Perspectives on Difference

Makings and Workings of Power

Edited by Anni Kajanus and Maylin Meincke
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Anni Kajanus and Maylin Meincke

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Preface

On the concept of difference

The concept of difference is the backbone of scientific inquiry. It takes on related concepts such as inequality, non-same, otherness, diversity, heterogeneity and change. It is applied, as Aristotle put it, ‘(1) to those things which though other are the same in some respect, only not in number but either in species or in genus or by analogy; (2) to those whose genus is other, and to contraries, and to things that have their otherness in their essence’ (Aristotle 2012:71).

As Bourdieu argues, ‘social identity lies in difference’ (1979:479). At the core of identity construction difference plays a role in how social subjects construct the Self and the Other, how they position themselves within society by relating to and differentiating from others spatially, temporally and ethically (Hansen 2006:37-54). As such, difference may take on various degrees of otherness, from fundamental difference between Self and Other to constructions of less radical difference.

Questions that matter therefore include how difference is established, what role (constructed) differences play in social relationships, and how actors navigate between different social realities. Some argue that differences are increasingly disappearing in this era of globalisation (cf. Appadurai 1996), which in turn raises the question of why some differences cease to exist, some are denied and others are upheld or intensified. What new differences are emerging in response to the globalising forces, the continuous flow and penetration of people, goods and (hegemonic) ideologies through previously closed borders? These questions were raised for discussion and resolution at the third SYLFF Association workshop on 14 October 2011.
Perspectives on difference constituted the theme of the SYLFF Association workshop held at the University of Helsinki on 14 October 2011 in celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Ryoichi Sasakawa Young Leaders Fellowship Fund (SYLFF) programme at the university. SYLFF is a multidisciplinary fellowship programme of the Tokyo Foundation, which has supported about 15,000 students in social sciences and humanities from 68 universities since 1987. The University of Helsinki has been receiving SYLFF funding since 1991, and each year has awarded three students in the field of international relations, Asian and African studies, and social and cultural anthropology a one-year SYLFF scholarship that funds full-time PhD research.

Two other workshops have been held since the founding of the SYLFF Association at the University of Helsinki, and their proceedings subsequently published. The first volume was entitled ‘Civil Society Reconsidered: A Critical Look at NGOs and Development in Practice’ and was edited by Hisayo Katsui and Richard Wamai (2006). Tuija Veintie and Pirjo Kristiina Virtanen edited the second volume, ‘Local and Global Encounters: Norms, Identities and Representations in Formation’, which was published in 2009.

Eight SYLFF fellows presented papers on their perspectives on difference at the third workshop. Six of those are included in the present volume.

Perspectives on difference in this publication

Perspectives on difference as the guiding theme of this volume might seem a rather loose and even disjointed thread for six articles from various fields of social sciences and arts. It is precisely in the different disciplinary approaches to a variety of topics that the essence of difference is highlighted, however. Despite their constructed nature, differences have consequences that are very real. The contributors to this volume address these implications in their particular fields of interest, showing how power operates, and is operated through difference.
The first article is by Minna Hakkarainen, who discusses how differences between words and their meanings matter in the context of development cooperation. She takes a closer look at an intervention by a Finnish NGO in Vietnam from a Bakhtinian perspective, showing how the concept of a ‘shared language’ in the field of development cooperation is problematic if one does not go beyond the words used by the actors involved. She further argues that the meanings of words are always context-specific and historically situated. Finnish and Vietnamese actors, for example, use the same word ‘participation’, but the different interpretations create problems and misunderstandings. Instead of stressing a shared language between partners in development, she suggests developing the practice of shared meanings through dialogue.

Staying in the field of development, Maylin Meincke applies discourse analysis to show how difference is constructed in papers on health policy with regard to African traditional medicine. Using post-structural theories she analyses how the ambiguous and heterogeneous nature of traditional medicine is simplified if it is articulated as the other biomedicine. Aligning African traditional medicine alongside biomedicine gives it an identity that is split between a positive and a negative sub-identity. As such it is constructed as an alternative medical knowledge system that has potential, but a lot of deficiencies that health policy can address. At the same time, aspects of traditional medical practice that do not conform with biomedical practice, such as belief in witchcraft and spiritual causes of illness, are consistently excluded. Implementation of such policy frameworks would lead to the creation of a traditional herbal practice that would act as a supplier of new drugs for biomedicine.

Jemima Repo considers difference from a theoretical viewpoint, offering a rigorous reading of Foucault’s genealogies of sexuality and race. She shows that even though both use difference to exclude and govern groups of people, they still vary in their logic and their function in biopolitics. Whereas race acts as the ‘death function’ that determines who and what is to be excluded from and disallowed to exist in society, sexuality works as a ‘life function’ ensuring the existence and creation of life. The violence and power of the former are equally entwined in the latter.
Moving from conceptual categories to the social ontological categories that affect our understanding of the world more profoundly, Pirjo Kristiina Virtanen writes about the difference between humans and non-humans in Amazonia. Among indigenous people such difference is produced and fulfilled though performance, particular ways of behaving and communicating. The overlaps between the categories are both a threat to the social order and simultaneously a way of incorporating disorder into the ontological structure. This model for dealing with difference is employed in the face of new challenges. The same skill of successfully moving and negotiating between categories that a hunter needs in order to deal with forest spirits is now required in order to deal with non-indigenous humans in the field of indigenous politics.

The change and continuity in cultural models of difference in the midst of drastic structural change is the focus of Anni Kajanus’ article. She relates the story of a young Chinese woman with a rural background who managed to transform her social status into that of a white-collar urbanite at a time when the gaps between different sections of the population were widening. Her socioeconomic mobility is attributed partly to conscious work at differentiation and adaptation, accomplished through the skilful use of traditional kinship and gender models, and partly to the new opportunities that migration and education offer. What makes such a process messy and painful is the fact that the cultural models and social practices are not resources existing in some vacuum to be manipulated, but are located in real-life interaction between people who are attached to each other through emotional ties.

Saana Svärd’s article addresses the problem of accounting for conceptual differences when using historical materials. She proposes that not only should the theoretical and methodological approaches informing the study of archival data be made explicit, they should be chosen in a way that does justice to the original cultural models and concepts. This is a challenge in the light of Svärd’s own research on the power of women in the Neo-Assyrian Empire. She first determines the relevance of her analytical concept of ‘power’ through discourse analysis, and then uses her understanding of the texts to draw out two more concepts, hierarchical and heterarchical power, in answering the question of what kind of power the palace women had. In her discussion she makes the point that an understanding of social structure and people’s agency at other times and in other
cultures is not achieved by simply relying on concepts that are used to construct difference in our society.

In Helsinki December 2012
Anni Kajanus and Maylin Meincke
Editors

References


The Role of Interpretations of ‘Participation’ in Development Practice

Minna Hakkarainen

Abstract

International development aid forms a complex system in which communication, and development and policy interventions are closely connected. The ‘strategic communication regime’ of an aid system, claimed to produce a shared language can, however, be questioned. This article challenges the notion of a shared language through an analysis of the ‘participation’ concept in a case study of a Finnish NGO’s interventions in Vietnam. My analysis introduces a Bakhtinian reading of development practice that has the potential to help us to go behind and beyond the assumption of a shared language. Deriving from M. Bakhtin’s concept of meaning construction, I argue that a distinction between words and meanings is crucial to aid practice. Therefore, the focus shifts from development buzzwords to their interpretations, affected by time, place and actors’ personal life experiences.

Introduction

Development cooperation is a field of practice that involves a great variety of actors from state agencies, consultancy companies, non-governmental organisations, to project beneficiaries and other stakeholders. What seems to knit the actors together is ‘an international aid system’ (Tvedt 2006), in which mainstream development policies are formulated and put into practice through development projects. The aid system, according to Tvedt (ibid:686), includes ‘a strategic communication regime’ – a ‘powerful and globally oriented communication regime in which communication and development and policy interventions are highly connected’. As an outcome of the communication regime, the system is said to operate with a shared language. That is, development ideas are communicated by key words that are included in development policies and are assumed to guide development practice. As the boundaries of the system are defined by material lines of either receiving, using or dispensing donor state money, those within the system are expected to speak the same development language. However, there are grounds for questioning the notion of a shared language.
The existence of different interpretations has been pointed out in ethnographic studies of development. For example, Mosse (2005:8) emphasises that ‘success in development depends upon the stabilization of a particular interpretation [of development concepts]’. He proposes that actors convey not only varied expectations of development projects, but also their interpretations of development buzzwords. Yet in order for actors to have a shared understanding of a project, a shared understanding of key words that are supposed to guide the action has to be reached first. Mosse’s ethnographic inquiry, however, shows how concepts like ‘participation’ have a high degree of ambiguity (Mosse 2005:36, 160). His detailed analysis constructs an image of a constant power play that takes place within development practice. The dominant interpretation of actors in a project implementation does not necessarily coincide with that of a donor. Thus, development buzzwords are merely mobilising metaphors that can both accommodate different interpretations of a concept and make such differences disappear in development discourse (ibid:230). It has been emphasised that development buzzwords ‘facilitate a multiplicity of contingent, situational and relational meanings, which continue to be contested as they are put to use’ (Cornwall and Brock 2005:1046).

Ambiguity of development buzzwords is also reported in a study on the concept of ‘partnership’ (Hakkarainen and Katsui 2009). Unlike the Northern NGO actors who were aware of international development discourses, their Vietnamese partners often conceptualised ‘partnership’ by using metaphors from their everyday life (ibid). This finding compromises Tvedt’s notion of a shared language, as conceptually those receiving aid flows are inside the international aid system and should, therefore, share the language with their foreign partners. As a matter of fact, we may talk about a shared language only on a surface level.

That different meanings are given to key development words has thus been noted (see also Nelson and Wright 1995), but not yet thoroughly addressed as a research focus on its own. A maintained systematic approach to development aid requiring ‘that problems be framed in terms amenable to technical solutions’ (Murray 2008) can be seen as a key factor in it.
Below I begin with introducing conceptualisations of ‘participation’ in development aid. Then a Bakhtinian reading of development practice will be motivated and his main concepts used here introduced. Third, I shall proceed to the selected case study of a Finnish NGO’s development interventions and discuss the role of interpretations in concrete project settings. Finally, I shall conclude my findings.

‘Participation’ and development theory

There are few concepts that have mobilised more enthusiasm among development NGOs than participation. However, even though the concept was also widely adopted by big, multilateral donors in the early 1990s and soon became ‘development orthodoxy’ (Cornwall 2003), development practice lagged behind the policies (Nelson and Wright 1995). The conceptual adoption of participation into mainstream development policies helped analysts to address the failure of Third World development. When states failed to deliver, among the possible reasons discussed was a lack of people’s participation. Participation discourse was not, however, a novelty in development aid discourse. Ideas and words travel from one discourse to another.

During the 1960s and ‘70s, the role of people’s participation was widely acknowledged among social and political activists, especially on the political left. Discourse on participation was linked to discourses on citizens and national development in both developed and developing countries (ICSW 1975), including a strong political reading and reflecting ideas on national development and government decision-making practices. In development aid discourse, however, participation was expected to tackle problems in aid effectiveness. In addition, participation encompassed ideas on gender equality and good governance. (Nelson and Wright 1995:4).

By the mid-1990s ‘participation’ was a widely promoted concept in international development. However, several interpretations of participation co-existed. ‘Participation’ was believed, for instance, to increase aid effectiveness and self-sufficiency, or it was conceptualised as independence from the state as well as inclusion of the people in the public decision-making processes (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Nelson
and Wright 1995). Despite their variety, all of these interpretations had in common a positive view of participation.

‘Participation’ and development practice

The question then became one of turning ‘participation’ into development practice. As a solution, tools such as the Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) were developed and widely adopted (see especially Chambers 1997; 1994).

Again, different actors understood participation differently and no uniform interpretation of participation resulted. However, as the concept was mainstreamed some form of participation was expected to take place within development projects. Consequently, tools like PRA were used to fulfill the requirements. The 1990s was a decade in which there were high hopes for participation in development. However, the following decade marked the beginning of participation criticism (e.g. Cooke and Kothari 2001; Kapoor 2002). It was argued that aid practice had failed to fulfill the promise of participation. Participatory processes were ‘undertaken ritualistically’, had ‘turned to be manipulative’ and even ‘harmed those who were to be empowered’ (Cooke and Kothari 2001:1). Development practice was said to include ‘participation’ that was merely cosmetic. Moreover, ‘participation’ was used ‘as a co-opting practice, to mobilize labour and reduce costs’, one way of making the locals participate in ‘our’ project (Chambers 1995).

Participation was also used to describe empowering processes in which a more substantial role was given to the people. Structures were created so that people could analyse their development problems, make decisions on interventions, control implementing activities, thus re-constructing their self-image and gaining confidence. Participation as an empowering process represented a political approach to the concept and was not limited to technical use of participatory tools. Participation in development was turned into participatory development.
A Bakhtinian reading of aid practice

I propose that in order to better understand the origins of different interpretations of development buzzwords and their role in aid practice more attention should be paid to the human aspect of development, that is, to the actors involved in development practice and factors contributing to different understandings. So far, little effort has been made to understand the origins of these interpretations or how they materialise within aid practice.

If we accept that different actors conceptualise development buzzwords differently and that these differences are of practical relevance to development aid, the aid practice becomes an arena for competing interpretations of the key concepts. Thus the challenge facing development actors, including development NGOs, is to be aware of and manage these differences. Here, I suggest, Bakhtinian reading of development can contribute to our task.

My interest as a researcher and development practitioner is precisely this: in the meanings, and not words per se, that play a role in development aid practice. I shall now introduce key concepts of Mikhail Bakhtin that facilitate a Bakhtinian reading of development aid practice.

Not words but meanings: Meaning construction and re-evaluation of meanings by Bakhtin

Bakhtin (1996) argues that words and meanings are not the same. Therefore, understanding the meanings behind shared words becomes a fundamental task for those who wish to understand and cooperate with ‘the other’ (другой). An individual’s understanding, the construction of a meaning of a word, is affected by time and place as well as that person’s life-experiences. Meanings thus constructed take concrete linguistic forms in utterance (высказывание). In other words, meanings are constructed by an individual in a certain place and in a certain (historical) time. Put another way,
development buzzwords are ‘words that evoke, and come to carry, the cultural and political values of the time’ (Cornwall and Brock 2005:1047).

Meanings are, therefore, necessarily and intimately linked with socio-political contexts of the time and subject to alterations along with the changes in time and place. The notion of meanings derived from their specific contexts contradicts the ‘assumption of universalism’ (Fforde 2009) that dominates mainstream aid practice. Each individual’s relationship to time and place, to the context in which he/she lives, has an impact on that individual’s meaning construction process. Therefore there is always an element of dialogism in a meaning construction. That is, meaning construction does not take place in a vacuum, but in a dialogue with other people and the contexts. This intersubjective meaning construction process may occur not only when two or more are physically present, but when an individual reads a text that represents another conscious mind.

The separation of words and meanings unavoidably means that ‘participation’ has a different meaning for a Vietnamese villager than for a highly educated Finnish development actor. In this sense, a villager is not part of a Tvedtian ‘international aid system’ that is signified by a shared language. Instead, his/her understanding of ‘participation’ derives mainly from personal experiences connected to local discourses and practices.

Unlike a Vietnamese villager, a foreign development NGO activist is likely to have accessed ‘participation’ discourses, which have impacted his/her meaning construction processes, at national and/or international levels. Also, Vietnamese staff of a foreign NGO can be expected to be aware of the interpretations of the key concepts as understood by their employer and, therefore, to be part of the international development discourse. Moreover, they have access to relevant discourses in their own country. On the other hand, they may not necessarily be fully aware of the meanings villagers and other local actors give to the concepts.

Meanings are not static. On the contrary, each encounter with the other (not just persons but also, for instance, texts representing the other’s conscious mind) may entail what Bakhtin calls ‘re-evaluation of meanings’ - an individual’s possible response to the
other. This response does not always take an immediate form in utterance, but can also materialise in actions (Bakhtin 1996:169).

**Dialogism and dialogical relationship: A possibility to learn**

An idea of dialogism is central to meaning construction and re-evaluation of meanings in Bakhtin’s conceptualisation. The concept of dialogue does not circumvent the issue of power within a society. Bakhtin is clear that not all voices are equal. However, Bakhtin held a view that all meanings are equally true to their holders as they are entwined to their worldviews and personal experiences. This polyphonic nature of a society is a key to understand Bakthin’s ideas. Dialogue is needed to test one’s views against those of the others, an encounter that may lead to re-evaluation of the earlier constructed meanings. An ideal form of dialogue is a dialogical relationship (диалогическое отношение), in which the other is expected to respond to the speaker’s utterance, either with words or by action. When entering into a dialogical relationship a person is aware that the response by the other may change his/her own understanding. Dialogical relationship can thus be described as a relationship containing meanings as potential. In linguistic terms, we are discussing the dialogical approach to language in which ‘the notion of literal meaning is rejected in favour of the view that a linguistic expression is to be seen as a potentiality to mean’ (Lähteenmäki 2001:69).

Not all forms of dialogue are what Bakhtin calls a dialogical relationship. He reminds us that encounters often take the form of a monological/authoritarian dialogue (Bakhtin 1996). That is, the speaker delivers a message to the other without any expectation of reply. I argue that international development aid is not alien to a monological/authoritarian dialogue. It takes place when ostensible negotiations are conducted with aid recipients, with no serious intention of compromising the pre-established forms of interventions or ideas behind them. The likelihood that a dialogue takes a monological or an authoritarian form increases when the speaker exercises significant power over the other. Foreign NGOs are by no means free from practicing monological/authoritarian dialogue vis-à-vis their local partners and beneficiaries.
Case Studies: Constructing ‘participation’ in development aid

It is within the rise of ‘participation’ in development aid that Devaid’s activities (our Finnish case NGO) are located. In the following, I shall first describe how participation was conceptualised when Devaid planned a savings and credit programme in a rural Tan Minh commune, Soc Son district, Hanoi in the mid 1990’s. Then I shall show how encounters with the chosen beneficiary group changed the forms of participation in the commune and how the feedback from the field led to an introduction of a village self-reliance and development intervention model in Hoa Binh province in 1997.

Participation in the savings and credit development interventions

Devaid saw participation as an essential element of any development intervention. The project plans identified improving women’s economic status (a short term objective) and their status in different levels of the society (a long term objective) as the project objectives. As an outcome of the plans a ‘Cooperation with women in Vietnam’ project in which all project activities were designed for women was created. Project participants were conceptualised as poor women lacking access to the official loan funds. The project was to offer them micro loans to make small investments for income generation purposes. The selected intervention, a savings and credit model inspired by the Grameen Bank¹, was formed around small loan groups. In accordance with the rise of participation in development discourse and its applications to the practice, Participatory Rural Appraisals (PRA) were conducted in the two pilot communes in the first half of 1996. The aim of the exercise was to collect baseline data of the communes and offer it to all project participants: local women, Women’s Union and Devaid staff. PRA was ‘to initiate local women to specify their own possibilities and constraints, problems and solutions in the credit fund management and regulations including savings activities;

¹ Grameen Bank (GB) originated in Bangladesh in late 1970’s. It’s innovation was to remove the need for collateral in order to get a small loan, often addressed as microcredit. The bank provides credit to the poorest of the poor, most of whom are women, that is, it serves those normally considered non bankable. GB model is based on ideas of mutual trust, accountability, participation and creativity. In the model, the credit is seen as a cost effective weapon to fight poverty and to serve socio-economic development.
possible loan’s sizes, uses and interest rates; loan disbursement and repayment mechanisms and other activities indicated in the project document’ (Fax 22.3.1996).

A collection of baseline data included the target group’s economic, education, health and social situations. This was to make sure that the preliminary model pre-identified and developed during Devaid director’s planning missions to Vietnam in 1994 and 1995 supported poverty reduction in the two pilot communes.

Tan Minh commune, a rural commune in the greater Hanoi region, was soon identified as one of the two project sites. Tan Minh was unusual for having a significant number of households headed by women. Devaid therefore decided that the programme in the commune would be open to female-headed households only. According to the project plan, the Women’s Union was to play a central role in project management and implementation of the savings and credit interventions by occupying the seats on a Board of Management (BoM). The plan, however, was soon changed.

Devaid’s Vietnamese project officer (PO) described his first encounter with the single women in the commune:

(...) when talking with women in Tan Minh, I realised that these women are so strong that they can survive in traditional Vietnamese village being alone with their children (...) especially those who decided to have children without marriage. (PO1 24.5.2010).

The reference to a traditional Vietnamese village and to those who decided to have children outside marriage are an indication that many of the single women were marginalised, not just economically but socially. In the view of the Devaid PO, exceeding the norms of sexual behaviour and insisting on giving birth to a baby were both choices that lead to hardship and social isolation, and thus in themselves demonstrated the women’s inner strength. He realised that the women needed ‘elimination of social difficulties’ as much as money, and consequently ‘some sort of official recognition also from Devaid’ became an issue (PO1 24.5.2010).
The PO suggested to the Devaid director that the single women themselves should be allowed to form the BoM. The proposed change meant that the poor women were given positions normally occupied by development ‘experts’. The initiative was welcomed by the Devaid director who authorised the PO to start necessary negotiations with the Women’s Union.

The negotiations took months and involved stakeholders in the commune, at district and national levels. The single women themselves were not aware that Devaid was endeavouring to change the project structure on their behalf (BoM 2011). Lacking experience in donor projects, they were ignorant of the ‘normal’ project management arrangements. None of the BoM members selected had prior experience in NGO projects, or of responsibilities such as the necessary bookkeeping and reporting. According to one BoM member, it took about three years before they felt fully competent to run the project without outside support.

In this intervention, ‘participation’ initially took the form of a technical PRA exercise that was expected to confirm poor women’s need of easily accessible loans. The PRA team of 14 members in Tan Minh included five project beneficiaries, five staff of the commune, two from the district WU and two from Devaid (Fax 10.2.1997). In addition to PRA, participation was conceptualised as a means to organise among the women. Participation was channelled to the loan groups which mobilised both compulsory and voluntary savings, received savings and distributed loans, organised monthly group meetings and so on. However, in the Tan Minh commune, interpretation of participation within a micro-credit scheme was extended to cover beneficiaries taking part in overall project management under the supervision and guidance of the WU and Devaid. This gave them recognition and created space for the single women to act. As the PO puts it:

"Many projects use participation but not many try to understand participation in a particular socio-political context. In Tan Minh they had different associations, but the key question to me was: How the participation could be effective and last long? Given the social structures and systems, I did not know exactly, but these women were strong – maybe they need some"
space... Maybe they find out the best way to coexist with the current local structures, which we may not be able to find. (PO1 24.5.2010)

The Devaid PO understood the limited ability of outside actors to truly comprehend the context in which development interventions take place. Many details remain hidden from a visitor, even a Vietnamese one. Moreover, due to unequal power structures, donors need a special sensitivity when entering a commune:

Though we talk about participation, we may impose! Coming from city, being educated, our women normally tend to agree with us. They never say ‘you impose’! (PO1 24.5.2010)

To the single women, participation in the loan group activities was initially a means to access loans. However, interviews (April 2011) with the Tan Minh single women suggest that a social aspect of participation was also recognised and valued. ‘Vui’ - a Vietnamese word frequently encountered, suggests that the loan programme has developed into a sphere of social networking that brings much happiness. ‘Vui’, ‘joyfulness’, is something that encourages women to participate in the project even if they have left their economic difficulties behind, as some have, or still have not found the courage to loan any money from the loan fund.

We may conclude that at the early phase of the project planning, participation took relatively conventional forms of engaging project beneficiaries. When participation was extended to include project management tasks in Tan Minh commune, no major obstacles were met from the single women’s side as there was no reference point of ‘normal’ practice in NGO projects. However, in order to extend single women’s participation to cover project management, Devaid first had to win over its closest partner, the Women’s Union.

Negotiations with the central WU proved easy, as the PO’s mother was working in the WU newspaper. The next challenge was to win over the district and commune WUs. The negotiations at the district level were relatively easy, although ‘usually that kind of negotiations would not lead anywhere’ (PO1 24.5.2010). The chair of the district WU
was herself widowed when her son was a baby, so she understood the difficulties of the single women and was willing to support them. In the negotiations with the most challenging partner, the commune People’s Committee (PC), she was personally willing to guarantee the success of the project. Still, negotiations took months. She and the Devaid PO met with the PC several times to discuss the management structure. (PO1 24.5.2010; NTB 7.11.2010). The PO insists that without the support of the district WU chair, Devaid would not have been able to implement the model in the Tan Minh commune.

There were still issues to be negotiated between Devaid and the WU. There was a danger that the WU would lose its role in the project if the model had been implemented as Devaid wanted. Moreover, the BoM members needed strong support to be able to grow along with their new responsibilities. Devaid therefore offered the WU the position of external consultant vis-a-vis the BoM. According to the agreement, the WU staff would train the BoM members, offer them consultation and advice and supervise their work. Moreover, realising that the WU was experienced and skillful in running micro-credit projects but lacked funds, the WU was given an additional loan of USD 10,000. With this money, the WU set up micro-credit projects of its own in three other communes in the district. The end result of the negotiations benefitted all parties.

