ARTICLES

REVIEWS

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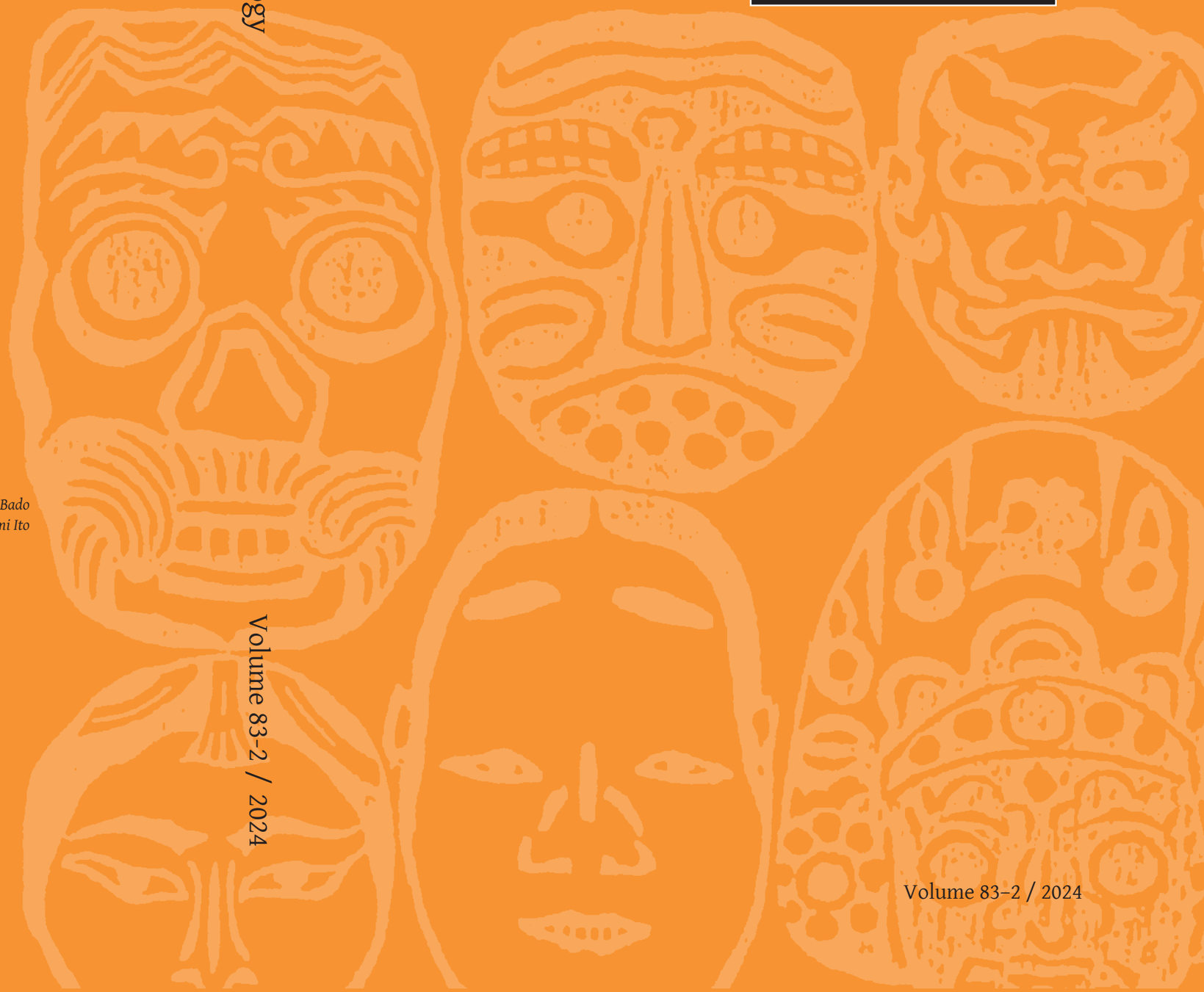

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Asian Ethnology

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REVIEWS

South Asia

Tibet

Aaron K. Reich
Saint Joseph's University

Seven Strands of the Serpent's Tail

Creativity and Cultural Improvisation in the Making of a Ritual Whip in Contemporary Taiwan

Among the most ubiquitous ritual implements in modern Taiwan, the ritual whip functions to dispel demons and to summon spirit soldiers, the material embodiment of a fearsome serpent deity. Known as Saint Golden Whip, a standard ritual whip has a wooden handle carved in the likeness of a snake, a dragon, or a hybrid of the two, and a thong at least six feet in length, woven from straw rope. Despite the prevalence of these ritual whips, scholars have yet to examine the people involved in making them; the stories of these artists have largely been lost to history, their methods unrecorded and unknown. This article details as a case study the production of a single ritual whip, telling the stories of the carver who shapes its handle and the weaver who braids its tail. Both artists discover their own improvisations to navigate the space between invention and inheritance, highlighting how cultural traditions take on new forms and find new expressions, as these traditions move forward from person to person, from one generation to the next.

Keywords: Taiwan—material religion—Daoism—ritual—whip—craft—cultural improvisation

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Winged serpent with one horn, Great Saint,
Body of limitless length and boundless breadth.
Our hero takes flight, Heaven and Earth shake, and
Malevolent demons and ghastly monsters all startle and scatter.

Invocation of Saint Golden Whip[1]
(*Jinbian shengzhe zhou*)

Prevalent across disparate ritual lineages throughout Taiwan, this invocation praises the serpent god, Saint Golden Whip (Jinbian shengzhe), for his exorcistic capabilities. Imagined as an enormous winged serpent with a single horn, the saint soars through heaven and earth, his presence alone vanquishing all of the harmful spirits in his path. In the lifeworld of Taiwan's common religion, when people speak of Saint Golden Whip, they may be referring to the deity, but most often the term points to the deity's material counterpart, a ritual whip, among the most common and most important ritual implements of ritual specialists for at least the last several centuries. Also known as a ritual rope (*fasuo*), a ritual cord (*fasheng*), a ritual whip (*fabian*), or a purifying whip (*jingbian*), a standard *jinbian shengzhe* has a wooden handle carved to resemble the head and upper body of a snake, a dragon, or a hybrid of the two, and a thong at least six feet in length, woven from several strands of straw rope.[2] In modern times, these whips travel with ritual professionals of varied lineages, both ritual masters (*fashi*) and Daoist priests (*daoshi*), packed in their briefcases and backpacks, together with other ritual implements, liturgical manuals, and prepared talismans. Between ritual occasions, these whips also appear enshrined on temple altars, their thongs coiled into a round base, their serpent-headed handles pointed heavenward.

A material embodiment of the formidable serpent deity, the whip is renowned for its exorcistic potency, "a ritual implement of great power" (Dai 2007, 34). When put into ritual action, the whip often finds use in liturgical sequences intended to establish the sacred space for a ritual occasion (*kaitan*, lit. "opening the altar"), to render the space "pure and clean" (*qingjing*). A ritual master of the Penghu Pu'an tradition, for

Figure 1. After a two-day pilgrimage across Taiwan, Daoist priest Liu Zhangxiang faces a touring bus and uses the serpent-headed handle of his *jingbian* to write an invisible talisman, ensuring safe passage on the return trip. Photograph by Aaron K. Reich.

example, will begin rituals for animating deity statues by entering the altar space with his whip draped around his neck, serpent-headed handle in one hand, straw-rope tail in the other, performing a series of patterned steps, the rite of "Treading Upon the Stars of the Dipper" (*ta douxing*). He will then strike the ground with the whip several times; each time, he spins to face a new direction, sprays sacralized water from his mouth, and intones incantations: "With one strike, the Gate of Heaven opens. With a second strike, the Door of Earth cracks. With a third strike, the Gate of Humanity joins with life. With a fourth strike, the Path of Ghosts is annihilated" (Lü 2010, 39b). During temple processions, minor-rite troupes (*xiaofa tuan*) may carry with them a longer ritual whip more suitable for outdoor performances, with a larger handle and a thong eighteen or more feet in length.[3] In temple courtyards, in front of large crowds, to the sound of hand drums and altar ballads, someone from the troupe will wield the long whip in spectacular fashion, striking the ground three times in succession, driving away malevolent spirits and calling upon subordinate spirit-soldiers to fall in line and stand ready for battle.

Aside from its capacity to generate a piercing clap when it strikes the ground, the ritual whip has other functions, several of which pertain to its serpent-headed handle. Ritual specialists may use it, for example, during small exorcisms (*shoujing*); in the course of the short ritual, performers may ask clients to huff a single breath of air toward the mouth of the serpent-headed handle, with hopes that the benevolent serpent god will devour their misfortunes (see Cao 2013, 54). On other occasions, a ritual performer may use the serpent-headed handle to write in the air invisible talismans meant to purify and protect a person, place, or vehicle (figure 1). At large-scale royal offerings (*wangjiao*), such as the triennial events in Xigang and Donggang, both great assemblies for the prevention of epidemics specifically and misfortune more broadly, the whip has a central place in the performance of exorcistic healing

rites called *jijie* (lit. "offering and resolution"). During the rite, ritual masters first ask families or groups of friends to stand side by side and hold the whip together, each person holding a part of the whip, from head to tail, stretched out horizontally. Bound together by the exorcistic whip, the group listens to the ritual master recite incantations for protection and healing as the short rite continues.[4] Across varied lineage groups, these serpent-handled whips, each one a material manifestation of the serpent deity, often undergo consecrations, rituals of animation similar to those intended to enliven statues and paintings of the gods.

The ritual whip and its association with a protective serpent god have a long history in Taiwan and the Minnan littoral. Private collectors in Taiwan boast serpent-handled whips dating from the Qing period (1644–1912), either produced on the island or imported during waves of immigration from Fujian.[5] In its basic function as a handheld instrument capable of generating a loud snapping sound, the purifying whip seems to have derived from court ritual procedures of the middle and late imperial periods. As part of an imperial procession, one or several "whip-sounding field officers" (*mingbian xiaowei*) would crack a whip three times, calling for order and silence among those in attendance. Most historical texts refer to these whips as "silencing whips" (*jingbian*), yet some texts use the cognate *jingbian*, "purifying whip" or "whip of purification," one of several common terms for the contemporary ritual whip.[6] The relationship between these whips of the imperial court and modern-day ritual whips finds its closest parallels in those ritual performances of minor rite troupes during temple processions. Conceived as the imperial guard of one or more gods, the troupe designates someone to use the purifying whip to strike the ground precisely three times in the temple courtyard, before the god's palace (*gong*), a clear reenactment of the silencing whip from imperial times. By the late Qing, descriptions of these silencing whips in historical compendia also indicate physical and iconographical parallels with the ritual whip:

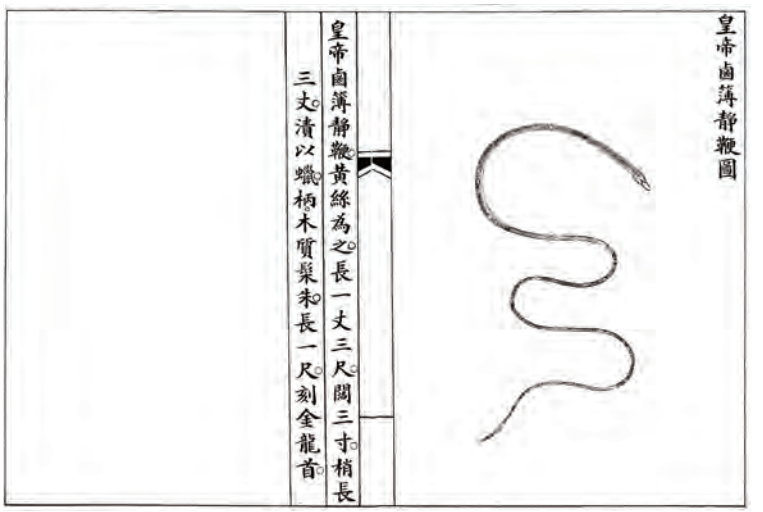

Figure 2. Illustration of a silencing whip and accompanying instructions. *Da Qing huidian tu, j.85.*

Figure 3. From left to right, images of deities Chen Jinggu (photograph courtesy of Lin Mengyi), Pu'an (Lü 2010), and Fazhu gong (photograph by Aaron K. Reich).

> Made of yellow silk, its length is [approximately] fourteen feet and its width [approximately] four inches; its tail extends [approximately] thirty-three feet and is coated in wax. Its handle is made from wood and is lacquered in vermillion; its length is [approximately] thirteen inches, with the carved head of a golden dragon (figure 2).[7]

While the carved handle of the modern ritual whip most often takes the form of a serpent or hybrid serpent-dragon, ritual professionals in the contemporary era may have a *jingbian* with a dragon-headed handle, reminiscent of the field officers of the Qing court.

Meanwhile, the *jingbian*'s status as an embodiment of a serpent deity has its roots in the lore of several deified ritual specialists whose cults have flourished in southeastern China for several centuries.[8] As scholar and Daoist priest Cao Yuqi has discussed, these regions have humid weather and dense forests, ideal conditions for poisonous snakes to thrive, making life more dangerous for the populace (2013, 56). Throughout the middle and late imperial periods, cult practices emerged for the pacification of serpent demons, and local legends developed wherein powerful ritual specialists used their techniques to subdue and subordinate such serpent spirits. These historical ritual specialists, such as, for example, the Celestial Mistress Chen Jinggu (766–790), the Daoist Master Zhang Ciguan (1024–1069) and his disciples, and the Buddhist ritualist Pu'an Yinsu (1115–1169), posthumously became deities in southeast China and Taiwan.[9] To this day, images of these gods often feature them holding a serpent or a serpent-handled whip, iconographical indications that these deities have in the past subjugated a serpent spirit and now can command its ritual power (see figure 3).

From the same time these hagiographies developed and circulated, ritual compendia still extant in the Ming Daoist canon (*Zhengtong Daozang*) make mention of powerful exorcistic gods who brandish golden whips (*jinbian*) as ritual weapons, Prime Marshal Zhao (Zhao yuanshuai) the most well-known among them. Several of these same ritual compendia feature one particular exorcistic god by the name

of Prime Marshal Ma (Ma yuanshuai), who in his iconographical descriptions enjoys the protective company of a subordinate deity named General White Snake (Baishe jiangjun). In a study of ritual traditions in Taiwan and their historical origins, Stephen Flanigan suggests that this latter deity may have come into being as a deified personification of the ritual whip; in other words, General White Snake could be an early expression of Saint Golden Whip, the serpent-whip deity now venerated throughout Taiwan and Minnan (2019, 71, 174). Although studies have not confirmed a direct link between the two deities, their corresponding iconographies and liturgical functions indeed seem to indicate General White Snake as a late-imperial precedent of the modern-day Saint Golden Whip.

From the earliest uses of the ritual whip to the present day, it would seem that ritual professionals first appropriated the silencing whip from imperial court ritual. Just as the silencing whip prepared both civil and military officials for an audience with the emperor, the ritual whip called into order subordinate spirits, readying them for their liturgical work. As time progressed, in southeast China, where cult practices surrounding serpent spirits and their subjugation proliferated, ritual whips took on a heightened status as material manifestation of subjugated serpent gods. To give visual expression to this divine status, and in close emulation of the silencing whips of court field officers, artists began to carve the handles of these ritual whips in the likeness of a serpent, a dragon, or a hybrid of the two. This had the effect of rendering the *jingbian* a ritual weapon and a divine image, a material embodiment of an immaterial apotropaic power. Over several centuries, as ritual specialists developed techniques for using the whip and circulated corresponding incantations, some of these individuals collaborated with local artists, or took on the role of artist themselves, generating designs and methods to carve the serpent-headed handle and to weave the straw-rope tail. Such artists had a pivotal role in the creation of the *jingbian* as a ritual implement and its maintenance as a cultural tradition. Yet, the stories of these artists, the carvers and the weavers, have largely been lost to history, their creative processes unrecorded and unknown.

To give expression to these artists and their stories, and to shed light on their creative processes, this article examines the making of a single *jingbian* in modern Taiwan. It details as a case study the ideas and techniques of two artists who collaborate in the production process: a carver who shapes from peach-tree wood the serpent-headed handle, and a weaver who braids from dried ramie fibers the serpent's straw-rope tail. In our modern age of mechanical reproduction, some ritual professionals, to save time and expense, may choose to purchase a factory-made ritual whip, either from a local shop of religious goods or from an online retailer. Yet, in the main, people in the business of ritual performance show a preference for *jingbian* that have been handcrafted. A hand-carved serpent-headed handle will tend to have more unique characteristics and look more impressive; a hand-woven straw-rope tail will make a louder and more beautiful sound when it strikes the ground. As regards its ritual potency, a handmade whip carries traces of its makers: the essence and spirit (*jingshen*) of its artists become forever infused in the wood and the rope, instilling the handmade whip with life and breath, a vitality no factory machine can replicate (Benjamin 2008).

This study explores how precisely the two artists generate this superior quality in their collaborative production of a *jingbian*. I argue that their artistic processes center around improvisations made in the space between inheritance and invention; for both components of the *jingbian*, head and tail, each respective artist relies on his creative faculties both to originate new cultural patterns and to maintain aspects of inherited tradition (Hughes-Freeland 2007). In forging their own novel ideas and inspiration, their own innovative designs and methods, the two artists reveal how traditions change over time. Never static concepts, traditions have a living vitality, taking on new forms and finding new expressions as they move forward from person to person, from one generation to the next (Silvio 2023).

In its analysis of the ways in which individual artists improvise in the maintenance of inherited cultural patterns and in the invention of new ones, this article draws inspiration from recent scholarship at the intersection of anthropology and material-culture studies. In the introduction to an edited volume on the topic of creativity and cultural improvisation, the book's editors express a sentiment that resonates closely with my thesis: "there is creativity," they write, "even and especially in the maintenance of an established tradition. . . . The continuity of tradition is due not to its passive inertia but to its active regeneration — in the tasks of *carrying on*" (Ingold and Hallam 2007, 5–6, emphasis original). The present article corroborates this claim through a concrete example, the making of a *jingbian*, highlighting the ways in which the two artists channel their creativity as they participate in the transmission of culture. In the early twenty-first century, scholars working in the field of material religion, both in East Asia and more broadly, have focused primarily on the use of material objects rather than on the artistic and ritual processes that bring them into being (Ingold 2013, 7). This study therefore aims to contribute not only to scholarship on material religion, but also to scholarship on the *making* of material religion. It details the ideas and techniques of two intersecting artistic worlds, the creative endeavors of two craftsmen, each one contributing in his own way to the "active regeneration" of the *jingbian*, among the most central ritual objects in Taiwan.

The two main sections to follow build upon ethnographic data collected primarily in the summer of 2021, both my observation of the two artists at work and over fifteen hours of recorded interviews. Regarded by their contemporaries as among the very best in their respective crafts, the two artists at the heart of this study live on opposite sides of the island: Lin Zhengda (b. 1975), the carver, resides in the eastern city of Taitung, and Huang Zhengxiang (b. 1985), the weaver, lives in the western city of Changhua. Both artists practice their craft primarily as an expression of personal interest and only secondarily as a means to supplement income. This study details the general approaches of the two artists, their histories, their ideas, and their techniques. It follows the story of a single *jingbian*—a collaboration of the two artists made for the author—from the initial selection of a peach-tree branch to the respective artistic processes of carving and weaving, and then to the ultimate consecration of the *jingbian* as a ritual implement. The final product of Lin and Huang's artistry, the ritual whip now serves as a material embodiment of their ideas and their practices, their spirits and their stories.

Figure 4. Lin Zhengda at his desk. Photograph still taken from Aaron K. Reich's field footage.

Carving: The many faces of Saint Golden Whip

Lin Zhengda spoke to me at the rear of his retail shop, the two of us seated together at the exact place where he carves his *jingbian* handles (colloquially *shengzhe*, lit. "saints"). He had several of them spread out on the desk's surface, which he had brought from inside of his home for the occasion of our interview (figure 4). "I prefer to make things that aren't the same," he said, "with more unique characteristics."[10] The seven *shengzhe* he had on display affirmed his preference for variety, their juxtaposition showcasing a breadth of sizes and designs, some finished works, others in nascent stages of development. Among them was the *shengzhe* he had made for me over the course of the last two years, presented to me just moments before, when I had arrived at his shop. In front of him, on his desk, an adjustable reading lamp illuminated his current work in progress: a *shengzhe* based on a Qing-dynasty original, a design for a close friend, a Daoist priest living across the island in Tainan. Next to the *shengzhe*, Lin had his orange-handled utility knife for carving and a painter's brush for sweeping away bits of wood.

He explained his workflow, his process of carving several *shengzhe* at once, his way of deciding from one moment to the next where to aim his attention. "I'll only go to work when I have inspiration," he said, smiling, a warm shimmer in his eyes.[11] "If it's a time when there's no inspiration, then I won't, I'll just lay it aside. So, for your *shengzhe*, I had laid it aside, working on it over a longer time. Now and then I'd think of it and continue the carving. If I didn't think of it, I'd do other things, [maybe I'd] first carve an initial shape [*chupei*, lit. 'initial embryo']."[12] As he spoke, he picked up a massive *shengzhe* from the corner of his desk, twice the size of all the others, a nascent handle still lacking in fine details. "When you don't have inspiration for this one," he said, pointing to another *shengzhe* on his desk, one in the final stages of carving, "then, you take another one," holding up the very large *shengzhe*, "and carve the initial shape . . . this one I have been working on for the last several days."[13] For Lin, this first step in the design demands less of his creative imagination. "You just have to see the serpent, this appearance, its form, but when you have to add embellishments, and if you're not doing that well, you can just set it aside. You wait for when you have inspiration and then go back to work. . . . When you've got inspiration, when you work, it'll be smoother."[14] In crafting several whip handles at once, Lin lets his intuition guide him, some days designing the fine details of one handle, other days carving the basic shape of another, each *shengzhe* taking at least one year to complete from start to finish.

We continued talking in Lin's atelier, at his large desk in the back corner of his family's small retail shop, the artist's primary source of income; he sells celebratory food items and paper materials intended for temple offerings. The first-floor facade

of their multi-story home, the shop faces the busy streets of central Taitung. On the top floor, Lin maintains an impressive domestic temple, replete with several altars and dozens of spirit images, a formal division of a Tainan temple called White Dragon Hut (Bailong an), the place where he first learned to perform minor rites many years ago. It was his original teacher of minor rites who encouraged him to carve *shengzhe*. "He told me to go get some peach wood, go carve; he told me to give it a try. And then I got more and more interested."[15] Nowadays, more than fifteen years after his teacher's suggestion, Lin continues to hone his craft, still carving at his shop in his free time between customers. "This one doesn't look very ferocious (*xiong*)," he said, showing me a photograph of a *shengzhe* from ten years ago. "It looks foolish, this face is foolish . . . not that scary, not that ferocious."[16] As an image of the mighty serpent god, a *shengzhe* should have a ferocious expression. In time, through his own creative discoveries, Lin would learn not only how to render the face more ferocious, but he would also formulate new patterns to give the serpent's body a more menacing appearance.

At times, at the request of a friend or client, Lin might carve a copy of an earlier "old saint" (*lao shengzhe*), a whip handle from generations past, like the one he was carving for his priest friend when I arrived. At other times, he fashions brand new designs, new riffs on traditional patterns, his favorite part of the craft. "If you're able to carve, you'll definitely have your own flavor," he said.[17] During his fifteen years carving *shengzhe*, Lin has developed several varieties of baseline body shapes and special features, and he combines these in novel ways to render each *shengzhe* a unique creation, different from any other. At the time of our meeting in 2021, he had developed three baseline shapes for the serpentine body: winding (*wanqu*), straight (*tongtian*, lit. "joining with Heaven"), and spiraled (*panxuan*). Lin can design *shengzhe* in these three shapes in any size, depending upon the preferences of his clients. For the surface pattern of these bodies, he has most often accorded with tradition, carving scales (*linpian*) around the serpent's back and sides. But more recently, he has pioneered a new design, a flowing mane (*zongmao*) that covers the back and sides of the serpent. He used this design for this article's *shengzhe*, more challenging to carve than the traditional scales. When devising this pattern, Lin drew inspiration from the four-character expression *shengmao daijiao*, literally "to grow hair and bear horns," a phrase that describes a person or thing with a monstrous appearance. "It means ferocious and fierce," Lin explained, "people see it and they'll feel afraid, it's like this person is especially formidable, with a very ferocious and fierce appearance."[18] For an image of the serpent god, invariably intended to protect devotees from malevolent forces, the more formidable its appearance, the more efficacious its function (Kendall and Ariati 2020).

Among those few *shengzhe* that Lin has designed with the mane pattern, one stands out to him as an exemplar of his artistic style, a two-headed (*shuangtou*) *shengzhe* that he made for a client in Malaysia, the first time he carved the mane pattern instead of the usual serpent scales. Completed in March of 2020, this two-headed *shengzhe* is one of only five two-headed handles he has made to date, a rare design in Taiwan, seldom seen in the oeuvre of other *shengzhe* artists. Lin carved his first two-headed *shengzhe* in response to a suggestion from his priest friend, who had an old two-

Figure 5. Detail of two-headed *shengzhe*. Photographs courtesy of Lin Zhengda.

headed *shengzhe* in his personal collection. It was on their first acquaintance, when the priest went to Taitung to assist in the performance of a large-scale ritual event. "We had a *jiao* [offering] in 2010 . . . at the Palace of the Celestial Empress [in Taitung] . . . before that time I had already been carving *shengzhe*. He asked me whether I had ever carved a two-headed one. I said I'll give it a try, I'll try carving one and see."[19] Nearly ten years later, when Lin was making the two-headed *shengzhe* for his client in Malaysia, he had carved several of these two-headed *shengzhe*, and by this later time had developed new ideas for his design.

Not only would the latest two-headed *shengzhe* have a flowing mane body pattern, but he would carve each of the two heads to have its own unique look, forging new and creative ways to render the original design he inherited from his priest friend. On his cell phone, Lin talked me through a few photographs of the Malaysia *shengzhe*. "The lips on this side come to a point, and on this side, it's like this," he said, making an underbite with his jaw.[20] One side had the traditional fire-gill (*huosai*) design on its cheeks, flames running along both sides; the other had a cloud pattern in the same place (figure 5). In shaping the signature single horn (*dujiao*) of the two heads, Lin made one large and the other small. He also changed how each head presented the Eight Trigrams (*bagua*), a standard component of most *shengzhe*, an octagonal-shaped design located on the serpent's forehead. For his single-headed *shengzhe*, Lin uses a *bagua* pattern known as Posterior Heaven (*houtian*), a pattern that corresponds with the phenomenal world, the created world, the world of local gods and human beings and the ritual methods that join them. For this two-headed *shengzhe*, he used the standard *houtian* pattern for one head and the *qiantian* pattern for the other, the pattern of Anterior Heaven, synonymous with the uncreated and unformed reality of the Way itself.

According to the testimonial of his client in Malaysia, Lin's two-headed *shengzhe* design has proven to have enhanced ritual efficacy. "About my friend in Malaysia . . . he told me about a young girl who was trapped by an underworld [spirit]. . . . He went to handle it, and the first time he used an average *shengzhe* to drive it away, but it didn't work. Afterward, he took the two-headed one, the one I made for him . . . and used it to drive away [the shade], and the shade [*hun*] scattered, it dispersed and scattered."[21] Aside from the two serpent heads of this *shengzhe*, other properties of Lin's whip handle may have contributed to its ritual potency, namely his use of two types of wood with apotropaic properties, peach wood (*taomu*) and willow wood

(*liumu*). Many years ago, a ritual master in the central city of Taichung suggested to Lin that, as a way to make his *shengzhe* more formidable, he could embed (*ru*) willow wood to form the seven-star pattern under the serpent's chin. Along with the single horn, the Eight Trigrams, and the fire gills, the seven-star pattern is another common iconographical feature of most *shengzhe*. Seven small circles connected by curving lines, the pattern represents the Northern Dipper and its apotropaic power. Lin followed this advice and later developed further methods of his own, using willow wood not only for the seven stars but also for the single horn and the Eight Trigrams.

In our conversations at Lin's desk, he stressed that this method of embedding a second type of wood is unique to him, his own contribution to how the *jingbian* looks and functions. "In traditions from earlier times there wasn't anyone doing it like this. . . . It was me who started embedding willow wood, and it's likely there aren't others. I haven't seen any others, and looking at old *shengzhe*, I haven't seen anyone use the embedding [method] . . . it's likely my own distinguishing characteristic."[22] In some cases, Lin reverses the two kinds of wood, using willow wood for the main body and peach wood for the embedded details. "If your [*shengzhe*] is peach wood, then I'll embed willow wood. If your [*shengzhe*] is willow wood, then I'll embed peach wood."[23] In either scenario, the use of two types of apotropaic wood not only gives his *shengzhe* a unique quality, but it also contributes to the perceived ritual efficacy of the finished whip, its capacity to trounce disaster and disease, to bolster peace and prosperity. In response to requests from one client, Lin may embed incense ashes from a temple altar into the head of a *shengzhe*, placed underneath the Eight Trigrams, a practice usually reserved for deity statues. As another example of Lin's proclivity for unique characteristics, for at least two of the *shengzhe* in his oeuvre, he replaced his standard carving of the two polarities at the center of the Eight Trigrams with a small movable marble.

It was July 21, 2019, when I first met Lin in Taitung.[24] After greeting me downstairs in his shop, he brought me upstairs to his domestic temple space in the top floor of his home. He brought from a corner a white plastic bucket containing several branches of peach wood and helped me to select a branch that would become my own *shengzhe*. As I later learned from our interview sessions in 2021, Lin had already treated those branches for more than a year. First, he soaks the branches in water for eight months and then dries them for another two months. This helps prevent excessive cracking in the peach wood when he carves. "This allows the fluid from the wood to seep, otherwise [the wood] will crack."[25] Lin changes the water every two or three days, because the fluid from the peach wood emits an unpleasant odor at first. When beginning to work with peach wood, he had no knowledge of this process. He would bring home peach branches and start carving right away, and each time, the branch would crack. Then, a ritual master in Tainan suggested he soak the branches in water. On his own, Lin intuited that he should soak the wood until it no longer emits an odor, which, as he discovered, takes about eight months. After the initial water soak and subsequent drying time, he then soaks the branches in diesel oil for another two or three months and finally dries the branches for another two months. The diesel oil, he says, protects the wood against insects. "If you don't soak the wood [in diesel], then termites will get in . . . and you'll have a bunch of holes [in the wood]."[26] For each

of these treatment processes, Lin learned his own methods over time as he became more adept at working with peach wood as a medium.

Even before Lin started the long treatment process for the branch that would become this article's *shengzhe*, he acquired the branch from a peach tree at a local peach farm, one of several branches he collected that day, sawing the branches from the tree with an impromptu ritual dedicated to the natural world and its spirits. "When I remove [the wood], I'll tie on a red cloth," he told me.[27] "I'll pray, I'll have a few words with the mountain, with the earth. To the earth god and the mountain spirits, to the tree spirit, you'll speak with them. If this tree has a spirit, has a tree soul, then you'll speak with it, saying that today we're going to take [these branches]. These will be used as Daoist ritual implements, so we'll express our deference."[28] Each time Lin goes to gather branches, his unscripted prayers infuse his artistic practice with religious sentiment from the outset. Always speaking from his heart, he performs his own ritual acts and utterances, carrying on an inherited tradition in his own way. Shortly after our first meeting in July 2019, Lin took the branch he helped me to select and used a black marker to sketch the outline of the serpent's head and upper body, tracing the handle of the ritual whip (figure 6). His drawing followed the natural contours of the wood, providing a preliminary vision for what would become a *shengzhe* of the winding type, the most common of Lin's three baseline shapes.

On July 22, 2019, the day following our first meeting, Lin started carving this article's *shengzhe*, initiating the artistic process with another alternative version of a traditional carver's ritual, a short ritual called the *kaifu*, the ritual of "Opening with the Hatchet." Each time he performs this ritual, he sits low to the floor, often seated on an upside-down bucket, and he places the branch in front of him. He burns incense and intones an incantation, a formula he learned from a close friend in the business of ritual, akin to those incantations that statue carvers recite during their respective *kaifu* performances (Lin 2015, 36–38).[29]

> Aromas of incense flourish, responding to Heaven and Earth.
> Lighting pure incense, it makes its way through Heaven's Gate.
> Golden birds rush like arrows of clouds.
> The Jade Hare (i.e., the moon) shines like a wheel.
> I humbly invite and call respectfully upon Saint Golden Whip.
> Soar swiftly upward, ride the mists, descend, and arrive here!
> With my whole heart focused, I humbly invite him.
> I humbly invite Saint Golden Whip and acknowledge his divinity.
> Today I perform the *kaifu* for the Golden Body.
> The god is here as I carve, carve the divine form.
> You reside above it, manifesting your divine might and presence.
> The god is here, the god is here.
> May this *kaifu* have great good fortune and splendor.
> By imperial decree, may it open,
> Spirit soldiers, spirit generals, swift as fire, as the law commands.

Figure 6. Outline of this article's *shengzhe* in marker on a branch of peach wood. Photograph courtesy of Lin Zhengda.

For statue carvers in Taiwan, and for Lin, the *kaifu* functions as an opening ceremony, announcing to the relevant gods that the carving of a new image will soon begin. After he intones the formula, rather than perform the central ritual gestures with a traditional hatchet, as statue carvers do, Lin uses a chisel, another instance of his liturgical improvisation. "Others use a hatchet . . . [I perform] 'Opening with the Hatchet' with a chisel, simply my own tool, that's it."[30] And whereas statue carvers most often strike the uncarved block of wood five times, Lin uses only three ceremonial strikes with the hammer and chisel. For Lin, the number five refers to the four limbs and head of an anthropomorphic deity. Meanwhile, the number three corresponds to the serpentine body: head, body, and tail. "I'll do three times . . . just three times like this. Because a serpent is not [something that] has a head and limbs. I'll just do three times like this and that's it."[31] In Lin's performance of the *kaifu* for his *shengzhe*, he exemplifies once more how he not only improvises in the various stages of artistic production, but also in the short ritual performances that punctuate the production process, acts and utterances that infuse his craft with religious sentiment and personal meaning (Andersen 2001).

On July 26, several days after his performance of the *kaifu*, Lin once more found time to continue his work on this article's *shengzhe*. He returned to his seat on the upside-down bucket and began to carve the serpent's initial shape, the first step in the actual artistic process. Akin to the short rituals that precede this step, Lin's method of carving the initial shape illustrates how he adapts to his materials, to his workspace, and to the tools he has at his disposal, in the continuation of cultural patterns. Seated low to the ground on the upside-down bucket, Lin pressed his sneakers tightly together to hold the marked branch in place. Then, holding the branch steady with his feet, he used his hammer and chisel and an ox-horn carpenter's plane (*niujiao bao*) to remove bark and excess wood. He continued this work at a steady pace for around

three weeks, carving only when inspiration struck. By August 18, he had whittled the peach branch to reveal the nascent whip handle, ten inches in length and around two inches in diameter, its form an undulating line from top to bottom, the rudimentary shape of the serpent god. He sanded the wood smooth, and on the flat plane that forms the serpent's belly, he marked my name, distinguishing this *shengzhe* from his other works in progress (figure 7). During this first step of the process, the carving of the initial shape, the *shengzhe* developed a crack along the right side of its face, a scar that endures to this day, still visible in the *shengzhe*'s final form. To repair the crack when it occurred, Lin simply used superglue, another of the many self-taught techniques he has invented along the way. An artist without formal training in the art of carving, Lin had no teacher to explain these methods to him, to suggest to him to sketch an outline with a black marker, to sit low to the floor and use his feet to stabilize the branch as he worked. Rather, Lin develops these techniques. He used his intuition, and his ingenuity, and through a long process of trial and error, he has devised his own way to carve the initial shape of the serpent-headed whip handle, the quintessential visual form of this inherited artistic tradition.

