miserable and even precarious.


The present dissertation is an ethnographic study of the Erasmus Programme, the European Union’s student exchange programme. This programme has, for the last three decades, resulted in an unprecedented exchange of ideas and people within the European Union, and it has quite radically changed the conditions for, and the appearance of, student life in many European universities. Over the years the community has developed a distinctive lifestyle, replete with partying and travel, and is characterized by a strong social cohesion and exclusive ethos. Empirically the study is a multi-local field study involving participant observation and interviews in two European capitals, namely Stockholm and Athens. Both present and former Erasmus students have been included in the study and were followed for an extended period of time. The study takes a close look at some of the experiential and social processes of the ‘Erasmus lifestyle’ and tries to understand them in the light of wider cultural and political processes such as the European unification process, cosmopolitanism, youth culture, and tourism. In the process it surveys part of the programme’s political history, local configuration, social dynamics, communication practices and global interfaces. According to the present thesis, the Erasmus Programme can be seen as a learning apprenticeship through which the young students gain entrance to and get valuable training in the reality of living in an increasingly interconnected world. The strong experiences engendered by the programme, both emotionally and cognitively, lead to a transformation in the student’s self-perception, social representations and social identity. For some students the programme leads to a drastic reconfiguring of their social networks and extant allegiances (e.g., towards their nation, culture), prompting them, after the end of their sojourn, to explore new venues in terms of career development, family life, and place of residence. Although the students do not seem to integrate with the host country to any significant degree, their extended experience of transnational mobility and their first-hand acquaintance with cultural diversity within the group encourages them to develop a more cosmopolitan outlook on the world and their place within it.

Valente Cardoso, Carolina 2019. The new Portuguese presence in Angola: Traces, emplacements and interactions of a postcolonial encounter. School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg.

Propelled by the impact of the Euro-crisis in the Portuguese economy and job market and the booming economy in Angola, during the last decade, a great number of Portuguese workers migrated to the former colony. At the same time, Angolan investors made important acquisitions in key sectors of the Portuguese economy. Together, these inverse flows of
people and capital marked a revivification of the economic, political and socio-cultural ties connecting ex-colony and ex-metropole, forty years after independence.

Framed as an “ethnography of post-colonial encounter” (Faier & Rofel 2015) and based on fieldwork carried out among the Portuguese living in the city of Benguela (central region of Angola), between August 2015 and February 2016, the aim of this thesis is to explore and reflect on these migrants’ experiences and subjectivities.

Addressing classical anthropological concerns with issues such as postcolonial reconfiguration of power relations, perceptions of continuity and change, constellations of (un)belonging and contested and competing past presencing discourses, the analysis deployed follows three interconnected threads: it identifies and explores traces of the past which shape the contemporary Portuguese presence; it points to the symbolic and material connections of the mobile subjects to the Angolan space/place, and the different types of emplacement enacted by them; and finally, through a set of critical figures of power embodied by the subjects, it investigates Portuguese-Angolan power relations as they are played out in everyday life interactions.

Proposing a situated postcolonial perspective on these topics, the thesis locates itself in the interception of three fields of scholarship: Lusophone postcolonial studies; North-South migration studies and research on whiteness and white subjectivities in Africa. With regard to the first one, its main contribution lies in following key themes such as ‘Lusophone post-colonial identities’ and ‘semi peripheral condition’ as they travel outside of Portugal. To the latter fields it contributes with empirical enrichment brought about by the distinctive features of a case that, at different levels, challenges what has come to be seen as the ‘normalized’ structure of transnational distribution of power.

2020

Brandshaug, Malene K. 2020. Liquid Landscapes: Human-water interactions and water scarcity in Yanque, Peru. School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg.