These events demonstrate how development practice includes unspoken expectations about the roles of different parties, and thus, draws de facto limits to participation. Assumptions of relevant knowledge and the role of technical expertise when ‘doing’ development concern development donors and beneficiaries alike. As noted, those lower in social hierarchies tend to share the assumption that urban, educated development workers do know better and are therefore unlikely to openly challenge their suggestions. These assumptions enforce social hierarchies between the poor and the non-poor, between individual citizens and organisations, and between well-educated and poorly educated. Thus creating space for participation is also about creating space for shifts in power positions. When moving towards transformative forms of participation, it is important to be receptive to a dialogical relationship with stakeholders and to actively ‘manipulate’ existing social hierarchies to allow the powerless to be heard.
Participation in a village self-reliance development model

After one year of project implementation, new elements were adopted. Feedback from the Binh Thanh commune, in which project participants were married Muong women, suggested that the microcredit project might also have negative effects on the lives of the participants. Individual cases of domestic violence and increased tension between spouses were reported as husbands objected to wives taking part in the project. The greater the role of a woman, often in additional project activities (e.g. touring households and vaccinating pigs), the more it seemed to annoy the husband. It became evident that a more balanced gender approach was needed as empowering women was, indeed, a contextual matter: it could not be treated as separate from the specific time and the place. What worked in female-headed households, did not necessarily work in households headed by men. Men could in fact neutralise the empowering attempts of women within individual households.

Another observation from the first year was that several of the poorest households did not participate in the project, as they feared that they would not be able to pay back a loan. Similar difficulties in including the poorest in micro-credit programmes have been reported elsewhere, suggesting that the model suits the ‘moderately poor’ better (Hulme 2012).

To tackle these problems, Devaid searched for more gender balanced participatory development models. The project officers benchmarked intervention models by INGOs in Vietnam. Attention turned to CIDSE’s health project, which utilised a community based approach. Inspired by this, Devaid staff developed a working approach that would involve entire villages. A pilot project of a village self-reliance and development model was set up in Dong Phong and Xuan Phong communes in Ky Son district, Hoa Binh province, in addition to providing micro-credits for women. The correspondence between the POs and the Devaid director shows that the introduction was not without challenges.

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2 International non-governmental organisations

3 CIDSE is an international alliance of Catholic development agencies.
We conducted needs assessment (...) early this week. The commune WUs and people’s committees showed enthusiasm and good cooperation. (...) The Ki Son WU likes the idea of cooperating in a capacity building project but their expectations/understandings are quite different from ours; that is mainly due to the new chairwoman, who used to work in the party line (...). We need to discuss more before any concrete activities can identified. (Fax 23.5.1997).

The new intervention model by Devaid represents a participatory development approach that emphasises deep beneficiary ownership. The model was linked to several development buzzwords in Devaid’s development thinking. Self-reliant development was seen as a preferred mode of development and a buffer zone against the negative impacts of the neo-liberal economic order. Mobilization and use of local resources were closely linked to the idea of self-reliance. Furthermore, voluntary participation was considered a necessary investment to achieve long-term sustainability. These interpretations were communicated by the Devaid director to her Vietnamese staff in their active correspondence.

Participation was referred to in increasingly politicised terms. According to the Devaid director, participation was essentially about democracy:

(...) I would always (...) have one strand of thinking (...) about participation – is that how am I able to take part in decisions that affect my life. And I think that’s not so common approach in Vietnam. (DD 28.1.2004)

It is no coincidence that the village self-reliance and development interventions were frequently referred to as the ‘village democracy project’ in Devaid’s internal discussions, as well as in the project documents directed at Finnish stakeholders.
Introducing participatory development into Vietnamese communes

Development aid discourse associated participation and especially the concept of participatory development with various positive attributes. Participation was the ingredient that development interventions needed to bring about sustainable and positive development outcomes, not only in economic terms but also in terms of the right to have a voice in the development decision-making processes, thus facilitating social equality at the grassroots level.

The potential project beneficiaries, however, saw Devaid’s participatory development initiative in a different light. The Devaid director admits that the differences were there to be seen:

(...) we have been discussing about people’s perception of participation and that differs very much. (...) I’ve come across many times with the idea that people think that participation is (...) forced, almost – (...) half forced labour you have to contribute for some government project or whatever. So people participate when they are told (laughing) (...). (DD 28.1.2004)

The Devaid project officer of the time also reported challenges in convincing authorities and villagers to take part in the pilot. The resistance from the authorities was not unexpected. To introduce anything new was never that easy in an environment strictly controlled by the state.

Devaid was less prepared to deal with the lack of people’s interest. ‘Participation’ was not a magic word for the local people, as it was for development NGOs. The Devaid PO explains:

(...) people experience long time being subsidised and guided and managed from the central level. So they are very inactive and dependent. (PO2 14.4.2004)
In addition, she argues that the system did not enhance people’s initiatives or active participation outside the defined ‘boxes’:

Before, (…), if they have a (...) very advanced idea, they would not dare to share if this not follow some (...) existing routines. They would not dare to… to share with people or take the initiative. (PO2 14.4.2004)

Local people seemed to have no conception of positive attributes entwined in participation within international aid discourse. Talk of participation resonated with the local people, but not in the way anticipated. The Devaid PO points out that after the issue of a grassroots democracy decree in 1998 by the state, communication on people’s participation intensified but it did not change people’s understanding of ‘participation’, as state rhetoric was not transformed into concrete activities, so ‘people got tired of listening’ (PO2 April 2004).

Facing people’s hesitation, the PO saw no other option than to continue her negotiations in the field and explain repeatedly what kind of development Devaid represents and what kind of cooperation they were offering. In order to facilitate the change in attitudes and the understanding of participation Devaid organised a visit to CIDSE’s community development project in Thai Nguyen province, to which representatives of the WU, the People’s Committee and other key stakeholders were invited. However, despite the positive experiences shared with the visitors, the problems did not disappear:

(...) after the trip people got exiting about what that village achieved. But when we discuss with them if they want to try with Devaid’s assist, many people (...) refuse. (...)...the one of the first two registered to be the pilot area... they change their mind and refuse after a few months, because they think that (...) they could not apply that and they are not interested. Not really interested. So, (...) we actually spent a lot of time to do awareness raising and changing the attitudes of the people before we can start that project. (PO2 14.4.2004)
Nevertheless, Devaid’s advocacy work with the local officials started to produce results. The WU and the Farmers Union actively participated in the village meetings to discuss what possibilities the project might offer. Even though the strengthening of the people’s voice in local decision making was a central issue for Devaid, they chose to emphasise the actual development potential of the model. Co-opting the state language and emphasising the interests of the local authorities responsible for enhancing local economic development were among the communication strategies used. People’s participation was thus introduced mainly as an instrument to mobilize local resources for poverty reduction purposes. Devaid emphasised that the project would not create structures that could potentially compete with local authorities, but would work in collaboration with the existing structures, with the WU, the People’s committee and the Poverty Reduction Committee.

According to the PO, promotion of this approach became easier after the Grassroots Democracy Decree (GDD) in 1998 was launched by the government as a superficially shared language and a clear policy framework could be identified. The decree introduced a form of people’s participation to boost economic development and enhance democracy in the communes (Decree No. 29/1998/ND-CP). Despite the differences between Devaid’s intervention model and the GDD, Devaid used it as a reference and argued that the village self-reliance model was in fact a way to implement the new government policy.

A key challenge for Devaid remained - how to convince people to take part in the project. Here the narratives vary depending on the speaker. Devaid’s PO found people passive and hesitant to talk, and she also pointed out how much work was needed to win the authorities over. The authorities admitted that as Devaid was the first foreign NGO in the area, ‘both authorities and people had many concerns’ but emphasised that they soon worked with Devaid to get the people who ‘had limited knowledge’ (BDH 4.11.11) to join the project.

To what extent ordinary people really conform to the ‘passive’ image presented remains uncertain. One female interviewee (BTD 5.11.2011) explained that people felt eager and happy when they heard about Devaid’s support. However, she learned about the project
from the chair of the Village Development Board (VDB), after the project was already established. One possible explanation for these conflicting views is that the close involvement of local authorities in the project propaganda made people identify Devaid with the authorities and assume that Devaid’s development approach was similar to that of the state.

The village self-reliance and development model itself is a simple one. First, a village meeting is called to discuss the model and the role of villagers in it. When they have agreed to join the project, the villagers discuss matters and list identified local development challenges. People elect members to the VDB, which takes over the responsibility of developing the people’s initiatives further and selecting the prioritized activities for a Village Development Action Plan. In theory, through village meeting discussions and selection of VDB members, the model gives everybody an equal possibility to participate in decision-making processes that have an impact on their lives. In practice, many challenges remain, particularly when considered from a gendered perspective.

**Considering time, place and personal experiences in meaning construction of ‘participation’ in Vietnamese villages**

The question addressed by Devaid was why a model that had been designed to enhance substantive people’s participation in local development did not attract the people as expected. The following causes can be named.

A former WU chair thought the main reason was that people ‘had taken part in some projects or something similar to [Devaid’s] but it didn’t bring benefits to them’. The government projects implemented in the district earlier ‘did not work effectively’ (interview 6.11.2011). In other words, negative prior experiences contributed to the people’s assessment of Devaid’s intervention. This being the case, local people associated ‘participation’ in Devaid’s utterance with ‘participation’ they had encountered in state led interventions.
Devaid considered that decades of socialist regime had made people passive. People were accustomed to top-down decision-making structures that had no place for people’s participation in the sense that Devaid meant. The Devaid director noticed that for the local people participation was ‘almost like half forced labour’. A similar negative interpretation of ‘participation’ has been noted in several Southeast Asian countries (Rigg 2003). This implies that in authoritarian regimes, whether politically left or right, people are likely to construct the meaning of ‘participation’ on the basis of the mainstream development practices of the state they are subject to. Moreover, even after the issue of the Grassroots Democracy Decree, people remained sceptical about ‘participation’, as official government rhetoric was not followed by concrete change in state practices at the local level. Thus, ‘people were tired of listening [to participation talk]’ (PO2 April 2004).

Second, Devaid’s development thinking includes an idea that outside financial support should be limited. Big flows of donor funds were seen as harmful to sustainable development, despite the good intentions. Therefore, Devaid only offered ‘seed money’ for local initiatives. For example, in infrastructure activities ‘the support should not be more than 50 percent of the total resources needed’ (PO2 24.4.2004). According to Devaid, such a policy was difficult for the people to understand. If Devaid was there to help them why should it demand a substantial contribution from them? People’s attitudes reflect a particular conceptualisation of development projects as ‘their’ projects, whether coming from a foreign organisation or the Vietnamese state. For example in Devaid’s savings and credit programmes that were run by the district WU, ‘villagers thought that they got money from the project and they didn’t have to repay it’ (interview 6.11.11, name withdrawn).

Third, according to a local informant (personal communication 4.11.2011), the lack of prior experience with foreign NGOs contributed to people’s hesitation in joining the project. They did not believe that Devaid would stay in the commune long enough for them to get any benefit from the suggested activities.

Fourth, the village self-reliance and development model was introduced a year before the Grassroots Democracy Decree by the Vietnamese government. This made the
advocacy work for the model challenging vis-à-vis authorities who were accustomed to discuss people’s participation only within official government policy. Structures that were designed to allow people’s participation, such as membership of the Vietnam Women’s Union or Farmer’s Association, were based on a socialist interpretation of the role division between the state (the developer) and the people (those to be developed). Thus understanding of development projects derived from top-down government interventions.

We can identify the main lines of meaning construction of ‘participation’ that were in conflict with Devaid’s positive and empowering understanding of it, derived from the local socio-political context of the time, of which people had firsthand experience. First, local authorities and organisations close to the state were accustomed to an authoritarian, state centred discourse on participation, in which people were conceptualised as objects of development. In such a conceptualisation, people’s participation was channelled through mass organisations to implement state-led projects. ‘Participation’ thus co-opted people within state projects and turned them into development objects to be told how much contribution, that is, ‘participation’, was needed. In the best case scenarios that were reported, people could comment on the local development plans. Activities that were supported by the people were more likely to be implemented. However, the decision making structures remained hierarchical. Financial resources are allocated to village and commune levels from above, that is, from district and province, and any new initiatives made by villagers that would exceed the given budget are taken to district or further to province authorities to be decided upon, depending on the resources available in each level. We may conclude that even if the normative interpretation of participation in Vietnam limits the role of authorities at commune and village levels vis-à-vis upper administrative levels, they retain power over the people in their jurisdiction.

Another main line of meaning construction of ‘participation’ in development was a perception by the common people that they were objects of state interventions. For them, ‘participation’ was not necessarily a matter of free will, but rather a matter of responsibility. As the government projects lacked transparency, people could not even be sure that all the contributed money was used for the stated purposes. Therefore, the
more the state led ‘participation’ discourse was intensified, the bigger the perceived gap between what was said and done, which consequently increased people’s suspicion towards ‘participation’ talk.

Furthermore, local practices tend to give women a secondary role in decision making processes, so that women’s experience of participation was restricted. As men, in accordance with their role as household heads, are expected to participate in village meetings, women are often left outside discussions on local development. The gender difference in roles is so great that women in Dong Phong commune who claimed to enjoy gender equality did not in any way question men’s dominance in local decision making practices, but rather seemed puzzled by my inquiries on the subject. When going around the topic with my questions, it became clear that women normally participated in meetings that discussed issues such as animal breeding that is part of women’s domestic chores. Normally, however, ‘most participants in VDB meetings are men’ (Interview November 2011). The Devaid PO approached the topic of women’s participation as follows:

(...) because (...) they often select man and (...) women - they themselves say that ‘oh, we could not do it, we cannot’. So, they are very hesitate (...) to participate or to be in that position. (short break) It’s also hard to find some active women in the remote area[s]. (PO2 24.4.2004)

That is, women themselves were seen to give away their right to take an equal part in decision making. The Devaid PO explains that this may partly result from women’s lower education level. Men’s dominance over public domains also means that women have less experience in public speaking, which is hindrance to their public participation. Sitting in the meetings in silence is not enough: Mohanty (2002, as cited in Cornwall 2003:1) warns that ‘the mere presence of women on decision making committees, but without a voice, can be counterproductive’. That is, women’s token participation ‘can be used to legitimise a decision (...) taken by the male members’. Cornwall (2003) emphasises that women’s involvement in participatory projects is often limited to implementation. This being the case, development projects that may at first appear to be transformative can in fact reinforce a status quo that discriminates against women.
Devaid’s experience from the village self-reliance model confirms that a particular strategy is needed if gender equality is to be promoted within community-based participatory projects.

Moreover, interviews with Tan Minh single women suggest that being a household head does not in itself guarantee a woman’s participation in communal events. Women reported lack of time and information as the main reasons for their absence from social events. In particular, women with young children are less likely to participate in activities outside their homes, as they have plenty of at-home work. Similarly, women in Dong Phong commune indicated that they were busy with their tasks already and, thus, consciously limited their participation in the meetings to those closest to their immediate interests.

**From what is, to what can be: Concluding remarks**

To use the Bakhtinian concepts, when starting their development project ‘Cooperation with women in Vietnam’, Devaid found itself in a situation in which different meaning construction processes led key local actors to strikingly different understandings of ‘participation’ than those of Devaid. In the savings and credit intervention model, Devaid’s participation agenda deepened as they realised the special needs of single women in the Tan Minh commune. The challenges faced were linked to assumptions within development aid practice itself; in particular, assumptions about the role of technical expertise in development practice. Questions such as who should be offered participation and in which kind of project activities, are thus highlighted. As recognition of single women in Tan Minh commune became an issue, Devaid’s conceptualisation of participation was opened up to cover project management. Such a form of participation was unforeseen in Tan Minh and there was strong opposition to the model from the commune PC. At the same time, the single women themselves were totally ignorant of the struggle waged by Devaid with the assistance of the chair of the district Women’s Union. As they hardly participated in any social activities outside home and had no prior experience of foreign NGO projects, they took the model as given.
When setting up the village self-reliance and development pilots, Devaid encountered serious differences in interpretation of ‘participation’. Negotiations were conducted by Devaid’s Vietnamese staff, who had access to local conceptualisations of participation. The urban, well-educated project officers who lived in the capital city Hanoi used national discourses in encounters with the local, rural authorities. That enabled Devaid to use state rhetoric to defend and promote their project model and objectives, especially after the issuance of GDD by the Vietnamese state. In fact, initially it was not a necessity for Devaid to change the local authority’s interpretation of participation. Rather, Devaid only needed them to allow the implementation of the pilots. Thus Devaid assured the authorities that their approach was not against state policies but supportive of them. However, in the long run, the NGO’s agenda included changing authorities’ understanding on people’s participation. Setting an example and engaging authorities as much as possible was the working approach selected. Devaid was, therefore, seeking for transformations in local decision making practices that would allow people to have a voice in local development agendas. In politicized terms, possibility to take part in decisions that affect a person’s life was seen an essential part of grassroots democracy.

As noted above, meaning construction, according to Bakhtin, is a dialogic process in which many factors such as time and place and personal experiences play a role. Therefore, as time and place can be seen as given factors, or at least beyond the power of an NGO to change, the main task becomes changing people’s experiences of participation and thereby enhancing re-evaluation of the meaning of ‘participation’ in the context of local development. Thus, what is said about participation and done within an intervention have to communicate the same. Any divergence of the two may be taken by the people as evidence to support interpretations of ‘participation’ in which people are treated as objects or tools of someone else’s agendas rather than being the subjects of development. The selected development intervention model, therefore, needed to create an alternative reality, in which the people could, through their participation, enter into a dialogical relationship with a development NGO. This is to say that despite the already existing reality outside the project, the chosen intervention has to create structures that allow people to make decisions about their own development issues and thus allow people to re-evaluate their prior understanding of participation in
development activities. In this way, the development project becomes a micro-cosmos that aims to show what is possible, a potential reality within the grasp of the local people. Simultaneously, development practice becomes a dialogic trust-building process, in which both parties respond to the other’s words and actions. Such a dialogical approach applied to development aid practice necessarily demands space for change, both in terms of intervention models as well as development objectives.

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African Traditional Medicine in Public Health Policy: A Discourse Analysis

Maylin Meincke

Abstract

African traditional medicine (ATM) has been recognised by the international community as an aspect of cultural heritage that can be utilised to strengthen national healthcare systems and reduce poverty. This is reflected in a multitude of international and regional policy frameworks and guidelines published since the late 1970s, which are increasingly translated by African governments into (draft) national ATM policies. ATM is ambiguous in nature, however, consisting of a multitude of practices that are sometime conflicting. Sixty-eight documents are analysed to show how public health policy has dealt with ATM’s ambiguity over time. The analysis is based on discourse theory, influenced by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Two dominant policy discourses are identified, which consistently construct ATM as the mirrored Other of biomedicine with a split identity. This split identity enables the exclusion of practices that are not compatible with biomedical practice, which makes ATM appear less ambiguous, governed by the same health paradigm in principle.

Introduction

African Traditional Medicine (ATM) has been attracting considerable interest from policy makers for more than 30 years. In 2011, 39 countries in the World Health Organization (WHO) African Region had some kind of policy addressing ATM, compared to only eight countries in 2001 (WHO-AFRO 2011). This is a remarkable improvement in just one decade.

The increase in the number of countries reporting an established ATM policy is related to the global interest in traditional medicinal plants and economic hopes connected to the utilisation of traditional or indigenous knowledge, which prompted the African Union to encourage countries to develop national policies (AU 2005; WHO-AFRO 2011). The promotion of ATM on an international level, however, started in 1977, but within a different policy framework. Back then, the World Health Assembly recognised traditional medicine as an important contributor to achieving health for all in developing
An essential aspect of this was Primary Health Care (PHC) (WHO 1978b), which identified the potential role of traditional healers as community health workers in rural areas delivering healthcare to the poor (Hoff 1992). The focus of interest changed radically from PHC towards traditional medicinal plants in the 1990s (Ventevogel 1996; Whyte 1988).

Even though international and regional policy frameworks have existed for over 30 years, only a few countries have implemented policies to ATM institutionalisation and control. Studies, most of which were conducted in the 1980s during the heyday of PHC, have identified several factors that impede national ATM policy formulation and implementation. The most notable of these, and undoubtedly the most important, is the focus on structural problems such as the lack of consistent political and financial support for ATM programmes. Given the often scarce financial resources for healthcare and the devastating impact of diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis, donors tend to prioritise disease-specific programmes (Freeman and Motei 1992; Green 1988; Pillsbury 1982), and to shun funding efforts to strengthen community healthcare (Standing and Chowdhury 2008). Moreover, persisting negative attitudes towards traditional healers and their practices are blamed for the slow progress in formulating and implementing ATM policies (LeBeau 2003; Wreford 2005). Traditional healers are often denounced as charlatans or ‘quacks’ (e.g., Staugård 1985:6), and are considered dangerous (Oppong 1989; UNAIDS 2000): some claim to be able to incurable such as cancer and HIV/AIDS (Amon 2008), and others to heal by supernatural forces. Consequently, traditional healers are believed to destabilise society via the use of witchcraft or playing a major role in witchcraft allegations (Geschiere 2005; Offiong 1999).

These negative attitudes, which are discussed in the next section, are related to the ambiguities inherent in ATM knowledge and practices. However, to date there has been no analysis of how policy deals with these ambiguities, which makes its formulation difficult. How does ATM policy define what and whom it refers to given its ambiguous and indistinct nature?
The ambiguity of ATM and the consequences for policy formulation

‘Identifying’ and ‘characterising’ traditional healers and their practices are essential in policy formulation, in that policy and any related legal document(s) have to clearly and expressly state in writing what and whom they deal with (Rautenbach 2011). However, the ambiguous nature of ATM makes this problematic.

The ambiguity of ATM is mainly attributable to its ontology and epistemology, in which it differs from biomedicine - a universal germ-based theory for health and illness. African traditional healing is not universal, it is personal and particular, and the related knowledge and practices have not been standardised or written down. On the contrary, oral tradition and some form of apprenticeship are the pillars of knowledge transmission (Thornton 2009), making it inevitably inconsistent. Treatment tends to vary from patient to patient, and depends heavily on the patient’s context and on the healer. Many healers receive knowledge of the nature of an illness and its treatment directly through a spirit (e.g., an ancestor) (Luedke and West 2006), and medicinal herbs often have more of a ritual than an actual, in the medical sense, curative function (Whyte 1988). With a different ontology in place, supernatural forces are frequently identified as the cause of an illness. Witchcraft, as Wreford (2005) rightfully points out, may appear irrational and unscientific, but acts as the explanans for illness and wellbeing throughout Africa and continues to be a reality for most Africans (Ashforth 2005; Bond and Ciekawy 2001; Moore and Sanders 2001; Thomas 2007). Consequently, the term used during colonial rule, witch doctor, is still linked to contemporary traditional healers.

Against this backdrop, numerous studies and policy documents define types of traditional healers and their practices along the dichotomous line of supernatural versus rational - the shaman-like traditional healer (the spiritual healer, witch doctor) and the herbalist. Bonesetters and traditional birth attendants are usually classified as members of the latter group (e.g., Landy 1974; Oppong 1989). Attempts to sort healers accordingly, however, have proven to be problematic when applying these rigid categories (LeBeau 2003; Oyebola 1980; Wreford 2005), since even so-called herbalists may well use divination to identify the causes of illnesses, and the use of herbal remedies is not uncommon among spiritual healers (Ashforth 2005). Furthermore,
research on the ‘acculturation’ of traditional healers to biomedicine has revealed a tendency to incorporate biomedical practices, thereby making the ‘traditional’ category inappropriate (Marsland 2007; McMillen 2004; Thornton 2009).

In sum, the different ontology and epistemology of African traditional healing poses problems in terms of defining ATM and its practitioners. It is debatable whether it is appropriate to call ATM a traditional medical system when its practices are neither traditional nor medical, and are so diverse that, according to Ashforth (2005), the only systematic characteristic may well be the supernatural aspect - divination.

The WHO acknowledges this problem, stating in its Traditional Medicine Programme for the years 2002-2005 that ‘traditional medicine eludes precise definition or description, containing as it does diverse and sometimes conflicting characteristics and viewpoints’ (WHO 2002:7). However, in identifying the potential risks and problems that could arise if a country wishes to control and integrate ATM in some way the WHO inevitably sets the boundaries of a possible definition within a biomedical framework. The following problems were identified during a WHO meeting in 1977:

(1) Emphasis on the cultural formulations of traditional medicine; (2) Problems of cultural transplantation and the need for preservation of the cultural heritage in order to avoid cultural alienation; (3) Marked inclination of the systems towards either curative or preventive measures, owing to economic advantages gained in certain settings; (4) Impossibility of integrating certain aspects of traditional medicine based on spiritual, moral or other fundamental principles – e.g., exorcism and special healing arts associated with spiritualism; (5) Commercial motives which control the modes of practice in certain settings; (6) Fundamental differences between the concepts of life, health and disease – concepts upon which the underlying philosophies of the various medicinal systems are founded. (WHO 1978a:17-18)

This statement lays out the policy options available with a biomedical framework in place. As such, it highlights the impossibility of including anything that is not
understandable from a biomedical perspective. How, then, is this reflected in policy papers that deal with ATM? This question is addressed in this article by means of post-structural discourse analysis.

A poststructural approach to ATM in public health policy

The objective of this article is to show how public health policy deals with the ambiguous nature of ATM. This requires a thorough analysis of how ATM is articulated in international and national policy texts in order to make it less ambiguous and easier to address by certain policy solutions. The method adopted is poststructural discourse analysis that is more similar to Jacque Derrida’s deconstruction than linguistic text analysis, and is based on the theories of Foucault, Derrida and others (see e.g., Hansen 2006; Torfing 1999). Essential aspects of the theoretical framework include discourse, as defined by Foucault (1972), and an ontology of linguistic construction, influenced by Derrida (1977), that highlights the interrelationship between identity construction and policy (Hansen 2006).