Several months later, on November 28, 2019, Lin started to carve the *shengzhe*'s facial section (*lianbu*), the second phase of any *shengzhe* that he makes, another occasion that shows how he develops new methods in the maintenance of inherited iconographical patterns. After he carves and sands the initial shape of the new *shengzhe*, Lin always proceeds in an order he regards as the traditional standard operating procedure: facial section, back and sides, belly, and lastly, the final details of the face and head. In carving the facial section of Saint Golden Whip, or of any spirit image broadly speaking, artists in the main hold that symmetry is paramount. To ensure symmetry, Lin first used a pencil to draw a vertical centerline over the top of the head and down to the nose. He then used a ruler to measure the centerline to the place he would carve each eye, making certain to maintain an equal distance on both sides. He used his utility knife to carve the nascent shape of the eyes, removing excess wood from under, above, and around each eye to create a low relief. He carved a light line in an upward slant from each eye, the basis of what would become the eyebrows. He measured and carved a prominent brow ridge between the two eyes. To maintain symmetry of the *shengzhe*'s nose, Lin folded in half a small white piece of paper, used a pencil to draw one half of the design, and then used his utility knife to cut both

Figure 7. Completed initial shape. Photographs courtesy of Lin Zhengda.

Figure 8. Beginning of the flowing mane pattern. Photographs courtesy of Lin Zhengda.

Figure 9. Lin carves the *shengzhe*'s belly. Photographs courtesy of Lin Zhengda.

halves of the folded paper, resulting in a shape with perfect symmetry. Lin used a temporary adhesive to paste the white paper in place and then traced the outline with a pencil. "If you just draw [the nose], there's no way to make it symmetrical . . . in the past I'd just draw [the nose]," he said, shaking his head and smiling. He pointed to the two sides of the nose. "[On] my earliest [*shengzhe*] . . . here and here would be different. If you just draw, there's no way to make it the same, no way to make it symmetrical, the two sides will be different."[32] In an effort to adhere to an inherited artistic convention, Lin developed his own methods to render his *shengzhe* with perfect facial symmetry. Once more, through a process of trial and error, he taught himself effective techniques to keep his craft in accordance with tradition; he improvised in the maintenance of cultural standards. With the nose in place, Lin used a ruler and pencil to make symmetrical the two sides of the serpent's mouth. He then used his utility knife and an electric drill to complete the carving of the mouth.

On February 13, 2020, just as the Spring Festival had come to a close, Lin started to carve the exterior of the *shengzhe*'s body, its back and sides, using the flowing

mane pattern he had developed in years prior, a design unique to his own artistic tradition. By way of personal correspondence, he explained this step of his process. "For the body of your Saint Golden Whip, I'm not carving scales. I'm going to carve a mane, long hair on its body . . . 'To grow hair and have horns' is the appearance of a demonic monster, a metaphor for an especially hideous or formidable being."[33] This *shengzhe*, he further explained, would become one of only three *shengzhe* he had made with the flowing mane pattern on its body. In carving the mane design, Lin first used a pencil to sketch wisps of hair on the serpent's back and sides (figure 8). He then used his utility knife to carve away excess wood, creating the mane pattern in low relief. He later added lines over the entire body, giving further visual expression to the flowing mane appearance. A few months later, in April, after he had finished the flowing mane, he turned to the belly section (*fubu*). As he had done when carving the mane, Lin first used a pencil to sketch the lines of the serpent's ventral scales, horizontal undulating lines in rows, running along the underside of the *shengzhe*, from under its chin all the way to the base (figure 9). With the rough outline in place, he used his utility knife to render the scales in low relief. In its final expression, the exterior design of the *shengzhe*'s body exemplifies Lin's creative process: he follows his own intuition and uses his own tools and methods both to pioneer unprecedented variations and to give form to inherited iconographical components.

One month later, in May 2020, Lin had finished carving the body and returned to the facial section to render the final details of the *shengzhe*. In this final phase, the artist once more gives creative expression to traditional iconographical conventions. In place of the usual fire gills (*huosai*) common to many hybrid half-serpent, half-dragon designs, Lin rendered the gills of this article's *shengzhe* in an aquatic fashion, each set resembling the fins of a fish, the first time he had ever tried this variation (figure 10). Soon afterward, he let the *shengzhe* rest for nearly one full year, not returning to the project until March 2021, when he was ready for the finishing touches, most of them iconographical elements on the *shengzhe*'s head and face: the Eight Trigrams, the seven-star pattern, and the iconic single horn. First, with a small chisel, he removed wood from the top of the head in the shape of an octagon, creating a space to insert a small piece of willow wood. As he had done earlier with the serpent's nose, Lin used his folded-paper method to create a design with perfect symmetry. Once he had embedded the willow wood in the top of the serpent's head, Lin carved on the willow an Eight-Trigram design, his expression of a conventional iconographical element. Next, he turned to the bottom side of the serpent's head, underneath its chin, and used an electric drill to make seven small holes. One by one, Lin placed into each hole a sharpened piece of willow wood and fortified the connection with superglue. He used a small hand saw to remove the excess willow wood and then sanded the remaining willow, forming seven small beads, which he then connected with gently sloping lines to form a constellation pattern, the seven stars of the Big Dipper. For the *shengzhe*'s single horn, Lin removed another small section of wood from the top of the head, just behind the Eight Trigrams. He then inserted a piece of willow wood, carved to a point; he adhered the willow in place and then carved and sanded it, the one horn of the winged serpent. Lastly, Lin carved his signature on the belly of the *shengzhe* near its base, a line of ten characters descending over ten respective rows of

Figure 10. Fish gills (front) compared to standard fire gills (rear). Photograph courtesy of Lin Zhengda.

Figure 11. Completed *shengzhe*. Photographs courtesy of Lin Zhengda.

ventral scales: "Respectfully carved by Mountain-Forest Crafts of Taitung, Taiwan" (figure 11).

To this day, Lin Zhengda continues to carve *shengzhe* for clients and friends, always working on several projects at once, taking his time, only picking up the utility knife when inspiration strikes (figure 12). Despite the fine quality and unique characteristics of his finished works, Lin never claims to have any special talent. Instead, he insists his craft is only a hobby, not a profession. Over the course of more than fifteen years, he has selected his own tools and developed his own methods, learning not from a

Figure 12. Lin poses with one of his completed *shengzhe* at a temple in Tainan. Photograph courtesy of Lin Zhengda.

Figure 13. Huang Zhengxiang. Photograph courtesy of Huang Zhengxiang.

formal teacher, but from the close study of old *shengzhe*, formulating techniques to recreate them in his own way. At the same time, Lin has pioneered new designs and novel iconographical elements, drawing upon his creative imagination to give unique expression to the many faces of Saint Golden Whip, the winged serpent god, vanquisher of demons. As our week together came to an end, we drove separate scooters to the Palace of the Celestial Empress, the large Mazu temple where he works. He introduced me to the temple's history and to the gods enshrined on its altars. As afternoon turned to evening, under the mist of a light rain, I thanked him, said goodbye, and headed back to the train station, soon to make my way to the other side of the island, to Changhua, to find a man I had never met in person: Huang Zhengxiang, the Snake Master.

At the time of our meeting in 2021, Lin, too, had never met Huang in person. Rather, the two artists became acquainted and began to correspond on social media. As Lin reached the final stages of carving this article's *shengzhe*, he suggested to me that I ask Huang to weave the straw-rope tail. According to Lin, Huang could

Figure 14. Huang purifies the *shengzhe* with incense. Photograph still from Aaron K. Reich's field footage.

render his designs thin and flat, especially suitable for a thong of around nine feet, an ideal match for the *shengzhe* Lin had made for me. At the time of this writing in 2023, Lin continues to recommend Huang to many of his clients. For clients who prefer a thick and round whip design, Lin may instead put them in touch with another weaver, his close friend in Tainan, the Daoist priest mentioned earlier. Meanwhile, in Changhua, Huang Zhengxiang weaves whips for clients from all over the island. An artist of considerable renown, the weaver has a waiting list of more than three years.

Weaving: Secrets of the Snake Master

Huang Zhengxiang lifted a ritual whip from his central desk (figure 13). "Here, I'll give you a listen," he said. He stood on the opposite side of his small office space and unraveled the coiled whip. His right hand wrapped around the carved serpent's head, he slowly raised his arm to an almost horizontal position, dragging the thong across the floor. With a fast downward swing of his arm, he cracked the whip on the floor. A sound like a gunshot rang out in the small room. My ears started ringing. "Most others don't understand the proper weaving technique," he said. "Their whips won't be able to make this kind of sound. . . . Do you have your *shengzhe*?" he asked, setting his whip aside. I removed Lin's carving from my backpack and handed it to him. He unwrapped it and had a look. I expected him in that moment to pause to admire the artistry, the quality of the carving, the unique details. But his attention went immediately to the bottom of the carving, to the place where his woven thong, once finished, would attach to the handle (refer to figure 11). He furrowed his brow. "He always makes them like this," he said, shaking his head. Huang pointed to the small dowel protruding from the base, the intended point of attachment, about one inch long, about the same diameter as a penny. "This won't hold well," he said. "There's nothing for it to hold on to. As you use it, as you're striking with it, the woven part will eventually fly off. What you need is this," he said, picking up another whip handle from his desk, a carving from another artist. He pointed to its base. The attachment

point had the same diameter as the whip handle itself, much larger than Lin's dowel design. A single carved line about one inch from the bottom of the base circumscribed the handle. "The woven tail can grab on to this," Huang said, demonstrating with a grabbing claw motion of his hand. "With this, the woven part won't fly off." "Is there a way . . . ," I started to ask. "I have a way," he said, "but it's a secret. You can watch, but you can't take pictures."[34]

Over the course of the next ninety minutes, Huang showed me his secret technique, one of several confidential methods he would disclose to me during our week together, each one an example of how the artist improvises in both the maintenance and reinvention of cultural conventions. "Most people who carve *shengzhe* don't do the weaving, so they just make them like this," he told me, referring to Lin's attachment point. "You've got to modify them to make them beautiful."[35] As he started to work, he prepared some incense in the small incense burner on his work desk. As the incense started to burn, Huang took Lin's *shengzhe* and moved it slowly over the white wisps of fragrant smoke, rotating it in a circular motion, purifying and protecting the whip handle, a ritual gesture that initiates his artistic process (figure 14). "My custom is, a new *shengzhe*, when it arrives, another master worker may have touched it, this kind of thing, so I'll first purify it. Only after I've purified [it and] my space will I then proceed. This also makes me more inspired."[36] His technique for modifying the attachment point involved the use of several small dowels, incense powder, and quick-drying glue to widen the original design of Lin's attachment point. When he was finished, the *shengzhe*'s attachment point took on a new appearance, approximating the look and feel of the other handle he had shown me. With the handle now modified, the next day he would start weaving the actual whip. "When you come tomorrow, I'll use the method of weaving that [the serpent god] showed me. That method of weaving is super strong."[37]

When Huang started in this traditional art form more than nine years ago, he, like Lin, had no formal teacher. Rather, Huang first took an interest in ritual whips as a student of minor rites, another parallel with Lin's personal history. "At first I was always going to Tainan to study red-headed minor rites," he explained (Flanigan 2019). "Later, I noticed that the use of the ritual rope in Tainan minor rites was quite prevalent, as every one of their temples had probably one, two, or three of them, or even more. And so I thought, this is also a path in the study of ritual, a course subject. . . . And so, I went to buy [some], brought some back from China, undid the weaving . . . gradually put them back together, and gradually came to an understanding."[38] But his mastery of the craft would involve much trial and error, as well as divine intervention. "Tainan's older generation told me that only a thick [whip] will be loud. But Saint [Golden Whip] told me that's not the case. Thin [whips] will be loud, it's only a matter of how to weave them. . . . So, I tried [to weave] thin whips." Huang smiled. "My first whip and second whip were both failures. I gave up. But he [the serpent god] came to find me again, he told me to continue weaving, because I had an inspiration. And so, I continued to weave, weaving thin [whips], and the more I wove, the better I got."[39] As he persisted in the craft, Huang began to earn a reputation for the superior quality of his work. He adopted a trade sobriquet, the Snake Master, Wanshe daren

Figure 15. Two Snake Master logos. Photographs courtesy of Huang Zhengxiang.

(lit., "the Master who Plays with Snakes," figure 15), which now doubles as his brand name on social media (Lin 2018; Chi 2018).

More than nine years later, Huang understands his craft as a calling, a certain duty to transmit his style of weaving to the next generation. "This really is just a service for Saint [Golden Whip]," he told me. "I've thought, if I give up this craft, stop weaving . . . who's going to weave these *shengzhe*? . . . This must be a mission. . . . If I give up, if I stop weaving, will Taiwan still have *shengzhe* this loud? Maybe not."[40] In Huang's assessment, most other artists weave their whips thick and loose, round and soft, and the result is an inferior sound. His method, by contrast, renders his whips thin and tight, flat and hard, a design especially capable of generating a deafening cracking sound. One of his whips, he told me, is so loud that it once shattered someone's ear drums. "That one can bite people," he said. "It once bit someone's ear off, seven stitches, even shattered the ear drum."[41] For a ritual whip to have a masterful quality, in Huang's view, not only must it have a beautiful appearance, but it also should have considerable resonance: the *jingbian* is an instrument of sacred sound (Nitzky 2022). For that reason, despite the potential danger the crack of the whip imposes on the ears, Huang does not recommend using ear plugs. "If you use ear plugs, you won't be able to make out its sound; it won't have resonance. You've got to hear it directly for it [to have resonance]."[42]

In recounting his artistic development, Huang describes his creative discoveries as divine revelations, direct transmissions from the serpent god. "I'm always changing," Huang said. After studying the patterns of older whips from Taiwan and China, he started to modify his weaving technique in accord with each new whip. "Every whip is different," he continued. "At first, I might take up a *shengzhe* and I might decide I'll weave it this way. But when I'm in the process of weaving, the inspiration it gives me may not be the same."[43] Never rigid in his technique, Huang adapts to the specific materials and circumstances of each new whip, consciously opening himself up to what inspirations might arise. I asked whether his inspirations come during dreams or in the daytime. "Both," he said, "I'll have both. Dreams happen less often, but inspirations that come directly from him [the serpent god] are more common.

When he comes it feels like a lightning flash, a fleeting insight that informs you."[44] Among the insights Huang has received over the years, one vision inspired him to perfect a complex pattern of weaving called "eel bone" (*shanyu gu*), a method from old Tainan that very few artists can replicate. Through his study of older ritual whips and his own process of trial and error, Huang has also mastered a variation popular on the archipelago of Penghu called the "Seven Star Tail" (*qixing wei*): six smaller tails of several inches each extend from the central tail, three on each side. When Huang weaves these specialty patterns, he never strays from the signature method he understands as having been revealed to him, an inspiration from the serpent god, a method of weaving that renders Huang's whips flat and hard, fastened solid (*zashi*), impressive to the eye, and piercing to the ear.

Aside from his renown in the traditional art of weaving, Huang has also earned local fame for his ability to crack the ritual whip, to generate thunderous sound with each strike. "Lots of people in Taiwan ask me to teach them how to crack [the whip], but I really don't have time," he told me.[45] As a master of wielding the *jingbian*, Huang has developed his own take on its function as a ritual weapon. "What kind of ritual implement do you think the *shengzhe* is?" he asked me. I told him my understanding, what I had learned from my time with Lin and from my interviews with ritual specialists. "It's a ritual implement for driving away malevolent influences," I said. "It can also summon spirit soldiers, get them to come to you." "Right," Huang said. "These two points are correct. Let me tell you, this thing, I call it a gun. Why a gun, do you know? When facing bad guys, we'll have to attack them, this is driving away malevolent influences. Attacking them, using a gun to shoot and kill them. Then why when we summon deities might we use this thing? It's like firing shots into the air, like a gun salute, like a national gun salute, welcoming dignitaries."[46] Huang continued. "When you use it, there's a blast, it feels like a gunshot, isn't that like a gun? When it's coiled up over there, when the gun's placed over there, it won't hurt anyone, it won't kill anyone, right? [But] when you take it out and use it, it could hurt someone. Isn't it the same as a gun?"[47]

Huang extends his firearm analogy to his interpretation of the *shengzhe*'s conventional iconographical features, the Eight Trigrams and the Seven Stars, designs that appear on the top of the serpent's head and the area underneath its chin, respectively. Whereas many ritual professionals with whom I have spoken understand these features to enhance the apotropaic efficacy of the ritual whip, Huang likens them to the safety on a gun: they ensure the serpent god does not become unwieldy. "It's a ferocious entity, so we'll use the Eight Trigrams and the Seven Stars to contain it, like the safety on a gun. We're not using it now, so the safety keeps it locked up. When we want to use it, we unlock it. So, that's why there's the Eight Trigrams and Seven Stars, they contain it from above and below; otherwise, we couldn't control it."[48] Like the serpent demons that Chen Jinggu and other past ritual masters had to subdue, and similar to most exorcistic deities in the Daoist pantheon, Saint Golden Whip, in Huang's view, may become unruly without the proper ritual restraints (Mozina 2021).

Huang's work and living arrangement have much in common with Lin Zhengda's; like the carver from Taitung, Huang views his artistic practice as a calling, a service

to the gods, not as a primary source of income. Rather, he and his family own and operate two adjacent small shops: one sells mung-bean tea during the daytime, the other, grilled meats and vegetables in the evenings. Together with his wife, his children, and his extended family, Huang lives in the rear side of the same building, opposite the two shops facing the busy streets of Changhua. Behind their residence, a local temple marks the place where Huang first became introduced to the religious culture. During an average workday, Huang weaves in his free time, between helping customers and handling maintenance tasks for the two shops. He weaves in a private studio space connected to the tea shop, where he keeps the tools of his trade, and, in a glass-door cabinet, a large collection of ritual whips and serpent-headed handles. As he works on his ritual whips, he can keep an eye on the tea shop through a large glass window that divides his office from the shop. When the shop gets a sudden rush of customers, he places a clip on the braided strands of ramie to hold them in place and steps into the shop to offer a hand. "This method of weaving is very slow," he told me, "it doesn't make any money. . . . In an hour, if I weave one *chi* [approximately one foot], that's $600 [NTD]. If in an hour I don't even weave one *chi*, how can I make money? Besides," he added, "my hands hurt, and I even need medical treatment," he said, referring to pain in his neck and back, chronic ailments resulting from the physical demands of his craft.[49] Despite the physical pain and the lack of financial reward, Huang continues to weave for friends and clients, always in accordance with his own very high standards, taking his time, serving the gods.

On June 11, 2021, Huang began weaving the thong of this article's *shengzhe*, a creative process that unfolded over several days, some parts disclosed to me in full detail, other parts remaining trade secrets of the Snake Master. When he started the work, Huang once more received a revelation from the serpent god, instructions detailing the specific parameters for the design. "Initially I had thought to use nine strands to weave. But the sense that Saint [Golden Whip] gave me was that he wants me to bring back the original tradition of Taiwan: to weave with seven strands, representing the Seven Stars."[50] He cited a ritual incantation. "When you're using this," he said, "there's an incantation: 'he moves through the guideline, paces the Dipper, and treads over the Seven Stars.'"[51] Common to disparate ritual lineages in Taiwan, the seven characters Huang cited form the second part of a couplet that praises the exorcistic power of Saint Golden Whip and describes his movement through the world: "Saint Golden Whip appears and demonic spirits startle," the first line reads.[52] In Huang's view, to weave with seven strands has particular significance: it strengthens the bridge between the ritual whip and the apotropaic power of the Big Dipper; at the same time, the seven-strand method pays homage to the earliest traditions of weaving in Taiwan. "Later," Huang continued, "as people continued to weave and made larger whips, they'd weave using nine strands, or even eleven strands."[53] In choosing to use seven strands, Huang made his decision in the spur of the moment, "a fleeting insight" that the artist experiences as a transmission from the serpent god.

When I arrived at Huang's studio that day, he had already started on the thong, first weaving the small basket at the head of the tail, the part that would later connect to the attachment point of the handle, which he had modified the previous day. He

did this first step before my arrival because he maintains his techniques for creating the woven basket as absolute secrets, as well as the exact methods he uses to join the woven basket to the attachment point of the carved handle. By the time I arrived, he had made nearly one *chi* of his signature flat braid; seven strands hung from the bottom, each strand comprised of a small bunch of ramie threads. The aroma of incense filled the air, the effect of a personal ritual that precedes all of Huang's weaving sessions. "I always light [incense] before I begin weaving," he told me. "It's my personal custom . . . the incense gives me a sense of calm."[54] As he worked, the thong hung from the horizontal beam on the metal H-frame rack he had designed. Large metal clips kept the thong attached to the rack; to protect the thong, Huang wrapped the area of finished braid in a thick gauze material before attaching the clips. With the thong firmly attached to the rack, and the rack weighted down with heavy tin cans, Huang used his full body weight to pull and twist each of the strands as he worked, forming one braid after another. "I've seen some people weave while sitting on the ground," he said, "but they don't exert any force. We've got to stand to exert force."[55] As Huang formed each new braid, he pulled hard with his arms, pressed hard with his fingers, the metal rack creaking in response to his body weight (Ingold 2013, 23). When he needed more leverage, he would lift his leg to a near horizontal position and press his foot against the rack, pushing forward with his foot, pulling backward with his hands (figure 16). "When I weave, it's like I'm pouring my life into it," he said. "For each thread, I tug and adjust . . . it's a technique."[56] Through a combination of strength and grace, intention and intuition, Huang rendered the chaotic mess of ramie fibers into a beautiful flat braid, one *chi* at a time, gradually tapering the number of strands from seven down to three.

After several days of observation and interviews, I left Changhua for about two weeks, returning on June 26 to watch the final step in Huang's process, the attachment of a "plastic tail" (*sujiao wei*), a thin strip of pink plastic extending from the very end of the whip, woven together with the ramie (figure 17). In my absence, Huang had continued to weave the last two or three *chi* of the whip. He had also attached the tail to Lin's *shengzhe*: the ritual whip was almost ready (figure 18). The plastic strip, the final step of the process, he explained, would ensure the whip generates a loud, sharp sound. "I've used every kind of rope material, and this red plastic rope is the loudest," he said.[57] When I arrived that afternoon, it took Huang only a few minutes to attach the plastic tail and bring the thong to completion. "Finished," he said. From the end of the plastic tail to where he started to weave it into the strands of ramie fibers amounted to around ten inches.

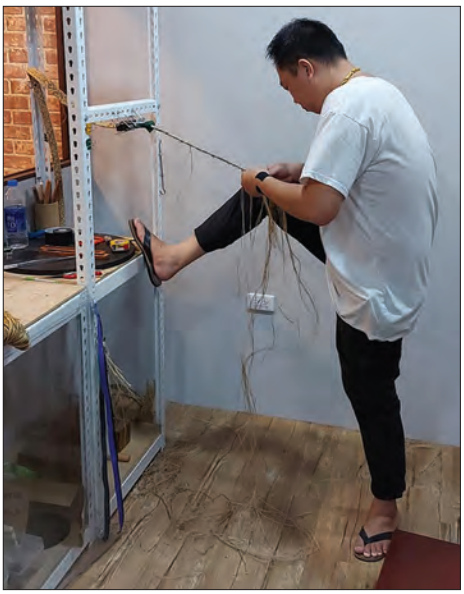

Figure 16. Huang weaving. Photograph courtesy of Huang Zhengxiang.

Figure 17. Plastic tail woven into the ramie strands. Photograph by Aaron K. Reich.

Figure 18. Completed *fasuo*. Photograph by Aaron K. Reich.

Figure 19. Huang photographs the completed whip (left); one of his photographs (right). Photographs by Aaron K. Reich and Huang Zhengxiang, respectively.

"Let's check its mobility," he said, walking to the side of the room, to the spot where he had first given me a listen to one of his whips weeks before. He held the wooden handle and gave a flick of his wrist; the subtle gesture created a ripple effect, the entire whip undulating from top to bottom. "Look how it sways. See? Did you catch that? This is what I call mobility." He coiled up the new whip, placed it inside a small photo booth adjacent to his studio space, and took several high-quality photographs (figure 19).

We went out into the warehouse and tried the whip for the first time, taking turns; I followed the method he had taught me earlier in the month: a slow drag across the floor, a quick snap of the wrist, a follow-through with the arm. "Does it sound nice?" he asked. "Very nice," I said. "It makes a very loud noise," he said, "and in that last bit, a chirping sound."[58] As he was wrapping up the whip for me, we returned to the topic of ritual consecration, to the question of whether to have the whip consecrated, the standard convention when a ritual specialist acquires a new *jingbian*. In days prior, he had suggested that, for me, since I had no immediate plans of using the whip in ritual performance, either choice is fine, to have it consecrated or leave it unconsecrated. But he had given it more thought. "I think you should have it consecrated," he said. "Otherwise, I'm afraid Saint [Golden Whip] might fall away from it."[59] His remark revealed something about his understanding of creativity and its relationship to the sacred: his many hours spent weaving the whip, "pouring his life into it," as he said, had the effect of infusing the new whip with divine presence. He hoped that I would have the whip consecrated not for the conventional reason of making it sacred, of bringing it to life. Rather, the handcrafted whip was already sacred, already a living presence, already an assemblage of human and divine forces and flows. Consecration, in Huang's view, would serve to fortify a sacred presence that he and Lin had already transmitted into the object through their respective "technologies of enchantment" (Pinney and Thomas 2020).

Figure 20. Liu Zhangxiang performs a consecration ritual for the *shengzhe*. Photograph still from Aaron K. Reich's field footage.

At the time of this writing, in 2023, Huang Zhengxiang the weaver, the Snake Master, continues to braid whips for clients and friends, always changing, developing new patterns, creating new ways to serve Saint Golden Whip. On the road to becoming one of Taiwan's most renowned weavers, an artist with a waiting list of more than three years, Huang had no formal training, no teacher to convey to him the proper techniques, the tricks of the trade. Instead, he studied the work of other artists, and, through much trial and error, he devised his own methods for replicating and improving upon these prototypes. Along the way, he forged a close relationship with the serpent god, the great deity of the ritual whip, who, according to Huang's testimony, revealed to him the flat-braid method, its tightly twisted strands rendering whips as hard as stone, capable of ear-splitting sound. An artist involved in the maintenance of an established tradition, the artistic production of *jingbian*, among the most central ritual implements in all of Taiwan, Huang's rise to prominence resulted entirely from his own methods, his own ideas for producing and perfecting this traditional craft. In his own words, "to study [this art] to the point of mastery, you need much inspiration, many ways of thinking, and many ways of making."[60] Whether understood as creative inspiration, divine revelation, or some combination of the two, these ways of thinking and making, these ideas and methods, in Huang's view, come not from outside of the artist, from teachers or books, but from within him, born from his engagement with the material world.

Concluding remarks

To honor the weaver's wish, I had the whip consecrated in Kaohsiung a few days after leaving Changhua, on June 28, 2021, an auspicious day on the lunar calendar. I asked my friend and close informant, Daoist priest Liu Zhangxiang, to preside over the ritual (figure 20). He took me to a friend's temple and performed an abridged version of his standard liturgy for Opening the Radiance and Dotting the Eyes. He called upon the gods with intoned incantations to the chime of his bell and burned talismans to purify and protect the whip. He marked with vermillion the vital points of the carved handle and woven thong: its eyes, nose, mouth, and ears; its single horn; its back; its heart; its belly; each of its Eight Trigrams; each of its Seven Stars; each *chi* of its braided ramie tail. He cracked the whip three times, its first use in a ritual context. "That whip has a really loud sound," he told me afterward, when he had finished the ritual. "Once you get it broken in, it'll be even louder."

This article has argued that the two artists at the heart of its case study look to creative improvisation both in the invention of new cultural patterns and in the maintenance of inherited tradition. When creating the two components of the *jingbian*, the serpent-headed handle and the straw-rope thong, its two respective makers, carver and weaver, both ground their artistic practices in their own ideas and methods, ways of the craft that each discovered through the study of older models and a process of trial and error. To make its case, this study highlighted how each artist adapted to his materials and environment, each one discovering over the course of many years optimal techniques that work for him, individual best practices to create components of the *jingbian* that both accord with cultural tradition and

exude a personal flair. In so doing, this article has shed light on an indispensable aspect of cultural transmission that scholars of material religion have largely overlooked, namely the role that individual creativity plays in the establishment and maintenance of cultural patterns. Too often studies of material religion focus on sacred objects and their use without concern for the people and processes that brought them into being in the first place. By shifting the spotlight to two artists who make the respective components of *jingbian*, and by focusing on their collaborative production of a single whip, this study proposes new ways to think about handmade ritual objects, each one an expression of its makers and their modes of invention.

For both artists in this study, and, by implication, other artists involved in the making of material religion, their ability to improvise and thereby leave a mark on posterity seems to derive in the first place from their having allowed the object to leave a mark on them. Both Lin and Huang, as young students in the craft of ritual, became introduced to the *jingbian*, and both soon aspired to make these ritual weapons with their own hands, each one drawn to one of the two integral arts of carving and weaving. The variety of actual ritual whips that the artists handled impressed upon them and became in time an internal image, an archetype, not a single model, but rather an *ideal*, a set of characteristics drawn from older whips and the creative imagination of the two artists. It is not a single whip but rather the *jingbian* as archetype that has impressed upon both artists: for both men, the ritual whip has become an integral part of their way of being in the world. It informs how they spend their days and even influences their dreams. Over time, as a natural response to genuine interest, the artists opened themselves to internal transformation; they have become vehicles for the *jingbian* as archetype, mediums for the serpent deity, not mere cogs in a machine of cultural reproduction but originators of new ideas, methods, and designs. Their creative methods and secret techniques make manifest Saint Golden Whip in forms both old and new, carrying on tradition and reinventing it at the same time, inspiring later artists upon whom their works might leave a mark. Generations into the future, one hundred years from now, a young artist in Malaysia, having heard the lore of Lin Zhengda's double-headed *shengzhe*, may turn to it as a source of inspiration for her own carving. On the west coast of Taiwan, a young artist may inherit a ritual whip woven by Huang Zhengxiang, the legendary Snake Master of Changhua. He might unravel it and braid it again, studying its design. And as the two young artists emulate the works of these great masters, the young artists add their own ideas and methods. Their stories join with those artists who have come before them and leave an impression on those artists whom they, in turn, will inspire.

Acknowledgments

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NOTES

1. For the entire invocation, see Lü Lizheng (1990, 53–54).

2. In my experience, both contemporary whips in Taiwan and historical whips from Minnan have thongs at least twice as long as the thong described in Asano Haruji (2008, 414).

3. For a comprehensive study of minor rite traditions in Taiwan, see Flanigan (2019).

4. For related uses of the whip in contemporary healing rituals, see Hsieh Shu-wei (2016).

5. For a high-quality photograph of a ritual whip from the Qing period, see Lin (2018, 69).

6. See, for example, Luo Maodeng's (1990) *Sanbao taijian xiyangji tongsu yanyi* [The eunuch Sanbao's journey to the western ocean]; Luo Maodeng was active from the sixteenth to seventeenth century. See also Hong Mai's *Yijian zhi* [Record of the listener] (2006, p. 1737); Hong Mai was born in 1123 and died in 1202.

7. *Da Qing huidian tu*, *j.*85.

8. To my knowledge, the earliest surviving textual reference to a ritual serpent whip occurs in Bai Yuchan's (1194–1227) writings, specifically in a polemical section on the ritual methods of the "heterodox masters" (*xieshi*) active in his day. See DZ 1307: *Haiqiong Bai zhenren yulu*, 1.11b in the Ming Daoist canon.

9. On these deities and their subjugation of serpent spirits, see respectively Fan Pen Li Chen (2017); Wang (2007); and *Pu'an tanfa* (2010, 12a–14a, "Songbian de gushi" [Story of the pine whip"]).

10. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 5, 2021.

11. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 5, 2021.

12. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 5, 2021.

13. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 5, 2021.

14. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 5, 2021.

15. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 5, 2021.

16. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 7, 2021.

17. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 7, 2021.

18. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 6, 2021.

19. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 5, 2021.

20. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 5, 2021.

21. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 6, 2021.

22. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 5, 2021.

23. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 8, 2021.

24. The description of Lin carving this article's *shengzhe* dervies from photographs, videos, and messages sent by the artist to the author via Facebook Messenger, from July 2019 to March 2021.

25. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 6, 2021.

26. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 6, 2021.

27. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 7, 2021.

28. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 7, 2021.
29. Lin Zhengda, Facebook message sent to author on June 7, 2021.
30. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 7, 2021.
31. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 7, 2021.
32. Lin Zhengda, transcript and recording, June 7, 2021.
33. Lin Zhengda, Facebook messages sent to author on April 10, 2020, and April 13, 2021.
34. Author's fieldnotes, June 10, 2021.
35. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 10, 2021.
36. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 10, 2021.
37. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 10, 2021.
38. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 12, 2021.
39. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 12, 2021.
40. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 12, 2021.
41. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 10, 2021.
42. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 26, 2021.
43. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 12, 2021.
44. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 10, 2021.
45. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 10, 2021.
46. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 10, 2021.
47. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 10, 2021.
48. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 12, 2021.
49. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 12, 2021.
50. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 11, 2021.
51. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 11, 2021.
52. For a reproduction of this couplet and the entire invocation, see Lü Lizheng 1990, 54.
53. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 11, 2021.
54. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 11, 2021.
55. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 12, 2021.
56. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 11, 2021.
57. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 13, 2021.
58. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 26, 2021.
59. Author's fieldnotes, June 26, 2021.
60. Huang Zhengxiang, transcript and recording, June 11, 2021.

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Contentious Cantonese

Rock Fights and the Culture of Violence in the Early Modern Canton Delta

This article examines an important but little studied aspect of folk culture in the Canton Delta in the early modern period (roughly 1800s–1940s); namely, ritualized rock fights. The yearly rock fights were popular forms of entertainment and competitive sport not only in China but also in Korea and Japan. They were ritualized annual events occurring during the lunar New Year holidays, and Double Five and Double Nine festivals. Many people regarded the rock fights as necessary for the community's well-being and good health. For the youthful rock fighters, who came mostly from poor, marginalized families, such blood sports were a necessary preparation and training for martial skills needed in life. These acts of violence and blood rituals were part of a well-established folk tradition deeply embedded in the everyday life and folk customs of southern China.

Keywords: violent sports—blood rituals—fertility rites—hooliganism—martial skills—machismo

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In the section on local customs in the 1871 gazetteer of Panyu County, Guangdong, the author included a short notice of what he considered a "barbarous custom" (*manfeng hansu*) prevalent among the villagers of the two townships (*xiang*) of Shawan and Jiaotang. To paraphrase the author:

> During the lunar New Year, when there was little else to do, boys would split up into gangs and amuse themselves by fighting in vacant fields outside villages. The rough-and-tumble play began with rock throwing but soon would escalate into fisticuffs and stick fights. Parents and elders, who found the sport entertaining, would crowd around the youths to encourage them to fight all the more. Whenever one side began to lose a battle the adults would join in the ruckus, picking up spears and shields and going at one another with all seriousness. What began with a few tens of young boys inevitably degenerated into a bloody affray involving hundreds of people. Yet even if someone were seriously injured or killed, no one would report it to the authorities for fear of being ridiculed as milksops by their neighbors. (*Panyu xianzhi* 1871, 6:12b)

The annual rock fights were an old and ubiquitous tradition not only in Panyu and the Canton Delta but also in other areas of China, as well as in Korea and Japan. Rock fighting, in fact, was deeply entrenched in Chinese folk culture. The fights were multifaceted, and different people interpreted them in different ways or emphasized different aspects. In this article I focus on three key meanings of rock fights: one, as popular spectator sports associated with the culture of the lower classes; two, as platforms where fighters could show off their martial prowess and toughness; and three, as blood rituals essential for forecasting the well-being of local communities. Rock fighting, I argue, was but one of the many forms of customary violence that pervaded the lives of working-class Chinese in the early modern era.[1] Rock fights are important because they provide an illuminating snapshot of the everyday assumptions, values, habits, and culture of ordinary Chinese, especially of those inhabiting the lower end of the social hierarchy.