In the farming district of Yanque in the Southern Peruvian Andes, everyday life revolves around acquiring enough water for irrigation. This thesis concerns water scarcity and focuses on a range of water management practices. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted among small-scale farmers from January to December 2016, the core chapters of this thesis scrutinise how water is searched for in physical and bureaucratic landscapes; how it is captured in canals, reservoirs and fields; and how it is paid to and for through offerings to earth-beings and through money transfers to the state and water organisation. By paying attention to human-water interactions, the thesis not only explores what people do with water, but also the variations in what water is, becomes and does in Yanque. Hence, this study is situated within an anthropology concerned with more-than-human relations. In an Anthropocene world marked by increased water scarcity, Liquid landscapes also addresses the relation between national and regional politics of water governance and local water management. It argues that a historical continuity of water scarcity in Yanque is exacerbated by environmental changes concerning disappearing glaciers and irregular rains, as well as by a continued coloniality. The thesis shows how indeterminacy is created in political spaces, in the mountain and valley landscape, and through emotion and affect. Furthermore, by describing and analysing heterogeneous practices that Yanqueños prove to be remarkably skilled in navigating and evoking, the thesis seeks to move beyond what can appear to be
opposing water realities. *Liquid landscapes* concludes that by enacting water as a sentient person and as a passive substance, Yanqueños do not simply adopt the dominant way of valuing water as an object to be used efficiently. Rather, they creatively combine divergent water management practices, use distinct yet entangled irrigation infrastructures, and make relevant multiple versions of water to deal with water scarcity. Moreover, the thesis ends by holding that although Yanque farmers are especially vulnerable to environmental and ecological changes, which are intensified by inequalities and marginalisation, the indeterminacy of their water situation is not only characterised by vulnerability and uncertainty, but also by strength, creativity and possibility.


During the last two decades, cash transfer programs have become a significant tool across low and middle-income countries in efforts to reduce poverty. However, there is a paucity of studies on beneficiaries’ own perspectives and lived experiences of cash transfers as well as potential long-term productive effects on livelihoods.

The aim of this thesis is to explore the material and socio-relational implications of state cash transfers for impoverished populations in rural South Africa in a changing livelihood context, using the Child Support Grant (CSG) as case. The CSG is an unconditional cash transfer to improve child wellbeing for households living in poverty. Material and social-relational implications of the grant are explored through combining household surveys with all (273) households in two rural villages in the Eastern Cape Province with interviews and observations. The surveys, conducted in 2016, followed up a previous similar survey from 2002, which was before the CSG reached these villages. Drawing on literature on cash transfers, livelihoods, and social justice theory, including the two interlinked concepts of redistribution and recognition, the study points to the importance of both material and symbolic redistribution in strengthening livelihoods and social justice.

The thesis reveals that in a context of rising unemployment and declining cultivation in the two villages, social grants have both protective and productive effects on livelihoods. The results show how the recipients used the CSG strategically for making small improvements to their livelihoods over time. The study also shows that the CSG has strengthened women’s autonomy and dignity and has reduced gender inequalities at household level. However, the CSG did not lead to significant improvements that could eradicate poverty in the long term.

This thesis further studies state-citizen relations and the contentious character of social grants in rural South Africa. There is a growing sense of entitlement to the CSG among recipients, while sentiments of grants being a form of charity exists simultaneously. The thesis concludes that the encounters with state bureaucracy primarily are avenues where CSG recipients see the state, enact a form of agency and gain recognition, which contributes to a sense of citizenship. In conclusion, the CSG is not simply an economic transfer of cash, which keeps individuals in households and communities afloat, it also becomes part of, and reshapes, social relations. The potential for recipients to gain recognition of their status as citizens is an important symbolic implication of social grants.

This study investigates the functioning of the domestic economy of smallholder cotton farmers with the overall aim of interrogating female agency, based on ethnographic fieldwork in Burkina Faso in the mid-1990s. The thesis addresses the following interrelated research questions: How were the smallholder domestic economies organized and how did they function? What were the mechanisms for economic inequality and social stratification? To what extent did women benefit from cotton farming? What economic strategies were available to women? And finally, how could female agency be conceptualized in relation to the domestic unit under male headship? Permeating the analysis is the insight that domestic economies of many West African farming societies consist of separate but interconnected economic domains, the “common” economy of the farming unit and the “individual” economies of its male and female members. It demonstrates that women have vested interests in both the common economy and their individual ones, since women’s individual undertakings, to a large extent, are motivated by their gendered responsibilities towards the domestic group. The study argues for an agency concept that captures the different modes in which women exercise agency, both as individuals and as members of social bodies.