The concept of discourse

Discourse constitutes all symbolic acts, such as architecture, art and behaviour, and not just written or spoken utterances (Hansen 2006:23). All discourse is governed by a discursive practice that acts as a reading principle of reality, such as grammar being the set of rules for a language (Foucault 1972:117). In the context of this article, however, which is restricted to policy documents, discourse refers to the texts published by international/regional organisations and national governments related to ATM, which follow a certain discursive practice, a set of historical rules or logic of how to talk about ATM. Given the different policy solutions that have been formulated in the last 30 years therefore, not all of the policy documents are part of one discourse. Depending on what policy they promote, in other words by what discursive practice they are governed, there may be more than one public health discourse related to ATM.
The ontology of linguistic construction

Poststructural discourse analysis is based on a specific ontology of linguistic construction that differs substantially from linguistic discourse analysis (such as critical discourse analysis). Whereas the latter conceptualises language as relationally structured and epistemologically productive, the former stresses its relational structure and its ontological productivity (Hansen 2006). Accordingly, all existence and human behaviour are understandable only by means of language and certain rules of interpretation. It is through discourse that things and (groups of) people within society assume their meaning and identity. Social realities are not just ‘out there’ and their essence does not have in itself meaning.

Consequently, critics often accuse poststructuralists of denying any existence outside of the discursive realm: if everything is discursively constructed, they assume that poststructuralists say that ‘there is nothing outside text’\(^4\). However, here one has to distinguish between ‘being’ and ‘existing’ (Torfing 1999). The material world does exist, but its meaning is only (re)produced through discourse, specifically through language. Another point of criticism, the denial of objective truth (Hansen 2006), is also refuted by the fact that moral claims can only be made within a specific discourse, by using language and a set of interpretive rules (Glynos and Howarth 2007). It thus follows that there is not one ‘true’ discourse describing ATM’s ‘true’ nature. Rather, there are many (a certain policy discourse being just one of them), of which some are more dominant but not truer than others.

Policy discourse simultaneously constructs subjects and objects, and produces their identities by linking and juxtaposing words, so-called signs or signifiers (Hansen 2006). Because this is a simultaneous process, the identities of the subjects and objects in policy are interlinked and relational (Hansen 2006:21). They are constructed by way of relational difference (a process of othering), resulting in the impossibility of identities

\(^4\) Jacque Derrida in ‘Limited Inc’ (1988 [1977]:148): ‘What I call “text” implies all the structures called “real”, “economics”, “historical”, socio-institutional, in short: all possible referents. Another way of recalling once again that “there is nothing outside text”. That does not mean that all referents are suspended, denied, or enclosed in a book, as people have claimed, or have been naive enough to believe and to have accused me of believing. But it does mean that every referent, all reality, has the structure of a differential trace, and that one cannot refer to this “real” except in an interpretive experience. The latter neither yields meaning nor assumes it except in a movement of differential referring. That’s all.’
being fully constituted (Glynos and Howarth 2007:14). In other words, there is not one ‘finished’ or ‘true’ identity, but all identities are contingent and inherently unstable. This ‘undecidability’ of texts (Torfing 1999:95-96) leads to the existence of often conflicting identities and internal slips and instabilities in discourse. Policy discourses, however, give the impression of fully constituting identities by excluding other possible meanings. Nonetheless, a careful empirical analysis of how identities are created in policy discourse can uncover inconsistencies in policy argumentation.

Methodology

An analysis based on discourse theories introduced above focuses on the process of identity creation by means of linking and juxtaposing signs. The method involves the deconstruction of texts to reveal internal slips and instabilities that are attributable to the impossibility of fully constituting identities. It enables to investigate how ATM is constructed to legitimise certain policies, to identify slips in seemingly coherent policy argumentations, and to establish whether the very logic that constructs the identities of ATM and its practitioners is problematic. This extends to ATM policies and policy recommendations, given that identities and policies are ontologically interlinked.

This study is based on 68 documents written at different times (within a period of over thirty years) by different people for different purposes, exhibiting the respective fads and fashions of development and its ever-changing buzzwords (Alfini and Chambers 2010) (see, for example, ‘participation’ as discussed by Hakkarainen in this volume, pp. 1-28). The documents includes on one hand policy texts published by international organisations such as WHO, UNESCO, UNAIDS and the World Bank Group. These texts comprise short resolutions from World Health Assemblies (WHA), health-policy (strategy) papers, guidelines, best-practice collections, literature studies, World Health and World Development reports and other publications. On the other hand, 16 enacted national policies or policy drafts dealing with ATM from governments in sub-Saharan Africa, which were available to the researcher at the time of the study, were analysed for this article.
The method used is similar to that of grounded theory. First the documents were read and analysed for overarching themes, or nodal points (Torfing 1999) that constituted the different policy discourses. They were then grouped accordingly. Even though all the documents included in this study deal with ATM, the policies promote different things depending on what has been identified as a problem that needs to be addressed. As mentioned above, post-structural discourse theories consider policies and identities to be ontologically interlinked. In other words, identities change according to the policies. What follows is an analysis of the words used to create the identity of the objects within the policy texts of a certain discourse, and of how they are simultaneously linked and juxtaposed in order to construct an identity that fits the policy promoted in the texts. It is thus about what has been identified as ATM and what its role is in a healthcare system: the focus is not so much on whether the words and definitions used are ‘true’ as on how ATM is framed and articulated in the documents.

Two discourses on ATM public health policy and their historical context

ATM policy documents fall into two categories. One collection of policy documents, which were mostly published between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1990s by the WHO, are structured around the nodal point of ATM as a human resource. The more recent publications by the WHO and other international organisations as well as national policy papers share the nodal point of ATM as a traditional knowledge system (TKS).

The first collection of policy papers have their origins in the period after the Second World War when many colonies in Africa finally gained their independence. In the subsequent years the governments of the newly independent countries found it difficult to provide adequate healthcare for the majority of their people. Following independence they inherited a healthcare system that was shaped during colonial times, centralised in urban areas and focused solely on care provided in hospitals. Hence, the majority of the population in rural areas had very limited access to biomedical care. In the 1970s the international community identified the lack of qualified personnel as the main reason for
the poor medical care in rural areas. Inspired by the success of the barefoot doctors in China, UNICEF and the WHO invited all Ministers of Health to Alma Ata in 1978 to make a united pledge for Primary Health Care (PHC) that should ensure addressing basic healthcare needs in rural areas through PHC workers (Standing and Chowdhury 2008). Traditional healers were considered suitable candidates because they were already active in rural communities and ‘continue to have high social standing in many places, exerting considerable influence on local health practices’ (WHO 1978b:63). Furthermore, it was recognised that biomedicine might be inappropriate in rural areas from a cultural perspective, and due to problems of access and affordability (Bannermann et al. 1982). In 1979 the World Health Assembly decided on the outline of the WHO programme regarding traditional medicine (WHO 1979). Not only were traditional healers seen as potential PHC workers, a stronger need emerged to ‘promote and develop research in traditional medicine, including medicinal plants and herbal remedies… and to undertake adequate measures for effective regulation and control of traditional medical practices’ (WHO 1979). This was already indicative of the special interest in the potential benefits of traditional medicinal plants that was to take centre stage in later years.

By the end of Halfdan Mahler’s reign as Director General of the WHO (he was the driving force behind PHC) interest in another aspect of traditional healthcare increased. The World Health Assembly resolutions from 1987, 1988, 1989 and 1991 highlighted the interest of WHO member countries in the ‘almost untapped wealth of medicinal flora’ (WHO 1987). This upsurge of interest in ‘traditional medicinal plants’ as a resource coincided with the emergence of ‘green’ thinking in international circles, and of cost-benefit thinking in healthcare. The depletion of environmental resources caused concern, and it was considered important to address the interplay between the environment and development (Rist 2002). This was coupled with the omnipotence of the World Bank in the context of development in the 1980s and 1990s. As from 1987, when the World Bank focused on financing healthcare, the economic aspects were at the forefront in health development (Walt 2006). The TRIPS agreement in 1991 finalised the policy connection between healthcare and world trade (Koivusalo and Ollila 2008), touching upon intellectual property rights of medications, of which research on and trade in traditional medicinal plants was an integral part.
Although, back in 1977, concern was voiced during an expert meeting organised by the WHO that the ‘tendency must not be allowed to continue to give the impression that traditional medicine was limited to the use of medicinal plants exclusively’ (WHO 1978a:10), starting from the mid-1990s the focus of interest changed radically towards traditional medicinal plants. Whereas the WHO still published guidelines, studies and readers concerning the utilisation of traditional healers in Primary Health Care programmes in the 1980s and early 1990s, also regarding the HIV/AIDS epidemic in southern Africa5, traditional medicinal plants slowly took centre stage.

As Ventevogel remarked, the emphasis since then was on ‘the possibilities of using traditional drugs, instead of traditional healers’ (Ventevogel 1996:47; see also Whyte 1988:217). This was especially evident in the placement of the WHO Traditional Medicine Programme within the division of Drug Management and Policies (Ventevogel 1996:43)6. Even though traditional medicine is consistently defined as ‘including diverse health practices, approaches, knowledge and beliefs incorporating plant, animal and/or mineral based medicines, spiritual therapies, manual techniques and exercises applied singularly or in combination to maintain well-being, as well as to treat, diagnose or prevent illness’ (WHO 2002:7), hence acknowledging non-medication therapies, the term traditional medicine is often used to refer to traditional medicines (as in medication; for a very obvious example, see WHO-AFRO 2004:1), and is thus confined to traditional medicinal plants and the knowledge therein of traditional healers. Although the knowledge of plants held by healers is considered valuable, it is also believed that there is a need for ‘assist[ing] traditional medicine practitioners7 to

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5 During this time UNAIDS continued to conceptualise traditional healers as an important human resource in the context of Primary Health Care and HIV/AIDS, as can be seen in their publications: UNAIDS (2000), UNAIDS (2002), UNAIDS (2006).

6 At the time of the research: Essential Medicines and Pharmaceutical Policies.

7 In accordance with the WHO Traditional Medicine Strategy 2002-2005 (WHO 2002), traditional healers, previously also called traditional health practitioners or traditional medical practitioners, are defined as traditional medicine practitioners (abbreviated as TM practitioners), as in the holders of knowledge about Traditional Medicine. Thus, traditional medicine is perceived as knowledge that can be separated from the healer. In line with this logic, it is claimed that so-called TM knowledge is the property of the communities and nations in which it originated, and healers are obliged to share it, especially since ‘the economic benefits that can accrue from large-scale application of TM knowledge can be substantial’ (WHO 2002:4), and used as a means of development.
upgrade their knowledge and skills in collaboration with relevant health providers’ (WHO 2009).

On the regional level, African countries have always been aware of the potential economic gains from their genetic resources. Specific interest in traditional medicinal plants and economic aspirations connected to the utilisation of traditional or indigenous knowledge (AU 2005) were behind the proclamation of the African Union’s Decade of Traditional Medicine, first announced for the years 2000-2010, and recently extended until the year 2020. This is connected to the annual celebration of African traditional medicine in sub-Saharan Africa on 31 August and to other activities aimed at increasing public recognition of and promoting research on ATM, thus strengthening efforts to institutionalise it on a national level (WHO 2011).

As a result of the African Union’s and WHO’s efforts to raise awareness of the benefits of ATM, many countries have started to formulate and issue national ATM policies based on international and regional recommendations. Differences between these national policy texts and international and regional policy frameworks are thus minor. Nonetheless, with witchcraft as a reality for many Africans today (cf. Ashforth 2005; Bond and Ciekawy 2001; Geschiere 1997; Moore and Sanders 2001; Thomas 2007), an additional distinction between witchdoctors and traditional healers, which is absent in international and regional policy recommendations, is often made in national policy papers. Some countries opted to legitimise colonial policies outlawing witchcraft. An explicit case of excluding traditional medical practices, aside the use of herbal remedies, is the Tanzanian ‘Traditional and Alternative Medicine Act, 2002’ (Government of Tanzania 2002a). A reference is made to the Tanzanian ‘Witchcraft Act’ (Government of Tanzania 2002b), which rules out traditional spiritual healing and legitimises only traditional medicinal herbal practices. Namibia, which is in the process of formulating a national ATM policy, is considering following the same path8. Except for the policy introduced by Zimbabwe in 1981 and subsequently amended in 2000 and 2002

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8 Source: personal communication with the responsible officer of the Namibian Ministry of Health and Social Services for ATM (01.02.2012)
(Government of Zimbabwe 2002)\textsuperscript{9}, the policies that were available for this research focused explicitly or implicitly solely on traditional herbal medical practice, defining acceptable traditional healing as such a practice.

In sum, despite calls for a revival of PHC and its continued importance in African countries (see e.g., Walley et al. 2008), the dominant public health discourse to ATM is currently framed by TKS. PHC is still part of it, but the idea of using traditional healers as PHC workers has lost its prominence.

Throughout the past three decades, discourses of resistance to all kinds of collaboration between traditional medicine and biomedicine by traditional healers and other members of the African society have been consistently silenced in all public health policy texts related to ATM. The resistance is most often directed at scientific research on traditional medicinal plants, which is needed in order to plan the standardisation and integration of ATM into national healthcare structures. Such research is frequently referred to as a new form of colonisation and imperialism (Nyika 2009). The need for systematic or legal tools to protect the knowledge of traditional healers and their communities, however, is often mentioned as a way to encourage further research. New kinds of regulating policy frameworks (Sackey and Kasilo 2010), such as ‘Access and Benefit Sharing’ (ABS) (Cheikhyoussef et al. 2011), based on the Nagoya Protocol (UN 2010) have been developed recently. However, these policy papers concern legal matters and economic benefits rather than improved health outcomes for African peoples, and are therefore not part of this study.

**Deconstructing ATM policy**

Following the above introduction of two ATM discourses and their historical context, this section takes a closer look at how the identity of ATM has been created by the two

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\textsuperscript{9} The Zimbabwean Traditional Medical Practitioner Act (Government of Zimbabwe ([1981, 2000] 2002) is the only national policy that addresses ATM, and states that spiritual healers with their practices, i.e. practices that do not necessarily involve the use of medicinal plants, are traditional healers. In contrast, acts and policy drafts of other countries are silent on the spiritual aspects of traditional healing, and define “legal” traditional healing as a practice based solely on traditional medicinal plants, which also excludes any activities that touch upon witchcraft.
discourses. First, the processes of linking signifiers to create an identity of ATM is analysed, which is then complemented by an analysis of the role differentiation plays in constructing ATM’s identities.

**Linking the signifiers**

The first public policy discourse focusing on ATM defines its benefit as providing human resources that are integrated into traditional societies in rural areas, in other words the traditional healer, who is thus the representative of ATM and becomes the object of the policies. Despite their beneficial characteristics, healers are said to have limited biomedical knowledge and to be in need of training in order to provide PHC services. ATM knowledge and practices do not really count, and are only seen as an inhibiting factor for the provision of adequate healthcare. Traditional healers have major misconceptions and lack biomedical knowledge. Their strong point is therefore not their knowledge, but their standing within communities as respected people who can influence health-related behaviour. They are a human resource, and as such should be given training in basic healthcare, health promotion and in recognising symptoms requiring immediate referral to medical doctors for treatment.

**Table 1:** The human resource discourse since the late 1970s with the signs linked to the identity of the traditional healer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘GENUINE’ HEALER</th>
<th>Old private practitioner</th>
<th>Preserver</th>
<th>QUACK/CHARLATAN</th>
<th>Non-professional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>affordable, accessible, recognised</td>
<td>cultural heritage</td>
<td>lack of organisation and standardisation</td>
<td>lack of adequate medical knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>simple techniques, natural resources</td>
<td>traditional knowledge, gained and tested over centuries</td>
<td>potential of fraud, misuse, harmfulness</td>
<td>witchcraft beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>offers alternative, complementary healthcare</td>
<td>historical and unique system</td>
<td>lack of scientific evidence of safety, efficacy, quality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>offers personalistic and holistic healthcare</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>active on the local rural level of family and community</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 shows in detail how the core identity within the policy documents is constructed. It reveals how signs are linked in order to create the identity of the traditional healer. Of significance here is the differentiation between the ‘genuine’ healer, who is respected, and the ‘quack/charlatan’ who pretends to be a healer because of the potential to accumulate money and power. Thus, the traditional healer has a split identity, that of a potential ‘genuine’ healer on the one hand and that of a potential quack or charlatan on the other. The former is again split between the old private practitioner and the preserver of tradition. The private practitioner offers affordable, accessible and recognised, personalistic and holistic healthcare to families and communities in rural areas, using simple techniques and natural resources. The guardian of tradition, in turn, as a holder of traditional medical knowledge acquired and tested over the centuries is the preserver of a cultural heritage, in other words a historical and unique healthcare system. The sub-identity of the ‘quack/charlatan’ is the non-professional side of the traditional healer, whose practice is characterised by a lack of organisation and standardisation, thus making it an easy target for fraud and misuse. Further, given the lack of scientific evidence of safety, efficacy and quality, not to mention adequate biomedical knowledge, there is a danger of delivering harmful healthcare. What makes the traditional healer a potential quack and charlatan is also the belief in mystical powers such as witchcraft, and the (ab)use thereof.

Table 2: The ATM knowledge discourse and the inherent signs linked to the identity of African Traditional Medicine (ATM) since the 1990s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POSITIVE ASPECTS OF ATM</th>
<th>NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF ATM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>affordable, accessible, recognised</td>
<td>lack of organisation and standardisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>simple techniques, natural resources (division into non-medication and medication therapies)</td>
<td>potential of fraud, misuse, harmfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alternative, complementary healthcare</td>
<td>witchcraft beliefs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knowledge holders are individual practitioners or communities in the rural areas</td>
<td>lack of scientific evidence of safety, efficacy, quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>historical and cultural context</td>
<td>lack of adequate medical knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>traditional knowledge, gained and tested over centuries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Within the discourse focused on TKS (which includes national ATM policies), this articulation of the core identity of ATM has not changed. As Table 2 shows, the traditional knowledge system has become the object of ATM policy, but the signs linked to its identity are similar to those that are linked to the identity of the traditional healer. The split identity is consistent with the latter but there are no divisions within its positive aspect: all signs are directly linked to it. The traditional healer is only mentioned in relation to the source of ATM knowledge, which is located at the level of the individual traditional healer and traditional rural communities.

**Differentiation and the final picture**

The identity of the traditional healer and ATM is created through differentiation as well as the linking of signs. In both cases the identity of the object of the policy is simultaneously created through the juxtaposition of the Self/subject, and biomedicine and its practitioners. Given that public health policy addresses ATM from the perspective of the dominant healthcare system biomedicine, consequently the Self within the policy texts is biomedicine, even though it is not always explicitly spelled out.

Figure 1 shows how the signs listed in Table 1 are also created through difference to the biomedical practitioner. The sub-identity ‘old private practitioner’ is the positive opposite of the biomedical practitioner, whereas that of the ‘quack/charlatan’ is the negative opposite. However, the sub-identity of the ‘preserver’ does not find a mirrored identity in the biomedical practitioner, the Self, in the discourse, since biomedicine is conceptualised as a universal truth rather than a culturally derived medical system. Thus, the identity of the traditional healer is not that of an antagonistic Other. Rather, as is often the case with identity construction in policies, there is a certain degree of mirrored difference (Hansen 2006:XX).
Articulating such a split identity as the mirrored Other of the biomedical practitioner makes the traditional healer into a ‘genuine’ healer only when the negative aspect of her identity is eradicated, which can only happen via mimicking the positive aspects of the counterpart, the biomedical practitioner. In accordance with this logic, she must also refrain from witchcraft beliefs and related healing activities, either stopping such practices and only applying what has been taught in courses and what has been assigned within a national PHC programme, or standardising her practice according to scientific knowledge and evidence. Hence, a traditional healer who does not adhere to biomedical standards, which includes the biomedical understanding of health and diseases, cannot be considered a truly respected partner in delivering healthcare to the people. The only exceptions are those who practise within the limited and set boundaries of a PHC programme as auxiliary health personnel operating according to biomedical standards.

**Figure 1:** Linking and differentiation of signs attributed to the traditional healer in public health discourse, 1970s till today (with grey indicating strengths, black weaknesses).
The more prominent discourse of ATM as TKS follows a similar line of argument. As Figure 2 shows, the discourse constructs the identity of ATM through its juxtaposition with biomedicine. The sub-identity ‘negative aspects of ATM’ is constructed as the opposite of biomedicine, whereas the positive aspects have no mirrored Other because the shortcomings that were previously articulated are silenced within this discourse. Consequently, the object’s identity is again established via a partly antagonistic relationship to the Self.

![Figure 2: Linking and differentiation of signs attributed to the African traditional medicine (ATM) in public health discourse, 1970s till today (with grey indicating strengths, black weaknesses).](image)

What follows is that the positive aspects of ATM are only mentioned when describing and arguing for the use of ATM, but are dislocated from and do not influence policy recommendations as such. Further, its identity becomes fully positive only when its negative aspects are addressed in such a way that biomedical standards are adhered to. Again, ATM knowledge has to be tested and standardised according to scientific evidence. Biomedicine and science, in the end, decide what is legitimate and useful knowledge with a future purpose and the right of existence within a standardised and

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**Positive aspects**
- cultural heritage
- historical and unique system of knowledge
- affordable, accessible, accepted
- simple techniques, natural resources
- personalistic, holistic
- local, rural, family, community

**Negative aspects**
- witchcraft beliefs
- no organization and control → fraud, misuse, harmful
- no scientific evidence to safety, efficacy, quality
- lack of adequate medical knowledge
- organised and standardised scientifically informed practice medical knowledge
institutionalised ATM. This is possible if it is constructed as a system of traditional knowledge and practice that can be separated from the traditional healer and the rural community. Consequently, it would be continuously constructed as universal and not personalistic, following the biomedical understanding of health and diseases as universal truths independent of place and person. ATM is thus a resource that can be accessed, developed and used once extracted from the knowledge holder.

Locating the traditional medical knowledge at the level of the individual healer entails the re-use of the identity of the ‘genuine’ healer from the previous discourse. However, given the change in thought that it is not the manpower that counts but the knowledge, the decisive factor for being a ‘genuine’ traditional healer is that the knowledge and practices are scientifically proven to be effective in treating the disease. As such, biomedicine becomes the decisive template to legitimising a healer’s genuineness.

**Conclusions**

The above analysis of the 68 policy documents revealed that one basic articulation has been used consistently throughout the last three decades in policy to ATM: its construction as the mirrored *Other* of biomedicine with a split identity. There are two consequences. First, biomedicine decides what ATM *beliefs* count as actual *knowledge* and how it can be developed into safe and complementary medical practice. Second, and consequently, through the articulation of a split identity the discursive practice excludes knowledge that cannot be linked to and aligned with a biomedical understanding of health and diseases. Aspects that biomedicine cannot grasp remain in the realm of beliefs. They should be extinguished or turned into knowledge through scientific testing, standardisation and education. Constructed as the *Other* biomedicine, ATM is inevitably treated as one kind herbal practice, as Thornton (2009:23) observed in the South African context, which has much potential, and needs to be developed. This effacement (Last 1986:4) is the backbone of ATM policy construction, making it less ambiguous and open to inclusion in health policy.
The logic that informs the articulation of ATM is based on what Airhihenbuwa calls ‘a deficit model evaluation’ (Airhihenbuwa 2007:117-118, see also Pigg (1995) for a detailed analysis of the practice of collaborating with traditional healers in Nepal), which he identified when analysing practices of development cooperation. In other words, in development it is usually the lack of something that counts and not what something can add to common standardised practices, such as biomedicine. Controlling and standardising ATM in the first place is seen as testing and improving current practices rather than looking for aspects to be included in biomedical practice. A clear exception is knowledge about traditional medicinal plants, which can be used to develop and test potent drugs. According to Briggs and Sharp (2004), this is in line with all (development) programmes that argue for the integration and use of traditional knowledge: they only offer solutions and new means to dominant knowledge systems, such as biomedicine, but do not challenge them as such.

The problems arising from such an articulation of policy implementation should be acknowledged when a country decides to adopt international and regional ATM policy recommendations. These, from a biomedical perspective, clearly promote an African herbal medical practice as the ‘new’ ATM, while disenfranchising other knowledge and ignoring the variety of practices that exist from traditional healer to traditional healer.

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References


Sexuality, Race and the Biopolitics of Difference

Jemima Repo

Abstract

The concepts of race and death have been taken up by a number of Foucauldian thinkers. This newfound interest raises questions about the place of sexuality in the theorisation of biopolitics, for if racism is the discourse that produces difference through inclusion/exclusion as recent texts purport, it raises the question of the nature of sexual difference. A more rigorous reading of Foucault's genealogies of sexuality and race, specifically their particular strategies and tactics, is therefore necessary. Teasing out the functionalities of difference in Foucault’s work, I argue that sexuality carries out a ‘life function’ that ensures the reproduction of a population. The tactics of sexuality include and exclude, but also refer back to the functions of the bodily organs and their discipline. The article thus conceptualises the strategy of sexuality in terms of its ‘life function,’ in other words the endeavour to reproduce life itself, the very object of biopolitics.