In the Canton Delta, rock fights were popular forms of entertainment and competitive sport, which also had important sacerdotal functions. Although the rock

fights had been banned by officials and deplored by most literati, they remained widespread not only in the Canton Delta, but also in northeastern Guangdong, southern Fujian, and western Taiwan, as well as in Korea and Japan, well into the twentieth century. The appendix sketches the available information from written sources on rock fights in southern China. Although I discuss rock fighting more generally, my focus is on the ritualized annual rock fights usually occurring during the lunar New Year holidays, as well as during the Double Five (*duanwu*, fifth day of the fifth lunar month) and Double Nine (*chongyang*, ninth day of the ninth lunar month) festivals. It was no coincidence that the yearly rock fights were held on days of great significance for agriculture, as they were meant to assure good harvests as well as to protect against pestilence in the coming year (Sōda 1997, 205). But unlike other festivals, which were often associated with orthodox, state-recognized temples or lineage-based ancestral halls, rock fights in the Canton Delta, at least, were loosely organized rough-and-tumble sports closely associated with working-class culture.

While in the past rock fighting was a ubiquitous sport across much of China, it nonetheless presents scholars with several methodological problems. For one, there are virtually no substantive written sources on rock fights in China, but only a few scattered remarks, always negative, in local gazetteers, newspapers, and literati jottings, as well as in several descriptive accounts by Western observers. Because of the scarcity of textual materials, I have had to rely heavily on fieldwork: interviews conducted in 2002 of village elders (all men, mostly in their sixties and seventies) in Shawan and Jiaotang, and in 2010 of villagers and local cultural experts in several locations in Panyu. My information was collected from group discussions, one-on-one interviews, and random conversations with villagers. Because I was told that in most areas in Panyu rock fights ceased in the 1940s, my elderly informants in 2002 relied on their own reminiscences from when they were children and on stories that their elders had told them. None of my informants, however, said that they had participated in rock fights. In my follow-up interviews with villagers in 2010, it was already difficult to find anyone with direct recollections of rock fights; it seems that the living memory of rock fights had virtually disappeared. Because of the sparsity of written sources, I have also supplemented my information on rock fights in the Canton Delta with information on rock fights in other areas of China and East Asia, which according to Sōda Hiroshi (1997) had similar "ritualized sports."

Another problem concerns how we should designate the rock fights. In China there never was any single or standardized name for the sport of rock fighting, but rather different areas had different names throughout history. In general, the terms were largely descriptive. In Guangdong they were characterized as "rock throwing fights" (*zhi shitou jia*), "using rocks to throw at one another" (*yi shitou xiang zhi*), "overhand rock [throwing]" (*jieshi*), and so forth (Liu 1993; *Panyu xianzhi* 1871, 6:12b; Wang 2006, 141). In Fujian and Taiwan, the sport was variously portrayed as a popular amusement, using such terms as "fighting with rocks for sport" (*doushi wei xi*), "playing at rock throwing" (*zhishi zhi xi*), "rock fighting sport" (*dashixi*), and other similar terms (Chen 1997 [1826], 29; *Yunxiao tingzhi* 1816, 3:11b; Guo and Zhang 2002). Rock fights were fundamentally local phenomena that differed from place to place and from time to time.

Ancient antecedents: *Jirang*, *seokjeon*, and *injiuchi*

Rock fighting was a competitive sport with ancient antecedents. It is likely, as the Japanese scholar Inō Kanori has argued, battles with stone throwing were intricately connected with China's ancient divination rituals and warfare (Inō 1917, 78). According to popular legends, the sport, which came to be known as *jirang*, dated back more than four thousand years among Chinese elites as a hunting competition, with important sacerdotal and portending aspects, in which wooden sticks were thrown (figure 1). Over time sticks were replaced with bricks and rocks. As rock fighting evolved, it became an increasingly important competitive sport useful for training skills needed in hunting and warfare. Following the fall of the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE), *jirang* became widespread throughout China among commoners, both young and old. By the twelfth century, however, it remained popular only as a children's sport associated with the Cold Food (*hanshi*) and Tomb Sweeping (*qingming*) festivals during the fourth lunar month, and in some areas of south China with the Double Nine festival. In the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) periods, the sport had evolved into "tile fighting" (*dawa*) contests between teams of boys who pitched broken bits of roof tiles and stones at one another. Although in ancient times many people, including literati, considered rock fights a respectable sport, by the late imperial era it had become characterized as a "noxious custom" (*esu*) among the lower orders (Wang 2006, 141).[2]

Both Korea and Japan had similar ritualized rock or stone fights, whose antecedents traced back to ancient China. As in China, rock fights in Korea and Japan had various designations; the most commonly used term in Korea was *seokjeon*, and in Japan *injiuchi*. In Korea rock fights date back to the mid-Samhan period (57 BCE–668 CE), and were closely associated with the agrarian cycle and fertility festivals, most commonly occurring during the first few weeks of the lunar New Year and on the Dano (Double Five) festival. According to the *Book of Sui* (*Sui shu*), the official history of the Chinese Sui dynasty, in the seventh century *seokjeon* enjoyed royal support and had become a part of state-sponsored festivals. By the seventeenth century it was deeply entrenched as a widespread blood sport among the Korean masses, with one source associating it with adolescent gangs of "rabble and riff-raff" due to excessive rowdiness and violence. Much like the scene describing rock fights in the Panyu gazetteer,

Figure 1. Ancient Chinese sport of *jirang*. Source: Ancient sketch redrawn by author, not in copyright.

Figure 2. Woodblock Print by Hishikawa Moronobu of Japanese Rock Fight. Source: Brooklyn Museum, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/120849; public domain.

George Gilbert, a foreign resident in Korea in 1892, witnessed two villages engaged in rock fighting that involved eight hundred to one thousand adolescent and adult combatants. As he recounted: "Young men start throwing stones at one another in the early afternoon, and continue to do so until evening. Once adults arrive at the field, the stone fighting becomes more severe" (cited in Park 2011, 130). According to Robert Niff, the fights often involved hundreds of participants who armed themselves with "polished stones, iron and wooden cudgels, armor made from twisted straw, wooden shields, and leather caps" (Niff 2009; also Hulbert 1905, 51). The rock fights were not only popular spectator sports considered useful for martial training, but they also had profound religious and shamanistic overtones for predicting agricultural success in the upcoming year. As late as the 1970s there were still reports of stone fighting in some rural areas (Hulbert 1905, 50; Sōda 1997, 208; Park 2011, 131; Siegmund 2018).

In Japan rock fighting is equally ancient, with some sources claiming that it dated back to the pre–Bronze Age Yayoi period. Usually referred to as *injiuchi*, the root term *inji*, according to several scholars, means "stoning." As in China and Korea, in ancient Japan stone throwing was commonly used in warfare on battlefields. Later on in the Heian period (794–1185), rock fighting became a popular children's sport that took place during the lunar New Year and at the Double Five festival. In the sixteenth century, feudal lords or daimyo, such as Takeda Shingen, even organized special stone-throwing companies of soldiers. Figure 2 is a late-seventeenth-century woodblock print by Hishikawa Moronobu depicting two teams of rock fighters, each designated by distinct banners. Here too battles usually started between teams of adolescent boys who were later joined by older men. They used rocks and sticks to

fight, and had shields and helmets for protection. As elsewhere, Japanese believed that the winning teams would have good luck, and their villages abundant crops in the following year. Although popular among the samurai warrior class, because of their excessive violence rock fights were banned in the Tokugawa period (1603–1867), and during the following Meiji period (1868–1912) they had all but disappeared (Amino 1992, 33–38; Amino 1993, 145–96; Frédéric 2002, 387).

Pugnacious youths and rock fights

The annual rock fights in the Canton Delta, which I concentrate on in this study, for the most part took place outside villages in vacant fields rather than in front of temples or ancestral halls. In general, villagers in Panyu told me that battles were fought on neutral grounds—public spaces or no-man's-lands deemed appropriate for fighting as they belonged to no particular group or faction. Qu Dajun, writing in the late seventeenth century, recorded that the rock fights in Panyu occurred in the "mountainous backwoods" (*shanye*), that is, in rustic, uncultivated fields on the outskirts of towns and villages (Qu 1700, 9:25a), and the 1871 Panyu gazetteer similarly relates that the rock fighters gathered in the "village wilds" (*cunye*), that is, in uninhabited areas outside villages (*Panyu xianzhi* 1871, 6:12b). One eyewitness, the Rev. John Henry Gray, recorded that each year in the suburbs beyond the walled city of Canton peasants convened in the "open plains," in areas often surrounded by rolling hills, to "attack each other with stones" (Gray 1878, 1:256). For the most part, the same was true for locations of annual rock fights in other areas of China and in Korea and Japan.

In southeastern China, the annual rock fights occurred in the same areas where armed affrays or feuds (*xiedou*) were commonplace and widespread (Lamley 1977). On the one hand, like armed affrays, rock fights were fought between individuals or teams in rival villages or lineages, as well as between members of opposing groups within a village or lineage. In some cases rock fights may have functioned as substitutes for armed affrays. But on the other hand, unlike the armed affrays, which were usually well-organized, large-scale conflicts between lineages or subethnic groups that frequently continued for months or years without end, rock fights were mostly unstructured displays of masculine violence between rival, often bitterly antagonistic, neighborhoods, villages, families, and surname groups that took place during particular festivals and were of short duration (usually one or two days). They also served different purposes. While it is tempting to view rock fights as more "civilized" forms of feuds, this was not the case.

Judging by the printed descriptions and testimonies from oral interviews, the annual rock fights were basically free-for-alls and "sporting battles of strength" (*douli zhi xi*) (Qu 1700, 9:25a; and fieldnotes from Panyu and 2002 and 2010). What the youthful fighters fought for was reputation and prestige. For them broken teeth and scars were badges of honor. Apparently anyone and everyone could join in the battles. There were few winners; most were losers. Fighting was a means of gaining respect and dominance over others. They created what Eric Dunning has called an "aggressive masculinity," whereby one's ability to fight was the key to power and status (Dunning

1983, 137; also Dunning 2000, 157; and Bourgois 1989, 8–9). Rock fights also were important release mechanisms for the pent-up tensions, frustrations, and antagonisms that had accumulated over the previous year. They can hardly be called civilized sports, because there were no set rules and they were brutal and bloody. Indeed, the avowed purpose of rock fights was the shedding of blood. It was not uncommon for participants, and sometimes even spectators who got too close, to be maimed or killed (fieldnotes from Panyu, May 2010; also Qu 1700, 9:25a; Gray 1878, 1:256–57).

Although ostensibly open to anyone, nonetheless most of the rock fighters in Panyu came primarily from marginalized families, the sons of the working poor. While fighters ranged in age from roughly ten to forty, the majority were adolescent boys between fifteen and eighteen years of age. For the young boys rock fights were rites of passage that tested their machismo and marked a transition into manhood. Based on my interviews, in many cases, they were the sons of so-called "Danmin" (or more derogatorily as "Tanka," literally "egg families"), who were mostly tenants and hired workers from satellite villages that were both economically and politically dependent on dominant lineages (Siu and Liu, 2006; Watson 2004a, 146–48). Written sources described the fighters as "pugnacious youths" (*dazai*), a Cantonese term that typically associated individuals with heredity servile groups with low social status (Qu 1700, 9:25a; Chan 1989, 312, 318, 333). In the delta they were the village outcasts, people that dominant groups disparagingly referred to as "trivial people" (*ximin*), "floating twigs" (*shuiliu chai*), and "lowly households" (*xiahu*). They were little different from the "bare sticks" (*guanggun*) or, as they were more commonly referred to in the Canton Delta, "rotten lads" (*lanzai*), who regularly filled the ranks of local guardsmen units, bandit gangs, and pirate bands. They existed on the fringes of polite society and took sport in upsetting social conventions (Liu 1995, 35; Watson 2004b, 251–65; Antony 2023, 20–43, 80–82). My local informants in Panyu described the rock fighters as hooligans (*liumang*), as macho youths who swaggered about the streets and lanes acting tough. Some villagers added that they belonged to local juvenile gangs (fieldnotes from Panyu in June 2002 and May 2010).[3]

Rock fighting was a manly sport, one in which females played no direct roles as combatants. People considered it too violent and dangerous, as well as unfeminine. Nonetheless, females did participate from behind the scenes as auxiliaries. Mothers and sisters attended the battles as devoted spectators, cheering on their sons or brothers and nursing the injured. Standing behind the front lines, women and girls helped the fighters by keeping them stocked with a steady supply of rocks and refreshments. In the early twentieth century, at least according to my Panyu informants, teenage girls worked the crowds selling snacks, fruits, and even toys to crowds of onlookers (fieldnotes from Panyu in June 2002; also Chen 1997 [1826], 29; *Sing Tao Daily* 2018). Writing about traditional stone fighting in Korea, Felix Siegmund has hinted that women attended rock fights in order to gauge the manliness and martial virility of robust male combatants (Siegmund 2018). Perhaps the same was true in China. Rock fights, in any case, delimited and safeguarded clear gender roles and identities within the participating communities.

Both Shawan and Jiaotang, which were the centers of annual rock fights in the Canton Delta, were also notorious bandit haunts since at least the Ming dynasty.

This was particularly true in that nebulous area along the border of these two rural districts, an area where political jurisdictions were vague, and gentry and lineage authority were weak. It was an area with numerous impoverished satellite villages where most people made their living by fishing, ferrying, and other menial jobs, the sorts of work that drew little respect and provided meager earnings. The lower delta was an area crisscrossed with a maze of creeks and streams and dotted with many hillocks, one of which was known locally as Rat Hill (Laoshushan), located adjacent to the present-day and still poor village of Jinshan (see figure 3). Despite the repeated attempts to eradicate brigands in this area, Rat Hill remained a notorious outlaw lair throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the 1770s and 1780s, bandit chiefs such as "Black Bones" Mai and Liang Yaxiang made Rat Hill their base from which gangs of eighty or ninety men would set off to plunder villages, markets, and shipping in the delta and along the coast (*Junjidang lufu zouzhe*, QL 45.9.18, and QL 45.9.27; also *Canton Register*, March 15, 1836, 9:43; Antony 2016, 196–97; Antony 2023, 78–101).[4] As late as the 1930s, there were still reports of bandits in this area (*Jiu Guangdong feidao shilu* 1997, 13). According to my Panyu informants, these were the sorts of people who participated in rock fights in their youth and who later as young adults joined bandit gangs or village guard units. Not coincidentally, as several villagers in 2002 told me, rock fighting previously had been a popular activity nearby Rat Hill (fieldnotes from Panyu and 2002 and 2010).

Another area mentioned in the Panyu gazetteer that was particularly famous for its yearly rock fights in the late nineteenth century was called Dragon Bridge (Longqiao). It was a rural mart on one of the small tributaries of the Pearl River southeast of Canton and not too far from Rat Hill (see figure 3). At that time Triad gangs oversaw the market, giving it a reputation as a rough area known for violence and unruliness (*Panyu xianzhi* 1871, 6:12b; and fieldnotes from Longqiao, May 2010). Even as late as 2018, "black societies" (*heishehui*) still lorded over the town through intimidation, extortion, and murder (see Antony 2023, 295n17). Villagers I talked to around Longqiao also associated the rock fighters with Triads, bandits, and hooligans.

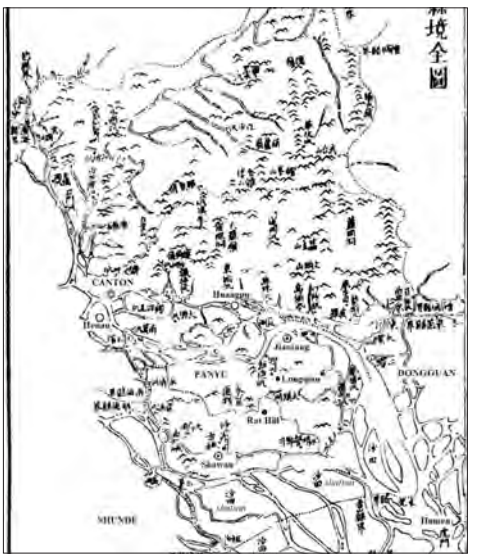

Figure 3. Map of Panyu County, Guangdong, c. 1871. Source: Gazetteer of Panyu County. *Panyu xianzhi*), Guangdong, 1871, not in copyright.

Because boys growing up in poor lower-class families had to be tough just to reach adulthood, learning how to fight at an early age was essential for survival in a world that they found excessively competitive and unfair. Children born into impoverished families were more likely to be exposed to violence than those born in literati families. In the latter case, children internalized rules and values that

encouraged them to become law-abiding subjects who viewed violence as wrong. In the former case, however, violence was an integral part of the socialization process, an inevitable fact of growing up (Dunning 1983, 137, 139; Englander 2003, 37–39). For the children of the laboring poor, I would argue, fighting was not merely a favorite pastime but also a routine factor of daily life and even a necessity.

As a number of psychologists have shown, children learn violent behavior by imitating aggression in adults, and children who grow up in violent environments are more likely to be violent themselves. If violent behavior is learned behavior, then children raised in families that approve and encourage aggression will believe violence is correct and acceptable behavior. Under these circumstances, explains Elizabeth Englander, "violence occurs because the person has been *rewarded* for being violent, or has seen others rewarded for being violent." In other words, there were positive reinforcements for aggression and violence. What is more, other studies have found that aggressive behavior that began in childhood usually continued into adulthood (Englander 2003, 39, 57–58, 94–98; also Dunning 2000, 160; Boulton 1994, 23–41).

In early modern Guangdong (as in many other areas of China), children in poor marginalized families frequently grew up in environments that approved and encouraged violent activities. The annual rock fights in Shawan and Jiaotang townships, as elsewhere, were not simply mock battles. The violence was real and at times deadly. Those pugnacious youths fought to the shouts and urgings of parents and elders who regarded the brawls as lively spectator sport. Rock fights were held during festivals as festive, bacchanal occasions. Fighters boasted, bawled, and cussed as crowds cheered them on. The battles also provided opportunities for gambling, drunkenness, and the undesirable mixing of the sexes, activities that usually met with great displeasure from officials and literati (*Panyu xianzhi* 1871, 6:12b; also Niff 2009).[5]

In the 1860s, John Henry Gray witnessed several rock fights near Canton. One involved about seven hundred fighters, who ranged in age from eighteen to forty, and attracted a huge crowd who viewed the fracas from hillsides overlooking the field where the fighting took place. In the festive atmosphere combatants took time out from the fighting to mingle with spectators and to buy soup and fruit from the hawkers working the crowds. On another occasion Gray witnessed a rock fight on Henan (Honam) Island (see figure 3), in the suburbs of Canton, where so many people were seriously injured that the village elders called upon police to put a stop to the melee. Accordingly, the next morning police "seized one of the ringleaders, and bound him to a tree. The peasants, however, drove them back, loosed the prisoner, and renewed the rough scenes of the day before" (Gray 1878, 1:256–57). This was no political or antigovernment protest, but rather a demonstration of spontaneous anger on the part of spectators. The annual rock fights apparently were too popular to be curtailed.

Rock fighting and martial training

The annual rock fights were important popular spectator sports originally rooted in military training and should be understood as part of the broader martial culture prevalent in early modern China (see Waley-Cohen 2006). The use of stone weapons in

combat, of course, was ancient, certainly dating back to the Neolithic era. For Korea, according to Park Daejae, even in the first century, because iron weapons were not yet widespread, stones remained as the primary weapons of war. It was likely the same in China and Japan, and in fact the military use of stones continued into modern times (Park 2011, 132; Inō 1917, 78). Even the advent of modern gunpowder armaments did not automatically or totally replace stones as weapons. Besides swords and guns, rocks remained in common use as hand-launched missiles. Rock fights, in general, provided useful training for both defensive and offensive maneuvers in combat. They furthermore served to sharpen the competitive spirit and male bonding among team members. Rock throwing, for instance, was an essential element in close-range naval combat in the Ming and Qing periods, and thus important for naval warfare training. For these reasons, aboard warships and merchant junks there were always ample supplies of rocks that were used as missiles to ward off pirates.[6] Pirates and bandits likewise used stones as weapons ("Military Skill and Power of the Chinese," 173; *Nawenyi gong zouyi* 1968 [1834], 12:91b; *Xingke tiben*, JQ 8.4.20, and DG 3.5.19; *Waijidang*, DG 13.9.19). The annual rock fights, like the competitive dragon boat races during the *duanwu* festivals discussed by Andrew Chittick, served to promote a martial culture, and more specifically provided a venue for violence and a potential recruiting platform for guardsmen units and bandit gangs (Chittick 2010, 70).

For the sons of the laboring poor, the rough-and-tumble sport of rock fighting was necessary preparation and training for martial skills needed in life. On the one hand, rock fights may have been important to village and lineage leaders who viewed them as useful training grounds for young boys and adolescents who would someday serve in their guardsmen units. Although verbally condemning rock fights, local leaders may have tolerated them precisely for this reason. On the other hand, bandits and pirates, who mainly came from the ranks of the laboring poor, were also known to seek out individuals with the martial skills one could learn from juvenile street gangs and rock fighting. The skills that boys learned from rock fighting helped to toughen them so that they could, as one Panyu villager told me, "eat bitterness" (*chiku*), which was a quality essential for both guardsmen and bandits. Rock fights allowed boys to hone in and show off their martial prowess (fieldnotes from Jinshan village in Panyu, June 2002).

For commoners, rocks were one of the most accessible and versatile weapons. They cost nothing to procure, and they were readily available and easy to use. During the Double Five festival, for instance, dragon boat teams prepared for the inevitable fights by stocking their boats in advance with rocks and other hand weapons (Zhang Qu 1738, 47; Gray 1878, 1:259–60; and *Lianjiang xianzhi* 1967 [1932], 19:23a). According to Derk Bodde, these races "took on the nature of a naval battle, with competing boats pursuing or grappling one another, and contestants or spectators on the banks throwing stones at each other" (Bodde 1975, 314). In the autumn of 1809, when pirates attacked Xijiao village in Shunde County, people simply picked up stones by the wayside to pelt the attackers and drive them away (*Shunde xianzhi* 1853, 17:18a). It also was common practice for villagers to stockpile rocks in their stockades and blockhouses as defensive weapons to use against bandits and rival lineages. Figure 4 is a display of small stones kept in one of the blockhouses (*diaolou*) in Zili village in Kaiping (fieldnotes from Kaiping, April 2007).

Figure 4. Display of rocks used as defensive weapons, Zili village, Kaiping. Photo by Robert J. Antony, 2007.

It was not uncommon, too, for foreigners to be targeted by rock-throwing Chinese. In Canton on the morning of February 24, 1807, a scuffle erupted outside the foreign factories when drunken British sailors from the East India Company ship *Neptune* were pelted with rocks and bricks by an angry Chinese mob. According to one witness, Peter Auber, the Chinese "continued throughout the day to throw stones at the factory and at every European passing," despite efforts from Hong merchants to disperse the crowd (Auber 1834, 225). In his reminiscences in *Bits of Old China*, William Hunter recalled that once when returning from an excursion in the suburbs of Canton, he and his companions were accosted by a band of boys who incessantly shouted "*fankwae*" ("foreign devils") and threw lumps of mud, stones, and old worn-out shoes at them. The boys chased them down the lane, and Hunter could only escape by running away (Hunter 1885, 66–67). As another foreign resident later remarked, rock battles not only afforded combatants the chance to show off their martial skills but also to torment foreigners with "good fun" (Downing 1838, 1:119).

Rock fights as blood rituals

For villagers in Panyu and elsewhere, the annual rock fights were revered blood rituals. People regarded them as necessary for the community's well-being and good health, as well as for predicting bountiful harvests based on beliefs that the rocks possessed magical powers to drive away calamity and death (fieldnotes from Panyu, June 2002 and May 2010; for Korea, see Park 2011, 131). People in southern Fujian depicted the sport as "throwing rocks as a portent" (*zhishi zhi zhao*) (Zhang Yongxin n.d.). Participants believed that the winners in these battles would have good luck over the forthcoming year. Villagers in Panyu, as in Fujian and Taiwan, understood that unless blood was shed in these annual rock fights, misfortunes—bad harvests, famines, typhoons, pestilence, ill health, bankruptcies—would befall them (fieldnotes from Jinshan village in Panyu, June 2002; also *Yunxiao tingzhi* 1816, 3:11b; DeGlopper 1995, 144).

Coming as they did at the time of the lunar New Year, marking the opening of spring, rock fights also were vernal fertility rites. The shedding of blood literally and symbolically impregnated the earth with life's essence. In this sense rock fights were rites of rebirth and renewal. It is significant too that the rock fighters, those pugnacious youths, were mostly adolescent boys. Because pubescent lads were

Figure 5. Rock Fight on Double-Nine Festival, Canton Delta, c. 1880s. Source: Dianshizai huabao, 1887, not in copyright.

considered especially animated with positive *yang* forces, their blood was particularly potent (De Groot 1910, 6:1195; Gray 1878, 1:265). As ritualized behavior, rock fights were a product of particular cultural assumptions regarding the relationship between bloodletting, fertility, and health.

We also find further evidence for this bloody vernal ritual from the rock fights in eighteenth-century Yangjiang, a county on the southwestern fringe of the Canton Delta. There the annual rock fights were not held during the lunar New Year but rather during the Double Five festival at a place locally known as the "Killing Mound" (Sidagang) (Qu 1700, 9:25a; *Yangjiang zhi* 1925, 7:11b). The fifth lunar month, a time of seasonal change, had always been a period of rampant pestilence and plagues, especially in the miasmatic south (Law and Ward 1982, 54).[7] Rock fights served as annual exorcistic rites of passage from one season to the next and were meant to cleanse communities of disease-causing evil spirits through a show of physical force.

The rock fights in Yangjiang were held on the Double Five festival, Wolfram Eberhard has posited, because of the need for "scapegoats" to ward off the "overwhelming dark powers" that were present at this time of year. The rock fights actually predated the now more typical dragon boat races, and according to local lore were linked to the bloody fertility rites of the Dai aborigines who inhabited much of south China before the influx of Han Chinese. To assure the fertility of their rice fields Dai gods demanded human sacrifice, the victim often being a Chinese settler who was kidnapped and fattened for this purpose. Villagers also offered a virgin to the ill-fated stranger who was encouraged to impregnate her. At the festival the victim was dismembered and the body parts distributed among the villagers, who then interred them in their fields to ensure good harvests. Later, Eberhard suggested, as more Han Chinese moved into the region, another form of ordeal had to be found, namely rock fights that often lasted until someone was slain. Wild singing and dancing accompanied the fights, and the whole festival ended with a great sex orgy in the nearby woods. Both the rock fights and the later dragon boat races were believed to bring good luck and protection to the winners; they also both had prophylactic values for warding off evil and disease (Eberhard 1972, 78–85; also Chittick 2010, 78–80).

Ritual rock fights also took place during the Double Nine festival, held on the ninth day of the ninth lunar month, a time that marked a cyclical change from summer to autumn and was considered a "noxious season" when demons and all sorts of pests went about causing trouble. To protect themselves from danger, people climbed atop

hills and cleansed themselves by drinking chrysanthemum wine and placing leaves of the *zhuyu* plant on their bodies and on doorsills.[8] As depicted in figure 5, as part of the festival celebrations, each year hundreds of young boys formed teams and took to the vacant fields and hills near the Five-Story Pagoda (Wucenglou) in the Canton suburbs and near Dog-Head Hill (Goutoushan) in Enping County to do battle with rocks. For the youthful combatants this was a blood sport essential for proving one's masculine virility and martial skills, as well as for bringing good luck to the winners and bountiful harvests to their communities. Chrysanthemum wine, the *zhuyu* plant, and rock fights all had cautionary properties for guarding against ailments caused by demons (Wang 2006, 141).

In traditional China, violence and blood-letting rituals were key features of both popular culture and folk religion. People enjoyed watching rock fights because, as psychologists have informed us, violence has a dramatic appeal (Goldstein 1998). Blood spectacles, such as the rock fights, were grand theatrical performances. Watching violence was not only a popular form of amusement, but also something imbued with magico-religious significance for both the performer and the audience. Much like the martial temple performances described by Avron Boretz, rock fights were "a species of dramatic performance, the aesthetic power of which is inseparable from its perceived ritual efficacy" (Boretz 2011, 14). The act was more than simply violence for the sake of violence. Beyond entertainment, bloody spectacles were auspicious occasions for young and old, male and female.

The shedding of blood also gave meaning to violence. Blood was the vital force of life so important in warding off evil spirits, curing illnesses, ensuring fertility, bringing good luck, and assuring abundant crops (De Groot 1910, 6:968–69, 1178–79; Willoughby-Meade 1928, 156). These acts of violence and blood rituals, epitomized in the ritual rock fights, were part of a well-established folk tradition that was deeply rooted in the everyday life and folk culture of early modern south China.

Rock fights and the culture of violence

The Cantonese people had a somewhat deserved reputation for violence and disorderliness. In the minds of many Chinese officials and literati, the people of Guangdong were by their very nature and habit contentious and violent. In fact, I would argue, in the early modern period violence had become a part of routine life for a substantial portion of Guangdong's population, but especially for the laboring poor who lived precariously on the margins of respectable society (Antony 2016).[9]

Although, over the course of several centuries, by the late imperial period China's educated elites came to increasingly identify themselves, at least in part, by their condemnation of most forms of violence, I argue that among ordinary folks both real (physical) and symbolic (mimetic) violence remained an intrinsic and ubiquitous part of their daily lives and mentality.[10] "For men with few prospects for conventional social stature and economic stability," writes Avron Boretz, "violence . . . becomes a viable medium for self-production" (2011, 10). Indeed hardship, poverty, and prejudice made violence an overwhelmingly accepted, even necessary, part of life for the laboring poor. For them it was essential for success and maintaining credibility.

For the educated elites, violence, as expressed in rock fights or banditry, was something they associated chiefly with the unenlightened and boorish lower orders. Violent play among children was strongly disapproved among literati families, but, as we have noted, not among many commoners. For the ruling class only necessary, justified violence—such as the punishment and torture of murderers, rebels, bandits, and other hardened criminals—was acceptable, and in these cases the actual violence was normally conducted by menials and rarely by scholar-officials themselves (ter Haar 2000, 124, 136–37). The violence that would have seemed senseless and irrational to China's elites, I would suggest, was perfectly reasonable and deliberate to the poor and marginalized in society.

Rock fights, in fact, were inherent components of Guangdong's culture of violence. For most ordinary villagers, violence was an innate and pervasive part of their routine lives and mentalité. Violence was unavoidable; it permeated people's daily lives in street fights, bloody sports and amusements, operatic performances, religious ceremonies, folklore, and public floggings and executions (Antony 2020). The rock fights discussed in this article were embedded in a working-class culture where fighting and aggression were appropriate behavior and often served as a means to acquire status, honor, and prestige. Champions of rock fights were treated as local heroes, renowned in their communities. They were real people who attained their status by being the meanest, toughest, and most ruthless fighters. People living in a hostile, brutal, and exploitative environment had no difficulty viewing violence as necessary for their survival. The working-class culture of violence had a logic of its own, distinct from and in opposition to the sociocultural norms of dominant Confucian-based society (see Dunning 2000).

We can agree with Elliot Gorn, who wrote about violence in the antebellum American south, that fighting hardened working-class men for a violent social life in which the exploitation of labor, the specter of poverty, and a fierce struggle for status were daily realities. As he put it: "The touchstone of masculinity was unflinching toughness, not chivalry, duty, or piety. Violent sports, heavy drinking, and impulsive pleasure seeking were appropriate for males whose lives were hard, whose futures were unpredictable, and whose opportunities were limited" (Gorn 1985, 22, 36; for China, see Antony 2016, 2023). The culture of violence was a culture of survival for poor and marginalized members of society. Rock fights were but one of the many customary forms of violence that pervaded the lives of lower-class Chinese in the early modern era. The constant, routine exposure to brutality and violence undoubtedly allowed some people, either consciously or subconsciously, to accept violence as an unavoidable part of human nature and social relations. The daily exposure to violence perhaps, as several scholars have argued, desensitized people and allowed them to accept violence as a normal part of life (Dunning 1983, 137; Felson 1996, 120; Englander 2003, 104).

Conclusion

A different sort of Cantonese history, society, and culture emerges from this study of rock fights. It is not the one we are most accustomed to reading about in history

books. Nonetheless, this culture of violence was just as real and important as the mainstream elite culture espoused by officials, Confucian scholars, and landed gentry. To fully understand Chinese society, culture, and history, we need to also look into the lives and mentalité of those people at the lower end of the social order, not only of the men at the top. Although the sources are fragmentary, nonetheless the lives of the inarticulate cannot be ignored merely because they have left us few records. Rock fighters and the downtrodden were as much a part of China as were officials and gentry-scholars.

Rock fights were rooted in a rough-and-tumble lower-class culture in which violence played a key role in survival. In fact, among the working poor there were frequent positive reinforcements for aggressive and violent behavior. For combatants, rock fights provided valuable martial training that would be needed throughout life. They were strictly a male prerogative that both assessed and asserted a young man's masculinity and vigor. The fights taught boys how to be tough and withstand hardships; for the winners, fighting was a key to prestige, respect, and getting ahead in life. Winners were treated in their communities as heroes. Annual rock fights were a popular source of amusement that also provided a safety-valve for accumulated tensions, as well as important community-wide sacerdotal functions for securing good health and bountiful harvests. The fighters themselves embodied both the heroics of knights-errant (*youxia*) and the brutality of hooligans.[11] With rock fights there were no clear boundaries between participants and spectators, entertainment and daily life, or the secular and sacerdotal.

We must take care not to interpret the rock fights and culture of violence as unique or aberrant features of Chinese history and society. We should never exoticize the sport of rock fighting as an exclusively bloody Chinese or Asian custom. It is important to remember that ancient Roman gladiatorial contests and Aztec ball games, as well as modern boxing, football, rugby, and hockey in Western societies are also widely popular blood sports. Despite enormous cultural differences, Chinese exhibited characteristics shared across the globe.

Notes

1. In this article I use the term "working class" to simply denote that socioeconomic group of individuals and their families who, for the most part, are manual laborers whose jobs provide low pay, require limited skills, and demand physical labor.

2. On the growing disfavor for violent sports among the elite over the late imperial period, see ter Haar 2000.

3. Similarly, Inō Kanori (1917, 77) described the rock fighters in Korea as hooligans.

4. In the notes, when giving dates, the abbreviations QL, JQ, and DG stand for the Qing-dynasty emperors Qianlong, Jiaqing, and Daoguang's reigns, respectively. These abbreviations are followed by the reign year, lunar month, and date according to the Chinese lunar calendar.

5. Similarly, Chen Shengshao (1997 [1826], 29) described the merriment of a rock fight in southern Fujian: "Women and children are giggling and everywhere is filled with laughter"; and

in Korea Homer Hulbert (1905, 51) described how "crowds on the hills roar with delight and urge on the conflict."

6. Most traditional Asian vessels carried rocks and stones as ballast, which would have been readily available for use in fighting.

7. In Xinhui County (Guangdong), instead of rock fights during the *duanwu* festival, in some areas villagers beat dogs with rocks and sticks so as to drive away evil spirits (*Xinhui xianzhi* 1841, 2:63a).

8. *Zhuyu* or *cornus mas*, commonly known as cornel (or Cornelian cherry) is a species of shrub or small tree in the dogwood family; Chinese believe that its red berries have medicinal value and the leaves and branches have magical powers to exorcise evil spirits.

9. Guangdong was certainly not alone in having a penchant for violence. Rowe (2007) demonstrates how people in Macheng, Hubei, nurtured a tradition of violence that dated back to the Yuan dynasty; and Boretz (2011) has argued that Taiwan and Fujian had a longstanding ethos of violence, which was a defining characteristic of working-class culture.

10. Symbolic (or mimetic) violence here refers to violence expressed in iconography, literature, mythology, magic formulas, and ritual practices. Distinctions between real and symbolic violence were not always clear.

11. In China, knight-errant refers to the good outlaw, someone who rights wrongs and protects the weak, as epitomized in such popular novels as *Water Margin*; see Antony 2023, chapter 1.