Introduction

Foucauldian scholars have recently begun to consider biopolitics in terms of how life can be made to die in order for it to live rather than ‘to make live and to let die’ (Foucault 1981:241). This argument is based on Foucault’s Society Must Be Defended lectures, in which he spoke of the ‘death function’ (Foucault 2003b:258) as ‘the murderous function of the State’ (Foucault 2003b:256). The death function refers neither to crude killing nor to the death instinct in the Freudian psychoanalytical sense but, in a ‘strictly historical sense’ (Foucault 1981:156) to all forms of ‘indirect murder’ (Foucault 2003b:256), increasing the risk of someone to death, political death, expulsion, rejection, discrimination and so on. Foucault located the death function in modern biopolitics in the discourse of racism, a pairing that a number of Foucauldian political scholars have taken up (Agamben 1998; Crampton 2007; Dillon and Reid 2009; Duffield 2006; Elden 2002; Esposito 2008; Jabri 2007; Macey 2009; Neal 2004; Reid 2006). Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito, for example, writes that racism separates those ‘that need to remain alive and those, conversely, who are to be killed’,
and that ‘the deaths of the latter… enable and authorize the survival of the former’ (Esposito 2008:110).

In contrast to the death function that has been accorded to race, I argue in this article that sexuality carries out a ‘life function’ that ensures the reproduction of a population through the production of heterosexual sexual difference as procreative difference. It is the biopolitical technology that produces the object of biopolitics, in other words life itself. Yet, the biopolitical function of death tends to be described in active terms, whereas the function of life is conveyed in passive terms. Killing is committed, but living is left alone to survive. Consequently the violence of biopolitics is transposed onto the death function at the expense of life in three ways. First, it transposes unforeseen murderous effects such of biopolitics as the active force that penetrates life; second, it reduces biopolitical violence to killing; and finally, it does so by downplaying the violence of the creation of life manifested in the biopolitical deployment of sexuality. Sexuality, as Foucault argues, is not just a technology of truth of the self, but also and primarily a biopower-produced discourse that ensures the procreation and optimisation of the productive and reproductive capacities of the human species. This newfound interest in race and death therefore raises questions about the place of sexuality in the theorisation of biopolitics. Race is a discourse by means of which the human species is divided into groups and accordingly regulated, normalised and excluded (Stoler 1995:9). On the assumption that racism produces difference through inclusion/exclusion, sexual difference might even be reducible to racial difference. This is where a more rigorous analysis of the different genealogies of sexuality and race is necessary.

Ellen K. Feder (2007a, 2007b) and Ladelle McWhorter (2004, 2009) are among those who have started to take a fresh look at sexuality and race. They agree that the two are joined in their common genealogy of biopower, in the same strategies of population management that deploy biological categories to split, normalise and control a population. Their careful genealogies convincingly show how race and sexuality ‘are historically co-dependent and mutually determinative’ (McWhorter 2009:14). Feder

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10 To be clear, for Foucault, ‘race’ refers not merely to skin colour, but more broadly to a ‘way of separating out the groups that exist within a population… to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower’ (Foucault 2003b:254).
urges us to “‘think together” these categories [of race and gender] without conflating and thus misunderstanding the specific mechanisms of each’ (Feder 2007b:3). However, she conducts a Butlerian genealogy of gender ontology (Butler 1999:43) rather than working further on sexuality. The strategic and tactical differences in the discourses of race and sexuality remain obscure.

McWhorter, in turn, scrutinises functional relations among biopower, race and sexuality. ‘Biopower,’ she writes, ‘would be impossible without [race and sexuality]… They [too] could not function apart from it, nor could they function apart from each other’ (McWhorter 2009:15). She refers to the ‘fundamental issue’ pervading the modern biopolitical discourse of race not as religion or skin colour, but as ‘abnormality’ (McWhorter 2009:34). Further work could be done here, not to refute McWhorter’s observations on abnormality but in relation to the discourse used to distinguish race from sexuality. In attempts to demonstrate their common genealogy the emphasis on abnormality as their unifying motif could lead to the conflation of sexuality and race unless care is taken. Given that sexual deviance is an abnormality that hinders the perpetuation of racial purity, McWhorter argues that sexuality is also tied to race. It is unclear whether she means that this is because of its regulation through the motif of abnormality, or that sexuality and race are merely two linguistically different manifestations of the same biopolitical motif. After all, she does not suggest with what motif sexuality works if not the raced discourse of abnormality. If sexuality and race are co-dependent and thus almost undifferentiable, why are there nonetheless separate discourses of ‘sexuality’ and ‘race’?

How should one proceed from here so as to further understand the biopolitics of sexuality in a way that takes account of the nuances of difference production that distinguish it from (yet render it co-dependent on) the biopolitics of race? In this article I propose responding to this challenge in two ways, strategically and conceptually. The focus in the former is on how biopolitics generates a more precise understanding of what the discourse of sexuality as opposed to the discourse of race does materially to regulate population. On the conceptual level I introduce tools that facilitate consideration of the biopolitical production of difference through race and sexuality. This conceptual equipment comes in the form of ‘the death function’ and ‘the life
function.’ As noted above, Foucauldian scholars have argued that race encapsulates the ‘death function’ as a function of biopower that enacts exclusion, discrimination, oppression, and social or material death. In order to delve further into the biopolitical mechanisms of sexuality that supply the state with the means to biologically reproduce, to create bios, or biopoliticised life, I introduce the concept of the life function. This life-administering violence is not limited to the discursive violence of subjectivisation (Foucault 1972:229), but compels the material reproduction of bodies in the population that is both the subject and the object of biopolitics. The article therefore explores the tactics of difference production through a critical discussion of the biopolitical strategies in which they are engaged. Such an analysis will enhance understanding of why sexuality is pivotal in the operation of biopolitics, and proceed to a more nuanced reading of it as the fundamental technology of life itself.

Race and biopower in Society Must Be Defended

Foucault’s writings on race before the publication of his Society Must Be Defended lectures were limited to a few pages in the first volume of The History of Sexuality (Mackinnon 1998; McClintock 1995; Said 1978). These two analyses, as Ann Laura Stoler explains in her seminal work (Stoler 1995:25), have significant differences. Foucault linked racism primarily to biopower and the emergence of nationalism in his lectures, whereas in The Will to Knowledge it is bound to sexuality and the bourgeois order. Racism therefore has a central position in the lectures, only to be repositioned as an effect of the discipline of sexuality in his published work. In Stoler’s view the shift of analytical focus from race to sexuality entailed ‘a clean erasure of the question of racism from his project’ (Stoler 1995:25), but I am inclined to see it as methodological. As I will explain, the lectures provide a genealogy of race and how it became biopoliticised, whereas The Will to Knowledge gives a genealogy of biopolitics in which sexuality is identified as the hinge through which race was biopoliticised. This has implications in terms of how the strategic operation of biopolitics is conceived: race and sexuality are not just two biopolitical discourses, but also occupy their own specific places in the biopolitical apparatus.
From the way racial discourse operated before the emergence of biopolitics it is clear that biopolitical racism, in other words racism based on a set of biological traits, is a discourse of the modern period. We are told that racism was not invented by the liberal regime of biopolitics, but operated long before it (Foucault 2003b:254). The discourse of race does not appear initially as biologically racist or repressive in the *Society Must Be Defended* lectures, it is the discourse of struggle or war articulated by those who lack power. It originally manifested itself as a critique of and an attack on the ‘unjust’ possession of power by another group (Foucault 2003b:70-73). Although the oppressed were the first to use the term, it was later appropriated in other contexts and bestowed with new connotations, such as the biological meaning it acquired in the nineteenth century.

In giving a genealogy of racism Foucault sought to uncover the rationalities of State racism in modern biopolitics. He contends that the discourse of race legitimised the State as the protector and administrator of racial affairs. When it became the manager of the life of the race, State racism transformed into a biological discourse, a change he locates roughly in the mid-nineteenth century. At the moment of its entry into the biopolitical mechanisms of the State the meanings and functions of racism as we know it began to flourish. Having already entered the State apparatus through the reversal of racial discourse, race was no longer a discourse of emancipation, but one of racial purity. The preceding context of struggle as a battle was replaced with the notion of an evolutionary struggle, one of natural selection, for the survival of the species (Foucault 2003b:80).

Secondly, racism not only delineated national boundaries, but also created divisions within the species that inhabited the State. Once the species could be categorised and stratified through the notion of biological degeneracy, for example, the discourse of race struggle worked as ‘a principle of exclusion and segregation and, ultimately, as a way of normalizing society’ (Foucault 2003b:61). It was no longer just a means of determining national insiders and outsiders, but also one of normalising State populations by dividing them into normative racial groupings. Race existed not only on the outside, but ‘permanently, ceaselessly infiltrated the social body’ (Foucault 2003b:60).
Finally, the biopolitical race struggle provided the State with a justificatory framework for its murderous function (Foucault 2003b:256): ‘Racism justifies the death-function in the economy of biopower by appealing to the principle that the death of others makes one biologically stronger insofar as one is a member of a race or a population’ (Foucault 2003b:258). It is the entrance of racial discourse into the domain of biopolitics that gives rise to State racism and enables the State to kill not only citizens of other States but also its own. Modern racism is therefore bound not only to the emergence of biopower (Stoler 1995:25), but also to the biopolitical State. Its discourses of exclusion and oppression are, in practice, the death function against any person or group of people it identifies as a threat to the life of the species.

In his last lecture Foucault acknowledged the ‘privileged position’ (Foucault 2003b:252) sexuality assumed in the nineteenth century: it was a ‘very different’ from race as an axis of biopolitics, although ‘not altogether that different,’ (Foucault 2003b:251). He already notes the different forms, functions and modes of their emergence in the biopolitical, the analysis of which he modifies, expands and fine-tunes in The Will to Knowledge, as I explain below. For the time being, ‘the emergence of biopower,’ is what ‘inscribes [racism] in the mechanisms of the State’ (Foucault 2003b:254). Sexuality, on the other hand, ‘was important for a whole host of reasons’ (Foucault 2003b). First, it is related to ‘corporeal mode[s] of behavior’ (emphases added); second, it ‘also has procreative effects’ through the inscription of biological bodily processes; and finally, it ‘occupies a privileged position between organism and population, between the body and general phenomena’ as it is where discipline (that acts on the body) and regulation (the biopolitics of populations) intersect. Located at such an intense and critical intersection, his identification of sexuality as ‘a vital field of strategic importance’ (Foucault 2003b: 252) buttresses his History of Sexuality in which he firmly posits it as the vital site of biopolitical manoeuvring. At this stage, however, race and sexuality circulate as two separate strands of biopolitical intelligibility, the former being divisive and deadly, whereas the latter is corporeal, behavioural and procreative.
Biopolitical genealogy vs. genealogy of biopower

The biopolitical genealogy in *The Will to Knowledge* is methodologically distinct from that in the lectures. The object of inquiry is biopolitics itself rather than race, which allows Foucault to observe that race enters the biopolitical through its entanglement with sexuality. He therefore places sexuality at the centre of the population problem: it is what, through its deployment by means of biopower, connects corporeal discipline to biopolitical regulation. It follows from an examination of the biopolitical function of sexuality that the affinity between race and sexuality first implied in passing in *Society Must Be Defended* can now support the argument that both employ similar tactics but serve different strategies in the biopolitics of population control.

Foucault identified sexuality as ‘a field of vital strategic importance’ (Foucault 2003b: 251) in his lectures, but in *The Will to Knowledge* he places it ‘at the heart of this economic and political population problem (Foucault 1981:25). Racism thus acquired its biopolitical redefinition through the vectors of sexuality. Foucault’s methodological transferral of the position of race in his genealogy of biopolitics from central (as a force that gives rise to the biopolitical) to integral (as one that was subsumed under the strategy of biopolitics) appears to be concurrent with a shift in his conceptualisation of the biopolitical. The more he investigated the consolidation of life as the object of politics, the less he located race as its critical axis. The delayed convergence of biopolitics with race in *Society Must Be Defended* and the relative marginalisation of the latter in *The Will to Knowledge* suggests as much. In the former it is ‘the emergence of biopower that inscribes [race] in the mechanisms of the State’ (Foucault 2003b:254), whereas in the latter sexuality provides the ‘anchorage points for the different varieties of racism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’ (Foucault 1981:26). In other words, in the lectures he used the concept of biopower to explain how racism came to be inscribed in the State as state racism. It is therefore a means of annotating the genealogy of modern racism.

*The Will to Knowledge*, in contrast, deals with the genealogy of biopower itself, prioritising the question of ‘life’ and ‘its unfolding’ as that over which ‘power establishes its domain’ (Foucault 1981:138). The focus is on the technology of power
that fundamentally underpins the politics of life, in other words what facilitates its reproduction: sexuality. Sexuality is not just a discourse that became biopoliticised, but was created by and for biopower in order to realise the power over life. Race could differentiate between species, but could not sufficiently account for their thorough and systematic normalisation, or for their reproduction. Whereas the lectures explore how populations are delineated according to species through racial difference, *The Will to Knowledge* addresses the question of how to make a species live by bringing it to life, keeping it alive, maintaining an appropriate rate of reproductive growth, and regulating it to live an economically productive life. Sexuality, Foucault argues, enables biopower to penetrate each of these aspects.

Foucault writes that modern biopolitics gives precedence to the maintenance and regulation of life over its purification and condemnation. Instead of the ‘irrevocable labeling of one part of the population’, the function of which is upheld by modern racism, the main mode of control operated through the ‘constant examination of a field of regularity within which each individual is constantly assessed in order to determine whether he conforms to the rule, to the defined norm of health’ (Foucault 2003a:47). Already then Foucault recognised the emerging political interest in life, normalisation, productivity and the body. In *Society Must Be Defended* we can witness the initial theorisation of these aspects that is more elegantly described in *The Will to Knowledge*. The lectures distinguish two series by which biopower operates in normalising society, ‘the body-organism-discipline-institutions’ series, and ‘the population-biological processes-regulatory mechanisms-State’ (Foucault 2003b:250) series.

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lectures he distinguishes two series by which biopower operates in normalising society, ‘the body-organism-discipline-institutions’ and ‘the population-biological processes-regulatory mechanisms-State’ series (Foucault 2003b:250). He renames these tactics in *The Will to Knowledge*. He calls the former ‘an anatamo-politics of the human body’ (Foucault 1981:139) that seeks to maximise and utilise its capabilities, and to discipline and integrate the body into a system of economic productivity. Regulatory controls, in other words the focus on the varying conditions that affect populations through birth, death, health, life expectancy and longevity, are conceptualised as the ‘biopolitics of the population’. This argument is familiar enough, but it again raises the question of why sexuality should be at the heart of the biopolitical and not race, or both). Race, after all, constitutes a discourse that is inscribed on the body and enforces disciplinary control over it. It also distinguishes species and therefore those who should be made to live or left to die. Like sexuality, it acts in the determination of organisms and populations through the production of difference. Yet, in defence of Foucault’s evaluation, one could argue that without sexuality as an essential biopolitical bond between the body and the population, the material and the rational, the foundation of biopolitics would be fundamentally unstable. The lectures and *The Will to Knowledge* both identify sexuality as the space between ‘organism and population’ and the point at which ‘the body and the population meet’ (Foucault 2003b:252) through discipline and regulation, respectively. Although racism is just as indispensable to the operation of biopolitics, sexuality appears to be a much more complex and intense aspect of biopolitical normalisation. In the next section I re-examine the position of sexuality along these axes of discipline and regulation.

**Strategies and tactics of sexuality and race**

The different modes of producing difference between race and sexuality are still unclear. How does biopower act on the body to racialise or sexualise it? Foucault answers these questions to some extent. However, his analysis of race is incomplete, and his elucidation of the different forces that sexualise and racialise the body is never sufficiently articulated. In what he calls a ‘strategic model’ (instead of a juridical one) of questioning discourses he uses tactics to describe the ‘reciprocal effects of power and
knowledge [discourses] ensure’, whereas strategy is the ‘conjunction and… force relationship [that] make[s] their utilisation necessary’ (Foucault 1981:102). In continuing this investigation I consider these tactics and strategies of difference in sexuality and race more closely.

According to Foucault, the overall objective of modern sexuality is ‘motivated by one basic concern: ‘to ensure population, to reproduce labor capacity, to perpetuate the form of social relations’ (Foucault 1981:37-38). In short, sexuality concerns the regulation of both the reproductive and the productive potential of the population. The emergence of liberal and neoliberal capitalism was one of the discourses and practices that emerged within rather than outside or against biopolitical raison d’État, with the objective of the State’s enrichment (Foucault 2008:14). The growth of the human population correlated with the growth of productive forces and financial profit (Foucault 1981:141). Sexuality was introduced as ‘the index of a society’s strength, revealing of both its political energy and its biological vigor’ (Foucault 1981:146), thereby making it necessary to control the forms and uses of individual sexual behaviour in order to make use of it.

How, then, does biopolitics make use of sexuality in order to ‘make society into a machine of production’ (Foucault 2001:1013)? Moreover, how could Foucault claim that the procreative function of heterosexuality turned out to be ‘the source of an entire capital for the species to draw from’ (Foucault 1981:118)? Biopower, he suggests (Foucault 1981:47), bestowed ‘a regulative role to the one type of sexuality that was capable of reproducing labor power and the form of the family’. In order to make bodies reproductive it was necessary to discipline them, and sexuality ‘was a means of access to both the life of the body and the life of the species’ (Foucault 1981:145-146). It enabled the control of both the body and the population as a whole, relying on a whole host of mechanisms (including, for example, medical, biological, pedagogical, demographic and psychiatric) for the ‘State management of marriages, births, and life expectancies’ (Foucault 1981:118). In other words, heterosexuality was recognised as the sexuality that reproduces the fleshy, material object of biopolitics, the species body,

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11 The relationship between biopolitics and sexuality seems somewhat repetitive: biopolitics produces sexuality in order to enforce the normative practices of heterosexuality that reproduce another generation of people to sexualise and reproduce. Arguably, this circularity is what makes biopolitics so self-sufficient. It does not ‘need’ the State in order to operate, because the operation in question is the biological and economic re/production of the State.
and was normalised in order to grasp and maximise control over this function. Hence, sexuality was not just a means of inserting the human body into the capitalism machine and ensuring labour capacity, it also ensured the maintenance of population numbers, behaviours and re/productive capacities.

From a genealogical perspective the biopolitical strategy of sexuality is at odds with that of race. Race bequeaths biopower its deadly mechanism by justifying the State’s right to kill. Sexuality, on the other hand, enables the reproduction of life through intervention in reproductive sexual behaviour. In broad terms, race provides biopower with the death function, whereas sexuality performs the ‘life function’. Both mechanisms differentiate through the negative tactics of exclusion and normalisation, but because such differentiations produce different practices of biopolitics, race cannot be conflated with sexuality solely on the basis of difference production. Sexuality has an altogether different function in the strategy of biopolitics.

Furthermore, and paradoxically, although race and sexuality function along opposing strategic trajectories, they are also complementary. As Foucault pointed out, one of the incredible contradictions of modern biopolitics is its discourse of reproduction and wellbeing, which coincides with one of the most murderous periods in history. States instigate mass slaughter in the name of life and prosperity. The critical intersection of race and sexuality, then, is of avail when the State kills on behalf of life, thus exercising the right to kill granted by racial discourse so that the sexuality of the population can continue to operate and reproduce human capital. Race enables the operation of sexuality in separating those who should reproduce from those who should not. The grand biopolitical necessity of the survival of the species, I find, produces both race and sexuality to perform the death function and the life function, respectively, both of which are indispensable to the formulation of the problem of biopolitics. For while there is no species without race, there is no survival without (hetero)sexuality. Neither one is of any use without the other in the biopolitical control of the population. The death function of race operates so that sexuality may perform the life function. Biopolitics harnesses the death function of racism as an indispensable accomplice in the reproduction and regulation of life.
This does not mean that sexuality cannot accommodate the death function. As I show below, it does, but the deadly and exclusionary mechanisms attached to it are strategically distinct from the death function of race. The sexual problem of biopolitical death has eluded some Foucauldian feminists. Foucault claims that sexuality is bound to the production of life, not death. How, then, Judith Butler asks in ‘Sexual Subversions,’ can we explain the discursive industry of death inscribed onto homosexuality through the AIDS crisis that proved so deadly for homosexuals (Butler 1996:61)? How do we explain this attachment of deadly practices to sexuality if death is the function of race? Does this mean that sexuality becomes raced? Clarification of the biopolitical strategies of difference is in order here. Biopolitics, according to Foucault, seeks to ‘foster life or disallow it to the point of death’ (Foucault 1981:138), ‘to make live and to let die’ (Foucault 1981:241). Butler, in contrast, reduces the strategies of Foucault’s biopower to ‘an exclusion of the threat of death’ in which sex ‘surpasses and displaces death’ (Butler 1996:63). Nevertheless, she continues, the technology of sexuality appears to be ‘deployed to save some lives and to condemn others’ (Butler 1996:71). One wonders how the condemnation of homosexuality accompanying AIDS is any different from the condemnation of any other non-normative sexuality that is construed as a threat to the vitality and reproduction of the race. Foucault (Foucault 2003a:60-61) makes it clear that sexuality is not just a question of production and vitality, but because it is also a fundamentally medicalised discourse it operates on the basis of normalisation to the extent of rendering monstrous those that it consigns to the abnormal. The abnormal must be medically, physically and psychologically corrected to be properly allowed to live or, especially if the correction fails, left to die, as many early AIDS victims were. The State allows such deaths to occur so that life may continue to heterosexually reproduce itself.

Race enables the State’s killing of life, but for life to be allowed to die does not necessarily require the death function of race as such. The death function seems to be at its most intense in the operation of modern racism, but nothing dictates that it should be exclusive to it. The murder of homosexuals in concentration camps under the Nazi regime perhaps serves as the only example of the systematic killing of homosexuals by a Western biopolitical State. To begin to understand the dilemma it presents requires that Foucault’s text be challenged, for those bearing the pink triangle were dispatched to the
camps not because they were not of the Aryan race (although undoubtedly some of them were both homosexuals and non-Aryans), but because their intolerable sexual deviancy was seen as a threat to the reproductivity of the Aryan race. Homosexuals were killed not because they were racially different, but because their homosexuality threatened the reproduction of a population that was defined by racial difference. Likewise, in *The Handmaid's Tale* Margaret Atwood describes chilling scenes in which alleged sexual criminals are executed.\(^{12}\) This serves as a reminder that the murder of sexual delinquents is not necessarily directed at *racial* others, it is also directed at those who fail to reproduce a given sexuality. Scholars of feminist and queer studies reading this are likely to be reminded of the brutal murder of the homosexual US university student Matthew Shepard\(^{13}\) in 1998, which is a significant reference point for the territorialisation of sexuality by the death function (McWhorter 2009:1-11; Loffreda 2000). Death is the final form of discipline for sexuality that does not behave itself. Thus the sovereign right of death is preserved not only through modern racism, but also through sexuality. Moreover, it is not reserved merely for killing others but still operates as the old sovereign form of punishment by torture and death in order to protect and discipline the population. The deadly mode of sexuality seeks to discipline bodies to reproduce, to enact the life function of biopolitics. Whereas racism is essentially exclusion of the basis of being, homophobia excludes on the grounds of misbehaviour, of how the body uses its sexualised organs. It ‘is an oppression based on the activities of the members of a group, and not any definite group attributes’ (Grosz 1995:225) such as racism.

In sum, race has proven to be the most effective biopolitical means of justifying the State’s right to kill, but this does not mean that it is necessarily exclusive to race. There are mechanisms other than race that justify the infliction of death on the basis of the

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\(^{12}\) The first handmaiden of Charles is ‘salvaged’, hanged by other handmaidens, for undisclosed but clearly sexually ‘obscene’ crimes (Atwood 1996:287). In the same ‘Participation’ tribunal, the handmaidens also kick and batter to death a man accused of rape. The reader is soon told that he was innocent and really a spy for the underground movement.

\(^{13}\) On the evening of October 6, 1998, twenty-one year old homosexual Matthew Shepard was kidnapped by two other twenty-one year old young men in Colorado. Shepard was brutally beaten with a pistol, severely bruising him and crushing parts of his skull, then stripped naked, tied to a fence and abandoned. He was discovered the next afternoon, taken to hospital, and died a few days later on October 12. Widely covered by the US media, Shepard’s death became a rallying point for gay activism, and especially for the lobbying of hate crime legislation. (see e.g., Loffreda 2000; Swigonski, Mama, and Ward 2001)
protection of the species from behaviour that does not conform to the habits necessary for its reproduction, for example, and that cannot be accommodated by the racial tactics of species difference. Non-heterosexual sexualities fall into this category. Thus, whereas the death function is predominantly practised through, although not exclusive to race, the life function manifests itself only through sexuality. It is to the tactics at play I turn in the next section.

**Organic functions and the biopolitical ordering of life**

Unlike race, sexuality is biopolitically significant for what it can make bodies do, for the functions they can perform. The perpetuation of sexual difference is first and foremost a re/productive process that supplies biopolitics with access to the organic functions of the species body in order to determine its purpose and discipline its pleasures. Sexuality names organs to produce difference and hierarchise the human species, and also folds the body into an ‘abilities machine’ (Foucault 2008:229), arranging its parts according to modern knowledge about reproduction. The aim in this section is to re-examine the tactics of sexuality by breaking down the biopolitical process that arranges the body’s organs into a re/productive machine. Gilles Deleuze’s account of the Body without Organs (BwO) provides additional space in which to further examine the life function of sexuality in relation to organs and functions. Foucault persistently emphasises the subjection of the body to biological, medical and psychiatric discourses, but Deleuze established an entirely new vocabulary in order to conceptualise the process a body undergoes from being a BwO (as he calls an undifferentiated body) to an organism (a differentiated body). Deleuze took on the task of theorising the ontological status of the pre-conceptualised body, the BwO or molecular-desiring machine (versus the social, technical or organic molar machine), whereas Foucault conducted his analyses strictly from historical material. Both, however, were fascinated by the definition of organs and the formation of organisms, as both were intensely interested in becomings. Foucault also explicitly discusses the medicalised relation between organs and life in *The Birth of the Clinic* and *The Order of Things*. Deleuze, however, initiates his analysis in a different time and space, an imaginary and abstract plateau in the trajectory of becoming
that gently prods and facilitates the further conceptualisation of Foucault’s genealogical plateau.

According to Foucault’s genealogy of the life sciences, in the Classical age prior to biopolitics, organs were examined in order to determine their function. Plants and animals were ‘seen not so much in their organic unity as by the visible patterning of their organs’ (Foucault 1994:137). The field of natural history sought to trace ‘an area of the visible… without any internal relation of subordination or organization’ (Foucault 1994:137). It is not that there was ignorance of the relations between bodies and elements (cf. the Aristotelian analogy, ‘the gills are to respiration in water what the lungs are to respiration in air’ (Foucault 1994:265)). However such relations ‘were only used to determine functions’ and ‘were not used to establish the order of things within the space of nature’ (Foucault 1994:265). Come the period of biology, science began to classify organs according to function. Before being defined by their components they were related ‘to the functions that they perform’ (Foucault 1994:230), such as reproduction, respiration, digestion and circulation, that uphold life. Biopower was able to draw out these vital life functions and regulate them by harnessing the organs that perform them into the biological abilities machine. This was possible only through the subordination of organs to function. The linking of the function and the organ was therefore not accidental, but purposeful in order to establish the ‘natural’ order of biopolitical life.

To be clear, it is not the existence of organs as such that is problematic, it is their agglomeration into an organism. As Deleuze explains, the organism is ‘a phenomenon of accumulation, coagulation and sedimentation, that in order to extract useful labour from the BwO, imposes upon it forms, functions, bonds, dominant and hierarchized organizations, organized transcendences’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2004:176). The Body without Organs conceptualises the body prior to its capture and organisation by the forces of the State. The BwO is so attractive to the State because it is ‘the field of immanence of desire’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2004:170). For Deleuze, desire is pure intensity, ‘a process of production without reference to any exterior agency’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2004:170-171). It does not rely on anything like the lack of the negative, but is in itself creative. The State stratifies the BwO into an organism in order to make it
into a machine of production. It seeks out the creations of desire, the functions that make it useful for the production of capital, name the organs that fulfil these particular functions, and categorise them according by set.

Sexuality also involved the subordination of organs to their function. As Foucault writes in *The Will to Knowledge*, sexuality was something ‘implanted in bodies’, that was ‘made’ into a principle of classification and intelligibility (Foucault 1981:44, emphases added). Sexual reproduction, I find, stands out as an *organic* function around which biopower is intensely concentrated. It is unique in that it reproduces new life, determines re/productive relations with others, and configures sexed subjectivity. ‘Reproductive organs’ or ‘sexual organs’, therefore, are not ‘reproductive’ or ‘sexual’ because they have availed themselves as such. They have other capacities, such as urinating, bleeding and pleasuring. Sexuality is rather the name of the technology through which the organic capacities of the BwO are classified and manoeuvred in order to support the life function in biopolitics. It subordinates all the abilities and effects of those organs to the life function, like the ‘pleasures’ that Foucault argues are now trapped in a negative relation of prohibition that disciplines sexuality. This includes the life-reproducing power of different organs, biologically sexed and named as female and male mutually desiring sexual organs. Sexual difference is reproductive difference, or the organic difference that enables reproduction. Through relations with sexed others, organic bodies are capable of producing an entirely new body, another organism composed of its own organs. Sexual subjectivation thus establishes the life function through the political ordering of the function of the reproductive organ.

The second particularity about reproduction in relation to other functions is that it establishes productive relations between sexed others. Heterosexuality is a relationship composed primarily of a complex re/productive rather than an exclusionary ordering. That is to say, unlike race, the purpose of which is to differentiate between groups in order to include and exclude, sexuality differentiates in order to reproduce, but in doing so, as mentioned earlier, also excludes with the purpose of disciplining and stamping out deviancy. In order to utilise the reproductive capacities of sexed bodies, the heterosexual family was held up as the main instrument providing sexuality with support for their extraction. Controlling relations between opposite sexes entailed mechanisms such as

Finally, this deployment of sexuality that orders reproductive organs extends from the medical doctrine of the biological body to the production of sexed subjectivity, to the ‘truth’ of whom and what one truly is. For the Greeks the material folding of oneself related to the body and its pleasures. Through *scientia sexualis*, the scientific discourse of sex allied with Christian moralism, ‘flesh was brought down to the level of the organism’ (Foucault 1981:117). It was an organism endowed with sexuality, and the one type that was identified as reproductive, named heterosexuality, existed in the form of sexual desire and pleasure between differently sexed female and male bodies. The biopolitical truth of the self, for Foucault, revolved around the discourse of one’s sexuality. To him as to many feminists the connection of the organic function to the subjective truth resembled the connection that naturalises and essentialises sexuality to the point at which the threat of its contestation is minimised. The biological limits of a woman’s reproductive system determine not only her being, but also her essence, a fixed, (pre)historical set of attributes that is just as much a part of what woman ‘is’ as as her organs (Grosz 1995:47-48). Foucault pays particular attention to the complexity of sexed subjectivity. Woman’s hysterisation was possible through the definition of sex as a lack, as something men had and women did not, and it also ordered and disciplined the female body through the functions of reproduction (Foucault 1981:121). Deleuze also specifically refers to the female body as the BwO, first stolen and then imposed with a prehistory. She is ‘defined by her form, endowed with organs and functions and assigned as a subject’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2004:304). One could therefore conclude that the deployment of sexuality forms notions of sex that haunt subjectivity, disciplining the subject and its organic functions. The life function is therefore saturated with the violence of subjectivation, a violence that compels human life to sexually reproduce itself.
Conclusion: The life function

To speak of a life function is not to speak of the opposite of the death function. Biopolitics is equally drenched with the violence that kills life as with the violence that persuades or coerces life into reproduction, the continual production of biopolitical life. If race is an intense plane of deadly violence, it does not mean that the life function is the opposite, life granting and non-violent. It is also an aggressive function, a sexual subjectification that seeks to compel the organic body to reproduce. Its sexual subject is the ‘subject of life-administering violence’ (Huffer 2010:254).

The life function is no less violent than the death function. Both split the species and determine their biopolitical destinies, the latter according to the biological categorisation of subjectivity, and the former according to the function of the reproductive organs. The idea of a ‘function’ is crucial here. It is a concept that allows scrutiny of the strategies and tactics of biopolitics. Relating it to biopolitical life and death enables one to ask why the ability of some ‘to partake of that vital flow of… interactions with others’ (Braidotti 2006:238) is extinguished whereas for others it is capacitated and disciplined. In both cases, however, the BwO is tactically territorialised by biopower in order to invigorate its biopolitical operation, albeit for separate yet mutually dependent strategic purposes. Given that the life function, the violent reproduction of life, is an indispensable if not the central function of biopolitics that seeks to make life live, the extent to which it has slipped into obscurity since the publication of The History of Sexuality is astonishing.

The death function and the life function are therefore not operational opposites, but are intricately intertwined and organised in order to harness the life of the species. As McWhorter argues, biopower cannot function without both race and sexuality, nor can race and sexuality operate without each other (McWhorter 2009:15). This, I have argued, is because in its present form biopolitics relies equally on the effectiveness of the functions they carry out. That said, just as these functions are not historically bound and stable, nor are they exclusively tied to the discourses of race and sexuality. They do not emanate from race and sexuality, but attach themselves to them as the discourses that most intensely and effectively enable their operation. Hence one can also witness
the death function in sexuality, but as a means of discipline or deadly punishment, not as a categorical basis of exclusion as it often is with race. This argument is perhaps easier to apply to race, whereas it is difficult to conceive of any form of reproduction other than sexual.

For the time being, sexuality remains intact as the discourse in which the life function is actively anchored. With such a massive and complex array of apparatus, from the biological sciences to demographic knowledge, psychoanalytical models and the family, and extracting and managing heterosexual reproductivity, the resilience of the sexuality discourse is unsurprising in the face of changing social relations that seem to challenge heterosexual biopolitics. One could say that its strange ingenuity is that it upholds the (hetero)sexual relations required for the sexual reproduction of human life, and at the same time organises the organic assemblage of the sexual organs that carry out the desired life function. The sexual territorialisation of the life function is so resilient precisely because it is so complex and amenable in terms of readjusting the calibration of bodily forces. As other writers have shown, the State has gradually appropriated diversity as a biopolitical resource, giving good cause to institutionally normalise homosexual relationships, new forms of family and lone parenting, for example. The threat they once posed to the life function is gradually lifting, along with the accompanying death function, as declining fertility rates in the majority of developed states compel the State to expand and strengthen the effectiveness of the life function. These developments should not be attributed unequivocally to the success of feminist/queer politics, and in fact only imply a change in the biopolitical configuration of sexualised bodies. The challenge of addressing the biopolitical forces that constitute them in the first place still stands.

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Differences Between Non-Humans and Humans in Amazonia: The Challenge of Reaching a Mutual Understanding in State Politics

Pirjo Kristiina Virtanen

Abstract

Interaction with humans and non-humans among indigenous Amazonian people is based on alterity in social production, in which the ‘other’ is also a crucial part of ‘us’. The aim in this paper is to show how Amazonian Indians attempt to overcome differences with other human beings through transforming their bodies in certain forms of speech and behaviour and processes of learning. Their aim is not to change others, because indigenous Amazonians conceptualise all beings as somewhat similar, but their bodies can change the way negotiation and communication are constructed. The paper is based on ethnographic data collected in the state of Acre, Brazil, among various indigenous groups, principally the Manchineri. I will show that the indigenous Amazonian philosophy related to non-humans also fosters understanding of contemporary human-to-human relations, and thus of indigenous politics, in the lowlands of South America. In Amazonian socio-cosmology different beings are identified from the different ways of communicating, eating, living and behaving that create different bodies. Awareness of these different ways is important in terms of constructing a mutual understanding.

Introduction

The focus in this paper dealing with Amazonian social philosophies is twofold. Firstly, it considers the differences and similarities between non-humans and humans in indigenous Amazonian thinking and acting, and secondly it examines how this could enhance understanding of current negotiations in indigenous politics. As far as indigenous Amazonians are concerned, communication and interaction are embodied actions vis-à-vis different entities, aimed at mastering their ways of seeing the world. In particular, I will shed light on their ways of relating to non-humans and how that facilitates understanding of contemporary indigenous politics as a type of human-to-human interaction. Non-humans in the Amazonian context refer here especially to animals, plants and various natural spirits. The paper is based on ethnographical data collected among various indigenous groups in the state of Acre, Brazil, in both forest and urban environments. The main corpus of my data encompasses the Manchineri, an
Arawak-speaking group living along the Peruvian border. They number some 800 in the reserve and 200 in urban areas. The Acre state is home to an indigenous population numbering approximately 16,000 and representing 15 different indigenous groups. They speak languages belonging to the Arawá, Arawak and Pano linguistic families. I conducted my fieldwork in 2003–10 during various visits.

As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1996) argues in his definition of *multinaturalism*, humanity in Amazonian cosmologies remains the same between non-humans and humans. They all have culture, but in fact there are various ‘natures’. The Amazonian ethnographies of Kaj Århem (1993) and Tânia Stolze Lima (1999[1996]), in particular, influenced his work. It has been shown that Amazonian Indians see animals, plants and various spirits as similar to human beings in their capacity to think, know and act socially. Humanity is the essential attribute shared by all cosmological agents, thus they see the world and think in the same way as humans do, although what they see may be different (they live in ‘houses’ similar to humans’ dwellings and consume foods and beverages that are ontologically equivalent to our own: for predators, our blood may be their manioc beer, for example). This shared humanity is amply illustrated in native artwork and mythology. Much pre-Columbian native art, such as ceramics, pictures animals or plants with human faces or a partly human body (see McEwan et al. 2001). These beings also appear similar to humans in mythology and oral history. Nowadays they have varying views of the world, constituted by their different bodies and created by their typical ways of communicating, eating, living and behaving. This is what Viveiros de Castro (1996) calls perspectivism. Thus there are multiple ‘natures’ in order to accommodate different views of the world, although they are based on a similar ontological system.

Overall, this is a very different view from that of traditional Western science, which has traditionally had strong human/non-human, subject/object and culture/nature dichotomies. More recently, however, Bruno Latour (1993, 2004), Steve Fuller (2011) and Gunther Teubner (2006), among others, have explored the human rights of non-humans such as animals, and the agency of machines and information technology, showing how ‘nature’ cannot be externalized or objectified as a bounded category. As Roy F. Ellen argues, ‘nature’ must be taken as a situational concept, and it is related to
one’s processing and previous knowledge. As he claims: ‘Conceptualisations of nature are not the inventions of individuals (in which case they would more closely reflect cognitive processes), but arise through historical contingency, linguistic constraints, metaphorical extension, ritual prohibitions and so on’ (Ellen 1996:118). However, the human sciences have been studied very little other than in terms of human cultures, objects or entities.

This paper represents an attempt to show that Amazonian Indians aim to overcome differences from other human beings through transforming their bodies and processes of learning. Their aim is not to change the others, because according to indigenous Amazonian conceptualisations all beings are similar to some extent, but their bodies can change the way negotiation and communication are constructed. I look first at indigenous conceptions of the natural environment and its agents, taking some examples from Manchineri’s corporeal negotiation practices with non-humans during hunting and healing. Major differences between Western bipolar thinking and Amazonian indigenous ideas of non-humans and ‘nature’ are revealed. Then I consider how indigenous people in the Amazon define themselves as humans, and examine the characteristic importance of relating to kin through corporeal practices in producing sociality. This explains why community members are considered differently, the so-called ‘real’ humans/persons. In the subsequent section I focus on the Manchineri people’s corporeal negotiations in interethnic relations with other humans, non-Indians and other indigenous groups, as well as on how these processes change the body. After that I shed light on the challenges of constructing mutual understanding in human-to-human relations, in terms of both attempted co-operative action and the maintenance of real humanness, or relatedness, among community members. I conclude the paper with a discussion of difference and how indigenous people in Amazonia have found a new way of overcoming it.

**Non-humans**

According to indigenous Amazonian social philosophies, some plants, animals and natural elements have agency and subjectivity and are thus regarded as persons (Århem 1996; Viveiros de Castro 1996; Descola 1986, 2005; Stolze Lima 1999[1996]). Non-
humans, like humans, are entities with individual personalities; there are no collective entities among them, such as among plants and animals that are categorised by species (see Gonçalves 2010). Moreover, similar to humans, non-humans may differ in response to their subjective experiences of other actors, and hence could be referred to in other than merely generic terms (Descola 1986, 2005). Non-human agents are usually invisible, although they may be present. Even if Westerners tend to think of nature as something given, and of culture as variable, the views of Amazonian Indians, as defined by many anthropologists, are over-generalised to reflect Amerindian cultures (see the critique in Ramos 2012). Even if there are many similarities in the Amerindian subjectification of non-humans, it is important to study the differences in views among Amazonian peoples in more depth.

The Manchineri have close relations with certain animals, plants and elements of nature. The most powerful animal spirits in their socio-cosmos are those of the toucan, the turkey vulture, the parrot, the frog, the monkey, the pink dolphin, the otter and the tinamou, and the natural elements wind and thunder are personified. These spirits are believed to live like humans, and their special qualities and behaviours to contribute to a person’s health, knowledge and strength. Some animals, for instance, are considered to have a positive effect on flexibility, thus people attempt to invoke their spirit. There are also so-called master spirits, such as the mother of the moon and the father of the forest, who may guide people and give them power. Plants also have powers that people can embody. Many Manchineri men and women, young and old, use protective and curative medicines made from numerous plants, bushes and trees to activate in their bodies specific qualities linked with non-human agency. They attribute to these non-human substances the fact that they become more cheerful and stronger, do not find their work so exhausting, can walk very long distances, find game and fish quickly, and even have success in their love lives. The spirits of (non-human) animals and plants, then, influence the subjectivity of the Manchineri, who even think they have affinity relations with some animals on account of their close, long-term relations with them.

Origin myths typically narrate how difference from other beings is defined. The Manchineri tell detailed stories about the origins of particular animals, beings and objects such as fire, trees, cassava, birds and the moon. In ancient times other beings
were perceived as humans, especially animals, and the Manchineri learned new things from the forest entities. That was the time in their ancestry when non-human beings could speak. The Manchineri differentiated themselves from the other through their own practices, ways of thinking, behaving, acting and doing things, and this differentiation continues today in their everyday actions. Animals, plants and other non-humans are no longer seen as humans because of their dissimilar bodies, but typically still appear as humans in altered states of consciousness, and can talk to people. According to Amazonian thinking, if in everyday life someone starts to see animals as humans it usually means that the person is becoming sick or insane, or is about to die. Shamans are experts in this, and are able to negotiate with non-humans and ancestor spirits.

The aim in ritual practices is to set up contexts for controlled interaction with non-humans. Amazonian ethnographies describe various rituals that may last days or weeks during which encounters with non-human beings, such as ancestors, may occur. Thus the relationships between non-humans such as ancestor spirits and the community members are materialised through sacred objects and musical instruments that are powerful transformers of energy. The use of such instruments is normally restricted to certain members of the community (on sacred flutes in the rituals of the North-western Amazon see, e.g., Hugh-Jones 1979; Hill 1993). The rituals enable communication between generations and different non-humans.

Furthermore, shamanic practices may materialise non-humans and create a way to communicate with them. Shamans are experts who know how to deal with the objects, rhythms and chants that are closely related to non-humans, the forest and ancestor spirits. They possess knowledge of non-humans, their behaviour and what to ‘call’ them, and can transform their bodies without turning permanently into non-humans. Various community members among the Manchineri and many other indigenous peoples have, or must have some shamanic knowledge. Shamans, or people with shamanic skills, lead healing rituals in which the encounter and interaction with the power of the non-humans are enabled. Healing is about perceiving the causes of an illness or unbalanced state, balancing the energies of the person and the cosmos, and even predicting the future. The healer uses personal techniques such as smoking, hallucinogenic substances, trance or fasting in order to identify non-humans and other beings that are invisible to other
community members (see, e.g., Chaumeil 1983). The non-humans may not appear to most people. Some beings also have the capacity to teach how to harm people and how to practice sorcery.

Dreams generally represent a contact zone between non-humans and human beings, allowing humans to receive guidance in their activities and decisions, such as whether it is good to go on a journey, or a hunting or fishing trip, to learn what is happening to an absent relative, or to predict what the community may face. In this way, through dreams non-humans can teach the Manchineri. Elders and shamans usually help to interpret the dreams. Animal and plant spirits as well as the spirits of other natural entities can also be activated through chants, body paintings and decoration, for example. Body paintings among the Manchineri tend to represent the skin of powerful animals such as the tortoise or boa constrictor that will help them to become stronger in materialising their qualities and powers.

Chanting is frequently used for calling non-humans and communicating with them, and different chants serve various purposes: for strength, guidance, healing and luck in hunting. Given that chanting is also about transformation, one must have knowledge of how and when it can be used. The lyrics of Manchineri chants tend to describe in detail how certain animals move and act as humans in order to initiate communication and a relationship with them.

Corporeality is an important element in these practices, thus hunters also try to imitate the noises and behaviour of animals on their hunting trips. The use of sounds and gestures ‘reproduces’ animals. Young Manchineri men are considered to be adults only when they can hunt alone: this means that they have developed certain communication, imitation and negotiation skills enabling them to interact with non-humans. Hunters have to know how animals, the forces of nature, and plants behave, and how specific signs in the forest environment can be interpreted.

Negotiation with so-called master spirits is the exclusive task of shamans in some communities. Tânia Stolze Lima (1999[1996]) shows in one of her seminal works on perspectivism how before a Juruna peccary hunt a Juruna shaman negotiates with the
master of peccaries, which appears as a peccary shaman, and how the change in the Juruna shaman’s body and point of view is fundamental for mutual communication. This type of cognitive model in interaction is an important aspect of relations with other indigenous groups and non-Indians (Virtanen 2009a).

Although ancestor and non-human spirits are among the Manchineri’s sources of knowledge, many people are afraid of encountering them. Non-human agents tend to have great physical powers and other qualities, and can even kill people or turn them into animals. Men seeking guidance from non-humans for hunting, for instance, must avoid the company of females, bring some gifts for the spirit, and hunt only what is needed. Animal and plant spirits are usually encountered when the person is alone, when non-human beings may appear to ‘tell their secret’ (typically during dreams and rituals; see Virtanen 2009b). These skills may be taught by other people, and are also transmitted from generation to generation. Personal experiences of encounters with non-human beings are discussed among community members. Overall, the narratives about the forest spirits that capture attention are related to morality, the dangers of the forest, and the production of sociality in the community.

**Real humans**

The kin of Amazonian Indians normally comprise a group among which objects, food and practices are shared and carried out together, and is not confined to consanguinity. What makes human beings especially human includes close relationships with their kin, respect for each other and participation in convivial living. Relatedness and living together is a decisive factor in forming kinship relations, and thus genealogical kin living far away may be excluded from the circle (Gow 1991; McCallum 1996). Certain types of food and the use of substances such as manioc beer, natural medicine and tobacco also make people’s bodies similar. All in all, shared practices separate kin from other humans and non-humans, and create dissimilar moralities between them (e.g., Londoño Sulkin 2005).
In general, Amazonian native communities define and construct their members as persons, and reflect this in their symbolic systems and as objectifications of human bodies. Personhood is thus produced in everyday actions together with community members. Age, sex, social roles, personal capacities and character place kin in the web of relations that also determine how to address and relate to each member. Persons are social actors who have constituted their personhood in legitimate processes of social action and relatedness within their communities (Conklin and Morgan 1996; McCallum 1996; Vilaça 2002, 2005). Therefore, many indigenous groups say that they are the real humans: in Piro languages, for instance, this translates as yineru (used by the Yine, also known as the Piro and the Manchineri; singular yine), and in Cashinahua as huni kui. These terms could also be translated as ‘real person’. The same expression in Portuguese is povo/gente verdadeiro, which many indigenous peoples use when referring to their group.

In indigenous Amazonian communities, distinguishing the real human perspective and subjectivity from other beings, typically animals and spirits, is a corporeal process visible in everyday actions, ritualisation and bodily representations (Viveiros de Castro 1996:131, 2001; Vilaça 2002, 2005). Corporeality is invested with a crucial meaning in that the human body is the locus of social representations connecting a person to other members of the community. This is manifested in body paintings, decoration and corporeal behaviour, and in ceremonies that facilitate the expression of status, gender and age, for example (Seeger et al. 1987; Turner 1991, 1995). It is possible for a non-community member, an outsider, to become one of the kin, but it is a gradual process that includes co-living, gift exchange, learning to speak the same language, and adopting the way of thinking and corporeal practices regarding the tasks of women and men in the group, for instance (e.g., Kensinger 1995; McCallum 2009).

Unlike the Western view, it is not a given fact that people are born as humans or that they remain as humans (Conklin and Morgan 1996; Vilaça 2002, 2005). Humanness has to be produced in everyday actions, proximity and relatedness to community members who are similar human beings. For many native communities in the Amazon, human agency is constantly constructed in negation among the non-human powers in the human body when it is undergoing change. In order to limit relatedness to non-humans
the person concerned may have to be isolated, follow a diet of selected substances, or avoid proximity with certain beings and objects. This may also be required before certain rituals involving an encounter with non-humans. Animals and spirits are a danger to real humans, who might start to act like animals or assume similar corporeal characteristics (see Viveiros de Castro 2001; Vilaça 2002, 2005). The Manchineri, who live in and have a close relationship with the forest, may have dealings with its denizens whenever they walk around looking for or collecting natural resources. For instance, when a man returns from the forest, having been hunting or gardening, he has to take a bath because he has been in contact with animal spirits, and even the smell of animals or other forest spirits could harm those who have not yet formed their proper personhood. Babies, for instance, cannot yet be included in the group of real humans.

Especially at the moment when a person is receiving a new identity, such as during birth, sickness, puberty or death, the changing body has to be protected from energies coming from the outside (Seeger et al. 1987). The practices that make people human and agents with power also include new activities, kinds of knowledge and contacts. For instance, nowadays state education protects the Manchineri from becoming animals, because they have educated people in the reserve who know how to act in the world and are familiar with the views of different people. I have discussed this in greater detail elsewhere (Virtanen 2012; see also Revista FAEEBA 2010).

The ‘other’ in the Amazonian socio-cosmos is fundamental in defining social differences such as the kin – non-kin and enemy – friend oppositions. However, the ‘other’ is constantly part of ‘us’, and the powers and knowledge are incorporated and appropriated. When the power of non-Indians is appropriated in an urban space various new agencies are at play. They are different from the non-human forest spirits that indigenous people have observed and dealt with for a long time, and with whom they are thus the most accustomed to communicate.
Negotiating with human Others

The Manchineri call other indigenous groups ‘kajitu’ and non-Indians are called ‘payri’, whereas in most Panoan languages non-Indians are called ‘nawa’. Several indigenous groups thought in their first contacts with them that the non-Indians were some kind of spirits (see, e.g., Kopenawa and Albert 2010) who consumed other types of food and drink that made their bodies different. It is believed in most indigenous groups that non-Indians are essentially dissimilar from the indigenous people, and especially that those who live in cities are the most distant from ‘us’ in that their values, acts and thinking are different.