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APPENDIX

PROVINCE	PLACE	LOCATION	TIME OF YEAR	TERMS	AGE
Guangdong	Panyu Shawan, Jiaotang	village wilds	lunar New Year (2nd-7th days)	throwing rocks at one another (*shitou xiangzhi*)	youths
Guangdong	Panyu	mountainous backwoods	lunar New Year		youths
Guangdong	Yangjiang	Killing Mound	Double Five		old and young villagers
Guangdong	Canton suburbs, Honan, Yim-poo	open plains	lunar New Year	attack with stones	18—40
Guangdong	Canton suburbs	fields near Five-Story Pagoda	Double Nine	overhand rock throwing	youths
Guangdong	Enping	Dog-Head Mound	Double Nine	overhand rock throwing	youths
Guangdong	villages near Canton		lunar New Year and Double Five		
Guangdong	Chaozhou, Chaoyang		lunar New Year	tile fighting	
Guangdong	Chaozhou, Xiajiushi		birthday of local deity		
Fujian		fertile fields	lunar New Year	fighting with rocks for fun (*doushi wei xi*)	first youths, later fathers and older brothers
Fujian	Zhangzhou, Quanzhou, Xinghua		lunar New Year	rock fighting as portent (*zhishi zhi zhao*)	youths
Fujian	Xiamen	along the coast	15th day lunar New Year	rock fighting for fun (*zhi shi zhi xi*)	
Fujian	Yunxiao	near Xiaoyin Temple and near tomb of previous official	lunar New Year	rock fighting for fun (*zhi shi zhi xi*)	
Fujian	Longhai, Zhangzhou		5th day lunar New Year	throwing rocks (*zhishi*)	youths
Fujian	Tongan, Zhangzhou	fields	lunar New Year		
Fujian	Xinghua		lunar New Year's day		first youths, later fathers and older brothers
Taiwan	Jinmen Nanshan, Beishan villages	secluded area along coast	Qingming to Double Five	rock fighting (*doushi*), throwing rocks at one another (*xiangzhi shitou*)	villagers
Taiwan	Taizhong	outside city	Double Five	rock fighting (*doushi*)	
Taiwan	Pingdong, Jiayi, Yunlin, Zhanghua, Taizhong		Double Five	rock battles (*shizhan*)	
Taiwan	Lugang (Lukang)	fields outside city	lunar New Year and Qingming		first youths, later fathers and older brothers
Hunan	Qianyang Lixi, Mohui		lunar New Year	rock fighting (*da yan*)	

Sources: *Panyu xianzhi* 1871,6:12b; Qu Dajun 1700, 9:25a; Gray 1878, 2:256-257; Wang Jiaju 2006, 141; *Canton Register* 9.8 (Feb. 23, 1836); *Lingdong Daily* (Feb. 21, 1904); Chen Shengshao 1826, 29; Zhang, Undated; *Xiamen zhi*, j.15; Yunxiao tingzhi 1816, 3:11b; DeGlopper 1995, 140-142; Ino 1917, 77; *Qianyang xianzhi* 1874; "Duanwu jiajie, Taiwan pian" June 18, 2018.

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"This Is Truly My Favorite Place to Be"

Buddhist Family Atmospheres in Secular Spaces

Since the triple disaster of 2011, parents in Fukushima Prefecture have been raising their children under a cloud of uncertainty about possible radiation in their environment. This article explores Buddhist responses to the precarity of these families as well as former Hansen's disease patients. Ethnographic research at a weeklong retreat for Fukushima families that Jōdo Shinshū clerics host each summer at a former national leprosarium in Western Japan provides a ground-level view of the complex interaction between Buddhism, the state, and the suffering of its citizens. I argue that Buddhism provides the human and liturgical resources to create an environment of ease, joy, and comfort, giving participants a temporary "home." In addition, the retreat is intentionally cast as a space to criticize and recuperate power from a Japanese government that is not to be trusted.

Keywords: precarity—emotions—secularization—Fukushima—Pure Land Buddhism

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Seventy-four-year-old Adachi's face showed only faint signs of paralysis from the effects of the *mycobacterium leprae*.[1] Nonetheless, his diagnosis with Hansen's disease in 1974 had meant that he was forced to leave his home in Osaka and live here at Kōmyōen, a state-run sanatorium on an island off the coast of Okayama, for several decades. As the current head of the neighborhood council (*jichikai*) at Kōmyōen, Adachi now stood at the podium at the front of the banquet room and took the mic to deliver a welcome message to roughly one hundred people who had gathered here for the weeklong "Exciting Retreat Tour" (*Waku waku hoyō tsuā*). The welcome party's guests included a dozen or so other residents of the sanatorium, six mothers and their young children from Fukushima Prefecture, and a number of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist clerics and their families. His welcome speech for the Fukushima families who would spend a week of leisure on the island concluded: "Welcome [*yōkoso*] to Kōmyōen! We hope you enjoy your retreat here this week. What a fine feast has been prepared. Please enjoy the Yebisu beer that my wife sent along, since she couldn't be here herself. Everyone, welcome home [*okaeri nasai*]! *Kanpai*!" Each guest and host raised their glasses of beer, juice, or cold tea, and responded in unison, "*Kanpai*!"

The two different expressions translating to "welcome" that Adachi used in his brief toast signal the practice of reconstructing home that takes place at the yearly retreat for families from Fukushima. "*Yōkoso*," on the one hand, is a hospitable greeting offered to someone visiting a place that is not their home. It is used by innkeepers to welcome guests, for instance, or tourist bureaus to welcome visitors to their town. "*Okaeri nasai*," on the other hand, is the greeting given by someone who has remained at home to those who are returning. It is the "welcome back" uttered by mothers when their children return from school every afternoon. The shift from one to the other in Adachi's speech evinces a deliberate invitation for the young families from Fukushima to make themselves at home in this most unlikely place: a national sanatorium (*kokuritsu ryōyōsho*) housing around one hundred Hansen's disease patients with an average age of eighty-six, located on a remote island in Okayama Prefecture (Shinshū Ōtaniha Kaihō Suishin Honbu 2018, 191).

After the toast, I turned to the Fukushima parent next to me, a stout and outgoing woman named Maki, and asked how she heard about this retreat. She explained that her family doctor had advised her to take her children out of Fukushima for at least one month out of the year because of radiation concerns, so she had searched the internet for "retreats" (*hoyō*). "There are lots of them. We go to several different

Figure 1. Children peering inside the costume of Komyo-tan, Kōmyōen's mascot, at the welcome party. Photograph by Jessica Starling (2019).

ones during the school break. But the atmosphere at each is different. This one is the warmest." She told me that when she first attended four years ago, her son had been shy and resistant. Reluctant to go off and play with the other kids, he had preferred to cling to her side. "But now he's gotten more comfortable," she said, nodding at her son, who, now nine years old, was happily sitting at another table with a boy his age who he had met last year (see children playing at the welcome dinner in figure 1).

How are we to make sense of the coming together of these two seemingly unrelated groups of people, and their restructured relationship to each other and to the space of the island sanatorium into one that resembles home-like familiarity—all at the invitation of Buddhist "hosts" whose own temples are hours away? I argue that it is a form of low-frequency Buddhism, an understated and elusive incarnation of a religion whose institutional dominance and public presence in Japan has been waning for most of the modern period. Buddhist doctrine, personnel, and institutional histories and networks are the very reason for the existence of this retreat, and yet the presence of the religion can be nearly imperceptible to those participants who are not tuned in to the "Buddhist frequency."

This article draws on participant observation and interviews to present a detailed snapshot of what Buddhist mobilization in response to suffering looks like in a culture known for being inhospitable to public demonstrations of religious faith. Buddhist clerics act here in a mode that defies categorization as spiritual, clinical, or even religious (at least as it is conventionally conceived). Buddhist actors work to fill in the gaps of family, society, and government by making intergenerational connections and creating space for articulating critical views of government policy. They do this work in secular spaces—in community halls, dormitories, and hospital rooms—as well as, briefly, in the small Buddhist chapel and interdenominational ossuary on the island. And for the most part, they do it not through formal liturgy or preaching, but through joviality and hospitality. Explicit discussions of doctrine are absent, in favor

of creating an easygoing atmosphere for participants, to reclaim a space for "humane living" (*ningen rashiku ikiru*).

Taking up recent calls to attend to the aesthetics and emotions of Buddhist belonging (Baffelli et al., 2021), this study complements previous scholars' focus on media, politics, and the clinical aspects of religious mobilization in post-3/11 Japan by bringing emotions and relationships into view. Detailed ethnographic vignettes allow a focus on feeling and atmosphere as instruments of place- and family-making, highlighting "the highly personal relations that constitute the very threads with which the fabrics of communities are woven" (Baffelli and Schröer 2021, 453)—even communities that are as spatially and temporally circumscribed as the one formed at this retreat. While some theories of emotions emphasize their systemization into "regimes" or rulebooks that operate on a hegemonic level (Reddy 2001), for the participants in the retreat, feelings of belonging—or of not belonging—defy such regimentation. Instead, the shared experience of "feeling differently" (Gammerl, Hutta, and Scheer 2017) creates a space in which the participants from Fukushima can restructure their relationships to their hometowns and government, and gain knowledge that empowers them to feel more confident in their critical-outsider position even after returning home to Fukushima. By participating in this familial yet ephemeral community, participants are "moved by feelings into a different relationship to the norms" of their family, neighborhood, and national government (Ahmed 2014, 201).

Throughout the retreat, Buddhist clerics move through and redefine secular spaces, their activities rooted in a sectarian cosmology and Buddhist moral vocabulary. Rather than operating as a normative emotional program or regime, Buddhism plays here on a very low frequency, primarily discernable to those trained in the tradition.[2] Buddhism is the animating factor for a network of actors whose religious backgrounds enable them to produce a familial atmosphere even in the most institutional of spaces. In what follows, I overview the historical relationship between Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists and Hansen's disease sanatoriums, highlighting the motivations of the organizers for pairing these two groups, who are connected by having been alienated from their natal hometowns as a result of political failures. I then explore the affective practices of placemaking in the examples of a roundtable discussion, a welcome party, and a Buddhist ritual. Throughout my analysis of the weeklong retreat, a sense of both the political and the familial nature of this low-frequency Buddhism clearly emerges.

Buddhism, Hansen's disease, and radiation

The founding organizers of the Exciting Retreat Tour, which premiered less than six months after the nuclear disaster of 2011, are two Jōdo Shinshū clerics (*sōryo*): Mori, a woman in her fifties who is co-priest with her husband of a tiny temple in Kyoto Prefecture, and Nishi, a man in his forties who is the resident priest of a temple in Okayama Prefecture.[3] Nishi and Mori have long-running ties to the sanatorium at Nagashima Kōmyōen and the one on the adjacent island of Aiseien, because of their

sect's historical involvement in ministering to Hansen's disease patients quarantined there since before World War II.

Those diagnosed with Hansen's disease have been one of the most stigmatized populations in modern Japanese history, a stigma that has been supported by a variety of biological, social, and religious factors. As Susan Burns has written, in the early twentieth century, attitudes about leprosy were characterized by a combination of "fear of infection, hereditary transmission, and the still potent idea of karmic retribution" (2019, 162). As a result, medical victims became social victims: they were isolated in remote sanatoriums, some of which were built by the government. The government's official "leprosy prevention policy," which mandated the relocation and quarantine of those diagnosed, has been blamed in a series of lawsuits for the trauma patients experienced, but families and neighbors also participated in the treatment of patients as objects of avoidance and shame (Hosoda 2010; Hirokawa 2011). As they endured relocation, many patients were also compelled to change their names to alleviate possible discrimination against their natal families, and sterilization was a common practice (Fujino 2001). As a result, residents became mostly cut off from their hometowns and natal households.

Susan Burns has argued that the sanatoriums established by the government as "Japan's first effort at building social welfare institutions on a national scale" were "not 'total institutions,'" in the sense described by Erving Goffman, but were in fact "complex communities that defy easy characterization as prison, hospital, village, colony, or sanctuary" (2019, 132–33). After World War II, the drug Promin, which was effective at killing the bacteria and therefore obviated the need for isolation of patients, became widely available. Patients who were cured were technically allowed to leave the sanitaria, and some were able to receive job training and be resettled, especially if they bore no visible marks of the disease. But reintegration into a society that so stigmatized their disease was difficult if not impossible for most. By the late 1960s, most of those who were able to return to society and live among other healthy citizens had done so. The population of the nation's sanatoriums thereafter became stabilized with mostly life-long residents. A 2001 poll conducted by the National Association of Residents in Hansen's Disease Sanatoriums found that less than 2% of the 4,388 people living in sanatoriums were interested in returning to society (Dessi 2007, 176).

For most of the twentieth century, Buddhist institutions were supportive of the state's policy toward Hansen's disease patients, just as they supported other imperial projects.[4] Emblematic of the Jōdo Shinshū's involvement was the formation of a group within the Ōtani denomination called Kōmyōkai, named after the Buddhist heroine Empress Kōmyō (701–760) who was said to have practiced charity to lepers. The abbess of Higashi Honganji, Ōtani Satoko (1906–1989), was made the general secretary of the association, whose position was to fully support the quarantining of patients away from the rest of the society for "the benefit of the nation" (Hishiki 1996, 30). Today, progressive Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists look back with shame at the "consolation sermons" (*imon fukyō*) preached by their institutional predecessors to residents of the sanatorium.[5] The Ōtani institution even issued an official apology in 1996 for its role in past discrimination (Dessi 2007, 178). The shift in the Shin Buddhist

doctrinal stance toward leprosy is clear from the abundance of publications over the past several decades with titles such as *Hansen's Disease and Shinshū: From Isolation to Liberation* (Shinshū Ōtaniha 1996), and *Now, Walking Together Side by Side: Through Our Encounters with Hansen's Disease Survivors* (Shinshū Ōtaniha Hansenbyō Mondai ni kansuru Kondankai 2003).

This historical entanglement with Hansen's disease has led to Jōdo Shinshū clerics' continued presence at the various national sanitaria throughout Japan, where around one-third of residents belong to a Jōdo Shinshū–related group (Dessi 2007, 174, citing a 2004 census). A small but active network of volunteers have been visiting residents of various sanatoriums, including Kōmyōen, since the 1990s. Volunteers are temple priests, wives, or both; most of their relationships to residents of the sanitaria go back decades. Higashi Honganji's district office in Okayama City supports these activities, with officials often shuttling volunteers from the train station in Okayama to Kōmyōen and Aiseien, both island sanatoriums about forty-five minutes away.

The long-running relationship between the Ōtani institution and the residents, staff, and administrators at the public sanatorium laid the groundwork for stalwart volunteers like Mori and Nishi to persuade Kōmyōen's administration to agree to host the retreat for Fukushima families. Given the natural beauty and spaciousness of the island sanatorium—related to its original function as a rehabilitation facility for Hansen's disease patients—they reasoned that an intergenerational week of hospitality and fun here would be healing both for the Kōmyōen residents and the Fukushima families. They swiftly mobilized their fellow Jōdo Shinshū clerics to act as volunteer staff at the retreat, which was first held in August of 2011.

Mori, Nishi, and their Jōdo Shinshū Ōtani-ha network were among many groups—some religious and others secular, some ad hoc and others more established—that moved to organize retreats to elicit the refreshment (*rifuresshu*), recovery (*kaifuku*), and smiles (*egao*) of young children who could not play freely outdoors in Fukushima (Nishimura 2014). The families who attend the Exciting Retreat Tour mainly hail from Fukushima City, which is about 40 miles from the Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Although they have not been completely displaced like those who lived inside the exclusion zone immediately proximate to the power plant, they experience stress and alienation from the land around them as a result of contamination (*osen*) from the 2011 nuclear disaster. This is the major reason for their attendance at out-of-prefecture retreats during their children's summer vacation: to enjoy a respite from the anxiety of unknown risk in their surroundings, and to enjoy clean air and fresh local vegetables.

While there are many retreats for Fukushima families, the Exciting Retreat Tour is unique in its location, and the combination of causes and populations that it intentionally brings together. Nishi, the temple priest from Okayama prefecture who co-founded the event, connects the Fukushima families and those diagnosed with Hansen's disease by emphasizing the sanctity of life (*inochi*) and its violation in both cases. In Nishi's mind, the suffering of both groups is directly linked to the Japanese state's failures:

> The people from Fukushima are connected to the sanatorium residents by sharing the same hardship of having had the government's policies rob them of being able

> to live a humane life [*ningen rashiku ikiru*], so that's why we host the retreat at the sanatorium. What it means to have a "humane life," what it means to have one's life [*inochi*] protected—I want the retreat to be a time and space for all of the people who participate to come together to [discuss] what this means.

Though "precarity" is somewhat amorphous and perhaps overused as an analytical concept, it has resonance here. Nishi identifies a precariousness in the sense given by Judith Butler as living a "damaged life" (Butler 2016, 201; see also Butler 2020), one with its roots in failed government policy. What's more, both groups' relationships to their hometowns have been cut off or contaminated, a mark of "the ontological disembedding of people from distinctively place-based associations" that Melinda Hinkson identifies as a feature of precarity (Hinkson 2017, 58). The rectification of this "disembedding" of the participants' relationship to place is part of the aim of the retreat. Rather than re-embedding participants in their native land, however, a family-like atmosphere is created at the island sanatorium—a place where no one is from. As I discuss below, many aspects of the emotionally charged notion of a *furusato*—a term that literally means hometown or "native place," but which also evokes "a warm, fuzzy, familial and ultimately maternal aura" (Robertson 1997, 103)—are deployed throughout the retreat to accomplish this.

The political dimension of Nishi's diagnosis of the cause of both groups' suffering is striking: he lays the blame squarely at the government's feet. A number of successful lawsuits have established the Japanese government's culpability in enacting discriminatory policies toward Hansen's disease patients and permitting human rights abuses to take place in sanitaria for many years (Hosoda 2010). The state is also seen as culpable for the Fukushima families' suffering in a number of ways, including insufficient regulation of nuclear energy and obfuscation of radiation levels in the surrounding areas after the nuclear disaster. An investigation commissioned by Japan's National Diet found that the nuclear devastation in Fukushima was the result of "a multitude of errors and willful negligence" on the part of the government (National Diet of Japan 2012, 9).

Even after the disaster, the state actively enjoined the population to move on from lingering fears about radiation exposure. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries enacted an emotional program, via a national advertising campaign, to calm growing concerns about food contamination and to lessen the impact of what they called "harmful rumors" (*fūhyōhigai*), as consumer avoidance was reducing sales of food products from the affected area. The voice-over of the advertisements said, "Today, all of Japan is closely connected through our good food and our pleasure in eating together, *Itadakimasu*!" (Kimura 2016, 7). Many citizens' groups reacted to the government's radiation policy with skepticism and anger (Oudheusden 2020; Ogawa 2023). Nicolas Sternsdorff-Cisterna has documented the resulting rise of "scientific citizenship," through which individual citizens acquired scientific literacy in order to "challenge the government narratives of safety after the disaster" (2019, 3). Most mothers who sign up to attend this and other retreats are seeking to become such citizen scientists, gaining empowerment through knowledge of the actual, rather than government-reported, radiation levels in the environment and the accompanying risk to their children. Thus food, hometown, scientific knowledge, and politics are

intertwined in the experience of Fukushima residents after 2011, a connection that is seen clearly in the ethnographic descriptions of the retreat that follow.

In characterizing this multifaceted suffering and the need to respond to it, the Buddhist organizers usually employ an ecumenical and humanistic rhetoric of respecting human life. This is in accord with accounts of secularization that describe "the appearance of a type of public religion focused on suffering and compassion" (Berman 2018, 229, citing Isomae 2014) rather than doctrinal specificity. Religions acting in the public sphere tend to mostly adopt and reproduce the values and ethical vocabularies of the secular mainstream. Michael Berman has even argued, with Junichi Isomae, that the work of Buddhist clerics as spiritual chaplains in disaster areas is an example of "religion against religions." By this they mean that religionists' public spiritual work "weakens their particular religion" by pulling them away from their duties as resident priests of their home temples (2018, 238). This line of argument reflects a certain understanding of religion, and specifically Buddhism, as properly existing in its most common institutional form.

However, we should not mistake the act of code-switching, or as Isaac Gagne calls it, "reflexive secularization" (2017), for the abandonment of religious means and motivations entirely. If we dig more deeply into the thought process of the Buddhist organizers and the atmosphere that they work to produce at the retreat, we can discern a more diffuse form of Buddhism, one that is animated by enduring institutional networks, sectarian doctrine, and religious professionals who are equipped precisely by their identities as Buddhist clerics to do this kind of public work.[6] Further, as I demonstrate in the next section, rather than mere conformity to and reproduction of dominant political and cultural frameworks, Buddhist actors actually create a space for challenging them.

Figure 2. The schedule for the 2019 Exciting Retreat Tour, primarily featuring recreational activities and opportunities to gather and eat. Photograph by Jessica Starling (2019).

Feeling differently: Gender, family, and politics at the retreat

Rather than making Buddhism an explicit aspect of the retreat, the organizers focus on creating a time and place for the mothers and their children from Fukushima, none of whom identify as Buddhist, to be at ease (figure 2). From the organizers' perspective, the attainment of true relief from their damaged lives in Fukushima requires coming to terms with the causes of their suffering. The retreat therefore included a carefully curated opportunity for the mothers to recount the ways in which they felt uneasy and out of sync with others in their community in Fukushima, including their husbands, because of their continued fear of the possibility of radiation exposure.

The hosts made no move to introduce a Buddhist framing, either to the suffering or its resolution, and were instead intent on affirming the women's experiences and connecting their situations to that of the Hansen's disease patients, as people whose lives have been damaged by misinformation and government failures. Through the externalization and affirmation of these feelings against a backdrop of familial ease, women connected their narratives of feeling differently than the government expected them to feel about radiation risk in Fukushima with those of their peers, and sought empowerment through community and knowledge about radiation and risk that they could bring back home with them.

This roundtable testimonial session took place on the first morning of the retreat. After an outdoor stretching (*taisō*) session and breakfast at the dormitory where the families were staying, the children put on water gear and everyone walked together to the community hall. Several priests wearing athletic clothes and towels around their necks set up tent canopies out front to protect from the blazing sun, and began blowing up a giant pool and filling it with water. While the younger male volunteers played outside with the children, the mothers entered the air-conditioned community hall, where they sat around a large circle of tables and were served tea and snacks by some female volunteers. The two lead organizers of the retreat, Nishi and Mori, introduced the session and then passed a mic around for the mothers to tell their individual stories of hardship. Two other Buddhist volunteers sat outside the circle and took notes about the mothers' stories, as did I.

Maki, who I had sat next to at the welcome party, went first:

> I guess the two main issues with raising kids in Fukushima are the questions about the safety of local vegetables, and the potential dangers of letting our kids play outside. These two problems present a challenge for mothers: how can we raise our kids in a healthy way? . . . I often end up just letting my children play video games all day. I don't usually talk about this, but when I look at my younger daughter and I look at my son, I think, the younger one has more body strength than the older one. That's because of how they were raised, and how he was made to stay inside all the time and just played video games. Basically, we have to make a lot of judgment calls as we raise our children, which is really stressful.

She reported facing a moral dilemma, echoed by others, about whether to allow her children to eat locally grown vegetables. Maki teared up several times during her talk, before finishing and passing the mic on to the next woman.

Chie, a diminutive and stylish young mother, gave a similar account of uncertainty and relentless caution about allowing her children to walk to school, eat the prepared school lunch offered there, or even play in the park next to their home where there sat numerous large garbage bags of collected soil, presumably contaminated with radiation. Unlike Maki, however, Chie also had a story of empowerment to share. She had started a mother's circle to exchange information and support with other mothers, who now numbered twenty. Chie reported that "some members are just so scared they are paralyzed. They're just scared, period. There's nothing that can be done about it." However, leading this group of women, bonded by their experience of fear and unease, had given Chie a sense of purpose amidst such uncertainty: "My efforts in this circle are really my salvation now." Like Maki, Chie became tearful during her time holding the mic.

The other mothers reiterated the themes that these two raised of distrusting the government's information about radiation risks in the land around their homes, and in the foods grown nearby. They expressed the heavy burden of a constant, low-grade anxiety that attends the constant weighing of safety and risk as they rear their children. Many have made the painful choice to deprive their children of some of the most quintessential Japanese childhood experiences, such as playing at neighborhood playgrounds, swimming in the school pool, eating school lunch, and enjoying vegetables from nearby farms.

When each of the mothers had finished talking, the mic returned to Nishi, the male organizer of the retreat. He asked whether the children's fathers were supportive of their concerns, and of their choice to bring their children to these retreats. Maki answered:

> My husband thinks completely differently about the issue of radiation than I do. He thinks, if the government says it's fine, it's fine. He doesn't see the need for me to take the kids away from Fukushima, or get them tested. But I have to get his permission to come to these things, right? So, usually I say, "We need to get [our son] away from the video games" as a reason to come, and he can't help but agree with that. I actually fight with my husband all the time, we don't get along at all. I have thought many times about getting a divorce, but in the end, I don't want my children to grow up without a dad, so I have stayed with him.

The other women similarly expressed the wish that their own husbands would show more concern about the risks of radiation, a trend that's in keeping with Kimura's findings about the gendered politics of food and its sphere of concern in Japan (Kimura 2016).

Nishi and his younger brother, who sat next to him, each took the mic to respond to the women's stories. The two men were in their forties and thirties, respectively, and both were husbands, fathers, and resident priests at Jōdo Shinshū temples in Okayama Prefecture. The older brother expressed sympathy for the women's burden of worrying for their children and having to constantly second-guess information they get from the government about environmental safety. He pointed out the added burden of carrying that worry alone without friends or spouses who they could share it with. The younger brother offered an explanation of where the fathers might be coming from: perhaps women just have a more intuitive concern for their kids, and

fathers are more distant from those emotions. He quickly followed that insight with the declaration that, "Of course, these differences are not inevitable," suggesting that he understood such differences to be socially conditioned to some extent, rather than innate.[7]

As the roundtable came to a close, mics were powered down, but informal conversations continued as everyone helped to rearrange the room in preparation for the children to rejoin and the volunteers to serve lunch (figure 3). While carrying chairs to the front of the room, Maki turned to Mori and commented how much she appreciated the opportunity to speak about these things with others who understood. It just wasn't comfortable to bring them up in public back in Fukushima, where most people now preferred to act as if things were back to normal.

Figure 3. Temple wife volunteers from Kyoto serving curry to participants. Photograph by Jessica Starling (2019).

The public yet intimate disclosures by the participants, as well as tears and even catharsis, are a perennial feature of the retreat. The women's emotional vulnerability is met with care and sympathy by the Buddhist volunteers, in the manner of surrogate family members. The compassionate, attentive masculinity modeled by the male priests contrasted starkly with the distanced lack of concern displayed by the women's own husbands. Meanwhile, the younger, unmarried priests outside served as avuncular babysitters for the women's children, splashing in the wading pools and playing catch, getting wet and sunburnt so that the mothers could talk and drink tea in peace inside. Before and after meals, some male volunteers took an active role in cooking and cleaning up, which is still extremely rare in married Japanese households (although on balance, the female volunteers performed a greater proportion of the kitchen work). The roundtable—and the entire retreat—thus became a space for critiquing the gendered division of labor that they carry out within their own families, and even for articulating and performing alternatives to those gender norms.

In addition to gender relations, alternative sources of knowledge and scientific authority were also discussed. Chie, the petite woman who had created a food safety circle for other mothers, was especially eager to share her scientific research and discoveries surrounding "detox" methods with the other mothers and priests.

When Chie described her self-made mastery of detoxification in defiance of official government information, Buddhist volunteers quickly make the connection to Hansen's disease. Ogawa, a female priest in her sixties from Osaka, advised Chie to get a nutritionist's license, so that people would believe her when she taught them about this method. She warned, "If you don't have credentials, they'll just go on trusting whatever their doctor told them. That's what happened in the case of Hansen's disease. Doctors gave inaccurate information about what caused it and how it spread, but people believed it, just because they were doctors!"

This exchange reflects how the Buddhist volunteers position themselves as critics of the unquestioned hegemony of the government and the medical establishment. They encourage the participants to claim that authority for themselves through scientific education and credentialing. It also underscores the throughline between the two groups, from the Buddhists' perspective: they both have suffered harm due to government failure. This subtext of the retreat became explicit twice in the schedule: on day two, the children listened to a lecture by the chief administrator of the sanatorium about the history of Hansen's disease in Japan; and on day five, the families walked around to visit individual residents' rooms to hear more about their stories.

The pairing of these two groups in the retreat achieves more than critical political awareness, however: it also produces affective, intergenerational connections. With an average age of eighty-six among sanatorium residents, the majority of whom are childless, the presence of youth is rare. Indeed, family visitors of any kind are uncommon; a 1996 a survey conducted by the Kyushu Federation of Bar Associations found that 23.8 percent of residents had absolutely no relationship with their birth families. Many of those who do have some relationship are limited to a few phone calls per year (Araragi 2017, 115). Sociologist Araragi Yukiko, who conducted oral histories of Hansen's disease patients at sanatoriums in Kyushu, argues that entering into the social world of residents forces us to think differently about the very concept of family (2017, 114–15). The Buddhist volunteers, whose own family lives have always been entangled with a religious institution and its stakeholders, are well positioned to do just that. The presence of children at the sanatorium, when the first retreat was held in 2011, had a profound emotional impact on the elderly residents. A member of the Kyoto-based group of Jōdo Shinshū volunteers called Rūri no Kai recounted to me the first year the event took place. Tears welled in the volunteer's eyes as she described the surprise with which the elderly residents had responded to being called "*jīchan*" or "*bāchan*" ("grandpa" or "grandma," affectionate terms for the elderly) for the first time in their lives. "They didn't even know that the children were talking to them," she explained.

These familial and political aspects of the retreat are in fact inseparable. The construction of a home away from home is only made necessary because the citizens' relationship to the land of their upbringing has been contaminated or completely severed by political and societal failures. The Buddhist organizers are aware that the context for participants' alienation is fundamentally structural. By pointing out a longer-running trend of discriminatory and untrustworthy behavior by the state and urging participants to develop their own expertise in risk assessment, they aim

to foster individual empowerment very much in line with neoliberal realities. By inhabiting the secular, public space of the sanatorium's dormitories and community halls in this way, Buddhist volunteers remake those places into spaces for articulating and offloading the burden that mothers bear as a result of the Fukushima disaster, and equipping them with alternative relational and scientific practices that they can bring back with them to Fukushima. In the next section I consider how food, drawing on regional identity, and an atmosphere of familial fun are instruments for helping to "rehumanize" the lives of participants at the retreat.

A time and space to feel human

At the strained edges of marriages, among women who are raising children in a state of fear of radiation and distrust of the government, the felt absence of comfort and normalcy creates an emotional vacuum—a vacuum in which a new kind of atmosphere can be created. During this week, suspended in the summer vacation period during the month of August when children are freed from the regular routine of school attendance, Buddhist volunteers transform the clinical spaces of the sanatorium into a place that has the "warm, fuzzy, familial" aura of a *furusato* (Robertson 1997, 103). This work of creating a family atmosphere in some ways resembles the efforts of the Shinto-derived Japanese NGO studied by Chika Watanabe, whose mission includes "making *furusato*" (*furusato-zukuri*) in its development work in Myanmar, as part of its environmentalist vision of reconstituting human relationships with the natural world (2019, 87–118). Similar affective associations, including a sense of loss and nostalgia, are at play here. While the social world of the retreat is certainly a product of the organizers' Buddhist "moral imagination" (as I discuss in the final section), there is nothing explicitly or formally Buddhist about the sense of belonging that is created.

The social ritual that kicked off this process was the welcome banquet (*kangeikai*). On the first night of the retreat, I sat at one of a dozen or so tables on which had been arranged a staggering number of homemade dishes, including roast beef and hand-smoked cheeses, spaghetti, wieners and various fried foods, a variety of pickled vegetables (*tsukemono*), pizza, and *takoyaki*. The feast must have taken all day for a team of at least ten cooks, all Jōdo Shinshū temple wives or female priests from the Kansai region of Japan, to prepare. There was also a wrapped store-bought box of sushi at each of our seats, and a large supply of beer, sake, wine, and *shōchū* at the back of the room waiting to be poured.

After his welcoming toast, quoted at the top of this article, Adachi, the town council president, returned to his seat at the end of our table and immediately dug into the *takoyaki*. "I love *takoyaki* because I'm an Osakan," he explained to me between bites. When he finished one plateful, we passed him down another. Ogawa, a temple wife also from Osaka who was flitting around the room delivering food, filling drinks, and introducing people to each other, approached Adachi, put her hand affectionately on his shoulder and lowered herself so that their heads were level with one another. "Do you like the takoyaki? I made it!" Adachi asked if there was any *shōchū*, and Ogawa ran back to the kitchen to fetch it. She came back and poured *shōchū* mixed with water for

Figure 4. Menu at the sanatorium highlighting local food from residents' respective hometowns featured in the cafeteria menu. Photograph by Jessica Starling (2019).

both him and the other sanatorium resident at the table, a man in a wheelchair with dyed black hair and thick opaque glasses covering his failing eyes. When the pickled vegetables (*tsukemono*) were passed around the table later, the man in the wheelchair informed us that he was an expert on pickles, because he was from Kyoto.

Although resonant in many ways with Paulina Kolata and Gwendolyn Gillson's observation about the power of food currency and food consumption to inculcate Buddhist belonging in Japan (Kolata and Gillson 2021), the belonging effected here is not particularly Buddhist. Rather than the traditional Buddhist vegetarian fare (*shōjin ryōri*) that would be served after a Jōdo Shinshū ritual, the dishes are generalized Japanese party fare, with regional associations. This is a key component of the "rehumanizing" that the Buddhist organizers aimed to effect. Even though most of the residents had not actually lived in their hometowns for many decades, they continued to identify with those places in ways as minute as food preferences and expertise in regional dishes. In the hallway outside of this banquet hall (which is on most days a cafeteria for residents), a poster on the bulletin board indicated that the nutritionists at the sanatorium reinforced the regional identification of residents with the dishes that their hometowns were known for (figure 4).

Identifying with a particular regional food, and bonding over that identification with others from that region, serves as a way of reasserting a patient's claim to their natal home and identity. For Fukushima families as well, the loss of the ability to comfortably consume local food due to contamination concerns was a key aspect of their precarity. For this reason, the Buddhist organizers always schedule a stop at a local produce stand on the last day of the retreat so that the mothers can stock up on uncontaminated, fresh vegetables to take home with them.

Over the course of two hours at the welcome party, we packed as much food and drink into ourselves as we could while listening to several more speeches from the organizers, other residents, and the chief administrator of the sanatorium. Eventually, the mic was passed around for everyone else to give their self-introductions, including the children, who nervously obliged. When it was Maki's turn, she described how

much she and her children enjoyed returning here every year. Her throat tightened with emotion as she concluded, "This is truly my favorite place to be." At a time when Japanese people increasingly complain of having no "*ibasho*" or place where they can be themselves—and considering how very arbitrary this physical place is with regards to Maki's biography—this is a remarkable statement.

Some insights from recent scholarship on the aesthetics of religious belonging can help us tune in to the Buddhist elements of placemaking here. We might count this retreat among the "alternative Buddhist moral space-making processes" identified by Yasmin Cho in contemporary suburban China. Cho's study focuses on the eclectic activities of lay devotees of a Tibetan lama, centered at a Buddhist-themed organic goods store where vegetarian dinners and public events on social issues are hosted. The objects, incense, music, and conversation that take place in the store "spatially charged the shop" in such a way that a visitor felt "something Buddhist hanging in the air" (2023, 8). In Cho's study, the "sense" of Buddhism conveyed to clients at a suburban Buddhist-themed organic products shop is as a "brand of wholesome products to consume, a well-being lifestyle to follow, and a superior morality to uphold" (ibid., 4). Indeed, most scholarship on Buddhist atmospheres in capitalist contexts has emphasized the charisma or brand value wielded by Buddhist semantics, objects, rituals, or individuals (for instance, Prohl 2020; Williams-Oerberg 2021; Brown 2022).

However, the presence and value of Buddhism at the Exciting Retreat Tour are somewhat different than this. Rather than an explicitly Buddhist atmosphere, what is created is a *familial* atmosphere, made by Buddhists for Buddhist reasons. The various participants, including Hansen's disease patients, Fukushima families, and Jōdo Shinshū priests, do not all share a Buddhist cosmology, vocabulary, or identity. Instead, they share a sense of what a *furusato* should be like, and what it should feel like. On a ritual level, rather than explicitly Buddhist forms, the organizers primarily rely on more universal social rituals such as the welcome party, along with local food practices and the labor of hospitality, to generate the feeling of a home away from home. As I explore in the next section, the Buddhist ritual and doctrinal notes of the emotional program of the retreat are deliberately muted for the sake of the participants, who mostly do not identify as Buddhist.