Various studies discuss alterity in relation to trade partners, enemies, employees of on-governmental organisations, and missionaries who have been associated with sources of power, knowledge and objects, and could be considered potentially affine due to the proximity created with them (e.g., Viveiros de Castro 2001; Gow 1991; Vilaça 2002; McCallum 1996). There are different types of non-Indians, and those with whom closer and friendly relations exist may become brothers- or sisters-in-law (McCallum 1996, 2009). Moreover, Amazonian Indians nowadays have to deal increasingly with different types of non-Indians representing government, non-governmental organisations, the church and companies. Thus they have to find new ways of interacting with them, entailing an increase in various interethnic relations.

Building a common understanding between different actors and the appropriation of their power and knowledge are fundamental given the current threats to the Manchineri related to, among other things, the security of their land: logging, overfishing, overhunting and pollution are just a few of the problems. The power related to state offices, for instance, is also needed in order to ensure improvements in health and education and economic sustainability, and to guarantee indigenous peoples’ rights in general. The same problems affect many indigenous groups, which therefore need people to speak and act with new actors in novel ways.

In political negotiations, Manchineri social actors may try temporarily to emphasise their similarity with some actors and differentiate themselves from others. This enables
them to participate in social encounters designed by non-natives, in which things may be seen from a specific human perspective embodied in the new types of human-to-human relations (Virtanen 2009a). The new contemporary interaction with the dominant society and cooperation with other indigenous groups engender new discourses and corporeal practices. These are recognisable in specific contexts such as political negotiations, but also on training courses and at cultural events when certain forms of language and gesture are used and different qualities are valued. In indigenous politics and many other negotiation situations, the indigenous people appeal to the law and speak about their rights. When Manchineri intermediaries talk with governmental officers they use specific concepts they know the latter like to hear, such as biodiversity, sustainability and indigenousness. They have learned the words from environmentalist discourses, for instance, but after the meetings they would ask me what they mean.

On a general level my ethnography shows the difficulty of constructing common perspectives owing to a lack of knowledge of how the dominant society works and how non-Indians think, speak and act. The Manchineri have fielded a candidate in municipal elections since 2004. However, it was only in 2008 that a Manchineri representative started to work for the municipal government of Assis Brasil, a town close to the Peruvian border, 80 kilometres from the Manchineri reserve. He told me about his experience when he moved with his family to the town and started work as an indigenous representative and advisor to the board:

It was 2008 and we stayed [here in Assis Brasil] performing the work. It wasn’t so pleasant for me, Cristina. I miss hunting a lot. Today I hold a rubber stamp in my hands. I’ve changed! My experience has increased, but my physical body has become very fragile. In the indigenous reserve we would fish, hunt and trek all day. We took water from the forest, that vine [with water]. I was very happy. But today I feel ill. I’ve become this.

As the above snatch of conversation shows, the man was content with his new experiences and embodied knowledge of new matters. That had changed his way of being. As Gonçalves (2010) points out about Amazonian personhood, subjects are produced through the processes of producing personality and experience in social
relations. However, his own health was in danger as he was eating different food and no longer spent time hunting and walking in the forest, so he had gained a great deal of weight. The young man continued, telling me that his urban work was too complicated in the local government because of lobbying and bureaucracy. Meantime his own community was not satisfied with his results, and he had difficulties explaining the logic of the political and economic processes of the state and how everything works for his people on the local level (see the discussion in Virtanen 2009a, 2012). Overall, his health had been declining due to a lack of contact with the substances of his community, such as medicinal plants. He worked mostly with non-Indians in urban areas, even though he often met other indigenous peoples. Thus, he generally had to deal with non-Indians alone. Just as in negotiation with animal or plant spirits, which usually happens when a person is alone, his work developed his personal talents and his ability to find a mutual understanding. However, during his career as a teacher and when he was involved in local government he had already formed a new type of relationship with non-Indians, practised interpersonal communication, and now aimed to see what he could achieve through his own capacities. Later he was invited to work in the state capital of Acre, Rio Branco, in an indigenous organisation. This gave him the chance to continue his learning process and embody new knowledge with non-Indians, something he had been aspiring towards.

It has also been pointed out that the adoption of non-native ways of doing and being is not about turning into non-Indians, it is about mastering knowledge of the other, and thus having two bodies. As Aparecida Vilaça (2007[1999]) shows, the Wari’ (indigenous people of Brazilian Amazonia) have two bodies simultaneously, Wari’ and white. According to my previous research, people in negotiation situations may also have multiple identities, and different embodiments may produce an indigenous identity (Virtanen 2010). It is, however, very difficult to deal with the two perspectives (native and non-native), especially if one has to spend long periods away from one’s community.

According to the Manchineri in the reserve, those residing in the city were usually considered similar to non-Indians, and their values to have already become similar to non-Manchineri values. Having better knowledge of how to set up economic projects,
they propose projects that, although aiming at less dependence on the dominant society, are impossible to execute. Most of them, after many years of absence from the reserve, have distanced themselves from the lifestyle of the community in the forest environment. The visits to urban centres also have a liminal dimension as the person leaves the known and the controlled, the community of kin (Virtanen 2009a). However, to some extent, interaction with those in urban and rural areas has increased and created new forms of relatedness. Generally speaking, the indigenous people of the lowlands of South America now have more power to decide with whom they want to cooperate and who will represent them.

**Opportunities for mutual understanding in human-to-human relations**

As has become evident, Amazonian Indians’ views of the natural environment’s agency as well as of the essence of many other subjectivities, give rise to many conceptual problems and communication challenges. For instance, the terms ‘culture’ and ‘nature’, used by governmental officers and people representing non-governmental organisations, usually have opposite meanings for indigenous people (see Virtanen et al. 2012 for a detailed discussion). This makes it even more challenging to convey the point of view of Amazonian Indians. As discussed, for them, animals and plants, like humans, also have culture, thinking and volitional capacities, and the forest environment is closely related to the history and well-being of the indigenous people. ‘Culture’ and people are not, for Amazonian Indians, separate entities, but what Westerners usually understand as ‘nature’ is culture. In the view of Gupta and Fergusson (2001) they are interconnected spaces of different agencies, whereas non-natives still usually consider them two different spaces.

Overall, literacy skills and the ability to speak the dominant society’s language help in overcoming differences when acting in indigenous politics. Those already living in urban settings are better able to accommodate the processes of negotiation in terms of the dominant society’s expectations than those living on the reserves: and as far as the community is concerned their role is to negotiate on their behalf. Indigenous people in representative roles and positions in inter-ethnic politics and the indigenous movement
position themselves as different from the dominant society, but in their discourses they look for common points. Typical discourses in this context refer to indigenous rights, environmental values and differences in the indigenous worldview. Questions of indigenous rights are involved more and more with national and global issues: on the local level, even international contacts are made in order to find funding for new projects. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) suggests that the appearance of terms such as ‘self-determination’ and ‘indigenous rights’ in the talks is promising, but must also be seen in the context of using power. Moreover, indigenous people have adopted the forms of political bodies and structures in the dominant society. Many native groups have managed to establish relations with state and international capitalism, build economies, set up cooperatives, and found their own associations and NGOs.

However, bodies of indigenous political representatives often end up locked in internal conflicts and leadership problems stemming from their different values, a lack of knowledge and of organisational skills, and different views on participating in a civil society (see Virtanen 2009a). Nevertheless, international contacts and changes on the global level in relation to the world’s other indigenous peoples have also given new strength and visibility to indigenous Brazilian peoples (Ramos 1998, see, e.g., Warren and Jackson 2002).

The way indigenous peoples represent themselves could also be understood in the light of the expectations of the dominant society. There is a tendency still to view indigenous groups from a romantic perspective as savage and exotic, materialised in a form of colourful indigeneity, and very different corporeality is sometimes required in order for them to communicate with outsiders as respected Indians who are maintaining their cultural traditions. Many researchers describe this kind of ‘othering’ in relation to Black and indigenous people elsewhere (cf. Hall 1992; Ahmed 2000). Unlike previous generations, who lived the politics of acculturation and oppression and had to dress, act and speak like the White population, indigenous youth have to show their indigeneity. The rise of ethnic awareness among native groups has also allowed many to benefit from the stereotypes of ‘Indians’, and hence they dress in traditional costume, display body paintings and wear headdresses in interethnic negotiations. On the one hand this has contributed significantly to raising new cultural consciousness among Amazonian
indigenous groups (e.g., Turner 1991). On the other, however, the new representations of indigeneity involve steps beyond nostalgia and cultural romanticism, and give a more realistic picture of communities regardless of whether they live in the reserves or in cities.

The Manchineri’s strategies for understanding the other, the non-Indians, and their attempts to build communication with them, have involved participation in local politics, and have produced demands for better education services along with participation in teaching in urban schools. The first Manchineri leaders to establish the regional indigenous movement, and then teachers and environmental agents going on training courses, brought new knowledge to the community, just as the shaman’s ability to receive knowledge from the forest spirits without turning into them benefitted the community as a whole. Added to the fact that indigenous politics has acted as a middle ground for actions, indigenous Amazonian groups have also instituted common practices and understanding through environmentalism. Environmentalists have seen Amazonian Indians as protectors and preservers of the rain forest, which is also valuable for people living outside of it (Conklin and Morgan 1995). For non-Indian conservationists, however, the value of the natural environment has been linked to its resources, and it has been defined as a ‘collective good’. Hence, environmental issues have become a political question that nation states should also consider (Eder 1996). Despite the differing views among Indians and non-Indians however, for indigenous groups it was a significant moment in terms of constructing alliances with environmentalists.

Indigenous Amazonian groups nowadays are more open to receiving visitors, and to sharing rituals with them, for instance. This may prove a new strategy for maintaining relatedness and interacting with others, as has been the custom for spokespeople in indigenous politics. They aim increasingly to show to non-Indians what kind of values they have and what kind of relations with beings in the natural environment are crucial for them. Non-human beings such as the forest spirits that give the Manchineri various resources, including strength and cheerfulness, are introduced in some contexts in order to give others a better understanding of indigenous ways of viewing the world. It is explained that these spirits were also essential for their ancestors, and relationships with
certain non-humans reproduced the relations between generations, as well as between the past and the present. Recently many cooperation networks have been established among people keen on indigenous healing. Shamanic practices, especially ayahuasca shamanism, are increasingly shared with non-natives in the Acre region (see Virtanen 2009b, 2012, forthcoming). For many local indigenous people it is a common technique and a way of receiving knowledge from plant and animal spirits. Nowadays shamanic rituals have become a space in which attempts are made to illustrate to non-natives what native values are and how they relate to other beings. Meantime, indigenous people also try to obtain knowledge about the essence and histories of the new entities, institutions and non-Indians actors with whom they aim to build up cooperation.

**Discussion**

In this paper I have discussed the differences in Amazonian socio-cosmology between non-humans and humans on the one hand, and their similarities on the other. Among the indigenous Amazonian people both non-human and human agents are important actors in terms of constructing identity and personhood. Different beings are identified by their ways of communicating, eating, living and behaving, and these elements can be appropriated thereby creating specific bodies. Amazonian Indians typically try to master different views in the global world by producing corporeal similarities with increasing numbers of non-humans and humans, thereby embodying their knowledge and power. Local knowledge is an important element when dealing with others (whether non-Indians, or animal or plant spirits) and may facilitate the construction of a mutual understanding. For them, beings differ on account of their histories: in other words they have been interacting with certain actors who have produced their bodies by means of new knowledge and sociality – their personhood. This makes beings different ontologically, but they can all be studied and their knowledge can become complementarily embodied.

Amazonian social philosophy, which is closely related to non-humans and animal–human relations, may also explain how negotiations employ bodies in human-to-human relations in diverse political, cultural and economic contexts. As discussed above,
Manchineri spokespeople act according to the context of the negotiation, producing sameness between actors by means of common corporeality. This is regarded as a change of body: in knowledge and essentiality it differs from typical Western thinking. The indigenous actors then become actors in the world or ‘nature’ of different kinds of bodies that have to be produced.

The Manchineri’s aim is not to change others, because all beings are thought to be similar to some extent, but to alter corporeality in relation to other subjects and change the way negotiation and communication are constructed. Moreover, they wish to make their own view understood in negotiations with non-natives. The differences are also evident when they favour indigenous agents, such as the exoticism associated with Amazonian Indians. The Manchineri try to overcome differences from other human beings through transforming their bodies and the processes of learning that are closely related to the body, similar to their interaction with non-humans. Amazonian Indians are curious to get to know the other, and learning the essence of the other is empowering for them. This is what people in Western countries usually lack in regarding their values, and economic and political systems as somehow superior.

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Being the First to Get Rich:  
Family Obligations and Social Mobility Through Education in China

Anni Kajanus

Abstract

The reform era Chinese society is characterised by two things: new opportunities and unequal access to them. The rising living standard is coupled with the growing gap between the rich and the poor. One of the main routes to socioeconomic mobility is education. Regional disparity in educational investment and the more relaxed implementation of family planning policies in rural areas puts one group of people in a particularly weak position in the education market. In their quest for educational achievement rural girls need to overcome economic disadvantage vis-à-vis their urban counterparts, and to challenge gender and kinship models that favour investment in sons’ education when competing for family resources with their brothers. The story of a young rural woman who makes her way to the urban educated middle class sheds light on the complex ways in which new social opportunities and cultural ideas of family and gender interact. Gender and class differences are intensified and played down to create distance, or to cut across it, at times in surprising ways.

Introduction

The past 60 years of political and economic reforms in China have had a profound impact on the practices and ideas related to the two major cultural models that categorise difference, kinship and gender. The Maoist project of liberating women included the promotion of women’s full participation in paid labour and education, and the implementation of the new marriage law\(^{14}\) (Bauer et al. 1992; Evans 1995). The central elements of the kinship model, patrilineal inheritance, patrilocal marriage and the notion of filial piety were all seen as somewhat counteractive to the revolutionist project. Aside from the purposeful policies of the state, the expanding social space that gave the youth of the collectivist era opportunities to interact outside of immediate familial control was of equal importance in changing gender and family relations (Parish and Whyte 1978; Yan 2003). In the following decades youth autonomy

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\(^{14}\) The 1950 Marriage Law set the minimum age for marriage at 20 for men and 18 for women, prohibited concubinage and arranged marriages, and legalised divorce.
increased and the centre of the family shifted from the intergenerational father and son unit to the conjugal couple (Yan 2003, 2009). The post-1978 birth-planning policies continued the change in family relations and gender roles, most dramatically in urban areas where one child for each couple became the norm. Despite the initial plan to implement the one-child policy in all Han regions however, strong resistance from the rural population effected later modifications. Two to three children, at least one of them a boy, became the dominant family pattern in rural areas (Greenhalgh 1993:245; Mueggler 2001:292-298; Kipnis 2009:208).

Rural resistance to the family-planning policies is linked to the lower living standards and the lack of social security and economic opportunities in the villages. The gap is further intensified by differences between regions. Despite the various campaigns to spread industry and investment from the coast to the interior, the coastal areas have remained the focus of economic development since the opening of the Treaty Ports (1842) in the aftermath of the first Opium War. The establishment of Special Economic Zones in the 1980s has further accelerated the direction of national and foreign investment to these areas. The uneven economic development in China today must be seen in the light of the specific conditions at the start of the reform era. In order to facilitate rapid recovery in industry, the economy and education after the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), scarce resources were channelled to a few key regions, industries, educational institutions, and fields of science and technology, for example. This policy was reflected in Deng Xiaoping’s slogan ‘Let some people get rich first’ (Rang yibufen ren xian fu qilai). Although the reform-era government has had some success in alleviating poverty and raising living standards in rural areas, the past 35 years have seen the gap between rural and urban areas, as well as between regions, widening further (World Bank 2000). The household registration system determines people’s permanent residency and therefore their access to services and employment elsewhere, restricting both physical and socio-economic mobility. Yet numerous accounts show that the rural and urban worlds are far from separate, best exemplified in the presence of the enormous temporary rural labour force in Chinese cities.\(^{15}\)

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\(^{15}\) It is impossible to know the exact size of this floating population (liudong renkou), but recently it has been estimated that around 211 million people of rural registration live and work in cities (National Population and Family Planning Commission, The 2010 Report on the Development of China’s Floating Population).
Education has emerged as one of the main routes to socio-economic mobility in China. In response to the highly competitive education system and labour market, overseas study has become a popular competitive strategy. This usually requires considerable investment from the family of the student, but urban parents are willing and able to focus all family resources on providing their only child with the means that will ensure an economically secure future. Thus the emergence of ‘daughter-only’ families in urban areas has resulted in more family investment in daughters’ education and careers (Zheng 2000; Fong 2002). In rural families on the other hand, even though emphasis on the importance of education has increased (Kipnis 2009, 2011), many parents choose to support the education of their sons rather than their daughters: according to the principles of patrilineality and Confucian filial piety, sons will care for their parents in old age whereas daughters will marry out (jia chuqu), transferring responsibility of care to their in-laws (Obendiek 2011). Furthermore, most urban parents have pension schemes and savings, whereas rural parents tend to rely solely on their children for old-age security. In this context, rural girls emerge as the most disadvantaged group in the competitive education market.

Yet, given the fuzzy rural-urban borders it ought not to come as a surprise that, despite the apparent obstacles of having to spread already scarce economic resources thinly among a number of siblings and the low quality of primary and secondary education, some rural students find themselves in a position in which higher education abroad is within their horizon of strategies. During my doctoral fieldwork focusing on urban single-child families sending their children abroad to study I came across several rural students with the same aspirations, and although every person’s story is unique, their experiences shared some characteristics that set them apart from those of their urban counterparts. The involvement of urban parents in the project of overseas study ranged from being the prime planners, facilitators and decision makers to providing emotional and/or economic support. For the students with a rural background, however, it was an individual project they had to pursue, at times in secret or in conflict with family members’ interests. For the first twelve months of my fieldwork I shared an apartment with such a young woman, who had come to Beijing to study and now had plans to go abroad for further education. During the time we lived together I came to know the
details of her situation and followed it through maintaining regular contact for the rest of the fieldwork period and after my return to Europe. My aim here is to tell her story in detail because it exemplifies particularly well the tensions that arise between the cultural categories of gender and kinship and new social practices in the context of drastic social change in China. It also shows how individuals can emphasise and cut across difference in order to negotiate these tensions.

**Crossing the fuzzy borders**

Hannah is a 25-year-old recent graduate of rural origin who lives and works in Beijing. She has two older brothers, but she is the only one in the family with a higher education. Her home village is located in Fujian province, Longyan prefecture. Because of its proximity to Taiwan and various special economic and technological development zones, economic opportunities in the area are ample in comparison to many other provinces. The availability of opportunities does not explain why some are taken up and others are not, but the specific characteristics of the local economy may help to explain why Hannah’s brothers’ education did not take precedence over hers. The growing ‘educational desire’, which Kipnis (2011) calls a totally social phenomenon, has greatly increased the value placed on the education of children in general, including daughters, but this emphasis varies by region. Entrepreneurial success stories are abound in Fujian, and more specifically in Longyan, and this downplays the role of education as the favoured route to socio-economic mobility. Parents do not need to fear that supporting the educational aspirations of a female child will directly lead to socio-economic immobility among other, especially male, children. Given the range of choices, a child’s individual inclinations may play a bigger part in the decision-making.

It is also worth noting that choosing to support the education of one child does not necessarily mean that a higher value or importance is placed upon this particular child’s endeavours and success. This was apparent when Hannah and I visited her family in Fujian. When I accompanied other students on their hometown visits I saw parents fussing over their returning offspring, showing a great deal of interest in their studies, daily struggles, and career and future plans, asking concerned questions and voicing
their opinions. The behaviour of Hannah’s parents was markedly different. There were no discussions about her life, studies, work or future plans. When directly asked for their opinions they gave disinterested answers such as: ‘she can do what she wants’ or ‘everyone has their own path, I hope she will do whatever is best for her.’ These statements seem to indicate a somewhat detached attitude, as if the parents felt Hannah’s future had only a limited connection to theirs, and therefore her endeavours had no direct value for them. In a situation in which parents rely entirely on their children to support them after retirement this is not an insignificant point. The parental attitude might have reflected the type of interpersonal communication and dynamics at play in this particular family, but it also followed the logic of the patrilineal family system, according to which a ‘married daughter is like water thrown out’ (jia chuqu de nu’er po chuqu de shui), raised for other people. Whether Hannah’s parents’ decision to support her through university was made without any expectation of future benefits to the rest of the family is difficult to say. They supported her through middle school and high school, but she paid back the loans that covered the considerably higher expenses of her university degree after graduation. To my knowledge, once Hanna had paid everything back her parents made very few requests for money. It does not necessarily follow, however, that they did not expect her to share the benefits of her education with the family. In China it is the children’s legal as well as cultural duty to care for elderly parents, and as sons Hannah’s brothers were the main carriers of this responsibility. It was thus more for the brothers than for the parents to organise the care and to negotiate the share each sibling should take on. As I show later in this article, Hannah was indeed in frequent conflict with her brothers about the type and amount of support she should give to the rest of the family. These conflicts suggest two interpretations of the situation: the two brothers saw Hannah’s education as a family investment whereas Hannah saw it as her own project. Both parties acknowledged the reasoning behind the other view to some extent, which often made the negotiations subtle and painful as opposed to direct. Ideas about what it means to be a daughter and a son, a sister and a brother, a woman and a man, lay behind these disagreements.

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16 The yearly tuition fee for high school was around 700 yuan, and 12,000 yuan for university.

17 Articles 10, 11 and 45 of the Law Protecting the Rights and Benefits of Older Persons, PRC
Hannah spent her childhood in a village. After the reforms in the 80s that decollectivised the farmland and eased mobility restrictions, the family gradually moved to the prefectural city of Longyan. Their relocation has not been permanent, and involves movement back and forth between the city and the village where they still have a house and allocated farmland, and where their household is permanently registered. The two brothers have tried their hands at several trades, including electrical engineering, construction, transport and the restaurant business. After leaving the village middle school the only training they have had has been on the job. Hannah is the youngest child, and the only daughter. She went to the village primary school with her brothers, but unlike them showed a great interest in studying and continuously received high marks. The primary school teacher encouraged her to pursue a better quality of secondary education in the city and she managed to achieve the required scores to secure a place in a middle school in Longyan. This coincided with the gradual migration of the family members to the city. Her father was already working at the nearby coal mine and her mother did housekeeping for the family that owned the mining company. The wages coming from these jobs, as well as the money the two brothers were now earning, increased the family income and they were able to replace the old family home in the village with a new three-storey building. In this relatively stable economic situation the family had sufficient funds to cover Hannah’s school fees and boarding expenses, and she was allowed to go. In time her parents developed a good relationship with the family that employed them. Hannah told me that when she was at school her parents’ employers always encouraged her and sometimes gave her money. ‘So we just became related like that.’ This relatedness, created through exchange, was indicated by the use of kinship terms between the two families. The supportive environment and Hannah’s own hard work bore fruit as she was accepted at a key-point college prep school (zhongdian gaozhong) and went on to study for the college entrance examination (gaokao). She did exceptionally well, and was offered a place on an International Business programme at one of the country’s top universities, Renmin University of China, in Beijing.

Meanwhile, however, the family’s economic situation had taken a downturn. When Hanna was at high school their new home in the village was destroyed due to flooding and required rebuilding. Moreover, her two brothers were then in their mid-20s and had
aspirations that required family funds, such as starting a small business, buying a motorbike and, most importantly, getting married. In this changed situation Hannah’s parents and brothers were not fully supportive of her plans to go to university in the country’s capital, which would involve finding money to cover the 12,000 yuan annual tuition fee and the monthly living expenses of around 800 yuan. At the time the parents’ combined monthly income was less than 1,000 yuan. Hannah recalled these tensions between interests:

So when I wanted to go to university my brothers didn’t support me. Because they thought that if my parents spend so much money on me, they will not have money to get married. How selfish they are! They only think about themselves! And my parents didn’t support me at first. But my [high school] teacher was always on my side, and he helped to persuade my parents to let me go. Because if you go to university, you have to spend about 60,000 yuan, including the meals. So my parents borrowed from other people and now I send them money, 1,000 yuan almost every month. Maybe after this Spring Festival we will not be in debt anymore, and my parents will feel happier.

Hannah’s teachers played an essential mediating role between her and her parents. The importance of these relationships became clear to me when we spent the Spring Festival of 2009 with her family in Fujian. During this visit we spent most of the time with Hannah’s immediate family or accompanying them on visits to relatives and neighbours. There were four marked exceptions to this. One of them was a visit to Hannah’s high school classmate, who had left for university in Beijing at the same time as she had, and just like her had now returned home for the Spring Festival. The three other meetings were with the employer’s family and two teachers. Through their higher economic and social status these people had facilitated Hannah’s access to opportunities that were available to very few people with a similar background. Her success, in turn, gave them pleasure and prestige, as well as social capital they could mobilise in aid of children of friends and relatives who wished to follow the same path. These people had had confidence that Hannah would benefit from her education, acknowledged her achievements and urged her to go further. This was a notably different attitude from that
of her family members, whose everyday life and concerns were quite far removed from those of educated professionals in big cities.

Hannah’s parents had not been readily convinced of the benefits investment in education would bring. In their view, this was an expensive route with no guarantee of success in the end. Stories of graduate unemployment and fierce competition had been circulating in the media since the 1990s, when the state job-assignment system was dismantled and enrolment in higher education drastically expanded (Zweig 2002). Coupled with the restructuring of the economy that had resulted in massive lay-offs, it had increased career uncertainty among those in the upper strata of the labour market. As Hannah recalled, this was also of concern to her parents:

They said, how are you going to find a job, are you going to sweep the streets? I said, maybe, but I really want to go, I like to study!

Finally her parents agreed to support Hannah, and borrowed money from friends and relatives to cover the expenses. After her second year she earned enough money to support herself by doing part-time jobs and working through the summers. She remembers student life as prudent, focused on diligent study and work. Unlike many other university students who were away from their parents for the first time and had recently been released from the pressure of preparing for the college entrance examination that dominated their teenage years, she did not date, and her social life mainly centred around a few friends who were as serious about their studies as she was. After graduating she landed an excellent job as a Business Development Executive at the Beijing office of an Indian mineral import company. Her initial monthly salary was 4,000 yuan, and after 18 months in the company it was raised to 6,000 yuan. For Hannah, this success validated her aspirations and the family’s reluctant support.

But now my parents are proud of me, I have a very good job, and I earn a good salary. I can send money home every month. I say to my parents, had I not gone to university, my life would be so different! I would work in a restaurant. I would be so tired, and earn very little, just 700-800 yuan a month!
A new life, a new reference group

After graduation, Hannah’s lifestyle changed. She moved to the affluent part of the city that is home to many young professionals, foreigners and multinational companies. This was a conscious choice, as she explained:

If a client or a business partner invites me for a drink in the evening and asks where I live, I have to be able to say that it’s somewhere around here. If I say, I live somewhere near the 4th or 5th Ring, maybe they will just say oh that’s too far, forget about it. So I pay a high rent but I think it’s necessary.

Hannah did not hesitate to spend money on things that indicated her status as a young white-collar professional, including a room in a Western style apartment at a good address, high-quality clothes, expensive hair styling, and treating friends and business associates to meals out. However, her consumption habits still differed substantially from those of other informants who were in a similar professional situation, but from an urban background. She was extremely careful with money, and knew exactly what she spent it on. She did not buy more clothes than absolutely necessary, ate simple and inexpensive food at home, and only used taxis for work-related trips. Apart from business dinners she rarely went out, spending her free time at home reading, watching TV or using the Internet. Her social life revolved around friends she met through work who could help, collaborate with and advise her on business-related matters. Being very attractive and outgoing she had many suitors, but she was not interested in dating unless the man met the high standards she had set for a potential husband.

These actions and attitudes seemed to simultaneously purposefully link her to a new ‘reference group’ detached from her background, and to highlight her continuing attachment to the original one. This concept is Oded Stark’s (1985, 1989) whose theory of the new economics of labour migration (NELM) challenge the neoclassical view that migration is based on utility-maximising decisions made by rational individuals (Ravenstein 1889; Stouffer 1940; Lee 1966; Borjas 1989). Stark argues that migration is rather a collective enterprise that also involves non-migrants, forming transnational communities that entail both the migrants and their social networks in their places of
origin. In many instances the main reference group for migrants, against which they evaluate their achievements and concerns, continues to be the community of origin. This view has given new insights into some phenomena that have troubled scholars, such as why a migrant would return after having saved enough money to build a house and a family tomb, rather than stay abroad to maximise life-time earnings; or why migrants are willing to endure a lower status in their host communities. To an extent, NELM may be of help in understanding the temporary rural-urban labour migration in China, which is often a household strategy to ensure an alternative source of income outside the local economy. Hannah’s case differs from that of temporary labour migrants in the sense that through university education she wished to permanently enter a social sphere closed to people in her original reference group, that of the national elite. The process of disengagement took place partly through the kind of purposeful action described above, and in part through spontaneous engagement with her new social environment. This, of course, is a somewhat simplified description of a process that involves complex emotions and attachments. I will return later to these complexities with regard to the negotiation of obligations with family members, but for now I will elaborate on the way Hannah engaged with the new reference group and alienated herself, as well as felt alienated, from the original one.

Hannah had few friends of rural origin in Beijing, and usually kept her village background secret in her interactions with people. She also told me that during her yearly visits home she felt alienated from her former classmates and friends. Their life experiences seemed far removed from hers, which rendered common topics of conversation few, and furthermore, brought about conflicts when Hannah criticised their life choices and decisions. She now seldom contacted former friends who remained in Longyan, and did not arrange to meet them during our trip. Instead, we visited the high school classmate who had embarked on the same route she had taken, and now lived and worked in Beijing.

Hannah’s lifestyle was very much geared towards realising the life plan, the dream she had developed after moving to the capital. After graduation she would work for some years to save money. Within five years or so she would have sufficient funds to study for an MBA degree in the UK. Eventually she would run her own successful business in
China, and start a charity that would focus on programmes to help disadvantaged rural Chinese. Her determination to realise this dream was observable in many aspects of her daily life, from the way she spent her time and money to the friends she chose. Hannah earned a monthly salary of 4,000 yuan, with an annual Spring Festival bonus of several thousand yuan. She spent more than half of her salary on rent and bills. With her careful spending habits, she could limit her other expenses to around 500-1,000 yuan per month, which left enough for moderate, but steady savings. Given that just the yearly tuition fees for an MBA in the UK currently range between 160,000 and 370,000 yuan, saving such a sum would, of course, be a hopeless endeavour. After working for a few years, therefore, she planned to save the necessary starting capital, gain experience and build guanxi (networks), and to quickly start her own business, which would increase her earning potential. Before any of this, however, her first obligation was to pay back the loans taken for her education. By the Spring Festival of 2009, she had done this. Soon after she was given a pay rise, and was now earning 6,000 yuan per month. There was a subtle change in Hannah’s attitude towards money. She became less prudent in her lifestyle, started to buy smarter clothes, took driving lessons and enrolled in flute classes. At the same time she was constantly developing ideas for starting her own business and negotiating with potential partners. She seemed to feel that, having fulfilled her obligations towards her parents she was free to focus on her own career and educational aspirations. It became clear very quickly that her brothers did not share her views.

**In the web of care**

As Charles Stafford (2000) argues, Chinese relatedness is very much tied to cycles of exchange. The idea that it is not patrilineage but exchange that is at the core of Chinese kinship makes it easier to understand how urban daughter-only families reformulate ideas of filial obligation and gender roles. Hannah’s family, however, is not such a family. There are two sons who, according to the principles of patrilineal kinship, patrilocal residence and filial piety, have the responsibility to continue the family line and to care for their parents.
A quest to challenge the focus on patrilineage in the study of Chinese kinship produced a bulk of literature in the 1980s and 1990s that established the importance of other kin ties. In his review of these studies Santos (2006) notes a tendency to contest the dominant lineage paradigm from within, depicting how the uterine family, matrilineal, conjugal and affinal ties challenge the power of patrilineal relations. What Stafford’s approach offers is not merely an acknowledgement of the fluidity and processual nature of relatedness, but an insight into how different kinds of relationships are connected, and how they become mobilised differently in specific contexts. My aim in the latter part of this article is to show how Hannah is still very much part of the cycle, or rather the web, of the exchange of care (yang) in her family, and how she, her brothers and parents use both patrilineal and Confucian ideals, and the fluidity of relatedness to advance their own interests in sometimes rather surprising ways.

In her study on siblinghood and support in rural Northwest China, Helena Obendiek (2011) documents how labour-migrant siblings support one sibling through higher education. Upon graduation the flow of support is reversed. In his description of how Hannah’s education had been funded big brother clearly portrayed a common family effort, stressing how hard they had all worked to get enough money together and later to pay off the loans. Another indication of the brothers’ feeling that Hannah was indebted not only to their parents but also to them became apparent during negotiations about father’s retirement. On the first night of the New Year Hannah, her brothers and father sat down around the table to have a discussion. During the following hours father was mostly quiet while Hannah and her brothers were negotiating. This conversation was in local dialect and largely unintelligible to me, thus the following account relies heavily on Hannah’s later explanation.

Hannah and her brothers wanted father to retire from his job at the coal mine because it was tiring and forced him to live away from home, returning only at weekends. During the previous year his health had become an added concern as the air pollution around the mine had given him a bad cough. There were two issues to resolve. Firstly, in the absence of any pension scheme, his subsistence had to be ensured. When mother retired from her housekeeping job during the previous year she started working at big brother’s restaurant and lived with him on the second floor. A similar arrangement would be
needed for father. Second brother was now a foreman at a construction company, and it was agreed that father would work as his assistant for a monthly wage of 1,000 yuan. He would stay with second brother, his wife and young daughter at their rented apartment. The second issue was the money still owed to friends and relatives for Hannah’s education and the weddings of the two brothers. Father refused to retire until the loans were paid off. Of the 5,000 yuan still outstanding, Hannah suggested that she would pay 3,000, and the brothers 1,000 each. The brothers were reluctant to agree, saying that they did not have the money. I understood that they wanted Hannah to cover the whole sum. After a heated discussion during which Hannah told them that they ‘are more than 30 years old now and need to start taking responsibility by paying back the money that was used for the weddings’, big brother gave in but second brother still resisted. He did not want to share in the payment, insisting that they should ‘pay together’. I took this to mean that he wanted Hannah to help him pay his share. The matter was left open, as neither party could persuade the other one to agree. Afterwards Hannah was angry, but she also implied that there was not much she could do about it other than pay the second brother’s share if he continued to resist. He did not clearly state why Hannah should pay his share, nor did Hannah tell me why she accepted that she had no means to force him and might end up paying. Both thought that they had some grounds for their claims, and took the indirect strategy of refusing to comply. Enquiring about the matter some weeks later, I found out that second brother had eventually paid his share.

When directly asked, both brothers claimed that Hannah’s education did not bring them any direct benefit, other than being proud of their sister. In practice, they often asked her for money or other help through her guanxi networks. The requests ranged from relatively small sums of money to be spent on big brother’s second wedding or medicine for their parents, to investing in a car so that the brothers could set up a transport business and arrange a loan of 50,000 yuan to finance second brother’s project of buying land and building a house. Once Hannah had graduated her brothers started to expect this kind of help from her. Like her brothers, when directly asked she maintained that she had the sole right to decide how to use her money, saying that her brothers had no choice but to approve of whatever plans she had because she could do what she wanted with her life. On several occasions she also said that once the loans for her
education were paid off she would be free. This did not stop the money requests from coming, or the implicit acknowledgement from all three of them that the brothers’ claims were not entirely ungrounded. Hannah agonised over their requests for loans precisely because she knew that they would not be willing or able to pay them back, and as their sister she would just ‘have to keep silent’. She would thus try, although not always successfully, to choose and limit the kind of causes she financed.

Obendiek (2011) further notes that as sons carry the main responsibility for providing for their parents, sisters’ investment in their brothers’ education or careers could be seen as part of paying off the parental debt of care. Thus far any surplus income had gone into paying back the family loans. Now the loans were cleared, Hannah was not the only one with ideas for new projects. Her brothers brought up their plan to set up a small transport business. Having no capital to invest, they needed Hannah’s help. Her reluctance, as she explained to me in private, was due to her distrust in their ability to make the business a success. The brothers also started talking about buying a house in the city, asking Hannah to join in the investment. Hannah, in turn, had waited for this moment in the belief that she would now be free to pursue her own goals. In her recurrent narrative she justified this through the notion of filial piety based on patrilineality. When first describing her family to me, she explained:

In China, parents think that a girl is going to get married and go away, but the sons will always stay with them. They live together and take care of them. The daughters, when they go to visit, maybe have to buy some clothes for the parents, or give some money. But not all the time, the sons will give all the time. But if there is only a daughter and no sons, in this case the daughter should take care of the family.

Hannah was making a clear distinction between the roles of sons and daughters, a distinction she repeated on several occasions in saying that once the debts had been cleared her help to her parents would be situational. Her narrative does not acknowledge that the structural and social change that had brought the kind of opportunities formerly unavailable to rural women within her reach might also have caused her family to expect a stronger supporting role than previously expected of daughters. Hannah made
her attitude clear to the family once the debts had been paid. Responding to her brothers’ suggestion of joint investments, she revealed her plans of going abroad to study. She also said that she had other plans, such as getting a driving licence, for which she needed money. Falling back on patrilineal logic, she reasoned that as she would marry into another family and not return to Longyan, these joint projects would not bring her any benefit. The brothers could not argue with this and gave up trying to persuade her. Hannah told her parents that if they ever needed money for food or clothes they should ask her, thus specifying the form of support she would give. She also told her mother that if the brothers ever neglected their moral and legal duties of caring for their parents, Hannah and the parents would sue them.

In explaining to me why there were now many young women getting an overseas education and with successful careers, and more specifically why her parents had supported her education, Hannah employed a different discourse. In contrast to drawing from traditional ideas, she now emphasised the change in Chinese society and in people’s thinking.

One reason is that China is now much more developed than before. So we can have a good life now, not so poor anymore. Before people used to think that sons were better, especially if they lived in the village. Sons will work with them and take care of them, because they live in the same house. Daughters will marry and live with other people, maybe in the same village or nearby. But now people are not so poor anymore, very few people stay in the villages and most move to cities. So they don’t worry so much anymore. And also their thinking has changed. Maybe they’ve seen that some sons don’t take such good care of their parents. And the daughter takes good care. Because the daughter loves her parents more. The sons are always thinking that they have to marry, or they have their own families, get pressure like that. So maybe the daughter doesn’t visit so often, just once a year, but will always give them more money. They know that when they get old their daughter will also give them money and take care of them. So maybe parents would still like a son, but they also think a daughter is acceptable.
And the one child policy has had a big effect on people’s thinking. Because if you have just one child you don’t have the choice of thinking, we want a son. So people focus more on success now. When people chat they’re always talking about whose daughter is very rich and things like that. If someone has many sons but they’re all poor, nobody will mention it. So when people have a daughter they want her to get a good education, and in the future they hope she will be successful, and then she will also give them money. So it’s money oriented, not so much about if it’s a son or a daughter. Maybe it’s not always so good, but society is like this. Maybe there are some people in the villages, very few people, who think a son is better, but most people think that son and daughter are just the same.

Membership in a patrilineal family and also in a web of reciprocal exchange translates into various obligations towards kin and family members that extend well beyond the simplistic view of the lineage paradigm. Yet, drawing on this precise logic, Hannah managed to negotiate some freedom and control over her resources. She acquired these resources through the new kind of opportunities that have become available to a few rural women in the midst of social and structural change in the China of the reform era. However, there are limits to this freedom. Although the idea of joint investments was buried, the brothers kept asking for Hannah’s help in various other matters. Most of the time she would give in and send money, although continuing to complain and resisting indirectly. For example, she did not tell the family about her pay rise. Accepting that some support from her was expected and justified, she tried to retain some control over the form it would take. One of her future plans was to buy a house in Longyan, which her parents, brothers and their wives and children could share. This way, she explained, her brothers could take better care of their parents.

In the web of emotions

I have described in detail the complexities of taking up new opportunities, and employing discourses of continuity and change in the negotiation of family tensions. What complicates the matter further, however, is the emotional attachment that is part of
relatedness. It has long been established that decisions about migration, investment, or any other activity for that matter, are not made on the basis of rational evaluation of some objective reality, even though deliberate calculation often forms part of the process. It would also do crude injustice to the individuals’ experiences to portray them merely as strategizing with whatever resources and cultural models are available. Hannah’s dilemma of situating herself in the family’s web of exchange seemed to be first and foremost emotional. Its painfulness was reflected in the interactions during our visit. Distressed, she told me about an incident when she had jokingly suggested to her mother that it was much better to have a daughter than a son because a daughter would give her money and take good care of her. But daughters are far away, sons will always stay by your side, her mother replied, leaving Hannah feeling unappreciated and adding to the bitterness she was already feeling towards her family over their lack of support and appreciation. On our last night in Fujian she aired these feelings in an argument with her parents and big brother. She said that her family was always thinking about money, only contacting her when they needed something, that her brothers had not supported her and that her parents did not care about her wellbeing. The discussion was mainly between Hannah and big brother, mother and father sitting mostly in silence. As the local dialect was used, my understanding was again limited. In the aftermath, however, expressions of remorse were clear. At the end of the night big brother said that perhaps he had not been a good brother, and needed to make amends. Mother told Hannah not to worry too much about her harsh words. Later that evening Hannah had a long private conversation with her parents, during which she promised them that if the two brothers did not have money to pay off their share of the debt, she would pay. In the morning big brother took great care in providing us with snacks and drinks for the long train journey, and when I was left alone with him for a moment at the station he asked me to look after Hannah in Beijing, as they were all worried about her health and about the fact that she had no one to take care of her.

In conjunction with the idea that daughters have become more appreciated in recent years, as described in the previous section, Hannah sometimes portrayed herself as the favourite child in her narratives. When discussing the arguments about money she conclusively responded to my questions saying that it was not really money that was causing the problems, but her brothers were always angry with her because their parents
loved her the most. She also related childhood stories of how she was favoured by her parents, such as by being given the best part of the fish, the head, to eat. Apart from the emotional value of this narrative of a valued, favourite child, it helped to explain her parents’ exceptional support of her as a daughter. The importance of this narrative to Hannah was all the more visible in the distress she expressed on occasions when her family’s actions and attitudes seemed to contradict it.

Finally, despite Hannah’s strong determination to make the most of the opportunities she had been given, the emotional connection with her family was too meaningful for her to ignore. Numerous times she expressed sadness over not experiencing the kind of warmth with her family members that she thought families should share. After the argument during our visit for the Spring Festival everyone seemed to be making an effort to show more concern. Her brothers and parents now telephoned more often, and in general Hannah said that there was less tension and more warmth in the relations. For her own part, she started using explanations such as ‘money is not the most important thing’, ‘I want my family to be close’, and ‘we all have to take care of each other’ when I asked why she had once again agreed to send money for some purpose. During one of our conversations about her ageing parents she said that she would always make sure that her brothers would be able to take good care of them. I probed further, asking if she would still support her brothers once her parents had passed away. Yes, she responded, because money is not the most important thing and she needs a warm family. So if the brothers have some problems, as their sister she will always support them.

**Conclusion**

Consequent to the idea of allowing some people to get rich first is the assumption that the rest will soon follow. In interactions with various respondents, mention of this slogan was usually followed by an explanation that it was the responsibility of those who get rich to use their wealth to help others still waiting their turn. Hannah shared this idea. When talking about her hopes for future success she stressed that all this would not be for herself, but for the benefit of the motherland and her fellow Chinese, especially the most disadvantaged from the same background as hers. First, however, she had to be
in a position to help others. What this position would be, and the specific methods and targets of her help were all clearly planned. Nevertheless, as became clear, people around her had other ideas. To her family they were the disadvantaged and Hannah was in a position to offer support. The reforms in educational policies, the economy and migration control had facilitated Hannah’s physical and social mobility. As she came to share the social field of urban-middle-class students she started harbouring the dream that was very common amongst them of going abroad to study. However, in contrast to the urban singletons and for the reasons explained above, hers was an individual ambition, not a family project.

In the negotiations about the amount and form of support Hannah should provide she used the notion of patrilineal filial piety to distinguish her role from that of her brothers, thus gaining some leeway in finding a balance between fulfilling family obligations and pursuing personal goals. Her brothers expressed a similar idea when they denied any claim to her success and stated that she had the right to decide what to do with her life and money. In practice, however, they often requested her support on the basis of the web of obligations according to which the parental debt of yang is paid back through supporting the brothers, who in turn carry the main responsibility for providing for their parents. Hannah departed from these patrilineal and Confucian ideals when explaining the opportunities and support she had been given, emphasising the recent change in family relations and gender roles and her right to strive towards personal success. The emotional attachment between family members underlined their actions and decisions, making the negotiations painful and sometimes overriding other interests.

Acknowledgements

I am most indebted to all the people who participated in this research. I thank Charles Stafford, Karen Armstrong, Stephan Feuchtwang and Fang I-chieh for their comments on the different versions of this paper. Funding was received from the Finnish Cultural Foundation, the Sasakawa Young Leader’s Fellowship Fund, the Confucius Institute and the Joel Toivola Foundation.
References


Differences in Ancient Assyria: Some Methodological Questions

Saana Svärd

Abstract

This article relates strongly to my dissertation ‘Power and Women in the Neo-Assyrian Palaces’ (Svärd 2012). I here discuss the methodological challenges encountered in my dissertation. One of the main issues was how to define ‘power’ in a methodologically fruitful way. Hopefully my reflections on the process and the possible solutions I suggest are also interesting from the point of view of other disciplines. This article thus relates to the theme of this publication in two ways, via gender differences and via methodological differences.

Introductory remarks

The main objective of my dissertation was twofold: first, to describe the roles of women attached to royal palaces both in the administrative structures of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and as individuals; second, my aim was to develop a productive new methodological approach for studying women’s power in the ancient world in general. The main research question of the dissertation therefore was not whether women had power or not, but what kind of power women had in Neo-Assyrian palaces.

To place this study in the context of my own discipline: Assyriologists need concepts and theory that are meaningful to the Mesopotamian cultural and historical context. At the same time, theory needs to be made visible in Assyriological studies despite - and because of - the particular challenges that the cuneiform material presents for developing such meaningful concepts and theory.

The descriptive material of my dissertation is likely to yield most interest among other Assyriologists, but the methodological insights will be useful to scholars working with historical material in various fields. The aim of this article is therefore to make my research results available for the use of a wide audience across disciplinary lines. Specifically, I address in this article the question of how to define ‘power’ in a
methodologically useful way. I have not indicated it in every paragraph, but the issues addressed in this article are more extensively discussed in my dissertation, although some of the parts have been revised for the present article. The reader will find further details there (Svärd 2012).

The Neo-Assyrian Empire

The Neo-Assyrian Empire was one of the largest empires of the ancient Near East extending from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean. Additionally, it is one of the best documented ones since thousands of Neo-Assyrian cuneiform tablets have been found, mostly from the area of modern Iraq. The reigns of the Neo-Assyrian kings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Neo-Assyrian kings\textsuperscript{18}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>King</th>
<th>Reigns</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aššur-dan II</td>
<td>934-912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adad-nerari II</td>
<td>911-891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tukulti-Inurta II</td>
<td>890-884</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assurnaširpal II</td>
<td>883-859</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shalmaneser III</td>
<td>858-824</td>
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<tr>
<td>Šamši-Adad V</td>
<td>823-811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adad-nerari III</td>
<td>810-783</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shalmaneser IV</td>
<td>782-773</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aššur-dan III</td>
<td>772-755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aššur-nerari V</td>
<td>754-745</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiglath-pileser III</td>
<td>744-727</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shalmaneser V</td>
<td>726-722</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sargon II</td>
<td>721-705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sennacherib</td>
<td>704-681</td>
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<tr>
<td>Esarhaddon</td>
<td>680-669</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assurbanipal</td>
<td>668-630*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aššur-etel-ilani</td>
<td>629*-625*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sin-šarru-iškun</td>
<td>626*-612*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{18} Based on Radner 1998:xxi and Kuhrt 1995:479. Note that uncertain years are marked with * after the year.
The Neo-Assyrian Empire had its roots in an older Assyrian tradition, although there was a large gap in Assyrian cuneiform documents from ca. 1200 to ca. 900. The Neo-Assyrian period is usually divided into two parts. During the first part (934-745), the kings consolidated their hold on the heartland of the Assyrian Empire, around the capital Assur and northern Mesopotamia. During the second stage (744-612), the Assyrian kings enlarged this area greatly by their persistent military campaigns until the Neo-Assyrian Empire became one of the largest the ancient Near East ever knew. (Kuhrt 1995:478-501; Van De Mieroop 2007:201-246)

The Empire left behind thousands of clay tablets: letters, administrative documents, literary compositions, texts relating to the religion, treaties, astrological reports etc.19 Most Neo-Assyrian texts have been found in its former capitals. The original capital Assur was an important city throughout Neo-Assyrian history, but King Assurnaṣirpal II moved the administrative capital and the royal court to Kalḫu. One of the most noteworthy Neo-Assyrian kings, Sargon II, used the riches gained in his military campaigns to build an entirely new capital, ‘citadel of Sargon’ (Dur-šarrukin). After the inauspicious death of Sargon II, Dur-šarrukin was abandoned by his successor and a new capital was established at Nineveh. Nineveh remained the capital of the Empire until its destruction in 612. The majority of the Neo-Assyrian texts were found at Nineveh, although a fair number of texts originate from Assur and Kalḫu as well. Smaller archives have been found in provincial Neo-Assyrian cities. (Kuhrt 1995:478-505)

Nonetheless, some portions of the Neo-Assyrian period are very poorly attested. The huge majority of the texts come from the reign of Sargon and after. The reigns of Sennacherib, Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal are especially well documented. On the whole, the distribution of the texts relating to the Neo-Assyrian palace women follows the geographical and chronological distribution pattern of Neo-Assyrian texts. (Svärd 2012:28, 236-305)

19 Many of the Neo-Assyrian texts have been published in the publication series State Archives of Assyria, here abbreviated as SAA. The SAA volumes cited in this article are included in the References.
In general, women acted in all the roles that men did in the Neo-Assyrian Empire, although considerably fewer women than men appear in the texts. The women corresponded actively, bought, sold, loaned, borrowed, guaranteed debts and acted as witnesses, owned property, were involved in trading ventures, used seals, etc. (Svärd 2008:88-98) However, they were probably under the jurisdiction of the male head of the family, except perhaps for widows and some other special classes of women (Démare-Lafont 2011).

Why and how to define ‘power’?

Since this article discusses the cultural concept of power and the meanings attributed to it in Neo-Assyrian society, I would like to begin by clarifying that the concept of culture is understood very broadly here. As the focus of my research was both on individual actors and on the structures of society, it seemed best to use the definition given by archaeologist Tracy Sweely. According to her, language and culture ‘are what happen when particular people talk to one another at a particular time and in a particular context’ (Sweely 1999a:4). I consider this definition loose enough to contain both the importance of social structures (‘particular context’) and the importance of individual action (‘particular people’).