"The very image of the Pure Land": Low-frequency Buddhism at the retreat

When I asked Mori whether she makes an effort to insert the teachings into the retreat, she replied:

> This isn't an activity we do in order to attract Jōdo Shinshū adherents, so we don't purposefully create situations to deliver Buddhist teachings. However, the [retreat] staff are all somehow in contact with the teachings of Buddhism and the Jōdo Shinshū, so they are participating in their own ways of living [Buddhism]. . . . The Shinshū has a teaching that the existence of everyone, everywhere, and at all times is equally valuable.

Figure 5. Mori hands out prayer beads for use in the Buddhist service. Photograph by Jessica Starling (2019).

Mori is careful to distinguish between propagation activities intended to spread the Buddhist teachings and this retreat, which has a more secular aim. However, she maintains that the motivation and connections—institutional, interpersonal, and karmic—that draw the staff to participate are inevitably Buddhist.

Mori asserts a trimmed-down version of Shin Buddhist ethics to underpin the retreat: "the existence of everyone, everywhere, and at all times is equally valuable." Nishi explained the minimal, unobtrusive presence of Buddhism: "As for Buddhist-related materials, we do put a leaflet in their take-home bags that explains the teachings in simple terms." He also pointed out that they always made sure to include memorial services at both Kōmyōen and Aiseien (a sanatorium on an adjoining island) at some point during the week. The memorial service I attended at the Jōdo Shinshū temple on Kōmyōen, it turned out, was extraordinarily brief, and whatever explicit lessons it communicated were focused more on history and the loneliness of those Hansen's disease patients who were shipped off to and then passed away on the island, than on Buddhist teachings. This was in line with the focus of the organizers on highlighting the existence of suffering in the form of isolation and alienation from one's home, as part of a program of returning participants to a more "humane life."

After lunch on the second day, everyone walked to the "temple street" (*teramachi*) on the island, where small chapels belonging to the Nichiren, Jōdo Shinshū, Shingon, Tenrikyō, and Kongōkyō traditions were clustered around a short cul-de-sac, with the island's communal ossuary across the street. Most of the chapels are no longer in use; only the Jōdo Shinshū temple has a relatively active lay group of residents and a group of clerics who visit the temple monthly.

Before we entered the temple, Mori gave each Fukushima child a prayer bracelet made of plastic beads, which they would later take home with them (figure 5). We removed our shoes and stepped up into a narrow hallway before entering the modest main hall, with tatami floors and about a dozen low chairs set up for the Fukushima children. Some of their mothers sat with them, others knelt in the back. The priests

Figure 6. Nishi explains the connection between Jōdo Shinshū priests and the sanatorium. Photograph by Jessica Starling (2019).

Figure 7. Two children listen to the priest's chanting. Photograph by Jessica Starling (2019).

and their families knelt on the floor. The Fukushima children looked at each other as they tried to figure out how to correctly hold their beads.

Nishi, a towel wrapped around his neck to absorb summer sweat, face tanned from a summer full of outdoor activities, gave some opening remarks in a voice directed at the elementary school children in front of him: "This is a Jōdo Shinshū temple. It's a very important place, because it's the reason all of us staff members first came to this island. Now Mr. Akamatsu is going to perform a service. Please chant along if you want" (figure 6). Nishi framed the significance of the temple in terms of its having provided the connection—historical, and implicitly karmic—between the Shinshū priests and the sanatorium. No more substantial content about Buddhism, or the Jōdo Shinshū specifically, was offered.

Akamatsu, tall and slim with a cleanly shaven head and a thin goatee, wearing sheer black summer robes and a stole over his athletic wear, nodded and took his

place at the front of the hall, facing the altar to Amida. As soon as he sounded the bell and settled into his initial *nembutsu*,[8] the two boys in front looked nervously at each other, glancing behind them to see what everyone else was doing. They were obviously unfamiliar with Buddhist ceremonies. The children of the Buddhist volunteers, though, had their beads in place and were sitting at attention while Akamatsu, whose children sat in the back, faced the Buddhist image in the inner altar and began chanting a Jōdo Shinshū scripture. The Buddhist volunteers, both children and parents, chanted along, as if they did this every day. Indeed, they may have: it is common for temple families to hold a short service in the main hall each morning, likely before breakfast. One boy from Fukushima, a confident and clever nine-year-old, kept turning around to look at me and the staff members, to see what we were doing, and then looking at his friend with a nervous smile (figure 7). Close to the end of the brief liturgy, the boy joined in. He remembered this part. The adults cooed with admiration, and his mom, who was sitting next to me, smiled. I ask her later how he knew the words, and she said that they go to so many of these retreats, year after year, two of which are hosted by Buddhist organizations, that he had memorized how to chant some of the *Shōshinge* (Hymn of Right Faith).[9] When I asked if they ever went to their Buddhist temple back home, she said that coming to this retreat a few years ago was actually her son's first encounter with Buddhism.

Akamatsu completed his chanting with a bow of his head and a few final *nembutsu* recitations and then stood up, turned around, and addressed his small audience. "Thank you very much. That is all. I would normally deliver a sermon now, but I'm not going to today. I'm not very good at sermons anyway." He bowed, and then Nishi led everyone outside to visit the ossuary across the street. The families noticed as they left that there were photos of them from previous years printed out and posted in the back of the main hall and the outdoor corridor that encircled it. As they tried to work out which year the pictures were from, based on who was there and how old the kids seemed, a chatty temple wife from Osaka observed that there used to be more posted there, but some had been taken down. She leaned down to two girls and said conspiratorially, "Probably someone thought, 'Those kids are so cute, I'm going take this one home with me!'" The girls giggled. The photos in the back of the temple hall remain there all year, a reminder of the perennial return of these youthful families to the island.

After we crossed the street to the ossuary, Mori arranged a bouquet of flowers at the shrine (figure 8). Each family had paid a 2,000 yen (roughly US $19 in 2019) flower fee, one of the few things at the retreat that came with an expense, to fund the elaborate bouquet. The families lined up in the blazing heat to take their turn at offering incense, but the priests soon realized that no one had remembered to bring a lighter. One priest who smoked finally located one at the bottom of his bag. Nishi gave a short speech about how lonely it must have been for these people, whose families did not come to claim their remains when they passed away, to have lived out their lives on the island, far from home, only for their remains to be interred there as well. Then he showed everyone how to drop two pinches of incense sand on the fire and clasp their hands to pray for the deceased. According to Kōmyōen's website,

Figure 8. Mori arranges flowers that each participant has purchased for offering at the sanatorium's ossuary. Photograph by Jessica Starling (2019).

3,200 people's remains are housed in the island's ossuary (Kokuritsu Ryōyōsho Oku-Kōmyōen, n.d.).

This comprised the totality of the formal Buddhist components of the retreat. Participants spent less than an hour in an explicitly Buddhist space, and apart from the facility with Buddhist chanting that the boy acquired by virtue of his successive years at these Buddhist-sponsored camps, the Fukushima children were unlikely to learn anything resembling sectarian doctrine. The priest who performed the brief service outright declined to give a sermon. The material and bodily practices of praying for the deceased Hansen's disease patients drew from a Buddhist repertoire for memorializing the dead, which remains the culturally dominant one in Japan (Rowe 2011). And yet, the service appeared as a brief ritual interlude, a contrast to the otherwise recreational slate of activities. For the majority of the retreat Buddhist doctrine remains implicit, rather than explicit. It is so understated, in fact, that it may barely appear on the radar of anyone other than the clerics who organized it.

Most public Buddhist mobilization in response to death and disaster after 3/11 has been brought in line with prevailing secular, clinical discourses about trauma, healing, and care. In order to forestall concerns about the dangerous nature of religions as proselytizing cults, and to respect the constitutional divide between religion and the state, Buddhist clerics operating in secular spaces are usually reluctant to bring up anything resembling sectarian doctrine. They often opt instead to emphasize the "therapeutic" value of religion, such as by instituting programs that train Buddhist priests in clinical counseling (McLaughlin 2013, 314). Deliberately side-stepping the loaded language of religion and sectarian doctrine in favor of the more generic and globally palatable language of "spiritual care" or "mind care" (*kokoro no kea*, Benedict 2018, 185), as well as projecting fun-loving and humorous images of Buddhist priests to allay fears that they are only concerned with death or are seeking to recruit people for their religion, can be strategies for managing religion in such secular spaces as hospitals, sanatoriums, and community centers.

In his study of Buddhist chaplains responding to the triple disaster of 2011, Michael Berman observed that "When engaging with suffering in public spaces, [Buddhist priests] must shed signs of their respective religions and avoid appearing as if they are working to spread those religions" (2018, 238). Certainly, the Jōdo Shinshū priests' reticence about doctrine and their restraint from using the camp to proselytize in any way is striking. However, the evidence here does not support Berman's further assertion that "[clerics'] traditions become internal motives without external expression, and feeling like a human can sometimes interfere with feeling like a religious professional" (*ibid*).

In fact, Jōdo Shinshū semantics are specifically deployed in the explanations of the priests and temple wives of why they engage in this work. For instance, Nishi insists that despite the absence of explicit Jōdo Shinshū teachings in the content of the retreat, the gathering of human beings whose lights are shining, as he puts it, "in full radiance," is itself an enactment of an ideal Pure Land Buddhist world. He explains:

> We Shinshū Ōtani-ha adherents aspire to the Pure Land. The Pure Land is a world where all living things can live together in full radiance. However, we human beings can't help but become more and more alienated from that world. There is a teaching meant to save human beings who are in this state. I considered expressing that teaching concretely in the course of the retreat. But, when I look at the residents of the sanatorium and the Fukushima mothers and their children interacting together, I realized that even without our forcing the Buddhist teachings onto them, they are the very image of the Pure Land.

In Nishi's and Mori's vision, explicitly Buddhist liturgy and doctrine are almost superfluous. The religious outcome effected by the retreat—an ideal world where living beings of different backgrounds, ages, and experiences of suffering can "live together in full radiance," as in the Pure Land—is sufficiently realized through less formal means.

The organizers' emphasis on creating a family atmosphere stands in contrast to two more economically focused approaches that scholars have taken to highlight manifestations of Buddhism in Japan's neoliberal or late capitalist society: that of entrepreneurship and branding. In John Traphagan's study of "entrepreneurial ecosystems" in depopulated areas of Japan, one of the figures profiled is a twenty-second-generation Jōdo Shinshū priest named Kenyu. Traphagan introduces Kenyu as breaking the mold of traditional priests in Japan, by having long dyed hair and seeking to engage laypeople in activities other than traditional Buddhist mortuary rituals. However, like other scholars, Traphagan seems to take the stereotypical image of Buddhist priests, as portrayed in popular media like the Itami Jūzō film *The Funeral* (Itami 1986), as a baseline reality rather than a satirized stereotype. When compared to the stereotype, Kenyu's actions indeed seem cutting edge, creative, and "outside the box." But in fact, Jōdo Shinshū clerics have always described themselves as *zaikezō* (lay-monks), and since the sect does not require clean-shaven heads, most clerics grow their hair out. In these and other ways, Kenyu is well within the "mold" of contemporary Japanese priests. Traphagan's own analysis relies on the economic trope of entrepreneurship; however, he briefly allows Kenyu to speak to the reader of his own motivation:

> Kenyu wanted to make sure that we understood one important point. "The most joyous moment in my life now," he said emphatically, "is to be told that my temple has a family atmosphere." (Traphagan 2020, 222)

Kenyu's emphasis is on creating organic occasions for younger laity to connect with Buddhism and creating a "family atmosphere" at his temple. What this article has sought to demonstrate is that in fact, the Buddhist work of creating such an atmosphere is not confined to the temple itself. It is true that structurally, the performance of mortuary rituals is what binds laypeople ritually and economically to their family temples (*bodaiji*) across Japan. But that has never exhausted the presence or meaning of Buddhism in Japan. Kenyu's insistence on the priority of his work as a Buddhist is identical to Mori's assertion that "we want them to have fun." I believe we as scholars should take these assertions seriously.

Moreover, Buddhists working to create a family atmosphere represents an even more subtle manifestation of the religion than the Buddhist atmosphere and brand values that scholars have thus far identified. Unlike Cho's suburban Chinese "atmospheric Buddhism," in which "morality" is branded as "uniquely Buddhist" (2023, 15), the Buddhist moral underpinning at this retreat remains mostly obscured to all but the initiated, those clerics whose efforts drive the transformation of this secular space, temporarily, into Amitabha's Pure Land. Neither the organizers nor the participants move to "brand" the retreat as especially Buddhist (Prohl 2020; Brown 2022). Instead, the Buddhist presence here is nonassertive, muted, and ephemeral: a temporary, family atmosphere is as concrete as Amida's light gets.

Conclusion: Recreation of home

Anne Allison has argued that in many sectors of Japanese society, "the soul"—by which she means "the meanings, desires, affects of social living"—is "on strike" (2013, 16). If the Japanese soul is on strike, then where is religion? The Exciting Retreat Tour offers a snapshot of the intersection of family, politics, and religion in the aftermath of the 2011 nuclear disaster, and in the long shadow of imperial Japan's dehumanization of its less useful subjects. Here, Buddhist actors patch the emotional holes left by failures of government and society, working to temporarily transform the government-run sanatorium into a place where participants can be themselves.

While questions of religious belief are largely bracketed, Buddhism still provides the liturgical resources for commemorating the loss of home and identity by Hansen's disease patients, and the social capital to recreate the temporary atmosphere of a *furusato* for the survivors of Hansen's disease and the "radiation brain" mothers and children from Fukushima. As Maki said in her speech at the welcome party, "This is my favorite place to be." The island sanatorium is the birthplace of no one involved—not the elderly residents, not the sanatorium staff, not the Buddhist organizers, nor the Fukushima families. The elderly residents of the sanatorium have lived in isolation from their natal homes for many decades as a result of their identification with a disease that is highly stigmatized. The Fukushima parents who are drawn to the retreat have found themselves out of sync with their neighbors and family members back home, in their uneasiness and distrust of official reports of radiation in

their environment. Finally, the Buddhist clerics themselves live a somewhat peculiar lifestyle in family-run temples, where their domestic lives belong to public religious institutions that, while often viewed cynically, are legally classified as "corporations for the public good" (*kōeki hōjin*) (Covell 2005, 152; Starling 2019, 63–80).

After the weeklong retreat, and increasing with each annual return visit to the sanatorium, the young Fukushima families join the long-running Buddhist volunteers there in embracing the phrase "*tadaima*" ("I'm home!") each summer they return to Kōmyōen. Thus, the atmosphere created by Buddhist actors at the retreat is, like much of Buddhist ritual in Japan, focused on family.[10] Just because it is familial, however, does not mean it is apolitical: contrary to scholarship that emphasizes Buddhist actors' roles as willing instruments of state policies (Lyons 2021), these Buddhists intentionally create a space for critique of the Japanese state and the scientific establishment.

This image of Buddhism as a source of familial feeling stands in contrast to the image found in most scholarship on Buddhism in Japan today. The reputational and material challenges faced by established Buddhism in Japan have been widely observed (Covell 2005; Reader 2012). Scholars looking for signs of life from traditional Buddhism within Japanese "late modernity" have emphasized entrepreneurial (Nelson 2013; Traphagan 2020) and clinical (Taniyama 2008; Berman 2018) roles for Buddhist clerics. I offer here an additional model for thinking about the presence of established religion in contemporary Japan, one in which Buddhist actors draw on their tradition's doctrine, networks, and social capital to operate in secular spaces, while remaining in some sense the familial religion that Buddhism has always tended to be from the laity's perspective.

Notably, the community that forms at the retreat is an evanescent one. At the end of the week, as the families board the sanatorium's shuttle van, headed to the Himeji train station and from there on to Fukushima, the atmosphere dissipates. But their presence leaves traces through commemorative group photos and the full-color magazine report that Mori produces every year, memories of hometown flavors and handmade dishes shared throughout the week, handicrafts taken home and displayed on bookshelves, prayer beads worn around wrists, and action shots of mothers and children that remain pinned to the back wall of the Jōdo Shinshū temple at Kōmyōen. With such physical and emotional traces of Buddhism in mind, I hope this study will serve as an invitation for scholars to think more expansively about where Buddhism can be found in contemporary Japan, with special attention to the role of emotions in Buddhist placemaking, even outside of traditional liturgical contexts.

Notes

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2. According to Riis and Woodhead, an emotional program is "a distinctive 'scale' of emotional notes"; "[c]omprehensive programs – like those of world religions – organize emotional notes

into sustainable harmonies" (2010, 47–48). Such harmonies in this case are produced and heard primarily by the Buddhist organizers.

3. I have used pseudonyms for research participants referred to in this article. Due to the ethical challenges of conducting research on vulnerable populations, any details I include regarding Hansen's disease patients and children at the retreat are based on my observations of public events.

4. See, for instance, Ives 1999; Victoria 2006; Lyons 2021.

5. For instance, Jōdo Shinshū clerics who visited the sanitaria would tell patients that their isolation was necessary for the good of the nation, and that they should feel gratitude for their blessings from the emperor and Amitabha Buddha (Shinshū Ōtaniha Kaihō Suishin Honbu 2018, 5).

6. For a study of the public domestic lives of Buddhist temple families, see Starling 2019.

7. Along with discrimination against Hansen's disease patients and other marginalized groups, the postwar Jōdo Shinshū Ōtani institution has grappled with issues of gender discrimination, and the Office for Women's Affairs (Josei Shitsu) at Higashi Honganji produces educational materials and supports programming on understanding gender inequality, from which the Nishi brothers have benefitted. See Starling 2019, 129–54.

8. The *nembutsu* is a short prayer ("*namu amida butsu*") that literally means, "I take refuge in the Buddha Amitabha."

9. The *Shōshinge* is a selection from the founder Shinran's (1173–1263) magnum opus the *Kyōgyōshinshō* that is frequently used in Jōdo Shinshū liturgies.

10. For a discussion of the centrality of family in laypeople's ritual participation and affiliation with Buddhist temples, see Covell 2005, 23–42; Kawano 2005, 21–37; and Williams 2005.

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Folkloric Filmmaking

Tricksters, Retelling, and Meaningful Violence in Hazarika's *Kothanodi* (2015)

The Assamese film *Kothanodi* (2015) radically demonstrates how film adapts to folklore, rather than the other way around. It actively contributes to the folkloric tradition, notably through its commitment to establishing a thoroughly material sense of premodern Assamese life. This grounds the representation of its folkloric narratives in a tangible ecology, bringing the grain of lived experience to material that might otherwise appear to be fantastical. If things horrify in *Kothanodi*, they do so out of recognition rather than shock. If the film features tricksterish phenomena, as in its account of a woman giving birth to an *ouṭeṅgā*, known in English as elephant apple, it also incorporates such tricksterism into its own methods, querying its own representation of reality and productively disturbing its audience. Similarly, violence takes many forms in the film. It can be customary and ancestral, superstitious or avaricious, intergenerationally transgressive or simply malicious. The audience is left uncertain how to decode all of it, other than to acknowledge that such material contains more truths and problems than might initially be realized. Such an adept appropriation of folkloric uncertainty into cinema not only captured an international audience for *Kothanodi* but also engendered the emergence of further interpretive routes, especially within online fan communities. Rather than reading Kothanodi as the auteurist product of its director Bhaskar Hazarika, it can instead be seen as part of an ongoing folkloric enterprise, an expression of the practical magic of a folkloric aesthetic.

Keywords: folklore—tricksters—horror—infanticide—adaptation—retelling—violence

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In Ram Venkat Srikar's online review of the Assamese film *Kothanodi* (2015), he cited how the great Italian director Dario Argento paid tribute to the capacity of the horror genre for cultural translatability and radical expressiveness: "Horror is like a serpent; always shedding its skin, always changing. And it will always come back. It can't be hidden away like the guilty secrets we try to keep in our subconscious" (Srikar 2020). We contend that this metamorphic and regenerative power is also definitive of folklore, and that horror and folklore work in confederacy with each other to peculiar effect in the medium of film. Cinema is a particularly effective medium for transmitting folkloric content, given its capacity to reach a broad audience. But beyond its provision of subject matter, folklore also informs the transmissive techniques of film, perpetuating traditions of retelling and generating new audiences. Cinema therefore can be seen as part of the ongoing collective labor of the folkloric domain, rather than a more narrowly circumscribed notion of auteurism. Read in this context, a film such as *Kothanodi* is no longer an end-product but part of a greater concourse of renarration and improvisation, generating further possibilities and continuities of signification.

In *Kothanodi*, director Bhaskar Hazarika adapts and intertwines four folktales from Laxminath Bezbaroa's collection *Burhi Aair Xadhu* (*buṛhī āīr sādhu*), or *Grandmother's Tales* in English.[1] In doing so, the film shows folklore moving through various transmission stages, from its origins in oral communication to literary expression and finally into the new cinematic language. In turn, this generates new forms of transmission through the discussions of fans on internet forums and other kinds of digital media. Online culture has dramatically demonstrated this capacity for the generation of lore, with cyber critics and fan communities fashioning interpretative trajectories of their own: "Fans produce meanings and interpretations; fans produce art-works; fans produce communities; fans produce alternative identities" (Jenkins 1992, 214).

Such activity and renewability will be explored through our analysis of both the aesthetics and the fan-reception of Hazarika's *Kothanodi* (2015),[2] a film shot entirely on location in Assam, India, with the apparent intention of communicating largely unacknowledged tales from the region to as wide an audience as possible (as indicated by its entrance in international film competitions). The intensely local feel of the production was paralleled by a remarkably transnational experience in post-production, suggesting a peculiar commonality had emerged.

Horror: But of what kind?

Given that infanticide is its most prominent theme, it seems plausible to describe *Kothanodi* under the umbrella term of a "horror" film. According to *A Dictionary of Film Studies*, the genre of horror is categorized as a "large and heterogeneous group of films that, via the representation of disturbing and dark subject matter, seeks to elicit responses of fear, terror, disgust, shock, suspense, and, of course, horror from their viewers" (Kuhn and Westwell 2012, 769). *Kothanodi* represents supernatural elements like ghosts, demons, and oppressive darkness within these generic expectations. Eerie music and wailing sounds sometimes enhance the goriness of the plot. It is possible that the translatable appeal that *Kothanodi* discovered might simply be an expression of the broad appetite for horror films. At the same time, the film combines these generic structures with an engrained sense of locality, which takes the representation of horror out of the domain of the familiarly sensational and into a more implicating and troubling place. Rather than merely screaming "boo" for shock effect, *Kothanodi*'s depictions of violence are grounded in a sense of the proximate rather than the otherworldly, even if strange things still happen, such as a piece of fruit starting to talk. This sense of a credible but terrible world emerges out of Hazarika's determination to embed the viewer in as much of premodern Assamese culture as possible, so that the tales emerge organically out of what appears to be everyday life.

Two facets of the film that substantiate a sense of the reality of Assam and acculturate the viewer are the characters' distinctive costumes and use of the Assamese language. They are dressed in the traditional and unique clothing of Assam, which for males is known as dhoti (or *dhuti*)[3] and *gamosa*/*gamusa* (*gāmocā*),[4] while *mekhela chador* (*mekhelā cādar*)[5] is for women. Other small details of female appearance communicate the specific identity of women in the film as Assamese, such as the way married women put wide vermillion marks on their foreheads and their own unique application of kohl (*kohal*), a cosmetic powder used as eye shadow. Another stark instance to verify the setting of the film is the depiction of Bihu, a traditional dance of Assam.

The bare realities of life in rural Assam are also shown through how the huts there are made of sawdust, wood, and mud. There are no significant buildings that represent permanency, not least because there are no bricks. Fencing and furniture are made of bamboo. Hazarika also signifies how nature is an integral part of the local social economy when we see a woman offering water to her guest in a vessel made of bamboo.[6] Another character is shown drinking what might be alcohol (rice beer), pouring it from a bamboo jug rather than a glass bottle. These small details are suggestive of an entire ecology, a way of life in which everything has its part. Nevertheless, this orderliness and ordinariness also contains the capacity for horrifying and traumatizing violence, which demands to be regarded as part of that ecology. The film's everyday instruments and machines of premodernity are more vital an element here of the storyteller's art than anything supernatural. Viewers are introduced to the use of locks made of wood used to seal the house instead of locks made of iron or copper with a key. They see a wooden loom used to weave the cloth that becomes a *gamosa*. The absence of electricity and the use of oil-wick lamps

further indicate the premodernity of the setting.[7] Yet these machines are also torture instruments. Most significantly, viewers of *Kothanodi* come across a machine made of wood that is used to pound rice, known as a *ḍheṅki*, as seen in figure 1. The film suggests how an either demonically possessed or insane stepmother murders her husband's daughter from his first marriage, Tejimola, by aggressively working her harder and harder on the machine.

Earlier in the same tale, the wedding invitation received by Tejimola and her stepmother also depicts an appreciation of nature's integral role among the people of Assam. The wedding invitation was not written on a card or paper but rather by placing a *supāri* nut[8] on two *tāmol pān* leaves (see figure 2).[9] This practice has existed in Assamese culture since its beginning; the leaves and the nut represent honor and respect.[10] For centuries, *tāmol pān* has been used for all significant and auspicious occasions throughout the region. Generally, this culinary item consists of one betel leaf and a nut that together indicate respect and honor, but on the occasion of a wedding invitation, two leaves are used to mark the significance of both bride and groom. Hazarika's precision in respecting these traditional practices again depicts

Figure 1. A rice pounder used in pre-technology times. One end of the *ḍheṅki* is pressed by the foot, and the other end pounds the rice. It is a communal activity where household women gather and pound rice and wheat (*Kothanodi* 00:26:25).

Figure 2. *Tāmol pān*, made of areca nut and betel leaf (*Kothanodi* 00:37:39).

the real and abiding rhythms of life in Assam, a previously agrarian society far from literacy and modernity, where its inhabitants survived with the help of natural resources. All of this suggests the self-sufficiency and toughness of the Assamese people. These qualities are what would sustain Assamese communities that had to endure the harsh effects of the colonial tea plantation system (Behal 2010). If it remains relevant to describe *Kothanodi* as a horror film, it is only in the sense that trauma is a potential in everything, including the most apparently humdrum details of life. Hazarika's meticulousness in representing material reality indicates his awareness that he too is part of the folkloric ecology of Assam, another element in an ever-evolving experience of the world.

Apart from his only Bollywood film, *Players* (2012), all of Bhaskar Hazarika's films have been made in his native region of Assam and in the Assamese language. In his meticulous approach to all stages and forms of production, including screenwriting, cinematography, and music, Hazarika might appear to be a classic auteur, as Farddina Hussain (2022, 3) has suggested, imposing his own vision upon both his audience and his material. Yet even as the film manifests his creative control, it also suggests that such creativity must be understood within the larger framing of a folkloric tradition where all stories lead to other stories. Makers of stories are only temporarily intervening to shape events until the next storyteller comes along. Hazarika is a storyteller from Assam, where many storytellers have preceded him. So, rather than a single author, he is demonstrating that he is part of a long and complex tradition. *Kothanodi* translates as "river of fables," apparently living up to its reputation in the broader Indian context as a land of folklore, beauty, and near-occultist mystique. Yet this also is a reminder of how "storytelling" here is intimately connected to a sense of place. Assamese people tell stories because that is what they do, and Hazarika is no different.

Hazarika's obsession was apparently not so much with the emphatic imposition of his own authority but rather putting his creativity to work at generating a sense of the complex world in which the stories circulate. In everything he did, Hazarika was apparently committed to communicating the grain of reality in premodern Assam, a necessarily gritty context to relate his versions of these stories of considerable cruelty and violence. These material realities present another level of story and experience to what is related, emphasizing that the fabulous must always be understood contingently with the materialistic. The stories that are told always relate to how real lives are lived. For example, while a wicked stepmother killing her stepchild sounds like a fairy tale, killing occurs in the daily context of shared labor. When a demon-like character appears in the forest to apparently seduce Tejimola's stepmother into that act of murder, it is not entirely clear whether it is a figment of her imagination or a fictional being in a fantasy world (as it might be related in a fairy tale). On the one hand, if the film is a fable, then the demon has all the reality of a demon in a fable; yet on the other hand, it also seems equally possible that the stepmother has just thoroughly lost her mind, and the film is a portrayal of that psychological collapse. The demon is there and not there at the same time, for it depends upon what you believe.

The supernatural is also contextualized by how the film draws its characters from a cast of common people, indicating the realities of life in rural Assam and refusing

to take the audience to a more fantastical world. It features a stepmother, a father, laborers, a daughter, neighbors, a priest, a fisherman, and village boys. These are ordinary people, and yet they too have their demons. Hazarika's source material, Bezbaroa's *Burhi Aair Xadhu*, is effectively a collection of bedtime stories (Bezbaroa 2012). Yet, Hazarika withdraws from its parable-like tendencies of the literary to intensify feelings of awful incredulity at what can manifest in such apparently ordinary people's lives. Removing the comfort that a moral might provide, Hazarika instead prompts the hazardous work of wondering about what prevails in life, whether with motive or the motiveless.

Folk wisdom in *Kothanodi*

Barre Toelken states that folk wisdom is "a discrete set of actions and expressions that are motivated and directed more by group taste and demand than by the private idiosyncrasies of an individual" (1996, 157). Folklore must be dynamic, reflecting the need for communities to tell and retell their stories rather than keep on repeating the same stories monotonously without modulation or adaptation. Hazarika argues that such retelling is necessary: "This is my cultural heritage, and I can take liberties with it. I like dark and macabre stories, and I changed the endings—for instance, the original elephant apple [*ouṭeṅgā*] story is about a king and his seven queens, one of whom gives birth to the fruit. I made the story about common people" (Ramnath 2015). Hazarika adapts stories of kings and queens to tales of ordinary people to show that such tales are, in fact, applicable to all facets of experience and responsible to the world as it is lived. This revolutionary leveling resists the hierarchical structures of class and caste that have conventionally presided over Assamese culture. Even as it seeks commonality of appeal, however, the film also shocks and disrupts. This also suggests the violence of cultural and political change, the painful birthing of a new reality.

Kothanodi also identifies a particular form of terror caused by custom, or uncritically living by beliefs that in any other context would seem bizarre or murderous. In addition, it raises the question of the abuse of power and the danger inherent in the absolute authority of the mother figure. The film narrates the story of four different families from different class groups, showing how the problem of uncritical belief pervades all sections of society. The film's opening announces four chapters whose titles relate to social ritual, social justice, and social violation: "a wedding," "a rebirth," "an acquittal," and "a murder." These are based on renditions of the stories *Champawati*, *Tejimola*, *Tawoir Xadhu* (Tawaoi's Story), and *Ou Kuwori* (Outenga Maiden)[11] from *Grandmother's Tales*. The most evident thread connecting the first three folktales is child-killing, although the third tale pivots into asserting a girl's right to life, which then prepares for the fourth tale's account of rebirth. Infanticide here appears as an inevitable part of life. The killing of a child in each story used in the film is thematically defined, with Hazarika highlighting jealousy, trust, and greed as a motive in each instance. Such acts, even if concealed under tradition and culture, reveal the darker aspects of a community and culture. Doing the work of folklore, *Kothanodi* does not ask the viewer to accept such horrors but rather to question how such unethical acts might happen, to retell the stories, and ask how the world might

be so. It asks viewers to question their responses when they witness such crimes, whether they perversely enjoy it or experience it as crisis. A related question appears around how cultures might take some degree of pleasure (however slight) in hearing or reading a story about the killing of a child, and whether that says something implicating about the nature of a particular place, if the life of a child appears to be so vulnerable. Do such stories manifest in Assam because the harshness of living conditions there—particularly in the tea gardens—had made life seem very cheap, even a child's life?

Such questions add depth and darkness to how the film aims to highlight the mysteriousness of the beautiful land of Assam as the so-called "River of Fables." A river's top layer might look beautiful and crystal clean but does not reveal what flows beneath it. Similarly, the film brings previously hidden beliefs among the people of Assam to the attention of the world beyond Assam and encourages the viewers to see how the community's collective wisdom might require the disruption of query. So *Kothanodi* redefines folklore as not merely a set of rules by which communities traditionally live, insisting that communities cannot only rely on tradition and custom but must question it. Folklore here shows how tradition sometimes needs to be resisted and that you should not always obey those who presume to teach you. Above all, you should live by your wits.

Question everything?

The first killing represented in *Kothanodi* is when a mother (Dhoneshwari, played by Seema Biswas) forces her daughter to marry a python, believing that the python is a god in disguise who will furnish her daughter, Bon, with gold and silver jewels (this magical occurrence had already happened to her husband's daughter in a previous marriage). Unfortunately, but unsurprisingly given that it is a python, the daughter is killed and eaten rather than rewarded or decorated with jewels. Solely because of her greed, the mother has offered up her daughter. Despite hearing her child screaming as the python entangles her, the mother ignores everything, waiting desperately to see the jewels. Since the priest and the father's first wife had warned the parents that it could end badly, their refusal to heed such counsel is tantamount to killing: the python killed the girl, but her parents effectively commissioned it to perform the act. This demonstrates a paradox of tradition, and again asserts that folklore is only worth having if it is subject to critical thought. Furthermore, if there was the precedent of the bounty of the previous marriage, there was also the admonitory counsel of the priest and first wife that needed to be considered. Circumstances shift, and all choices should reflect this reality. In this story, the promise of material gain corrals the mother into the dogmatic assumption that all pythons will bring a similar jackpot, failing to recognize the intervention of the divine in the previous wedding. Just because something happened once does not mean that it will happen again.

The film accounts for the wife's greed through the description (by her daughter, Bon) of how she witnessed the marriage of the daughter (Champawati) of her husband's first wife to a python. The village people understandably considered this python a supernatural entity, because it had the power to talk like a human and

showed interest in marrying the daughter. If a python has such divine powers, it is a blessing, and marriage is condoned. The second wife trusted that the same experience would befall her daughter and even willed it to happen, even though the python did not speak and therefore did not promise to be anything other than a poisonous snake. Her most grievous mistake lies in not believing the evidence of her own eyes and ears. Despite the manifest absence of the divine, she arrogantly willed the magic to happen again, even as the python crushed her daughter. Her fantasy of enrichment reveals the monstrousness of her greed, even showing it to be murderous.

The following chapter ("An Acquittal") sees a couple, Poonai (played by Kapil Bora) and Malati (played by Asha Bordoloi), burying their three children directly after they are born. The couple commits this act upon instruction from the husband's uncle, who is regarded as a soothsayer. According to him, the first three children will bring bad luck to the parents and cause their destruction. Despite making no rational or practical sense, the couple initially conforms, since they assume they should believe in soothsayers and their elders. The sayings of elders represent the best advice and should be followed without a doubt or question, and such justifications tend to overcome all acts or expressions of resistance. Thus, the three children die. The parents were only doing what they were told, and the soothsayer could rationalize the behavior by claiming to be a protector of the family. Inheritance and deference to tradition are murderous here. The husband (Poonai) trusted the uncle blindly because his father's "last wish" was to obey his uncle. However, after birthing her fourth child, the mother resists. She decides to save the child from her husband and the uncle's prophecy. The twist in this tale was that the first three newborns had all been males, while the only child that was allowed to live was a girl. This restructuring of the folktale by Hazarika also throws a dramatic contemporary light onto the tradition of killing a girl child in many parts of India. He asks viewers to understand the tale critically through the character of the wife (Malati), who is enraged with the feeling of resistance and decides to kill the uncle (soothsayer) rather than following him blindly. This spirit of resistance ultimately enabled her to keep the fourth child, which suggests that not all community wisdom is genuinely wise and that it should therefore not be trusted.

The story is remade to indicate how reality itself should be remade. Assam becomes a folkloric ground upon which to enact forms of social revolution. Therefore, the film encourages audiences to view the critical flaws and blind trust that lead to such crimes and makes self-justified pillars of the community, the greedy mother or the soothsayer, no less than murderers who should be punished. This understanding also informs how the wife in the second tale questions her husband about whether they are "happy" with all their wealth and comfort after following their uncle's guidance. Is his version of human sacrifice the only way to live a good life? Should the idea of a good life only be measured by material wealth? Even as folk beliefs can provide solidarity to a community, folklore also demands that these beliefs always remain in question. Hazarika sees folkloristic material as an opportunity for exploring multiple forms of freedom, from the bodily to the intellectual, the aesthetic to the political. It is where Walter Benjamin's "liberating magic" remains possible and relevant (1968, 11). *Kothanodi* asks the viewers and people of the community to think about impediments

to justice and freedom and the possibilities for enacting change by removing them. The father's unethical act in acquiescing to the shamanistic ritual of killing his children blurs the wall or line between good and evil. He obeys the sacrificial law of the community but not the natural law of nurturing and parenthood. The film here reminds the viewers of false prophecy, and that if there are soothsayers, there is a possibility of pseudo-soothsayers as well. Yet this logic runs the danger of becoming another form of liberal dogma, which should equally be subject to folklore's scrutinizing force.

Toward the end of the film, Poonai and Malati visit the forest at night to see the graves of their children, and the heads of the dead baby boys rise from the ground and speak of the evil that they would have done to their family. The uncle was right, at least in relationship to the male children; at the same time, Malati was right to resist him when it was time for her daughter to be born. In this, she felt the moment when the uncle's teaching no longer corresponded to reality. The film expresses the uncomfortable view that you cannot always readily know what is right or wrong, and that in moments of real crisis you need to trust something deeper than the reified forms of learning you inherit. The trick lies in knowing when the opportunity to disobey is a good one. The stepmother who assumes that all pythons have a divine potential to dispense good fortune made a very unwise wager. Poonai gambled and won.

The third killing we witness in the film is grossly cruel: a woman named Senehi (played by Zerifa Wahid) kills her stepdaughter Tejimola (played by Kasvi Sharma) with a rice pounder. As in the first killing, greed and envy are shown to be primary motives; the stepmother resents the love, care, and money that her husband offers his daughter. The murder is brutal and shown in sadistic clarity, to the extent that there is no apparent mitigation for this archetypically evil stepmother. Yet the extraordinary cruelty occurs in otherwise ordinary circumstances.

In the rice-pounder scene, the stepmother summons Tejimola to help her husk rice at night. The stepmother claims that the daughter needs to atone for having spoiled a dress that she had lent her to wear at a wedding. The killing is inexorably depicted as part of the everyday practice of rice preparation. It starts with Tejimola pouring the rice into the bowl of the thresher (*ḍheṅki*) and her stepmother pounding it with her foot. The *ḍheṅki* itself is a risky instrument, requiring the labor of two people: one threshes the rice by using her foot to raise and lower the pounder portion, while the other uses her hands to make the rice move back and forth, which facilitates effective husking. This process presents obvious dangers but has continued for generations. The stepmother asks Tejimola to move the rice back and forth, and she will pound the *ḍheṅki*. The scene becomes subject to a terrifying escalation of rhythm. At one point, the stepmother starts to pound the *ḍheṅki* rapidly, which results in Tejimola injuring her right palm. She begs her stepmother to stop, as she is hurting and will not be able to spread the rice around anymore. The stepmother, however, asks her to use her other hand to continue the process. Next, Tejimola's left hand is compromised as the pounding escalates in speed. Still, the stepmother continues, ordering Tejimola to use her legs. Poor Tejimola, crying in pain and seeking forgiveness, continues to move the rice using her right foot and left, and one after the other is hurt. When both her hands and legs are injured, Senehi asks her to use her head. She also asks her to

Figure 3. Demon with python eyes (*Kothanodi* 00:18:00).

accept her accusation that she stained the dress on purpose.

Now, when Tejimola knows she is going to be killed, she lies to her stepmother and claims falsely that she deliberately soiled her mother's dress as she hates her. Senehi hesitates, disarmed by the idea that Tejimola would acquiesce in the lie that she has concocted, perversely indicating her own belief in the girl's essential lack of duplicity. The demonic figure (see figure 3) whom Senehi previously encountered in the forest then reappears to assure that the killing will be completed. In the moment this happens, it is almost a form of mercy killing, as Tejimola is already horrifically maimed. More cynically, Senehi would be liable to answer her husband for his daughter's atrocious condition if left in the current situation. Yet as she kills the girl slowly, and Senehi's pleasure increases, her actions no longer appear to be motivated by such a sense of design.

When she starts the process with the idea of hurting and torturing her stepdaughter, it is not clear that she wants to kill her, but she gradually discovers such pleasure in hurting her that it becomes practically inevitable. Like a good obedient girl, Tejimola kept doing her work until her last breath. At the same time, this only fuels Senehi's violence. If Senehi's initial motive appeared to be material envy or revenge, she now appears to be captivated by something more mysterious, possibly of a psycho-sexual nature. In the final act of torture, when Senehi asked Tejimola to use her head to stir the rice in the pounder, Tejimola at last cries out for her father's help as she can sense death approaching. Senehi brutally wrenches her head back and forth, escalating the speed of the pounder until Tejimola's flesh is churned. We see the flesh falling out of the pounder in the reflection on the wall. The stepmother starts to enjoy the crying and wailing of Tejimola to the extent that she forgets to stop and continues pounding with feverish intensity. She might be insane, overpowered by the feeling of jealousy, or she might have been bewitched. Yet, it hardly matters to speak of motivations at this point. The excruciating cruelty of the killing keeps bringing the audience back to the material suffering of the girl rather than what might have made the stepmother do it. What is remarkable is the refusal to mythicize the violence or to allow it to be sublimated into any kind of explanation, whether rational or irrational. It remains in the mind of the viewer as a problem, something that requires rethinking and retelling to find any dimension of peace. In other words, it needs the complicating and discursive energies of folklore.

The audience first meets Senehi when she slaps her innocent stepdaughter as soon as her husband leaves on a journey. From that moment, the viewer's attention is fixed on her sadism, and how far it might go. Thus, viewers tend to forget about Tejimola until we witness her actual killing, which raises a question of whether viewers only see the daughter when she is suffering. Hazarika's choice of storytelling strategy demands the audience to reflect upon its own position relative to the horror of what

is witnessed. The torture and abuse of Tejimola occurs in the presence of neighbors and visitors, yet it is met with silence and avoidance. The design of *Kothanodi* troublingly asks whether this echoes the partial disinterestedness of a film audience, and whether the violence is regarded more as spectacle or entertainment than a phenomenon of reality. Does the horrific killing-scene really horrify? If so, it is not simply because it shows sadistic violence; instead, it is that violence emerges out of a relationship between a stepdaughter and a stepmother in a recognizably ordinary context. If there are demons on show, they emerge out of the ordinary conditions of life, nevertheless. If the death of Tejimola with a rice pounder while working is an act of sheer cruelty, it is also credible. It also draws attention to the greater context of Assamese history, and the reality of the lives of Assam tea garden laborers and the inhuman conditions imposed upon them by plantation owners (Behal 2010). If one asks the question, in what sort of a place can a child be worked to death, the answer here might be a place like Assam under the harsh conditions of the plantations, where being worked to death was not age exclusive.

The last episode of *Kothanodi* does not depict a murder but the abandonment of a child born in the form of a piece of *outenga* (*ouṭeṅgā*) by her mother, Ketki (played by Urmila Mahanta), who is then ostracized by her community. This wild fruit, also known as elephant apple, is central to Assamese culinary identity, since it is found in the dense jungles of Assam. Folk beliefs traditionally regard a woman who bears anything other than a human child as either a witch or an outcast, and certainly a bad omen for the family and the community. Ketki's native village follows suit, banishing her because she gives birth to an elephant apple. Yet the rush to condemn her as cursed might be premature. In Assamese folklore, there are infinite possibilities due to divine power and beliefs; science has no bearing on events. It does not matter whether it is scientifically feasible that a woman could give birth to fruit. If the logic of "what happens, happens" is accepted, it is possible that a girl could indeed be born as an elephant apple. This also means that the reverse could be possible, with the fruit turning into a baby girl in the process of rebirth. Confirmation of the possibility of such strange events comes when Devinath (played by Adil Hussain) appears in the story. He is a merchant and traveler who has traveled around the nation. He claims that these phenomena exist in many other parts and that they are magical and mystical but not dangerous. He offers up the generosity and translatability of folklore as an antidote to the accursed codings of the villagers. He says that a bird nurtured and brought up a girl somewhere in some other culture or part of the state: "A woman gave birth to a kitten in Sadiya . . . , a bird had raised a woman, a girl was hatched out of a duck's egg one morning" (see figures 4a, b, c).

Such folkloric tales are active and ever-present, despite their apparent irrationality. Devinath indicates how the world might seem strange or improbable, but that this is no reason to fear things. Yet even if Devinath seems possessed of a worldliness and wisdom that the villagers lack, he is also subject to the nightmarish unpredictability of life. Even as he speaks of accepting the peculiarities and apparent terrors of the world, he is subject to the dramatic irony that his daughter Tejimola is being maltreated and murdered in his absence. Devinath's relative urbanity cannot protect him from the same unpredictable forces he sees as prevalent in the world.

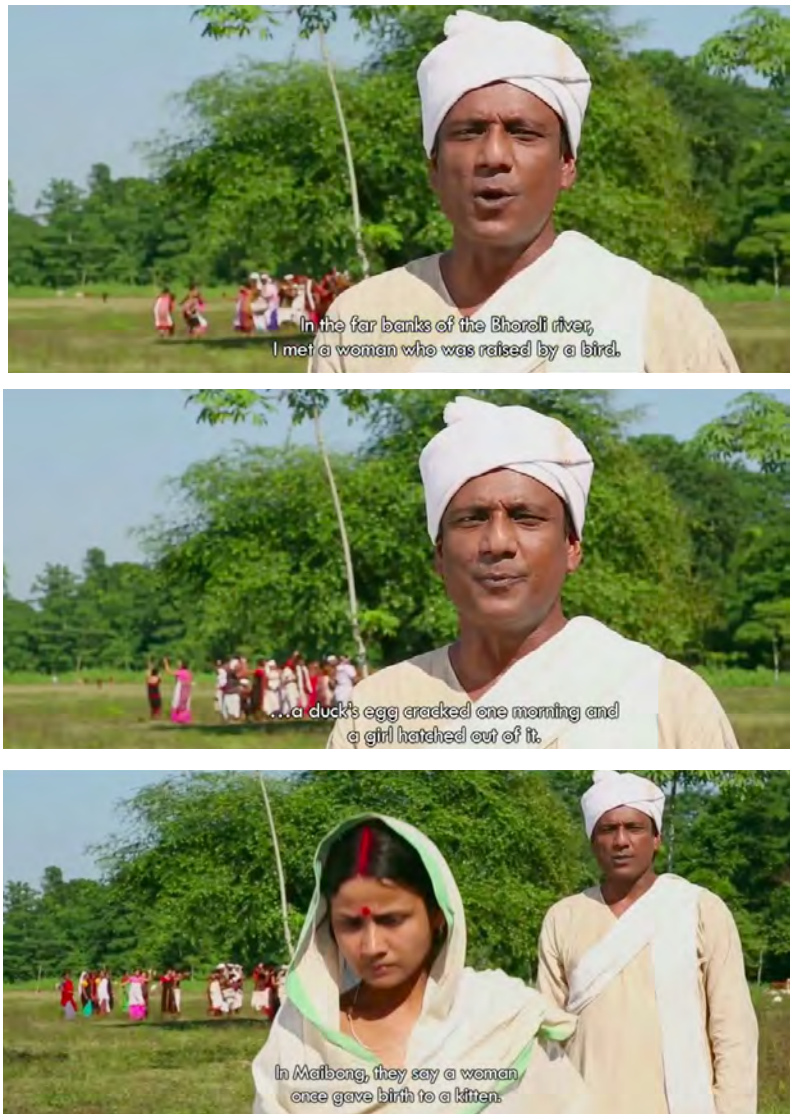

Figure 4 (a, b, and c). In the three stills, Devinath informs Keteki about the phenomenon of giving birth outside generalized norms. He assures her that this magic is directed by divine powers (*Kothanodi* 00:39:50).

Tolerance has to be taught and communicated; otherwise, people might revert to superstition and viciousness. In this, Hazarika also addresses still-prevalent situations where a woman might be ostracized or punished for failing to follow societal norms. In the twenty-first century, a woman bearing an elephant apple would probably face the same hostility.

If the implication is that communities have to be constantly reminded to maintain tolerance and inclusivity, the film might be saying the same about its audience. Hazarika invites the viewers to read and see folktales critically and to apply them intelligently across time and space, to the extent that he blurs the lines between the tales and asks for them to be read as part of a greater continuum. If he has made adaptations of what were once regarded as bedtime stories, he has turned them into

actively and necessarily problematic trickster-texts, or "talking books," to use Henry Gates's terminology (2014, 139). Hazarika's folkloric direction allows for conjuring with time, magical displacement of what appears to be ineradicably established. When the baby girl is reborn from the elephant apple, she appears as if she had lived during the same period in which the fruit had been taking her place. There is no rationality or logical reasoning offered for this appearance and disappearance, since it is more a matter of believing what you choose to believe. The setting appears to be premodern Assam but it is not clear precisely when, and yet the film is full of a material specificity about its location that insists upon the grounded nature of the production. Hazarika's film locates its audience in a tangible representation of the past, but in such a way that it speaks urgently to the abiding injustices of twenty-first-century life.

Kothanodi's international success as a film paradoxically lies in its intimacy and modesty of ambition; it tells stories from Assam and spends much of its time giving an audience a particular feel for what life in that setting means. Such a vivid rendering of a particular locality is what opened the door for the film internationally. An audience in Dublin or at a film festival in Bavaria could understand and respect that they were experiencing a culture that was as recognizable and locally coherent as their own. The more clearly defined it is on its own terms, the more one locality can speak to another.

Communication of the film

Hazarika's *Kothanodi* was a considerable success, reaching many audiences by appearing at international festivals, and inspired much comment and reception online, mostly positive. Film reviewers on YouTube, Korbin Miles and Rick Segall (2021), mention how this film is not about the actors but the storyline, arguing that the film has excellent grasping power and does not let its audience move for a second. Segall and Miles are from California, home of Hollywood, and their interest in *Kothanodi* speaks to the film's reach at an international level, even with the determinedly local nature of its material. As mentioned earlier, however, this sense of sharply drawn locality generates the film's translocal and international potential. The folklore of Assam comes alive and, as such, reminds audiences of how other traditions can do the same thing if rendered intelligently and flexibly. In a way that is as flexible and adaptive as folklore itself, Hazarika establishes the unraveling mystery of all four intertwined stories in a sinister, shocking, and implicating way. Even negative reviews acknowledged the terms of what *Kothanodi* was doing. Arcadia Cinema reported that "Hazarika connects the stories together, 'pushing' popular children's folk tales in the direction of horror and witchcraft," but fails in terms of clarity:

> The stories are not clearly separated and the markers of difference among the characters are not clear. It is also unclear if Hazarika is situating the older folk tales in *[the]* contemporary moment, or in a timeless frame? The viewer is engaged in the efforts to place the magic in the context of realist images of village life in Assam, and the issue of separation of narratives adds to the demands. (Arcadia Cinema 2016)

What the reviewer sees as a lack of absolute clarity appears to these authors as a designed refusal of categorization and literary closure. The messiness of *Kothanodi* takes it out of the generic logic of representation and puts it in an alternative zone that we would identify as the productive uncertainty of the folkloric. It is not stepping out of bedtime stories and into horror; rather, it shows that the boundaries between these modes of representation are not safe. Other evident aspects of genre that it conjures with are ethnographic cinema and documentary, not to mention the more melodramatic aspects of Alfred Hitchcock. Again, it does not do this in an authoritative way, but rather as a means of manifesting another dimension of understanding. If *Kothanodi* was a painting, it would not be a smoothly romantic landscape, but a cubist aggregation of multiple perspectives and possibilities. It is a decidedly unbeautiful film. The reviewer argues that Hazarika aims "to construct a seamless narrative of four tales" but "falls short in helping the viewer adapt to unfamiliar context of a distant culture" (ibid.). It is hard to speak of Hazarika's aims, but if seamless implies smoothness and synthesis, we argue that *Kothanodi* delivers roughness and disconnection. At the same time, the identification of the problem of representing "the unfamiliar context of a distant culture" is alert to the experience of encountering *Kothanodi*, a film that not only promulgates strangeness but does that through "strange" methods of representation. The viewer is continually trying to figure out what kind of a film, and what kind of reality, they are encountering.

Kothanodi's success at international film festivals led to its release on digital platforms worldwide, such as the worldwide film-screening platform MUBI, where the film received a rating of 8.2/10 from its viewers (MUBI 2021b). Several viewers posted reviews of the film on the MUBI website, and their comments demonstrated the transglobal resonance that people discovered in the film's representation of folklore. One reviewer mentioned how they learned about the elephant apple and the abundance of herbs and fruits they subsequently associated with it, adding that it reminds them about the wood apple jam tucked in their cupboard (MUBI 2021a).[12] Another reviewer, named Maya, commenting on *Kothanodi*, looks at it through the dual lenses of black magic and motherhood, a mostly unidentified or untouched cultural connection, taboo because the mother figure is always associated with love, tenderness, and care (ibid.). However, such automatic associations are precisely what the stories of *Kothanodi* question, and Hazarika's particular daring lies in showing that real folk wisdom lies in questioning everything. To live, nothing should be assumed; everything must be tested. To manifest this, he summons a tricksterish refusal of piety and of custom for custom's sake. Viewers on MUBI remarked on this quality of the impious, identifying it adeptly both as a local and broadly human phenomenon:

> "Diabolical and mysterious, mixing the real with the ethereal . . . this film digs deep into the nether regions of the human psyche."
>
> ". . . mercilessly pulls up a mirror, showing society its dark underbelly."
>
> ". . . digs up the sinister undercurrent from the depths of each text of the Assamese folktales."
>
> "It's dark, greasy, set in the mystic perpetual miseries of Majuli islands." (ibid.)[13]

Hazarika's storytelling shows the world the kind of crimes that happen in the house's backyard, behind the veil of unquestioned beliefs and moral codes. He also establishes an ecological perspective on the codependence of humans, plants, and animals. This then is turned again to indicate how the natural domain is further entangled with the supernatural, and that fear is as necessary a part of everyday life as cooking rice or going for a walk. The use of subtly eerie music and soundtrack noise enhances the feeling of implicit terror in Assam among the viewers. There are no songs, for this is far from Bollywood. Wailing sounds and cries of babies are deployed to acknowledge the dire fates of the children depicted in the film. At the same time, this asks the audience to reflect upon how such an amalgamation of miseries might relate to the history of Assam, and what other things might be audible or visible if people could only remark them.

Hazarika works insistently in sight and sound to communicate the authenticity and rawness of folk life, whether through the violent threshing of the rice pounder, the weaving of the cloth, or the graininess of the sound of the elephant apple rolling on the dirt. Curiously but very effectively, the film also gives voice to the fruit; in part, this adds to the strangeness of what is happening and generates a sense of the supernatural, but it also serves to naturalize the transformation of the elephant apple into a girl who is seeking love and acceptance from her mother. What seemed absurd or ridiculous metamorphoses into organic and revitalizing reconciliation, the transformation that folklore often promises. Devinath understands this, and it represents his only hope, given what he must surely find out about the fate of Tejimola.

Hazarika carefully chose the tales to reflect upon motherhood and its responsibilities. He then develops a related query within that exploration into the maltreatment of children, sometimes even to the point of murder. The story of the stepmother killing Tejimola shows that taking on the role of a mother is not necessarily the same as being one, and that it is dangerously impractical to assume that a woman will naturally mother a child with love, especially if that child is not her own. As soon as Devinath leaves on his journey, the stepmother shows her real anger and jealousy toward Tejimola, which manifests as escalating cruelty. The worse her rage gets, the more it seems the stepmother cannot help it; she is in a form of mania that has no cure. Despite her cruelty, the stepmother is represented by Hazarika as wretched rather than demonic, someone apparently beyond help. The radical conclusion is that even she requires the compassion of the audience, such is the volatility and the unfathomability of being human. The force of the death instinct that overtakes Senehi is not something that anybody would welcome.

Helplessness and helpfulness necessarily coexist here. Devinath cannot protect his daughter from his second wife, but he can help the woman who birthed the fruit, advising that she should accept it as her child. Furthermore, he offers up the folkloric wisdom that he has seen that such strange things might and do happen in the world. Strangeness is unavoidable, a phenomenon that attaches itself to life with remarkable tenacity. Prior to her murder, Tejimola had led us to the girl who was forced to marry a python by her mother for the greed of jewels. That natural mother's covetousness relates to the envy that apparently motivated the stepmother, and both culminated in killing. Both deaths were evidently avoidable and yet feel equally inevitable, given

the psychopathologies of the respective characters. The wedding preparations also interconnect to the successful fisherman who has been burying his newborn babies on his uncle's advice. As previously noted, the fisherman's wife finally rises to resist the cyclical sacrifice of her children and resolves to take justice into her own hands by planning to kill the uncle and protect her fourth-born child. In doing this, she refuses to accept the patriarchal teachings of her husband's family line, but she also rejects the superstition that her husband's success in business depends on anything other than his ability to fish. This is a matter of ecology rather than theology. Multiple explanations coexist and contend in Hazarika's concourse of retellings and readings. If *Kothanodi* presents stories, it also implies that we should tell them again, and that in our constructions of what we think is happening in these tales, the fungible work of folklore is still occurring.

This last story affirms the film's particular location on the river island of Majuli. This island enjoys a reputation in the Indian context as an island of mysteries and stories. Hazarika, to a degree, fulfils this reputation and plays with the apprehension that it creates. However, he also eradicates clichés, destroys assumptive models of righteousness, and dives deep into the darkness to bring out a more implicating version of reality. The film reflects the abiding presence of horror and historical injury in Assam. Heinous acts occur in the darkness (the man burying his newborn children) but also in plain sight (the torture and death of Tejimola). However, redemption and kindness are also shown as equally possible and present. The portrayal of greedy and evil motherhood in two stories counters the protective courage and caring manifest in the other two stories. Hazarika addresses the binaries of good and evil, destruction and protection, and jealousy and caring, showing how the art of storytelling is the necessary way of negotiating a path between these extremes. In this, he can be seen as a trickster-artist, raising hell and disrupting reality, making folklore how it should be made. Lewis Hyde asserts, "trickster embodies a large portion of our experience where good and evil are intertwined," and he further mentions Paul Radin's take on the trickster: "He knows neither good nor evil, yet he is responsible for both" (Hyde 2017, 10). *Kothanodi* ends with the elephant apple being reborn as a girl. This can be read as Hazarika's attempt to restore faith in human survival, but the strangeness of the event remains to prevent any oversentimentalization and false closure. The survival of some girls does not erase the memory of the accumulated killings of others. Only a cautiously optimistic awareness of how magic destroys and protects can remain.

Netlore: Connecting with the audience

Kothanodi was not a cosmopolitan product with Bollywood appeal, but a film created to address the mystery and traditions of Assam. In addition, however, it sought to communicate these aspects of folklore to an audience beyond India. In this, it succeeded. *Kothanodi* was not necessarily a massive hit at the box office, but it succeeded in raising awareness on a global level and generated new connections and readings. Unanticipated relationships with other films and other folktales began to emerge through interpretative communities online. A reviewer on MUBI

compared it to the Japanese horror genre of *kwaidan geki* (mysterious, tragic), made famous cinematically by director Masaki Kobayashi's *Kwaidan* (Ghost Stories, 1964), also an adaptation of four folktales (Dionysus67, comment on *Kothanodi*).[14] Other reviewers remarked on possible comparisons with Bengali stories from *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Grandmother's Bag [of Tales]), while Americans expressed their gratitude over learning about the folklore of Assam and the benefit of thinking about folklore as a network of translocal and transglobal connection. In its own way, folklore might be directly connected to the phenomenon of the internet itself. These responses demonstrate how folklore is present in every culture, religion, and country; it also shows how quick people can be to recognize this. They express the potential for commonality that such tales and structures manifest. It can be argued that Hazarika's implicit audience was neither the consumer of Bollywood nor the Assamese community but an international audience literate in the transglobal possibilities of folklore. More overtly, it can be claimed that the audience Hazarika sought was *any* audience, to break out of the self-imposed limitations of local and national culture into the chaos of everywhere. As the director aimed to talk about the folklore of Assam globally, he put the film into the global network of the international film festival circuit, where it prospered. It was first screened in October 2015 at Busan International Film Festival from October 1–10, 2015, followed by the London Film Festival in the same month, according to an interview with Hazarika (Chopra 2019).

Networking had already helped the film in other ways. Interestingly, due to budget constraints, Hazarika had gone ahead with crowdfunding to meet production costs for the film. He raised INR 2,100,000.00 (26,334.73 euros) from a community of ninety-seven backers,[15] which was rewarded when the film won the National Film Award for Best Assamese Feature Film (2015). According to Hazarika, the main idea behind screening the film at a film festival was to approach where a market is attached; you get your foot into the sea and see if you can make a sale internationally (Chopra 2019). In this way, the subject-to-hazard mentality of a trickster comes into necessary focus: the film had to go where the money could take it, or where the money lay in wait. This is another aspect of emergent folklore, that of negotiating the uncertainties and crises of late capitalism, where money provides chaos and order at the same time. Furthermore, crowdfunding is not only about helping the filmmakers but also supporting the film and the story to reach a broader audience, to promote the culture and heritage of such a film through a medium that is easily accessible and appreciated by everyone. The film form is inherently translatable and adaptable in the digital age, an especially adept messenger between diverse realities. As crowdfunders, people from Assam and elsewhere formed a community to support the film and showed the initiative and constructive creativity that folklore itself cultivates.

CineTrickster

Hazarika philosophically plays the role of a trickster in highlighting the possibilities of folklore in the modern world and raising a question about things subtly accepted or hidden in the culture. As Hyde mentions, "trickster *creates* a boundary or brings to the surface a distinction previously hidden from sight" (2017, 7). As a director,

Hazarika also acts as a trickster, for he depicts the character of a "boundary crosser," "creative idiot," and "doubleness and duplicity" (ibid.). What might look like ruptures or disjunctions become moments of productive query. Hazarika retells the folktales and modifies them radically. He deliberately eliminates the pretext from all the tales and finds new forms for the depiction of what previously appeared as binary portrayals of good and evil in folklife. He can be understood as both a creator and destroyer. He creates a world that highlights the possibilities of restoring blind faith and hopes with rationality and the pragmatic magic of living accountably to circumstance. He destroys beliefs that have become bland assumptions and ideas that have become dogma.

The ultimate reincarnation of Tejimola into a plant provides a final confirmation of the fluid nature of a trickster, but again Hazarika does not tell the complete folktale. Like a "trickster who relies on his prey to help him spring the traps he makes" (Hyde 2017, 19), Hazarika traps his viewers. He makes them question their instincts and morality and the true nature of their enjoyment. He proficiently eliminates the pretext and subtext from the original folktales to deconstruct horrific events, demanding that the audience should seek to find their own understanding of what has happened, and what continues to happen.

The elephant apple is yet another trickster, a piece of fruit with human faculties of hearing, thinking, and listening that keeps following its mother.[16] Folklore holds that no matter what a woman gives birth to, there is life present in it, be it a fruit or an animal. When Ketki starts treating and caring for the fruit as her own child and worries about when it went missing, Devinath practices a ritual to release the human child entrapped in the fruit and shows his own tricksterish aspirations. His first attempt to liberate the human child fails, as the fruit hears him talking about the plan and avoids his trap. He then prepares another scheme to liberate the human child but successfully conceals it from the *outenga*. One trickster outdoes another, and reincarnation occurs.

Significant violence in *Kothanodi*

Kothanodi points out the unique position of folklore in the discourse of modernity's racialized capitalism, witnessing how the tea garden community experienced exploitation and how stories evolved to express their impact. The plantation is not visible here. It is not the apparent setting of any of the stories, and yet it is the essential background to all that happens in the film. The evident violence and cruelty on show must be understood within the context of populations being displaced and cultures unmoored in the cause of cultivating tea. Slavoj Žižek describes the problem of defining violence and understanding its essential relationship to the apparently "peaceful" ground against which it must be understood. There is an immediately recognizable "'subjective' violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent," which can be seen in the killing of Tejimola (Žižek 2009, 1). However, Žižek contends that such "subjective violence is just the most visible portion of a triumvirate that also includes two objective kinds of violence" (ibid.). The first of these is the "'symbolic' violence embodied in language, and its forms, and the other is

'systemic' violence, or the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems" (ibid.). So the economic system of nineteenth-century capitalism delivered tea to consumers in London and elsewhere, mostly indifferent to the human cost of that crop in Assam. This implacably rational violence produces the subjective explosions encountered in narratives such as *Kothanodi*. These texts call upon folklore because they can warn about the damage that such "systems" might generate. The uncle-soothsayer recommends human sacrifice, but he does so to preserve prosperity; as such, his superstition is founded upon the idea of a profit margin. His "beliefs" are fundamentally identical to those who believe that shareholders' dividends are worth more than workers' lives or safety.

Hazarika draws inspiration for his direction from Japanese horror films such as *Onibaba* (Demon Hag, 1964) and the aforementioned *Kwaidan* (1964), which explore folklore's capacity for blurring the line between human and nonhuman. He also shows how society is conventionally incapable of processing such blurring. Women in *Kothanodi* struggle to escape the binary categorizations of Assam's social structures and are, therefore, especially susceptible to social condemnation, as when the community denounces Ketki as a witch. They do so principally because they do not know what else to call a woman who has given birth to a fruit. Hazarika refuses to indulge in such confident judgments. Senehi might appear thoroughly evil, yet she also might be understood to be deranged or mentally ill; one online observer concluded that she was "schizophrenic" (MUBI 2021a). There is insufficient evidence to diagnose what motivates Senehi's actions, because it remains sufficiently obscure to resist definition. This makes it both more terrifying and fictionally powerful. For Malati to save her daughter, she must break out of the submissive role that society demands; in resolving to disobey her husband's uncle, she also resolves to kill him. Effectively, the two things amount to the same thing for her, with the same amount of risk. If she disobeys the men in her family, she may as well have done away with them; such would be the condemnation she faces. To break out of the nightmarish cycle in which her husband acquiesces, which currently means her children must be buried alive, she must contemplate an act of violence that will turn the order of things on its head. To change things, she must not only disobey her husband and her uncle but also confirm that resistance by undertaking to break the law and the objective violence it sustains.

However, toward the film's end, we see that the uncle protected Poonai from the first three evil children. The buried children reveal their evil plans to kill their father:

> Boy 1: "My plan has been destroyed by the uncle; I would have strangled father to death at the age of fifteen."
>
> Boy 2: "At the age of fourteen, I would have hacked father to death."
>
> Boy 3: "I would have taken all the wealth and poisoned him." (*Kothanodi* 01:34:57–01:35:12)

As discussed earlier, this raises potential for conflict among the viewers and appears to indicate that the uncle's authority should have been maintained. Yet Malati was not wrong to refuse to kill her daughter, even if she and her husband did right by following the uncle's instruction to kill the boys. In taking the radical

decision to kill the uncle if necessary (she hides a knife in her sari), she already ended the vicious cycle of fortune and protection, and took decisions about her life into her own hands. She refused to accept the shaman uncle's authority and was thus prepared to go to any limit to protect her child. Her act of revolutionary violence did not require physical expression but was practically divine in that it remade the coordinates of how she would live. The muttered threats and maledictions are the sound of a masculinist hegemony that is fading.

Conclusion: Film to folklore

Kothanodi is a folkloric film because it adapts film to folklore, rather than the other way around. It emulates folklore's querying of the world and conventional representations of it, finding ways to communicate and complicate at the same time. Hazarika also communicates the adaptive power of folk myths and how they can discover significance over time and in different locations. The global reach of *Kothanodi* was ironically achieved through its intensely local feel, its confident aura of what folkloric Assam felt like. Out of this viewing experience, audiences could notice recognizable and tangible aspects of other local traditions, as well as their ability to offer necessary resistance to the blandly brutal demands of modernity. Its promotion of folklore as a mode of enquiry challenges viewers ethically and existentially, leaving them contemplating the relationship between lived reality and the world of folk imagination.

The comprehension of violence is vital to this film. What might appear fantastic and impossible ultimately becomes comprehensible, even if it also comes with a sense that not everything can be controlled or rationalized. The film summons folk culture and ghosts and asks the audiences to learn from them. The world of folktales, if viewed critically, produces an instructive awareness that communities need to change and reshape according to the exigencies of reality. It exposes the cruelties and perversions that can be protected under cover of beliefs and tradition and demands that they be dismissed. Against this, *Kothanodi* offers the ability of folklore to retell and renew as the only tolerable and productive code to live by. This is a practical lesson rather than a moral one. Nothing ever dies if it is recreated and retold.

Notes

1. The film talks about four different folktales from Assam. The director interlinks them with each other and in doing so arguably forms a new folktale altogether. The film reflects on the tribulations and afflictions of a range of mother figures, and shows them dealing with their own demons.

2. *Kathā* means story and *nadī* means river. Hence, the title translates as River of Stories.

3. A lower garment for males, a type of sarong wrapped around the waist and legs, that resembles loose trousers made out of a long rectangular piece of cotton cloth.

4. A white-colored piece of rectangular cloth with red embroidery at the ends significant to Assamese culture that is wrapped around the neck.

5. A traditional Assamese sarong worn by women.

6. Assam forests are richly stocked with bamboo canes of various sorts. Bamboo is a hugely significant economic and existential resource in South Asia. Over the years, Assamese people cultivated bamboo for commercial purposes. It represents a large part of household industries.

7. A type of lamp made out of a wooden bowl filled with oil that fuels a wick.

8. Areca nut.

9. Betel leaves.

10. Areca nut and betel leaves are symbols of devotion, respect, and friendship, offered on auspicious occasions.

11. *Outenga* (*ouṭeṅgā*) is an apple-like fruit mostly eaten by elephants, which is why it is called Elephant Apple in English. Its botanical name is *Dillenia indica*.

12. Mis Marg, comment on *Kothanodi*, directed by Bhaskar Hazarika (MUBI 2021b).

13. Majuli (*mājuli*) is an island in the Brahmaputra River, located in Assam.

14. It is based on Lafcadio Hearn's collection of Japanese ghost stories, most of which are found in his 1904 publication titled *Kwaidon: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*.

15. The people who supported and funded the film.

16. The *outenga* sings a song when it gets lost and feels abandoned.

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Decline of the Kusunda of Nepal

The people belonging to the Kusunda indigenous ethnic group of Nepal used to speak a language isolate that is commonly known by the same name. In this article, we provide an account of the decline of the Kusunda and their language, identifying a range of internal and external factors that contributed to this decline, including their earlier existence as nomadic hunter-gatherers, their clan system and marriage customs, inward migration by other ethnic groups and gradual displacement of the Kusunda, the imposition of the Hindu caste system and the national integration policies of Nepal as a nation-state, stigmatization and discrimination, decreased livelihood opportunities, and a lack of alternative options. We describe how this decline was a gradual process, culminating in the present situation of a mere 160 people who ethnically identify as Kusunda and only a single speaker of their language left.

Keywords: Kusunda—language endangerment—Nepal—caste system—hunter-gatherers

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Language is a fundamental element of human communication and shapes both the identity of individual speakers, and the identity of the community to which these speakers belong. The mother tongue, the first language learnt by speakers of a certain community, encapsulates the cultural knowledge, beliefs, and social norms of this community and serves as the vehicle for the transmission of this knowledge, beliefs, and norms. The significance of the mother tongue is especially prominent in small, close-knit hunter-gatherer societies that have very distinct and unique cultural practices and shared cultural values that are expressed through the oral transmission of this language.

While the concept of ethnic identity in such societies is complex and multifaceted, the mother tongue often becomes a strong marker of a distinct ethnic identity. In the absence of writing, it is the spoken word, the mother tongue, that passes down the ancestral wisdom and preserves the cultural practices. For example, Barry S. Hewlett and Casey J. Roulette (2016) found that among contemporary hunter-gatherer communities, language is a key factor in maintaining group cohesion, wherein the unique linguistic features of the mother tongue act as a bonding agent that fosters a sense of belonging and shared cultural identity. Indeed, the shared language serves as a marker of group membership and thus contributes to the delineation of a distinct ethnic identity, of separating the "own" from the "other." Frank W. Marlowe (2010, 47–49), for example, found that among the Hadza, the ability to speak and understand the Hadzane language is the single most important factor for establishing group membership.