First, one needs to establish that the way researchers understand and define cultural concepts affects the research results they get. Some scholars in ancient Mesopotamian studies argue that theory just clouds the research issues and that material should speak to us without theoretical tools that might distort the results. I have rather adopted the view of Terry Eagleton that ‘Hostility to theory usually means an opposition to other people’s theories and an oblivion to one’s own.’ (1983:viii) The idea of a researcher as an objective and impartial observer has largely been proved false in humanities. Most now believe that a researcher’s own culture, gender and other variants affect the research in many ways. The postmodern view accepted by many is that all knowledge is necessarily produced – not found – by scholars (Bahrani 2001:12-13). Assyriologists as

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20 Regarding anthropology, see, e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986, Marcus and Fischer 1986.
well need to bring forth the theories and methodologies implicit in their research.\(^{21}\) If we accept that the way we understand and define cultural concepts indeed affects the research results we get, the methodological implications are clear.

But how exactly does one go about finding a definition for ‘power’ that is fruitful and does justice to the culture one is studying? In my study, I started by evaluating sociological discussions regarding the concept of power from the viewpoint of women’s studies and Assyriology (Svärd 2012:31-54). From the very beginning I was intrigued by questions relating to theoretical framework and methodology. One can of course just decide to choose the ideas of Foucault, or Weber, or Giddens as the departure point for developing text analysis. But how will one know that one has chosen correctly?

Anthropologists have discussed the same problem extensively (e.g. Arens and Karp 1989). Western concepts are not universal. Concepts that are foreign to the culture that is being researched are not likely to yield good research results and have little explanatory power. As the Assyriologist Benno Landsberger stated already in 1924, there is little use in approaching ‘the alien mind from a fixed system of conceptual referents … Were I to proceed in that way I could always only find again in my object what I already had within my own perspective.’\(^{22}\) This same dilemma is well known in linguistics. Formal linguists in the 20th century thought that individual languages were just variations of the underlying cognitive language module shared by all human beings. Linguistic relativists opposed this and have proved that there are far-reaching differences on the conceptual level between speakers of different mother tongues. (Levinson 2003:14-16) Their view is supported by the cognitive linguists who claim that the lexical meaning of the word is ultimately the sum of a potentially rather large number of discernible senses (Fleisch 2007:41-42, 46).

As Assyriologist Julia Asher-Greve has written: ‘To merely adhere blindly to momentary fashionable methodological dogma ignores the fact that methodologies

\(^{21}\) For criticism concerning earlier Assyriological research, see, for example, Westenholz 1990; Asher-Greve 1997; Van De Mieroop 1999, 138-154; Bahrani 2001, 7-28.

\(^{22}\) Landsberger 1976, 62. The original idea (presented during his inaugural lecture in 1924) was first published in 1926, but published in English (edited and translated posthumously) in Landsberger 1976.
share the same diversity and ambiguity as the problems to which they are applied’ (Asher-Greve and Asher 1998:36). There is a danger of theories and methodologies being used as window-dressing, to achieve the appearance of ‘modern research. ’When a theoretical framework or a tool of analysis is applied indiscriminately and with little regard to the special nature of ancient texts, it does not help us to interpret the ancient culture - instead it hinders us. Which one of the multitude of theories and methodologies is the right one for the study of my specific topic and material?

The solution is based on the well-known idea of cultural relativism. According to it, an individual’s beliefs and activities should be understood by others in terms of that individual’s own culture. It therefore seems clear that the validity of concepts, theories and methodologies has to be evaluated from ‘inside’ the target culture. However, this principle has not had a major impact on Assyriological methodology; perhaps because when one is studying the ancient Near East, this evaluation is easier said than done. In anthropology, extensive ethnographic fieldwork in the culture that is being researched is required. But how can it be done in ancient Assyria?

To conclude, although the modern concepts cannot be applied in ancient material without modifications, these modifications are extremely difficult to make, since only scattered remnants remain from these ancient cultures. Although there are tens of thousands of texts excavated from the ancient Near East, even in the best documented sites and eras the documents barely outline the skeleton of the society.

**Semantic analysis to the rescue?**

In order to be able to discuss women’s power in Neo-Assyrian palaces, it was necessary for me to consider what power meant for the Assyrians themselves. Although not an easy question to tackle, I approached this problem from a semantic and lexicographical perspective (Svärd 2012:56-65). The cognitive linguistic tradition mentioned above has been embraced in a discipline related to Assyriology, namely Biblical studies. Both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament have been the objects of many semantic studies.
that adhere to these principles. One of the scholars in this field, Reinier de Blois, argues strongly for the application of cognitive linguistics. Its advantage, according to him, is that \[w\]here traditional linguistic theory claims that words have meanings, the cognitive linguist would say that meanings have words’ (de Blois 2008b:266).

Following the cognitive tradition, one could postulate a ‘meaning’ – in this case ‘power’ – to which many words would refer. Nevertheless, because of the differences on the conceptual level between languages, such a hypothesis would need to be backed up by empirical data. The existence of an ontological category of power in many languages does not mean that there was necessarily an ontological category of power in Assyria. Such empirical data, however, exists. Some Assyrian words can be seen as direct references to the Assyrian concept of power (‘power,’ ‘influence’). Others attest to this conceptual domain by addressing more specific properties (‘to rule,’ ‘governor’). To be more exact, this conceptual domain of power can be perceived as an emic mental label for Assyrian vocabulary that describes power relationships between people. I thus argue that Assyrians had such a cognitive concept of power – a pre-existing ontological entity power in their language – that alludes to a multitude of words. In other words, although Assyrians have not written long discussions on the nature of ‘power,’ the empirical data supports the idea that a concept of power is lurking behind various words. (Svärd 2012:56-65)

The concept of ‘semantic domains’ is relevant here. Every word is a member of a larger group of words and shares certain aspects of meaning with them. This larger group can be called a semantic domain. De Blois differentiates between two kinds of semantic domains, lexical and contextual. (de Blois 2008a, 2008b) The lexical semantic domain is formed of words that are related paradigmatically. The human mind categorizes all concepts, and each concept is assigned a cognitive category, or a lexical semantic domain. For example, in English, the concept ‘apple’ belongs to the lexical semantic domain ‘fruit,’ together with pears, oranges and so on. At the same time, from a syntagmatic perspective, concepts always associate with other concepts, forming contextual semantic domains. In other words, the concept ‘apple’ can function ‘in different settings … each of which evokes a different image in our minds.’ The

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horticulture-domain for ‘apple’ evokes images of ‘tree, ripe, picking, etc,’ whereas the commerce-domain for ‘apple’ implies ‘booth, seller, money, etc.’ (de Blois 2008b:274). These contextual semantic domains can thus be described as groups of words that ‘occur together in a prototypical scenario’ (de Blois 2008a:206).

The lexical semantic domain is mostly useful for simple concepts like apple. For example, in the Neo-Assyrian textual evidence, paradigmatic relations could be established for ‘horse’ (sisû in Assyrian). However, there are no analogies of the ‘apple - fruit’ type for words usually translated as power (for example, dannu, ‘powerful’). It thus seems that this avenue of inquiry is not useful. Even so, if all (or at least most) of the words that refer to the Assyrian ontological category ‘power’ could be identified, then the contextual semantic domains could be examined for each (Svärd 2012:58-61).

One of the methodological tools for building a contextual semantic domain is presented by John Sawyer. The methodology that Sawyer outlined more than forty years ago in his monograph Semantics in Biblical Research: New Methods of Defining Hebrew Words for Salvation seems applicable to my problem. He studied one semantic domain in the closed Corpus of the Hebrew Bible, ‘salvation,’ whereas I study one semantic domain, ‘power’ – admittedly larger and more complex than ‘salvation’ – in the Corpus of Neo-Assyrian Texts. Additionally, Sawyer, like Assyriologists, is concerned with style and emphasizes that the style of the passage necessarily affects the interpretation (Sawyer 1972:16). Royal inscriptions would have to be analyzed separately from, for example, letters.

For Sawyer, the first step was to create a ‘minimum lexical group on which a discussion of OT Language about Salvation can be based’ (ibid:35). This starting point was partly based on the intuition of the scholar, on probabilities and a certain ‘feel’ for the language (ibid:34). Unlike semantic fields, this lexical group can be precisely defined and consists ‘only of words very closely related to one another’ (ibid:30). In Sawyer’s

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24 This database includes almost all texts from the Neo-Assyrian time period in transliteration. The Corpus was compiled at the University of Helsinki under the directorship of Professor Simo Parpola, who has been kind enough to grant me permission to use it. For more information, see http://www.helsinki.fi/science/saa/.
case, the core of the lexical field of Hebrew ‘salvation’ consisted of eight roots (ibid: 35).

The next step for Sawyer was to establish a semantic field for his concept. Sawyer tracked down each of the eight roots and checked their context and all the words that connect to the ‘main word.’ This way he built an ‘associative field’ surrounding the core of the lexical field, which included ‘all the words associated in any way with a particular term.’ The associative field can naturally never be complete. However, this associative ‘cloud,’ characterized by densely intertwined connections, enabled him to provide a better interpretation and translation of the texts. (ibid:30-35)

Like Sawyer, I established a ‘minimum lexical group’ (ibid:35): choosing some Assyrian words. The starting point in this kind of endeavour is difficult. Like Sawyer, I was forced to rely on intuition and probabilities. Fortunately, in the field of Akkadian studies, much research has already been done regarding the meaning of words, namely in lexicographical studies. The word ‘power,’ ‘Macht’ and related translations in scientific Akkadian dictionaries (Kämmerer and Schwiderski 1998; Parpola 2007a) provided an entry point into the Assyrian concept of ‘power,’ further refined by my own understanding of the language and the concept of power. Although the dictionaries offered a valuable departure point, at the same time this created a methodological problem. Since lexicographers have been working from/within their own cultural background, they have translated those Akkadian words as ‘power’ that fit their (usually modern Western) idea of what power is. This is why there might still be many Akkadian words which relate either to a Western broader concept of power, or some other formulation of power, but which have not been translated with the word ‘power,’ ‘Macht’ or equivalent terms. One could say that there is a danger that by using dictionary translations to explore the Assyrian concept of ‘power,’ one winds up full circle, back to the Western concept of power and bypassing the Assyrian meaning of ‘power’ altogether.

In many ways, this is the general methodological problem of all research into ancient cultures. Translations, out of necessity, are always only close approximations of the ancient meaning. Nonetheless, if one wishes to say anything at all, one is forced to
attempt translations, based on probabilities, context and one’s ‘feel’ for language as Sawyer puts it. The hypothetical minimum lexical group for ‘power’ that resulted was by no means an exhaustive list of all Assyrian words related to power. It is, however, intended as a working hypothesis on a topic that would merit a series of studies.

Applying the semantic approach to my textual material – the Neo-Assyrian texts relating to palace women – helped me to outline some ‘dimensions’ of power for palace women, such as ‘authority.’ These dimensions were used as analytical categories for discussion of the texts. To give just a small example, I grouped together the texts that referred to the authority of the king’s mother.

For example, in the letter SAA 10 244, the exorcist states to the king that he is working with his colleagues to carry out the king’s orders: ‘we shall take counsel together (and then) speak out – the mother of the king is as able as (the sage) Adapa!’ The compliment of someone being as wise as Adapa is usually reserved only for kings (Parpola 2007b: 176). Another occasion where the mother of the king is complimented using a phrase reserved for kings occurs in the letter SAA 10 17. It is unclear what the purpose of the letter was since only a few lines are preserved, but the tone is very reverent. Parpola has restored:

The verdict of the mother of the king, my lord, is as final as that of the gods.
What you bless is blessed; what you curse, is cursed (Parpola 2007b:220)

In both letters, the writers’ high position is remarkable. These men who praise the king’s mother are close advisors to King Esarhaddon himself.

The results of these analyses were clear. To sum up, women’s authority in my textual material was for the most part derived from their position in the court. This was especially true regarding the women of the royal family. It seems that the power of the queens and the kings’ mothers was very much equated with authority and qualitatively similar to the power of the king. As for the other women of the palace, their authority did not always derive from their official duties. They could receive their authority as a one-time authorization or because of their skill and expertise. In most texts, authority is
the most relevant dimension of power. However, although the other women of the palace could act authoritatively, unlike the queen, they exerted power also through communication. (Svärd 2012:66-86)

Furthermore, the prominence of authority in these documents suggests that many power-words were status-specific rather than gender-specific. In other words, power had more to do with the office that the woman held than her gender. Just as the queen’s power was qualitatively comparable to that of the king, the power that the female officials of the palace wielded resembled the power of the male officials of the palace. It thus seems that there were few (or no) Assyrian words that described specifically female forms of power. Nonetheless, one should note that the nature of the evidence might distort the issue here. The textual evidence that remains from the Neo-Assyrian society does not illuminate women’s activities well. Instead, the women who do appear in the Neo-Assyrian texts were women who were active in male spheres of action. (ibid: 66-89)

Although many theoretical and methodological advances have been done in biblical studies regarding semantic analysis, in ancient Near Eastern studies this approach has not yet been used extensively. Partially this is because of the nature of the textual evidence. This methodological approach ideally requires well-documented Corpus covering the subject matter or the time period completely. For the studies relating to the Bible this is not a problem, but texts relating to a specific society or a time period in the ancient Near East have rarely been published comprehensively, the Neo-Assyrian era being a notable exception.

Even this preliminary semantic analysis made me realize its limitations. I found it to be a useful methodological tool, but not enough in itself. The words that I suggested relating to the Assyrian concept of power mostly attested to hierarchical power. Nevertheless, hierarchical power might rise to the forefront of my analysis because other concepts of power are very difficult to detect lexicographically. It is thus clear that the Assyrian concept of power cannot be pinpointed by a lexicographical analysis alone. However, in practical terms, with the help of semantic analysis I could confirm the hypotheses that I had formulated regarding the definition of power. The analysis
suggested that in addition to the large-loomng concept of hierarchical power, other forms of power were relevant as well. To complement the hierarchical approach, I constructed the concept of heterarchy. *(ibid:86-89)*

**Concepts of power: Hierarchy and heterarchy**

The theoretical framework I chose built on (1) theoretical/conceptual approaches from other disciplines, for example, sociology and (2) preliminary semantic analysis. It led to a dual understanding of power as hierarchy and heterarchy.

I began with the fairly common hypothesis from sociology that power in Neo-Assyrian society had something to do with status and hierarchies. Power can thus be seen as a hierarchical phenomenon, from a structural and/or individual point of view. From structural view point ‘power’ is something inherent in the structures of society whereas from individual view point power is perceived primarily as something that happens in contests between rational autonomous individuals. Most social scientists accept that neither view point is sufficient alone, because acts of individual power are always embedded in the power structures of the society. Many Assyriological studies implicitly employ both views. The preliminary semantic analysis suggested that the approach is valid: the vocabulary of power in the Neo-Assyrian language seems to confirm that for Assyrians hierarchical power relationship between individuals were important. Nevertheless, some hints were offered by the semantic analysis that suggest that in addition to hierarchy other forms of power were relevant in Assyria as well.\(^\text{25}\) (Svärd 2012:31-45, 86-89)

In the end, I decided to use the concept of heterarchy as the second theoretical approach of my dissertation, as a complementary approach to hierarchy. The concept of heterarchy was first used in studying the human brain, which was discovered to be heterarchically organized. This revelation in 1945 had a profound impact in neurology and information studies, but less impact in the social sciences. (Crumley 1995:2-3) In

\(^{25}\) For references to sociological and Assyriological views, see Svärd 2012:31-45, 86-89.
1979, the archaeologist Carole Crumley developed the concept further and defined heterarchy as a system of relations:

… in which each element possesses the potential of being unranked … or ranked in a number of different ways, depending on systemic requirements … Elements in a hierarchical structure are most frequently perceived as being vertical …, whereas heterarchical structure is most easily envisioned as lateral, emphasizing the number and variety of connections among elements and the varying circumstantial importance of any single element. (Crumley 1979:144)

Crumley (1979) used the concept of heterarchy in ‘the regional heterarchy model’ that she developed. This model related to spatial archaeology and regional science, not to the study of power in ancient societies as such. Nonetheless, the potential for studying power in ancient societies was there. Originally, Crumley did not elaborate on the concept of power, but twenty years later, she seems to equate ‘governance’ and ‘decision-making’ with power (Crumley 1995:4). Crumley states: ‘The addition of the term heterarchy to the vocabulary of power relations reminds us that forms of order exist that are not exclusively hierarchical and that interactive elements in complex systems need not be permanently ranked relative to one another’ (ibid:3). Additionally, hierarchical relationships are part of the heterarchical power matrix (Crumley 1979:145).

Archaeologist Janet Levy has applied Crumley’s concept of heterarchy to examining gender in what she calls ‘chiefdoms’ (stratified, non-state societies) in Bronze Age Denmark and the south-eastern United States during the Mississippian period. According to her, in such societies, numerous individual characteristics – for example, gender – contributed to a person’s status and power, thus making lateral and parallel (heterarchical) relationships as important as vertical (hierarchical) relationships. According to Levy, the strong structures of the society limit the actions of individuals in state societies but in chiefdoms, the individual qualities of the person are a more important source of power. (Levy 1999:63, 72, 74) For the purposes of this article, it
suffices to say that Levy brings together ideas of individual, negotiated power and the more general concept of heterarchy.

All in all, her view is not transferable to the study of Neo-Assyrian society without modifications. Her emphasis on individual characteristics is not ideal for the study of Assyria. Since the Assyrian Empire was not a chiefdom (the object of Levy’s study), the structures of the society played their part in power relations. This is why understanding power as a sum of personal traits is not fruitful for the study of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Furthermore, her main focus is on archaeological data and the social organizations it posits, not on gender-related power. (Svärd 2012:211-218)

The most important point I draw from Levy for my analysis is that terms like ‘hierarchy’ and ‘chiefdom’ do not sufficiently convey the complexity of power relationships (Levy 1999:74). The statement Levy makes concerning her material can be applied to Assyria as well: ‘to focus only on individual high chiefs is to miss an important point: in these societies, there were multiple sources of influence and power, sometimes reinforcing each other, sometimes intercutting each other.’ Power had to be exercised and secured in complex ways that ‘hierarchical’ does not do justice to. (ibid: 75)

The concept of heterarchy has been used in relation to Mesopotamia at least twice (Small 1995; Bolger 2008). Both articles use the term to describe the power relations in the whole society or a certain region. I would like to detach heterarchy from this view and bring the concept closer to Crumley’s original, looser definition of heterarchical relations. Crumley’s heterarchical relations can be envisioned as a three-dimensional web with elements changing places all the time. In other words, I see the concept of heterarchy as applicable to interpersonal relations, the importance of which has been demonstrated by many archaeologists working with gender and power (Nelson 1999:187; Spencer-Wood 1999:178-180; Sweely 1999a:1-2; Sweely 1999b:155 Svärd 2012:209-211). In the end, I found Crumley’s original, broad definition, combined with the idea of power as something present in all human interaction to be the most productive approach.
If an example of this type of power is needed, one could imagine a fairly typical scenario at any modern workplace. A coffee room, where there is no apparent hierarchy present and which is definitely not a forum for formal decision-making, but in the course of the discussion, someone suggests that the company should pay for coffee for the employees in order to increase productivity. If a general consensus is reached that the idea is a good one (and the relevant structures exist, i.e. the company is not in dire financial straits), it could be implemented the very same day. Power was used, a decision was made, but no hierarchy or protocol was evident. (Svärd 2012:214-218)

This is, of course, a rather simple example and does not fully cover the complexities of power relations. In any decision-making area, myriad factors influence the decisions even in a setting that appears egalitarian. Nonetheless, this example illuminates the concept of heterarchy as the opposite of hierarchy, while at the same time including hierarchical power-relations. (ibid)

I do not deny the existence of hierarchical structures in Neo-Assyrian society. However, when analyzing the power of Neo-Assyrian women in the palaces, heterarchies of power should be allowed for, as far as is possible with the surviving ancient evidence. If one focuses only on hierarchical chains of command, one gets too narrow an image of power. (ibid)

Furthermore, one needs to differentiate between influence and heterarchical power. Archaeologist Suzanne Spencer-Wood defines some forms of power (dialogue, affiliation, cooperation, persuasion, inspiration, negotiation, empowerment and collaboration) as ‘powers with’ that influence ‘others without the authority to control or force them’ (Spencer-Wood 1999:179). Influence thus comes close to the concept of heterarchy. ‘Influencing others,’ though, suggests that power flows mostly in one direction, from ‘the influencer’ to ‘the influencee’ and is located in the relationship between the two persons. The acknowledgement of larger structures of society, the vision of more complicated three-dimensional webs of power and Sweely’s idea of power depending on the context of the communication, separate my concept of heterarchy from influence. (Svärd 2012:214-218)
Some examples

In this last section of the article, I would like to give a few examples of the research results that I got by using the methods described above. Some results relating to the queen will serve as examples here. As stated above, my aims were twofold. First, to describe what kind of women lived in the palaces and in what kind of roles they functioned. Second aim was to develop a useful methodology based on the concept of power. This second aim was fulfilled by understanding power as hierarchical and heterarchical.

It was the hierarchical understanding of power that formed the theoretical basis for the descriptive part of my study. Power can be seen as something that can be observed directly, either in the structures of the society or in the actions of individuals. This is why I approached the hierarchical power of the palace women by examining how structures and individual women interacted. I found it very useful to outline the structures of the palace institution in which the women functioned. At the same time it allowed me to document them as individuals. (Svärd 2012:52-55, 90-202)

Most of the textual evidence related to the queens, whose household and position were permanent fixtures of the Neo-Assyrian society. Once chosen as the queen, the position was for life. The evidence demonstrated that the queen exercised considerable hierarchical power and that there was only one queen at a time. Furthermore, it seems that their sphere of action and the nature of their authority was comparable to that of the kings. One of the best known queens in the history of Mesopotamia was the Neo-Assyrian queen Naqi’a. She is especially well known from the reign of her son, Esarhaddon. Her authority is illuminated by, for example, this letter in which a military commander addresses her as ‘his lord.’ The commander asks for help against an enemy attack in following manner (SAA 18 85):

Now they have dismantled the bridge …. We do not know whether or not they will go on …. The military forces must reach us my lord! … My lord should know that my heart is completely devoted to my lord’s house.
The heterarchical perspective of power, on the other hand, enabled me to interpret the textual evidence in a new way. It soon became apparent that the women who exercised hierarchical power were often engaged in lateral, negotiated power relations as well. For example, the queen Naqi’a receives a following letter from her son (SAA 16 2):

> Concerning the servant of Amos, about whom you wrote to me – just as the king’s mother commanded, in the same way I have commanded. It is fine indeed, as you said.

Now, if we analyze the letter from the perspective of hierarchical power, we can say that the queen is lower on a hierarchical scale, since she has to ask for her son to act in the matter and cannot give a direct command. However, when analyzed from a heterarchical perspective, the interdependence between the mother and son is evident. Such a relationship is not explicable by hierarchical structures of power. She did not issue an order to him, and he did not exercise his higher position in the social hierarchy. Instead, the final decision regarding the servant was the result of communication and possibly, negotiation. Although earlier research has certainly been aware of women’s influence in the palaces, my study made explicit the power concepts employed in previous research and further expanded them using the concept of heterarchy. (Svård 2012:219, 229-233)

**Summary and concluding remarks**

The women related to the palaces are without a doubt the best attested women in the Neo-Assyrian texts. My study was the first comprehensive survey regarding them. Nonetheless, its aim was not to present a mere catalogue of powerful women. Instead, the aim was to go further than that and show that by using theories of power, one can get new viewpoints additional to those obtained by traditional philological methodology.

Sociological approaches, however, cannot be applied to ancient Assyria indiscriminately. This is why I endeavoured to identify some of the ways Assyrians
themselves might have seen ‘power’. Despite the tentative nature of the results of the semantic analysis, they suggest that authority and hierarchical power as well as power through communication were relevant to Assyrian society.

I concluded in my research that a semantic analysis could suggest validity for the chosen theoretical and methodological approaches of the research. Nevertheless, it can only point the way. Other approaches will be more valid for other research topics. In any case, a multidisciplinary approach is the best way to address methodological problems. There is no need to re-invent the wheel when there is a real ‘smorgasbord’ of methodologies available.

The concept of power has rarely been discussed in Assyriological research, although the definition of power influences research results. Implicitly, Assyriological studies have understood ‘power’ as hierarchy. The descriptive part of my dissertation was based on this understanding. However, the study of hierarchical power is not enough. A subtler approach was needed to complement the hierarchical approach. This alternative approach consisted of concentrating on heterarchical, negotiable and lateral power relations in which the women were engaged.

In addition to hierarchical relationships, these heterarchical power relationships (which encompass hierarchical relationships) were of vital importance. The concept of heterarchy opens up new possibilities for analysis that are not limited to women or the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Instead, heterarchical power could be one possible way to conceptualize power in a society in general.

To summarize, my aim in this article was to delineate how I defined the concept of power in my research regarding the Neo-Assyrian palace women. With the help of semantic analysis, I concluded that hierarchical and heterarchical perspectives on power were useful approaches. I also determined that the traditional approach of studying hierarchical aspects of power is not the only way to study power. To complement this approach, power can be viewed as something more complicated, a relationship that is constantly negotiated and renegotiated. By utilizing the concept of power as a
theoretical tool, new insights into women’s power are gained. My approach thus opened up new avenues for interpreting the texts.

References


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