Often as a result of external pressures, many hunter-gatherer societies adopt the dominant languages of more numerous or powerful societies, resulting in a gradual or sometimes rapid decline of the use of the mother tongue. Because of the prominent role of the mother tongue in preserving and transmitting cultural practices, social values, and indigenous knowledge, the loss of the mother tongue often results in an erosion of the ethnic identity. Ernest S. Burch Sr. and Yvon Csonka (1999, 60), for example, write how the primary threat to the cultural survival of the Caribou Inuit is the loss of their language, Inuktitut. The preservation, promotion, and revitalization of mother tongues among (former) hunter-gatherer communities are vital for preserving linguistic diversity as well as for safeguarding their unique ethnic identities. Hence, Nigel Crawhall (2002) describes how for the San people, revival of language and identity have become intricately linked.

In this article, we aim to add to the corpus of ethnographic descriptions of the relation between language and identity by sharing the reasons for the decline in the population of speakers of Nepal's language isolate Kusunda. The Kusunda are a former hunter-gatherer society that has become sedentary and, in the process, has lost nearly all of its previously unique culture. While lamenting this inevitable loss, at present the Kusunda attach special value to their language, which precariously hangs on with a single speaker left, as the repository for the preservation and the vehicle for the transmission of their unique identity.

The Kusunda and their language

The Kusunda[1] language used to be spoken by the indigenous ethnic group[2] known to outsiders by the same name. The Kusunda language has several unique features that are not commonly found in the surrounding Indo-Aryan or Trans-Himalayan languages, and that are even rather unique within the wider Asian context. Phonologically characteristic are distinctive uvular stops and an uvular nasal consonant with concomitant features of pharyngeal stricture and lower fundamental frequencies on preceding vowels (Watters 2006, 26–27, 37–43); a non-contrastive point of articulation, where, instead, contrast is formed by the active articulator, namely labial, apical, laminal, velar, or uvular/pharyngeal (ibid., 31–37); neutralization of the voicing contrast and the relatively recent development of aspiration; and partial vowel harmony (ibid., 24–25).

As described in detail in David E. Watters (ibid., 68), Kusunda features a unique morphophonological process whereby marked grammatical structures are not distinguished from unmarked ones through affixes, as is more common, but through a harmonic auto segmental process whereby consonants and vowels are retracted further into the oral cavity: apical consonants become laminal, velar consonants become uvular, and vowels from the upper set shift to the lower set.

Kusunda has obligatory person-number agreement markers on the verb, and these markers can be both prefixes and suffixes (ibid., 59–66). Unlike many other languages of the region, Kusunda has a nominative-accusative case marking alignment (ibid., 51–52). Verbal subordinate structures are not based on nominalizations, but they are fully finite, and their subordinate status is signaled entirely by their syntax (ibid., 106–25). Finally, an unusual feature of Kusunda is that converbs do not mark sequential events but overlapping ones (ibid., 128–33), while sequential events are marked by series of fully formed verbs (ibid., 124–27).

Kusunda is also unique from another perspective. Since Robert Shafer (1954, 10–12), Kusunda has generally been considered a language isolate: a language with no known affiliation to the main linguistic phyla of the region, Trans-Himalayan (Sino-Tibetan/Tibeto-Burman), Indo-European, Dravidian, and Austro-Asiatic (cf. van Driem 2001, 258, 261; Watters 2006, 20), or for that matter, to any other language or language family of the world. Other language isolates of South Asia are Nihali, spoken in India, and Burushaski, spoken in Pakistan. Even though no proper description of Kusunda existed till 2005, there have been several early and more recent attempts to link Kusunda to other languages. Examples are the examinations of the possible links

with Tibeto-Burman (Forbes 1881; Rana 2002); with Tibeto-Burman but with a Munda substratum reflected in the pronominalization system (Grierson 1967, 273, 399–405); with Burushaski and the languages of the Caucasus (Reinhard and Toba 1970); with Yenisseian (Gurov 1989); with Nihali (Fleming 1996); and with Nihali and "Indo-Pacific" (Whitehouse 1997; Whitehouse et al., 2003). While, in absence of written or archaeological records, linguistics is one of the means through which science can uncover the population history of Asia and the world, van Driem remarked:

> If Kusunda bears genetic affinity to any other known human language, the time depth of this relationship evidently exceeds the empirical limits of what can be cogently demonstrated by historical linguistic comparison on the basis of the modicum of recorded Kusunda data. (van Driem 2001, 261)

Nonetheless, van Driem later suggested that Kusunda may be related to Yenisseian and Burushaski (van Driem 2014, 80). None of the proposals listed here has gained much ground, and, most recently, Pascal Gerber (2013, 2017) found little evidence for a relation between Kusunda, Burushaski, Yenisseian, and Na-Dene. Augie Spendley's ongoing historical comparative work, reconstructing Proto-Kusunda by using the available sources and comparing these proto-forms to languages of the Trans-Himalayan and Indo-European language families (Spendley, personal communication, June 26, 2022), will be a major step in discovering more about the phylogenetic affiliation of the language.

Based on available historical records, the oral accounts of the Kusunda people, and the present distribution of the 161 people that identify as Kusunda, they lived across a wide geographical area. This Kusunda home range encompassed the Middle Hills and the Śivāliks[3] of western and mid-western Nepal[4], as is indicated in figure 1.

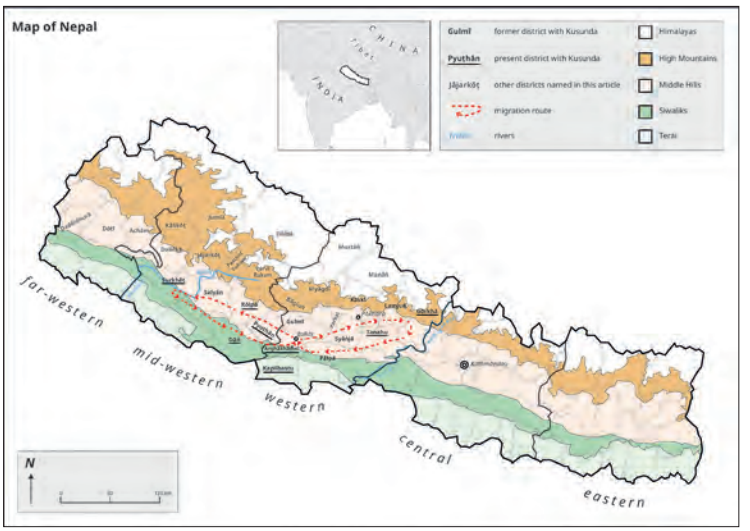

Figure 1. Location of Nepal and the original Kusunda home range and migratory routes. Source: Timotheus Adrianus Bodt, Uday Raj Aaley, and Yeshy T. Sotrug, "Map of Kusunda Migratory Route and Present Settlements in Nepal (Colour Version)," Zenodo, 2023. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8175479

At present, the Kusunda population is concentrated in the Inner Tarāī valleys of Surkhēt and Dāṅ, and in the Middle Hills of Pyuṭhān district, as can be seen from Table 1.

Table 1. Present-day Kusunda populations.

Band	District	Municipality	Ward/Village	Households	Population
Eastern	Tanahuṁ	Vyās	10	1	2
	Gōrkhā	Gōrkhā	Tēhrakilō	2	6
		Ajirkōṭ	2/Bhāccēka	1	5
Western	Dāṅ	Ghōrāhī	18	4	22
			12	1	6
			14	1	5
			10	1	1
		Tulsīpur	4	1	10
		Rājpur	7	3	17
		Gaḍhavā	2	2	9
	Arghākhāṁcī	Sandhikharka	6	1	4
	Surkhēt	Gurbhākōṭ	5/Sahārē	3	16
		Bhērīgaṅgā	2	1	2
	Rōlpā	Ruṇṭigaḍhī	Sarpāla	1	3
	Pyūṭhān	Sarumārānī	6/Tirām	1	24
		Svargadvārī	2	2	18
		Airāvatī	6/Bijulī	1	9
	Kapilvastu	Vāṅgaṅgā	5/Kōpā	1	2
Total				28	161

Source: Adapted from Uday Raj Aaley, *King of the Forest* (Dang, Nepal: Nepal Kusunda Development Society, 2022).

The Kusunda call themselves *gilangdei myəheq* or "people of the forest," which is often shortened to *gimyeq*.[5] While Brian H. Hodgson (1857, 328) mentions *mĺh'yák* or "mankind," and Johan Reinhard and Tim Toba (1970, 27) have *mihaa* or "man," in contemporary Kusunda the word *myəheq* or *myeq* simply refers to "Kusunda."[6] Sometimes, the Kusunda call themselves *begəi*, which is also how they refer to people of the *Ṭhakurī* caste,[7] whom the Kusunda alternatively refer to as *lahangdei myəheq* or "people/Kusunda of the village." However, *lahangdei nu* or *lahanggei nu* means general "villager," with the Kusunda word *nu*, in addition to being the second person singular pronoun, meaning "person, human, man." We explain more about the now widely accepted exonym of the people, "Kusunda," in our section on the stigmatization, discrimination, and exclusion of the Kusunda.

The origin of the Kusunda is shrouded in mystery. Two origin myths have been presented in the literature, one in Reinhard (1976, 2–4) and Nārāyaṇ Prasād Adhikārī (2020a), and the second one in Dor Bahadur Bista (1967), Reinhard (1976, 2–4), Dōr Bahādur Biṣṭa (2007, 68), and Cuḍāmaṇi Bandhu (2012). The first myth describes the

Kusunda as the descendants of Rām and Sītā's son Kuś, who led a nomadic existence in the forests, while the high-caste Ṭhākurī descended from Kuś's twin brother Lav and practiced sedentary agriculture in the villages.[8] Although van Driem (2001, 256) describes this myth as "their [the Kusundas'] own local lore," the Kusunda themselves do not attach much value to it, both for its improbability—the Kusunda are thought to descend from a thatching-grass doll that came alive—and because they consider the story an invention by high-caste Hindus to absorb the Kusunda within the larger Hindu Indo-Aryan fold. In the words of the Kusunda:

> A myth has been created connecting the Kusunda with Lav and Kuś. The Kusunda are said to be the descendants of Kuś born from *kuś* grass, but this is a Sanskritization [Nepali *hindukaraṇ gariēkō hō*]. (Dhan Bahādur Kusuṇḍā, personal communication, Ghōrāhī, March 29, 2023)

Among many Nepalese, and especially those of western Nepal, the Kusunda are widely believed to be the oldest and most indigenous people of the country, even predating other (former) nomadic hunter-gatherer groups such as the Chepang, Raji, and Raute. The Kusunda themselves also believe this. In Nepali, they usually speak of themselves as a group of *ādivāsī* or *mūlvāsī* people, both terms meaning "aboriginal, indigenous, autochthonous."

> The Kusunda are the aborigines [Nepali *mūlvāsī*] of Nepal. We have been living in the forests of Nepal since ancient times. (Dhan Bahādur Kusuṇḍā, ibid.)

More recently, in keeping with the official terminology used by the Nepal government, they have started referring to themselves in Nepali as one of the *ādivāsī janajāti* or "indigenous ethnic groups."

The presumed antiquity of the Kusunda may well be related to the highly distinct language and their—until recently—nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Only one genetic study (Rasmussen, et al. 2014) includes genetic material of fourteen Kusunda people. The study indicates that the Kusunda broadly fall within the Southeast Asian cluster that also includes Cambodians and Burmese. But the study (ibid., 9, figure 1C) also shows that at higher resolutions ($K > 11$), the Kusunda have a predominant Kusunda-specific ancestry component, which in some Kusunda individuals is the exclusive component. This Kusunda component is unique in the context of the other material used in the study, although traces of it can be found in some Burmese, Yi, and Naxi individuals. Further population genetic studies are urgently required to be able to say more about this likely unique Kusunda genetic heritage, its relation to other Asian populations, and to the population history of Asia. As van Driem earlier stated,

> the palaeontological and archaeological record of the Himalayan region is still poorly studied, but it is certain that small, primitive human populations were present in the area before the advent of the later population groups who in neolithic times introduced tongues ancestral to the modern Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Aryan languages of the region. Ancient linguistic remnants such as the Kusunda language of Nepal attest directly to the presence of such older population groups.

> . . . Kusunda may represent the only attested remnant of a more ancient linguistic stock of the Himalayas. (van Driem 2001, 195, 202)

In the mid-nineteenth century, Hodgson (1848, 1857, 1874) described the Kusunda population as already being in serious decline. For example,

> the lapse of a few generations will probably see the total extinction of the Chépángs and Kusúndas, and therefore I apprehend that the traces now saved from oblivion of these singularly circumstanced and characterized tribes . . . will be deemed very precious by all real students of ethnology. (Hodgson 1874, 48)

We don't know who Hodgson's Kusunda-language informants were; we don't even know whether he relied on a single speaker or on multiple speakers. We do know that Hodgson never met a single Kusunda speaker himself but relied on data collected for him by one or more anonymous other people.[9] Hodgson also provides no indication of how many Kusunda he estimated to be living in Nepal, and therefore we don't know whether at the time of his writing the Kusunda population was indeed in decline. His writings indicate that he considered the Chepang—who have survived into the twenty-first century with a relatively strong and vibrant speech community of 84,364 people and 54,392 mother-tongue speakers (National Statistics Office 2023)—and the Kusunda, who are reduced to 161 people and a single speaker,[10] as similarly threatened. Perhaps Hodgson had no idea about the actual Chepang and Kusunda populations but just presumed their endangerment from their distinct lifestyles: like the Kusunda, the Chepang were considered to have been (semi-)nomadic hunter-gatherers.[11]

After a gap of over one hundred years since Hodgson's first description in 1848, several Nepalese and Western ethnographers published ethnographic notes on the Kusunda (Hermanns 1954; Yōgī 1954, 8–9; von Heine-Geldern 1958a, 1958b; de Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1959; Bista 1967). In the late 1960s, Reinhard made video and audio recordings of a few Kusunda people, their culture, and their language. These recordings represent a priceless snapshot of Kusunda language and life in the past and illustrate the value and importance of ethnographic and linguistic documentation work. The ethnographic notes he published (Reinhard 1968, 1969, 1976) and the linguistic description he wrote and published together with Toba (Reinhard and Toba 1970) were the first detailed accounts of the Kusunda and their language and culture. Thus, 130 years after Hodgson, Reinhard wrote:

> The fact that there are only a few speakers left alive – indeed I personally know of only two – indicates just how urgent it is that research be conducted in the near future. It is hoped that this article will serve as a stimulus to some researcher to undertake work on the Ban Raja before a tribe unique in Asia will indeed have "vanished." (Reinhard 1976, 15)

From the observations by Hodgson and Reinhard, we can infer that Kusunda ceased to exist as a language spoken on a daily basis by a viable speech population in regular contact with each other sometime in the latter half of the nineteenth or first half of the twentieth century. In some scattered settlements, Kusunda was spoken in individual households for a while longer. Reinhard's observations show that in the late 1960s, the Kusunda living in Dāṅ, Gōrkhā, and Surkhēt still spoke

their language, but the individual histories of the last remaining speakers provided later in the present article indicate that Kusunda basically ceased to be spoken on a daily basis soon afterward. In 2004, Watters and his Nepali counterparts worked with the remaining Kusunda speakers and published the first grammatical description of the Kusunda language (Watters 2005, 2006). As for the reasons for the decline of the Kusunda population, Nārāyaṇ Prasād Adhikārī (2020b, 95) mentions the low population growth of the hunter-gatherer society and a population bottleneck (that is, what he refers to as "Darwin's evolutionary theory"); subsequent inter-caste marriage; natural disasters;[12] mixed settlement with non-Kusunda; modernization and assimilation with other ethnic groups and modern society; exposure to the external environment and culture; stigmatization and discrimination; and factors such as forest destruction, wild animals, epidemics, diseases, migration, and the speed of development. Several of these reasons have also come forward in our research.

Since 2008, Uday Raj Aaley has traced and visited all the Kusunda families, households, and individuals, traveling the length and breadth of sometimes remote areas of Nepal. Through asking Kusunda people for the known or last known location of their relatives, by using sporadic reports in the media, or by relying on historical accounts and hints from other researchers, community members, and local authorities, he has been able to identify the people who self-identify as Kusunda, but also those who no longer identify as Kusunda but, because of their ancestry, could be considered Kusunda. Aaley conducted this survey of all the Kusunda people in Nepal on the request of the Nepal Kusunda Development Society and the Nepal Language Commission. Aaley visited these Kusunda in the villages where they normally reside, usually spending several days of informal, in-depth discussions while sharing meals or walking around the village and the forest with them. He meticulously kept written records of the information he was shared in Nepali. Among the people he interacted with are the few elderly Kusunda people who remembered living the nomadic hunter-gatherer life in the forest; the Kusunda shaman who still performed curative rituals; but also young adolescents and children who had no more than a rudimentary sense of being Kusunda; the Kusunda men and women who had married spouses of other ethnicities and assimilated to their partner's language and culture, adopting a non-Kusunda identity; and other Kusundas who had purposely and voluntarily accepted a different ethnic identity. We will introduce the main interlocutors for this article in the next section, describing the last speakers of Kusunda.[13]

In 2018, Timotheus A. Bodt joined Aaley, and in 2019, we invited the then last two speakers of Kusunda to Kathmandu, where we recorded over twenty hours of audio and twenty hours of video recordings. We elicited data about their language, but also simply let them narrate stories and anecdotes and converse to each other on any topic that they wished to address. These recordings have been stored in repositories on Zenodo (www.zenodo.org), and we are currently in the process of transcribing, translating, and annotating these recordings. We have also been interacting with the Kusunda people, both children and adults, who have been following classes in the Kusunda language, and we are in close contact with the grassroots Kusunda community organization, the Nepal Kusunda Development Society. While this article represents the accumulation of fifteen years of data and experience, wherever

possible, we have tried to incorporate references to our Kusunda interlocutors' own statements of experiences, ideas, and opinions. Some of these quotes are translations from Nepali, indicated by the interlocutor's name, the location where the interview was held, and the date of the interview. Other quotes are translations from Kusunda, indicated by the interlocutor's name, the location where the interview was held, the date of the interview, the name of the file, and the time stamp of the quote.

In this article, we start by introducing our main interlocutors, the elderly Kusunda people. We then describe the characteristics of the nomadic Kusunda hunter-gatherer society and discuss the Kusunda clan system and their marriage customs as an additional factor in the decline of their population. While these internal factors explain the intrinsically low number of Kusunda people, they can't account for the decline their population experienced. Next we describe how the migration of other ethnic groups into the traditional Kusunda home range displaced the Kusunda from many of their original forest habitats. While there were no concerted policies of ethnic assimilation, integration, or cleansing, policies aimed at creating a single, unified Nepali state resulted in the decline of the traditional Kusunda language and culture, with stigmatization, discrimination, and exclusion of the Kusunda by other groups and society as a whole. Faced with all these factors and losing access to their traditional forest habitat, the Kusunda had limited alternative options for survival, resulting in a gradual but definite downward trend in the number of Kusunda people. We end with a short conclusion.

The "last" speakers of Kusunda

Throughout the years, there have been several reports that the "last" speaker of Kusunda (for example, Poudel 2018; Rana Magar 2018) or the language itself (Rana 2000) had "died," almost as regularly as people have been looking for this "last" speaker (for example, Ālē 2012; Pōkharēl 2012; Chaudhary 2018) of the "disappearing" Kusunda indigenous ethnic group (for example, Luiṭēl 2000; Ālē 2014). Although Aaley (2017) found a total of 150 people living scattered across several districts of Western Nepal who ethnically identify themselves as Kusunda, only three of them spoke Kusunda. By 2018, there were only two speakers left (Chaudhary 2018): Jñānīmaiyāṁ Sēn Kusuṇḍā (henceforth Gyani Maiya, born in 1936, died in 2020) and Kamalā Khatrī (henceforth Kamala, born in 1972 as Kamalā Sēn Kusuṇḍā). Four other Kusunda who are sometimes referred to as semi-speakers do not recollect their language beyond a few words: Guñj Bahādur Śāhī Kusuṇḍā (henceforth Gunj, born in 1964) of Bāṇgaṅgā in Kapilvastu district, Līl Bahādur Śāhī Kusuṇḍā (henceforth Lil, born in 1942, died in 2023) of Buḍhīcaur in Pyuthān district, Prēm Bahādur Śāhī Kusuṇḍā (henceforth Prem, born in 1934) of Ambāpur in Dāṅ district, and Gōvind Bahādur Ṭhākurī Kusuṇḍā (henceforth Govind, born in 1964) of Bhitrīsikṭā in Dāṅ district. Of these elderly Kusunda, Gyani Maiya and in particular Lil and Prem spent a considerable part of their life in the forest, speaking fluent Kusunda with their families. Kamala, Govind, and Gunj grew up in villages, where only Kamala spoke Kusunda.

Govind and Gunj learnt some basic Kusunda words and phrases from their parents but never spoke the language with any fluency. Gunj and his siblings in Kapilvastu

initially unofficially adopted the surname Ṭhakurī out of shame for being Kusunda. When they realized that considerable benefits were attached to being officially recognized as Kusunda, they registered their official surname as Kusunda when citizenship papers were regularized in the mid-2000s. Similarly, Govind added the surname Kusunda to his existing surname Ṭhakurī to be able to access benefits accruing to Kusunda people. At the same time, Prem used to speak Kusunda while he was living in the forest. He only married a Magar woman and settled in a village when he was forty years old, which is when he switched to speaking Nepali and Magar. Because all his family members had settled in different villages, often at considerable distance from each other, they lost contact and no longer spoke the language. Now, at age eighty-nine, he can't remember Kusunda beyond a few words and phrases. Similarly, Lil used to live in the forest till age thirty, and he too spoke Kusunda fluently. He then got married to a Kāmī (low metalsmith-caste Hindu) woman and moved into her village. Because they raised a large family themselves, Lil lost contact with his brothers and sisters, who also married and moved into the villages. Hence, he did not remember the Kusunda language beyond a few words and phrases, and he passed away in early 2023.

Gyani Maiya was born in 1936 to a Kusunda father and mother, and she spoke her mother tongue in her youth, while she lived in the forest with her family. In 1946, when she was ten years old, her father died, and she moved in with her maternal uncle who lived in a village, where she learnt to speak Nepali. In 1954, she got married to an ethnic Magar, moved to his household and village, and while she learnt the Magar language of her in-laws, they most commonly spoke in Nepali. Since then, Gyani Maiya hardly met with her own family and other Kusunda people, although she did meet Kamala in the 1970s. Gyani Maiya's prolonged disuse of the language made her lose her proficiency: Gyani Maiya became a "dormant" speaker until 2004, when she met Kamala again. Kamala was born in 1972 from a Kusunda father and mother in a settled community, but even after her marriage to a Khatrī (Chētrī caste) man, she continued to speak Kusunda because her mother, Puni, lived with her until her death in 2006. Only from 2007 till 2017, when she was in India for work, did she not speak the language. Hence, whereas Gyani Maiya had a gap of nearly sixty years not speaking her language, Kamala's gap was only ten years. However, since Kamala only spoke the language with her mother, we are unable to say that the variety of Kusunda that she speaks is more "original" or "archaic." On numerous occasions, both Gyani Maiya and Kamala pointed out the phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactic differences between their speech. Gyani Maiya passed away in January 2020, and as far as we know, Kamala is now the last speaker of Kusunda in Nepal. Kamala wishes that everyone (all the Kusunda) would speak Kusunda, so that the language would not get lost, and she would be able to speak it again.

> Now, Kusunda language classes are being held. Kusunda children are learning their language. I think that now the number of people who can speak the Kusunda language will increase. (Kamala, Ghōrāhī, April 28, 2023)

We are unable to ascertain why the two male Kusunda, Lil and Prem, are unable to recollect much, if any, of the Kusunda language, despite having spoken it for the

first thirty or forty years of their lives, respectively, whereas Gyani Maiya was able to speak Kusunda with some degree of fluency even though she only spoke the language in the first ten years of her life. All three speakers had a gap of fifty to sixty years of not speaking the language before being reintroduced to other Kusunda speakers. Similarly, it was surprising to note that even during the three months in 2004 that Prem stayed together with Kamala and Gyani Maiya in Kathmandu, he was unable to recollect his knowledge of the language and speak it again. We observed that even among the present generation of Kusunda learners, both the adult learners and the students, the female learners are more interested and motivated than the male students and also make significantly more and faster progress (see Aaley and Bodt 2023).

Two other Kusunda people whose quotes we use in this article are Himā Kusuṇḍā (henceforth Hima), Lil's granddaughter, who is currently learning Kusunda again, and Dhan Bahādur Kusuṇḍā (henceforth Dhan), the chairperson of the Nepal Kusunda Development Society that represents all the Kusunda people.

The Kusunda as nomadic hunter-gatherers

The earliest available written records and more recently collected oral histories indicate that the Kusunda were nomadic hunter-gatherers, a lifestyle that some of them maintained until the mid-twentieth century. The Kusunda moved from place to place in the forests of their home range, much like the linguistically unrelated Raji (Rawat) and Raute people of far-western Nepal and adjacent areas of India. The Kusunda constructed temporary lean-tos or slept in caves. They obtained most of what they required from the forest: firewood; branches and leaves for the lean-tos; food items such as meat, fruits, nuts, mushrooms, berries, roots, and tubers; medicinal plants; and cane, vines, wood, bamboo, and giant stinging nettle for making daily-use items. This nomadic life is still remembered by the few remaining Kusunda elders.

> I was born in a place called Hāpur in Dāṅ. I lived the nomadic life with my father in the forests of Dāṅ, Pyūṭhān, and Rōlpā. (Prem, Ghōrāhī Ambāpur, April 2, 2021)
>
> I lived the nomadic life in the forest with my family until I was twenty-five years old. We lived in the forest by making lean-tos. Sometimes we also stayed in a cave. We used to eat whatever we got from the forest. After we stopped finding food in the place where we lived, we used to go to live in another forest. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, May 5, 2019)

When the Kusunda could not make a lean-to or find a cave, they would sleep next to an open fire, often a large burning log, but not without risk.

> The women and the men slept separately, the women slept on that side of the fire, the men slept on this side of the fire. They placed a bed of cloth, they looked for leaves, dry leaves, and they made the bed. They covered themselves with a single nettle fibre blanket (Nepali *bhāṅgrā*). They sleep near the fire. They made the body warm. Now you know why they burnt the body. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, July 31, 2019, KGG310719E2_E3_E4.wav 00:05:36.776-00:06:03.642)

The *daŋbəi* or "shaman" of the Kusunda was a well-respected member of the band. Through divination, he would determine where the Kusunda would stay.

> Before, there was a very powerful shaman. He looked at the soil. He trembled and looked at the soil. He looked and said whether it was good or bad. He said: "It is good, do good there," or he said: "It's bad, don't build a lean-to there." He told [us] to do one thing or the other. If he saw white, he built a lean-to, and we stayed there. He stayed there too. How long did he stay there? If it is bad, he did not stay there. He said that he will not stay in that place. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, July 31, 2019, KGG310719E2_E3_E4.wav 00:02:52.867-00:03:25.218)

Unlike all other sedentary populations of Nepal, the Kusunda did not rear any domestic animals. Some of the elderly Kusunda still drink black tea with salt rather than the ubiquitous sweet Nepali milk tea and will eat chicken only, as they consider it the domestic variety of the jungle fowl.

> The Kusunda did not rear any animals. Neither cows, nor chickens, nor dogs, nor buffaloes, nor goats, nor anything else was reared. We used to see these animals and they have names in the Kusunda language, but we did not rear them. And we did not consume their milk and meat. We did not drink water touched and rendered polluted by cows or buffaloes. (Gyani Maiya, Lamahī Kulamōhar, March 24, 2019)

They also had a taboo on the consumption of the meat of any animal that did not climb and roost in trees. This excluded a substantial number of widely available sources of protein, including fish, hoofed mammals such as barking deer, goral and serow (both species of wild goat), wild boar, macaques and langur monkeys, and rodents such as rats and mice. Still, the Kusunda men were expert hunters, using a bow with long arrows to shoot birds—in particular jungle fowl, pheasants, and partridges—squirrels, monitor lizards, and masked palm civets. Hunting took place mostly at night, when the eyes of potential prey would be reflected in the fire of the torches the men carried. While hunting and collecting honey was the prime occupation of the men, the women would collect edible leaves, mushrooms, nuts, and berries, and dig for edible roots. However, all elderly Kusunda agree that men also participated in foraging. Collecting firewood and water, keeping the fire alight, and cooking were primarily the responsibility of the Kusunda women.

> We used to eat yams [Nepali *tarul*], air yams [Nepali *giṇṭhā*, *Dioscorea bulbifera*], tubers [Nepali *kandamūla*], fruits, and green leafy vegetables found in the forest. . . . The men used bows and arrows to hunt in the forest, and they used snares to catch *kālij* pheasants. They used to catch monitor lizards and search for monitor lizard eggs. (Gyani Maiya, Lamahī Kulamōhar, March 24, 2019)

> We never used dogs while hunting. We did not hunt the [terrestrial and] hoofed animals like porcupine and barking deer. We used bows and arrows to shoot tree-dwelling palm civets and birds, and we used to catch monitor lizards. (Gunj, Vāṇgaṅgā Kōpvā, Kapilvastu, April 25, 2017)

> The men go to the forest. They go hunting. They hunted. They came deep at night. They came with the light of fire. They brought meat. They ate a lot of meat. . . . The men go to the forest. They dig for yam. They hunt jungle fowl. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, July 31, 2019, KGG310719E2_E3_E4.wav 00:00:07.786-00:00:020.731; 00:00:48.702-00:00:53.239)

At a certain moment in history, probably as a result of decreasing food availability in the forest toward the end of dry season that lasted from November till May, the Kusunda developed a custom of visiting villages and trading forest produce, especially meat. In the absence of products to trade, they would beg for food grains and other necessities.

> Later, the Kusunda also started hunting other animals and fishing in the river. And they started exchanging food with the villagers. (Gunj, Vāṇgaṅgā Kōpvā, Kapilvastu, April 25, 2017)

> The men went to hunt jungle fowl and *kālij* pheasants. They hunted in the forest. They brought [the birds] hanging in a nettle bag. They brought [the birds] alive and went to sell [the birds]. They throw many [birds] down. They sell the fowl, the jungle fowl. They sell [the birds], and the people buy [the birds]. What did the Kusunda do? They brought rice. They brought paddy. There's a lot of money. The daughter-in-law bought cloth. She brought money. She brought one [piece of cloth] with [a design of] ears at the bottom. She bought and wore clothes. They bought rice, corn, paddy and brought [it] home. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, July 31, 2019, KGG310719E2_E3_E4.wav 00:04:14.346-00:04:56.022)

> The men go to the village. They beg. I beg. They come. Corn, flour, rice, wheat, whatever they gave, they bring rice and whatever they gave. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, July 31, 2019, KGG310719E2_E3_E4.wav 00:01:09.591-00:01:23.617)

Despite this, the Kusunda often experienced shortages.

> Like that they stay hungry. They eat vegetables and stay begging, only vegetables, there is no salt. There is no oil, they stay like that and eat. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, August 1, 2019, KGG010819D2B-D6B_E2B-E8B.wav 00:01:04.918-00:01:14.070)

Anecdotal evidence indicates that infant and maternal mortality among the nomadic Kusunda was high, and life expectancy was low. Diseases and illnesses were treated with medicinal plants from the forest. Especially in the winter months, the nights were cold. The Kusunda barely had any clothing or bedding, and instead had to keep themselves warm by burning big logs close to their lean-tos.

> My parents passed away when they were around fifty years old. My mother gave birth to seven children. By the time I became adult, only one younger brother had survived. My other siblings had passed away in the forest. At that time, there was no hospital for treatment. If someone was sick, we used to call the shaman [Nepali *jhām̐krī*] and eat medicinal herbs found in the forest. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, May 5, 2019)

> I made the medicine against [bites by] rabid dogs. That person would not die. If the stomach turned around and hurt, I performed a curative ritual [Nepali *jhārphuk*, also "sorcery, witchcraft, (black) magic"]. Performing a curative ritual cured it. If burnt by the fire, if they got burnt by the fire, I blew on it. By blowing on it, I performed a curative ritual. The female evil spirit [Nepali *bōksinī*] gave poison to someone. I gave him medicine, he got better. I gave him medicine and I cured him. She [the *bōksinī*] put the poison in. I threw it out. I threw away the snake [that

> is, the poison]. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, August 3, 2019, KGG030819E1A.wav 00:00:06.267-00:00:44.254)
>
> In the past when we were living in the forest, it was very cold. There were no clothes. We slept naked. They [Kusunda] slept and roamed around naked. I looked for logs, I looked for firewood, she [the mother] lit the fire. She lit a fire to [warm] the body, she drew water, too, she heated [the body]. She made the body warm. The people [villagers] saw it and said: "Why do they [the Kusunda] burn the body?" We stayed and slept near the fire, we didn't have clothes. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, July 31, 2019, KGG310719E2_E3_E4.wav 00:05:01.270-00:05:31.608)

These conditions meant that the Kusunda were not numerous, at least not when they were first recorded by Reinhard in the mid-twentieth century.

The extended Kusunda families, described by a Kusunda as *tsiji nu* or "my people," organized themselves in bands, in Nepali *bagāl* or "flock." A band would consist of families belonging to different clans. In Kusunda, people belonging to the own clan would be called *gimdzi mjəheq*, "our own Kusunda," while people belonging to the other clans would be called *ədzi mjəheq*, "the other Kusunda." The bands traveled across great distances.

> Earlier, no matter where the Kusunda bands [lit. Nepali *bagāl* or "flock"] wandered, they used to meet in Balkōṭ every twenty to twenty-five years. . . . One band of Kusunda has reached till Gōrkhā through Pālpā, Syāṅjā, and Tanahuṁ in the east, while our band has reached till Surkhēt through Gulmī, Arghākhāṁcī, Pyūṭhān, Rōlpā, Dāṅ, and Salyān. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, November 11, 2018)

From anecdotal evidence such as this, we conclude that from the start of the twentieth century the center of the Kusunda range was at Balkōṭ, formerly in Gulmī district.[14] From there, the western band, composed of twenty-five to thirty Sēn and Śāhī clan members, would travel through the hills of Arghākhāṁcī, Pyuṭhān, Rōlpā, and Salyān districts till Surkhēt, and then back to Balkōṭ through Dāṅ and Arghākhāṁcī districts. The eastern band, with an estimated sixty people, traveled from Balkōṭ through Gulmī, Syāṅjā, Kāskī, and Lamjuṅ to Gōrkhā district, and then back through Tanahuṁ and Pālpā to Balkōṭ.[15] Once every twenty-five to thirty years, namely once in every adult Kusunda's lifetime, the two bands would meet each other in Balkōṭ; the last time this happened was in the early 1930s. The migratory pattern of the two Kusunda bands is represented in figure 1.[16]

Kusunda clan system and marriage customs

The nomadic Kusunda used to marry at a young age, typically fifteen or sixteen for boys and twelve or thirteen for girls. Kamala was slightly older because her parents could not find a suitable spouse for her. While there were no Kusunda boys of her age of a different clan, they could not afford the dowry required by a non-Kusunda family. Finally, she was married to an elderly Khatrī (Chētrī) man.

> I got married at a young age, I was sixteen years old. My husband was fifty-two years old. My first child was born when I turned eighteen years. It was very difficult. (Kamala, Ghōrāhī, April 18, 2021)

As an indigenous ethnic group, the Kusunda were endogamous and would only marry with other Kusunda. We know of at least six Kusunda clans, in Nepali called *thar*, to have existed[17]: Malla, Khān, Sāha (Sah, Śāh, Śāha), Sēn, Singh, and Śāhī. These clans were exogamous. The Kusunda had a preference for what Reinhard (1976, 6) described as (maternal) cross-cousin marriage. However, the Kusunda practice was slightly distinct.

> Kusunda [girls] have the custom of marrying the son of their father's sister [Nepali *phupū*] because their clan [Nepali *thar*] is different. Kusunda [girls] do not marry the son of their father's brother [Nepali *kākā* or "father's younger brother," but also *ṭhulābā* or "father's elder brother"]. They belong to the same clan and are considered siblings. Among the Kusunda, one clan must marry another clan. (Hima, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, March 30, 2023)

Similarly, Kusunda boys would be allowed to marry the daughter of their mother's brother [Nepali *māmā*], but not the daughter of their mother's sister [Nepali *sānīmā*].

At least from the early twentieth century onward, the meeting of the two Kusunda bands in Balkōṭ in Gulmī was the time for marriages between the members of the eastern and the western band.

> [Upon meeting in Balkōṭ,] if the age and the clan [Nepali *thar*] matched, marriage would take place. My father got married in the forest only. I was born in the forest of Balkōṭ. While my father was a Kusunda of the Śāhī clan, my mother was of the Sēn clan. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, November 11, 2018)

During the course of the twentieth century, the people of the two bands faced an increasing problem with a lack of marriageable partners, primarily because of the low number of people within each band and the limited meetings between the two bands.[18] An added problem was the existence of a generation gap, where at the time that one clan had male members of marriageable age, the other clan did not have female members of marriageable age, and vice versa.[19] Hence, though any Kusunda would have to find another Kusunda of a different clan to marry, this became increasingly difficult, and one by one Kusunda of marriageable age had to resort to finding spouses of other ethnic groups. Marrying partners of other sedentary ethnic groups almost invariably meant giving up the nomadic lifestyle, as families and communities would strongly discourage joining a nomadic Kusunda band.

> I wandered in the forest until I was forty years old. Then I thought of getting married. I did not find a girl to marry in our Kusunda band, and I married a Magar girl. After marriage I started living in the village. . . . I had to marry a non-Kusunda because of not meeting the Kusunda bands. Since my marriage, I have been living in Ambāpur village of Ghōrāhī sub-metropolitan city. (Prem, Ghōrāhī Ambāpur, April 2, 2021)

As a result, the clan members became increasingly scattered, settling down near different villages in different districts, and contact between them was lost in due course of time.

> After living in the forest, I came to Pyūṭhān. I got married in Pyūṭhān and lived on this high hill. We also had children. My wife and I farmed here together. I have heard that my sister and relatives live in Dāṅ and Surkhēt, but we have not met each other. It is too far to go and visit. I am also very old, so we may never meet now. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, November 11, 2018)

> Although presently there are other Kusunda, they are very far away. There is no Kusunda band. In other districts, only one or two [Kusunda] people live, we don't even meet. (Prem, Ghōrāhī Ambāpur, April 2, 2021)

This explains why at present we find settled Kusunda in Arghākhām̐cī, in Pyuṭhān (from where some of them migrated to Kapilvastu), in Surkhēt (where Reinhard met them in 1968), and in Dāṅ (where Reinhard met them in 1970), all descendants of members of the western band. We also find settled Kusunda in Tanahum̐ and in Gōrkhā (where Reinhard met them in 1968 and Caughley met them in 1983 and 1984, though the people he met did not speak Kusunda anymore), and Caughley met a lone Kusunda in Pālpā in 1980,[20] all descendants of members of the eastern band. This scattered settlement, in turn, further restricted chances for future endogamous marriages.

> There are only 160 Kusunda people left in all of Nepal now. They are scattered over various districts. They are economically disadvantaged. We don't even meet each other. Because they live far from each other, the Kusunda have not been able to marry other Kusunda. (Dhan, Ghōrāhī, December 11, 2023)

The present-day Kusunda populations, summarized in Table 1, still reflect the erstwhile migration pattern through stage-wise settlement among the sedentary populations.

Migration and displacement

The population history of Nepal, and indeed the Himalayan region in general, has not been examined in detail yet. But considering their unique isolate language (Shafer 1954, 10–12; van Driem 2001, 258, 261; Watters 2006, 20), their partially distinct genetic makeup (Rasmussen, et al. 2014), and the fact that until relatively recently the Kusunda maintained a nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle (Reinhard 1968, 1969, 1976),[21] the Kusunda may be an ancient population stratum of the Śivāliks and Middle Hills of mid-western and western Nepal, and perhaps even beyond (van Driem 2001, 195, 202). After their initial arrival in the region, subsequent population strata settled in the same region. The forebears of the speakers of the Trans-Himalayan language Chepang settled the Śivāliks and Middle Hills to the East of the Būḍhīgaṇḍakī and Triśūlī rivers, while the forebears of speakers of Trans-Himalayan languages such as Raji and Raute settled the Śivāliks and Middle Hills to the West of the Bhērī and Karṇālī rivers. The Kusunda inhabited the area in between the Bhērī-Karṇālī and Būḍhīgaṇḍakī-Triśūlī rivers. The ancestors of the speakers of other "Greater Magaric" languages (Schorer 2016, 206–7) such as Magar and Kham settled the Middle Hills and High Mountain regions of mid-western and western Nepal, while the ancestors of

speakers of the "Tamangic" languages (Mazaudon 1994) such as Gurung, Thakali, and Manangi settled the High Mountain regions of western Nepal.

The present-day distribution of the speakers of these language clusters still attests to these migrations. The Raji and Raute and the Chepang mainly inhabit the Śivālik and Middle Hill regions of far and mid-western and central Nepal, respectively. The speakers of languages of the Greater Magaric cluster are found in the Middle Hill and High Mountain regions of mid-western and western Nepal, mainly in the districts of Gulmī, Arghākhām̃cī, Pyuṭhān, Pālpā, Parbat, Bāgluṅ, Myāgdī, Paścimī Rukum, Pūrvī Rukum, Syāṅjā, Tanahum̃, and Rōlpā. They were originally found in greater numbers even further southwest, in Dāṅ, Salyān, and Surkhēt districts; east, for example in Gōrkhā district; and west, establishing principalities in the Middle Hills of, for example, the districts of Jājarkōṭ, Ḍaḍēldhurā, Ḍōlpā, Ḍōṭī, Jumlā, Achām, and Dailēkh. The speakers of the Tamangic languages Gurung, Thakali, and Manangi can be mainly found in the High Mountain regions of the districts of Manāṅ, Lamjuṅ, Mustāṅ, Gōrkhā, Kāskī, Tanahum̃, and Syāṅjā.

As settled agropastoralists and agriculturalists, these later migrant groups would have cleared the forests for agricultural land and pastureland, grazed their livestock in the forests, and depended on these forests for fuelwood, timber, and non-wood forest products, directly competing with the Kusunda for forest resources. As their population expanded, they may have outcompeted the Kusunda and relegated them to marginal areas and increasingly distant and lengthy migratory routes.

Much later in history, perhaps in the last millennium BCE or the first millennium CE, although even later estimates exist such as the twelfth (Witzel 1999, 58) to fifteenth century CE (for example, Tucci 1956; Hitchcock 1974, 118–19; Stiller 1973, 63), the Indo-Aryan Khas people[22] progressively entered western Nepal. They assimilated many of the sedentary Trans-Himalayan-speaking peoples while they spread eastward. Magaric-speaking peoples, for example, started adopting the Hindu faith and the Khas clan names, social structure, and language, and contributed to the establishment of principalities and petty kingdoms that ultimately culminated in the unification of what is now Nepal and the establishment of the Nepalese royal dynasty. The evolving caste-based Khas societies and the partially assimilated sedentary indigenous populations placed further pressure on the forest resources, reducing the resilience of the Kusunda bands and their lifestyle and consequently of the Kusunda population itself.

The Hindu caste system and national integration policies

In addition to the intrinsic limitations to Kusunda population growth and their displacement as a result of migration, external factors of a sociopolitical nature are likely to have significantly contributed to the accelerated decline of the Kusunda in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During the Rana regime that controlled Nepal from 1846 to 1951, Sanskritization of non-Khas (that is, non-Indo-Aryan) populations was encouraged through the promotion of Hinduism and Khas Kurā (Nepali), and the institution of the first national legal code of Nepal, the *Mulukī Ain*, by Jaṅ Bahādur Rāṇā in 1854. This code codified the rigid social caste

system of Hinduism into enforceable law. The Kusunda were assigned the very low *masinyā matvālī* or "enslavable alcohol drinkers" status within the new hierarchy, in addition to being considered backward jungle dwellers. These measures were aimed at incorporating and subjugating the many indigenous ethnic communities under the Hindu, Indo-Aryan rulers of Nepal, legitimizing and sanctioning the rule of the small, high-caste Hindu minority over a highly diverse majority (for example, Bhattachan 2009; Lawoti 2005; and an overview in Limbu 2005, 41–44). There was little room for ethnic and linguistic consciousness, and ethically and linguistically distinct groups, their history, and their identity were repressed and actively destroyed (Tumbahang 2010, 74). During the subsequent *pañchāyat* system of governance that lasted from 1960 till 1990, official national integration policies promoted the concept of e*k rājā, ek bheṣ, ek bhāṣā, ek dēś* or "One King, One Dress, One Language, One Nation," with further Sanskritization through promotion of Hinduism as the state religion with the king as its head, of Khas Kurā as the national unity language, and of *daurā suruwāl ḍhākā ṭōpī* and *gunyu cōli* as the national dress for males and females, respectively (for example, Tumbahang 2010). The Kusunda, like other ethnic groups, were not officially recognized as indigenous and distinct people. Moreover, the Kusunda were not recognized as a threatened population, and there were no official policies to protect them.

Many Ṭhakurī and Chētrī males married women of other ethnic groups, making the Kṣatriya caste (which includes the Ṭhākurī and Chētrī) the most populous caste in Nepal, accelerating the spread of Khas Kurā (which later became known as "Nepali") as the dominant language, and explaining the distinctly non-Indo-Aryan physical features of many Ṭhākurīs and Chētrīs in Nepal.

> Chētrī and Ṭhākurī [men] have also married the Kusunda daughters, because the Kusunda are the kings of the forest. Only one or two Kusunda [men] have married the daughters of Chētrī and Ṭhākurī, but many Kusunda [men] have married to girls of the lower castes. (Gyani Maiya, Lamahī Kulamōhar, March 24, 2019)

Indeed, there are many cases where Kusunda men married women of lower castes, such as the Kumāl ethnic group, traditionally considered as the potter's caste, adopting the Kumāl caste name. While within the social hierarchy of Nepal's caste society this was not a promotion (both Kusunda and Kumāl fall within the so-called "enslavable alcohol drinker" group of the *Mulukī Ain*), it would have made life within the village community easier, as it would ensure membership of an existing community that provided access to land and a social network. As a single Kusunda family in a sedentary community, life would have been much harder.

> I married a girl of the Kāmī caste and started living in the village. That's why I have a house and some land for cultivation. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, May 5, 2019)

Sanskritization of the Kusunda is evident in many elements of their culture, including the origin myth described in the introduction of this article and the adoption of high-caste Hindu surnames. Recollections by elderly Kusundas indicate that even while they were still living the nomadic existence in the forest, they practiced quintessentially Hindu stage-of-life rituals such as *annaprāśana* or "first

rice feeding," *chēvar* or "first hair cut ceremony," and *kiriyā* or "mourning period." At the same time, they also held on to non-Hindu customs, such as the compulsory presentation of the meat of the palm civet and monitor lizard, eggs, and alcohol during a wedding, and the burial, rather than cremation, of the body of the deceased.

> When a baby is born, the naming ceremony [Nepali *nvāran*] is done on the eleventh day. . . . When a child is born in the forest, during rice feeding ceremony [Nepali *annaprāśana*], they feed the rice at six months. . . . At the first hair cutting ceremony [Nepali *chēvar*], the maternal uncle himself comes and feeds rice and cuts the hair on the head. . . . He [the eldest son] sat for the mourning ritual [Nepali *kiriyā*]. He did not eat anything. He sat for 13 days. He fasted for 13 days. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, August 1, 2019, KGG010819D2B-D6B_E2B-E8B.wav 00:02:41.737-00:02:45.701; 00:03:42.391-00:03:48.545; 00:04:42.095-00:04:47.009; 00:12:38.045-00:12:44.073)

> The bride cooks and lets others eat. She wears red [the red vermillion tika on the forehead] first. First we wore red [tika]. The bride cooks and all the people eat. Now when he [the groom] goes to feed [them] meat, palm civet, eggs, and monitor lizard meat, he comes to the home in the forest. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, August 1, 2019, KGG010819D2B-D6B_E2B-E8B.wav 00:07:54.634-00:08:21.074)

> Someone died. They bury him. Many people gather. The Kusunda join in and bury him. They cover the navel with thorns and place stones on the corpse. It [the corpse] remains. [Otherwise,] the jackal will dig and eat [the corpse]. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, August 1, 2019, KGG010819D2B-D6B_E2B-E8B.wav 00:11:31.139-00:11:38.033; 00:13:08.465-00:13:17.841)

Stigmatization, discrimination, and exclusion

"Kusunda" (Nepali *kusunḍā*) is a Nepali word that used to carry a strong derogatory and pejorative undertone across much of western Nepal. Almost a century ago, Turner (1931, 102) wrote that the Nepali term *Kusunḍā* or *Kusunḍō* was especially used as a "term of abuse for the so-called Rajput [Rājpūt, that is, Ṭhākurī] of Nepal." Till present, calling a Ṭhākurī by the name "Kusunda" is considered quite an insult. Even the most recent edition of the widely consulted Nepali dictionary has the following definitions of *kusunḍō*, perpetuating the negative connotation assigned to the name "Kusunda" (Nēpāl Prajñā–Pratiṣṭhān 2018, 239):

> (1) A nomadic caste, living in the forested area to the southwest of Kāṭhmāṇḍau; (2) *asabhya* "savage, barbaric; barbarian"; (3) *dhusrōphusrō ra nāṅgō-bhutuṅgō* "shabby and naked."

The stigmatized, stereotypical image of the Kusunda is also reflected in the *kusunḍā ghāmṫu nāc* dance, performed by the Guruṅ, Magar, and some smaller indigenous ethnic groups of mid-western and western Nepal (Moisala 2018). This dance is performed just at the onset of the paddy transplantation season. In this dance, the Kusunda deities are supposed to enter prepubescent girl dancers who, while in trance, die and are then brought back to life, thus bringing rejuvenation of

the agricultural cycle and securing a successful agricultural season. In one part of this dance, a group of Kusunda males and females are represented by men with faces blackened with soot, wearing shabby rag dresses, and adorned with characteristic attributes. They are often beaten and even symbolically killed.

Because of the stigma attached to them, the Kusunda avoided contact with sedentary groups as much as possible and did not participate in village society.

> We are the kings of the forest. The villagers also called us Vanrājā. But we used to stay away from the villagers. They used to look down on us [Nepali *hēyakō dr̥ṣṭilē hērthē*, lit. "used to look at us with the sight of disdain"], make fun of us [Nepali *ṭhaṭṭā garthē*, lit. "deride, mock"], call us "Kusunda" [in a disparaging way]. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, May 5, 2019)

Early reports indicate how in the 1950s the Kusunda were considered a shy and honest people, who would avoid larger trade centers and densely populated areas and conduct barter and trade at the outskirts of the smaller towns (de Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1959, 79–80). But despite the low status they were assigned in society after 1854, there was a certain recognition among all other groups, including the highest caste groups, that the Kusunda represented the oldest, indigenous population of the region,[23] somehow related, through myth or in reality, to the Ṭhakurī rulers. Hence, no household would let Kusunda who had come to beg for alms leave empty-handed, often also in fear for the power and control that the Kusunda *dangbəi* or "shamans" exerted over the local deities and spirits of the forests, trees and animals, the mountains and rocks, the rivers and streams, and the weather. Similarly, in absence of a healthcare system, villagers often called upon the Kusunda's knowledge of medicinal plants.

> What does he [the Kusunda shaman] do during the monsoon time? He says: "Get up, get up!" It rains. He gets soaked with rain. When it rains, what does he shoot up above [in the sky]? Shooting it, he stopped the rain. He stopped it, it does not rain. It doesn't rain, in that way, he controls the rain. Our powerful Kusunda shamans control the rain. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, August 3, 2019, KGG030819E1A .wav 00:01:47.366-00:02:16.024)

From the negative connotations of the Nepali word "Kusunda," it becomes apparent what mainstream Nepali society in general thought of the Kusunda people. The Kusunda were excluded from most activities in village life no matter among which ethnic group they settled, and, like many disadvantaged ethnic and caste minority groups, had less access to socioeconomic development and services such as education and healthcare. Even after settling in villages, the stigmatization continued and became strongly associated with the Kusunda language as the primary marker of the Kusunda identity, rather than with their former distinct way of life. As it was their distinct language that perpetuated the stigma attached to their ethnicity, and in the face of discrimination and humiliation by other people, the Kusunda shifted to speaking Nepali or the language of their spouse and community. Hence, fewer and fewer Kusunda grew up knowing their language.

> I used to talk to my mother in the Kusunda language. But we did not speak Kusunda outside the house in the village. As soon as we spoke the Kusunda language, people recognized us as Kusunda, and we would feel ashamed [Nepali *lāj lāgthyau*]. That's why we started speaking the Nepali language. (Govind, Rājpur Bhitrī Sikṭā, May 5, 2019)

> At the time we started living in the village, we became like the villagers. We started raising animals and we started farming as well. We started worshiping [Nepali *pūjāpāṭh garna*] and celebrating festivals [Nepali *cāḍparva manāuna*] like the Hindus. We also adopted other surnames [Nepali *thar*]. [Only] our language was different. That's why we stopped speaking our own language. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, May 5, 2019)

Because of the stigma attached to the name "Kusunda," many Kusunda people in rural areas preferred to be called "Vanrājā" or "forest king," a name that, like the caste name "Ṭhākurī," some have adopted as their official surname.

> We lived in the forest. We are the Vanrājā. Just like the Ṭhakurī are the kings of the village, the Vanrājā are the kings of the forest. Rather than Kusunda, we are the Vanrājā. (Dhan, Ghōrāhī, March 29, 2023)

> I wanted to be known as Ṭhakurī, because the villagers used to look down at the Kusunda with disdain [Nepali *hēya*]. (Govind, Rājpur Bhitrī Sikṭā, May 5, 2019)

Ethnolinguistic minorities often face negative stereotyping and stigmatization related to their ethnicity and the name or names—whether endonyms or exonyms—by which they are known (for example, the Ainu in Japan; see Martin 2011, 67). Nonetheless, as a tribe, the Kusunda have now accepted the official name "Kusunda," and they no longer consider its use offensive.

Decreased livelihood opportunities

After the first quarter of the twentieth century, improved healthcare, sanitation, and education resulted in socioeconomic development and rapid population growth in Nepal. The need for more agricultural land to feed the growing population led to widespread deforestation (Adhikārī 2020b). Much of this deforestation took place in the Tarāi and Śivālik regions, with massive resettlement of people from the hill regions to the flat, fertile lowlands and inner valleys. In 1957, all forests were nationalized, and traditionally forest-dependent groups were excluded from living in and off these state forest resources. Despite officially stated objectives throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s that aimed at mobilizing people's participation, raising public awareness, and increasing public involvement in forest management, deforestation continued due to a lack of public support and absence of monitoring and regulation (Wagley and Ojha 2002, 125). The *panchāyat*-era, state-sponsored participatory forest policies did not include local stakeholders and users in the decision-making and planning process and largely ignored traditional and indigenous rights and local customary practices, provoking antagonism and dispute (Wagley and Ojha 2002, 128). Only in the 1990s did a more participatory approach to forest management gain a foothold in Nepal.

During the second half of the twentieth century, the increasing population led to an increased use of forest resources by the settled population, with as a direct consequence a decreased availability for the few remaining nomadic Kusunda. In addition, the sedentary farmers and livestock herders set annual forest fires to regenerate the grass and foliage that served as fodder for their livestock. These uncontrolled fires formed a direct threat to the Kusunda and their traditional lean-to huts in the forest. The livelihood opportunities as a nomadic forest people became severely curtailed, with the forest no longer providing enough to sustain the Kusunda families.

> Before, my father and grandfather used to say that we Kusunda used to get all our food in the forest. We used to go from one forest to another forest, and we never used to meet any other people. Later, in the hills too, the villagers increased. They started cutting trees and they started setting fire to the forest for fodder grass. Then we started having problems living in the forest. We had to reach far and wide. (Prem, Ghōrāhī Ambāpur, April 2, 2021)

> My grandfather's generation didn't used to come to the village. They used to live in the forest far away from the village. But my parent's generation used to come to the village. They used to give the things to eat they found in the forest to the villagers and exchange them for grain. . . . The villagers used to set fire to the forest so that new fodder grass would grow in the warm season. The fire was blown by the wind and spread throughout the forest. Our lean-tos also burned. Even the branches and leaves of the trees would burn. The things we used to eat from the forest would burn. The animals and birds that we hunted would burn and run away. Therefore, we had to move to another place. But because the forest was set on fire everywhere, we had no place to stay. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, May 5, 2019)

Moreover, they could no longer obtain enough forest produce to barter for food grains and other essentials, and hence had to increase their begging practice, or permanently settle down. But even for sedentary Kusunda, such as Kamala who was born in a village after her parents had settled there, having insufficient land and skills to cultivate crops and rear animals meant they had to go begging on a regular basis.

> I went with mother. Mother begged for corn flour. She begged for oil. She begged for salt. She begged for turmeric powder. . . . She left early in the morning. She returned in the evening. She brought wheat flour. She brought rice. She brought oil. She brought salt. (Kamala, Kathmandu, KGG010819_B2.wav 00:00:05.068-00:00:16.548; 00:01:23.470-00:01:37.150)

Within a relatively short period of time, the last remaining nomadic Kusunda men decided to marry into the sedentary communities and settle there permanently, rather than bringing their spouses with them into the forest. Similarly, the Kusunda families sent their daughters as wives to sedentary farmers. Because of the Hindu custom of dowry, a bridal prize given by the bride's family to the groom's family prevalent in Nepal, the Kusunda, who did not have money or property, could not make demands on their daughters' spouses. Kamala, for example, was married to a fifty-two-year-old Chētrī when she was sixteen years old. Her husband later took a second wife.

> Father and mother said: "An old man will take you away. A young man will take you away." Mother said: "Listen to me! There is no money for a young man to take you away." We married. He married me. I was forced to marry. He married again. (Kamala, Kathmandu, KGG290719_B2.wav 00:01:01.050-00:01:17.718)

Similarly, there is anecdotal evidence that at least for some Kusunda families the move to the villages was not completely voluntary, although in Gyani Maiya's quote, it remains unclear who "they" refers to.

> I was born in Balkōṭ in the East. We lived in the forest. We were small in the forest. . . . They coaxed us and took us to the village. We lived in the village of Jurmasinā there. They coaxed us and took us there, we lived there. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, July 29, 2019, KGG290719_A2.wav 00.00.09.877-00.00.32.537)

Lack of alternative options

The effect of all these developments was that the Kusunda gave up their traditional way of life. Lack of attention for their fate meant that they were not provided with an alternative means of livelihood. Instead, the Kusunda were left to fend for themselves. The Kusunda did not own land and did not have the means to buy it. Kusunda women who married men of other indigenous ethnic groups or castes were not entitled to own land, and moreover, they—and by consequence their children—lost their Kusunda identity and name because of the patriarchal and patronymic society. Kusunda men who married village women of other indigenous ethnic groups or castes were not entitled to land because of the patrilineal inheritance system in Nepal. These Kusunda families could only permanently settle near existing villages on *ailānī* or "nonregistered" land, government land that had not been claimed by any private individual. Local village communities gave away the nonregistered lands to the Kusunda, because this did not affect the landholding of anyone in the community personally. Hence, the Kusunda families—the descendants of the Kusunda males who settled and married with local village women of other indigenous ethnic groups and castes—ended up illegally occupying government land for which no land revenue or tax had to be paid, and from which they could be evicted by the local community, rich landowners, or a local or regional government at any given moment in time.[24]

> After I got married, I started living in the village. I didn't have land, she [my wife] didn't have land either. So, the in-laws [wife's relatives] told to make fields on the uncultivated slope and stay there. This is *ailānī* land, it had not been registered. We can be removed at any time. It is not secure, but we have no choice. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur, May 5, 2019)

> At the time that we [Kusunda] started living in the village, we had no land. The Kusunda, living in the forest, had no money. There was no opportunity to buy land and live there. That is why the Kusunda started living on *ailānī* land. It is not possible to register *ailānī* land. The government or local communities can have us evicted and removed. Then where should we go? (Dhan, Ghōrāhī, March 29, 2023)

The small plots of nonregistered land allowed for some agricultural activities. The Kusunda supplemented this by bartering forest produce for food grains, cooking oil, salt, and other essentials with the local villagers. When there was not enough to barter, the Kusunda used to go from household to household in the nearby villages and beg for alms. The Kusunda were also renowned for their knowledge of the forest, including the ability to distinguish edible from poisonous mushrooms, their knowledge of medicinal herbs and plants,[25] their propitiation of local deities and spirits, and their hunting skills.

> If someone fell ill in the village, the villagers would call the Kusunda shaman [Nepali *jhāmkrī*]. The Kusunda shaman would go the village and perform as shaman, and he would also give medicinal herbs [Nepali *jaḍibuṭi*]. I have also gone to the village and conducted curative rituals [Nepali *jhārphuk*] and performed as shaman. (Lil, Sarumārānī Buḍhīcaur [Tirām], May 5, 2019)

> From time to time, people from far away also come. I feed [them] medicine. This is what they do. They say: "Bring the Kusunda's daughter." They come to my house. They take the medicine there and go home. They take the medicine. (Gyani Maiya, Kathmandu, August 3, 2019, KGG030819E1A.wav 00:03:32.578-00:03:48.132)

Decline of the Kusunda as a gradual process

After losing their nomadic lifestyle, the various Kusunda family groups no longer met each other, and the possibility to marry within their own indigenous ethnic group was greatly reduced. The Kusunda had no option but to marry people of other ethnic backgrounds (Adhikārī 2020b). Distance between the members of the settled Kusunda families, clans, and bands has been a major factor contributing to the loss of the language. Once they settled in different villages across the various districts of western and mid-western Nepal, the mountainous topography, poor road networks and public transport services, and lack of telecommunication facilities made contact between the family members extremely difficult. Slowly, the Kusunda language disappeared, and the Kusunda people became assimilated into other ethnic groups.

> After marriage I started living in the village. We started talking in Nepali language at home and I forgot the Kusunda language. . . . After I started living in the village, I forgot my language. . . . Who to speak our language with? Our language and culture disappeared because there was no band of speakers. I would like to speak our language, but there is no one to speak to. (Prem, Ghōrāhī Ambāpur, April 2, 2021)

> I spoke the Kusunda language until I was fifteen years old. My father passed away. I started living in a village in Surkhēt. In the village, we only had to talk in the Nepali language. After that, I forgot the Kusunda language. (Govind, Rājpur Bhitrī Sikṭā, May 5, 2019)

Only in more recent years have improved roads and transportation services and the expansion of the mobile phone network created the possibility for long-lost relatives to get in touch again.

The demise of Kusunda was not the result of forceful, imposed policies of extermination or assimilation like we find in other parts of the world. Since 1854, there was an official policy that promoted Khas Kūrā, also known as Gōrkhā Bhāsā and now as Nepali, as the national language. For example, in eastern Nepal, the Kiranti-speaking groups were banned from using their language in communication with the government and even in daily life. The measures to achieve the hegemony of Nepali were further strengthened in the early twentieth century, when a call was made for "Gorkha Bhasa" (Nepali) to "kick out" the "wild" languages of Nepal (Tumbahang 2010, 73). However, there are no records of the Kusunda having practically been prohibited from speaking their own language in daily life, and it is hard to fathom how such a prohibition could even have been implemented and enforced in individual households, particularly when they are nomadic forest dwellers. While population growth and fragmentation and nationalization of the forests the Kusunda depended on left them with little choice but to move into existing settlements and live among other indigenous ethnic groups, there was no mass genocide or forced relocation of the Kusunda. There were no forced intercultural or exogamous marriages, but the lack of marital partners from within the indigenous ethnic group left them with no choice but to intermarry with other indigenous ethnic groups and castes. There was never a policy that removed Kusunda children from their families to educate them, but the general lack of education made them vulnerable to outside pressures and unable to change the fate of their indigenous ethnic group and their language. Hence, unlike other indigenous languages in the world, especially in the Americas and Australia, the demise of Kusunda has been a slow and gradual process likely extending over several centuries but accelerated during the twentieth century, that came about because of the characteristic lifestyle and marital customs of the people that spoke it and the wider sociocultural and socioeconomic changes in the area where they lived. While the Kusunda were ignored, there was never an official policy of extermination or genocide.

Conclusion

The fate of the Kusunda people and their language is not uncommon in the history of humanity. But the fact that Kusunda is a language isolate makes the loss even more profound. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Nepal, like many nations, pursued a path of rapid socioeconomic development. But no matter how successful or unsuccessful that development can be considered to have been, it has come at a significant loss in terms of aspects of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity, as well as biological diversity and resilience. The Kusunda and their language and culture are perhaps the most poignant example of the decline and near-demise of a unique and distinct ethnic group.

Notes

1. Transliterations and transcriptions of toponyms, names of ethnic groups and castes, Nepali words, and names of Nepalese authors and their works when written in the Dēvanāgarī script

all follow the standard Indological transcription, unless the Nepalese author has published in English, in which case we use the published (Romanized) name. The only major exception is the name Kusunda itself, where we use the most common Roman transliteration, Kusunda, rather than its (correct) transliteration, Kusuṇḍā.

2. With the term "indigenous ethnic group," Nepali *ādivāsī janajāti*, we follow the official terminology used in present-day Nepal: a people who are "not part of the Hindu *varṇā* 'caste' system, have own ancestral territorial land, religion, culture, and history, with their primary mother tongue language, traditional customs and rites, cultural identity, and social structures." See also Nēpāl Ādivāsī Janajāti Mahāsaṅgha (2006, 1).

3. Nepal can be divided into five physiographic regions: the Tarāī (plain lowlands); the Śivālik (i.e., the lowland Śivālik or Curē hills and the Bhitrī tarāī uptyakā or "inner Tarāī valleys"); the Madhya pahāḍ or "middle hills" (the lower mountain ranges); the Ucca pahāḍ or "high mountains"; and the Himāl or "high Himalayas."

4. From 1972 until the promulgation of a new constitution in 2015, Nepal was divided into five *vikās kṣētra*s or "development regions": Eastern, Central, Western, Mid-Western, and Far-Western. In the new constitution, these development regions were replaced by seven *pradēś* or "provinces." Because of its convenience, we continue to use the old east-west division of Nepal into development regions in this article.

5. For example, *gilaŋdei mjæhək* (Aaley 2017, 93) and *gimihak* (ibid., 92).

6. For example, *mihaq ~ mehaq* or "Ban Raja (that is, Kusunda)" (Watters 2006, 14), and *mjæhək* or "king, Kusunda" (Aaley 2017, 148).

7. Because *bəgei* also refers to the high-caste Ṭhākurī, we are not convinced by Watters's (2006, 14n5) etymology of *bəgei* deriving from Hindi *begār* or "forced labor," which in turn derives from Persian *bigâr*, nor its possible etymology from Nepali *bhikhārī* or "beggar."

8. This identification is not uncommon; for example, in the Indian state of Bihar the *Kuśvaha* or *Koeri* claim descent from Kuś, while the *Kurmi* claim their descent from Lav.

9. The Rana rulers of Nepal at that time did not allow Hodgson, or for that matter any outsider, to visit areas outside the Kathmandu valley.

10. The 2021 Census of Nepal enumerated 253 Kusunda people with twenty-three mother-tongue speakers, something we know is incorrect, because Aaley's survey represents an exhaustive enumeration of Kusunda people and Kusunda speakers. The number of Chepang and Chepang mother-tongue speakers may similarly be an overestimate.

11. However, we find there is little evidence to support the idea of the Chepang having been nomadic hunter-gatherers in their traditional homeland in Dhādiṅ, Makvānpur, and Citvan districts. Rather, they may have been sedentary agriculturalists living in small, scattered communities within the forest, heavily depending on the surrounding forest.

12. Here, Nārāyaṇ Prasād Adhikārī (2020b, 95) quotes Līl Bahādur Kusunda (Śāhī) as saying that "Some [Kusunda] may have died by being buried by a landslide, swept away by a flood, an earthquake, a volcano, and some may have died from an attack by wild animals, but not by being killed by an enemy." Līl Bahādur did not mention these reasons to us.

13. We appreciate the comment by one of the anonymous reviewers that only three of our Kusunda interlocutors actually lived in the forest, until the ages of ten or until their forties, and

that hence their recollections of that life may not be correct. However, we base our findings on the cumulative memory of all the Kusunda people we have interacted with. Many statements in this article are based on personal experience, as is indicated by the quotes we have added, while other statements are based on oral transmission of knowledge. Where two or more people have similar narratives, we consider this must have been "fact," especially if it is supported by the scant earlier writings. In the absence of detailed written or other records on the Kusunda, we think that triangulating personal experience and transmitted knowledge of several people in this way is the best, and indeed the only, way in which to reconstruct their past.

14. Balkōṭ is now in Arghākhām̐cī district.

15. Reinhard (1968, 100) reported that around 1918 what was presumably this eastern band of around sixty Kusunda people split into two groups. While the Quan (Khān) and Sai (Śāhī) clans lived in the forests around Pokhara, where the last member died around 1950, the Sian (Sēn) and Shing (Singh) clans lived around Gorkha, where Reinhard met them. One of the anonymous reviewers expressed surprise that based on the anecdotal evidence there may have been around fifty to sixty Kusunda in the early twentieth century, but that there are 160 Kusunda at present. Indeed, this does not appear like a "population decline." However, the fifty to sixty Kusunda only accounts for those in the two nomadic bands and excludes those that had already settled down. Moreover, the figure of 160 Kusunda is partially the result of more recent population growth (as a result of a general improvement in socioeconomic conditions in rural Nepal) and the inclusion of Kusunda families and individuals who had adopted other surnames.

16. Notably, one band of the Raute people of far-western Nepal continues to follow a similar cyclic nomadic pattern (see Fortier 2003 for an excellent discussion on the Raute and the formation of their identity), passing from Jumlā district to Kālikōṭ, Dailēkh, Surkhēt, Salyān, and Dāṅ districts, then returning back to Jumlā.

17. While Śāhī and Sēn are confirmed as Kusunda clans as they still survive till date, and Khān and Singh were earlier mentioned (Reinhard 1968), the Sāha and Malla clans (Rana 2002) had already ceased to exist by the late 1960s.

18. One of the anonymous reviewers of this article found an inconsistency between our description of Kusunda intermarriage with other ethnic groups and the presumed unique genetic makeup of the Kusunda. There is no inconsistency here: the Kusunda used to be endogamous until, at least from a population genetic perspective, relatively recently, with endogamous marriages still the norm in the early twentieth century. Also, the reviewer rightly pointed out that by the twentieth century, it was practically impossible for the two Kusunda bands to practice endogamy and band exogamy: indeed, this was the reason that intermarriage with other ethnic groups became imperative.

19. The reason behind this generation gap is unknown. As we explain in Aaley and Bodt (2023, 249-50), this generation gap continues to limit the options for Kusunda to marry other Kusunda. A similar bottleneck led to the gradual demise of the Bulu Puroik of West Kameng district in western Arunachal Pradesh, India; see Lieberherr (2017), who describes how Puroik had to marry members of other ethnic groups (Miji, Sartang) unless they were able to establish contacts and travel across considerable distances to marry with Puroik in East Kameng district.

20. On his subsequent visit in 1985, Ross Caughley, who was working on the Chepang language, found that this speaker had passed away (personal communication in Watters 2006, 11).

21. As one of the anonymous reviewers of this article rightfully pointed out, the fact that a society presently depends on hunting and gathering does not imply that they have always been hunter-gatherers, and they may have been sedentary agriculturalists who reverted to hunting and gathering as a result of some internal or external pressure. A detailed analysis of the etymologies of Kusunda names for domestic animals and crops may shed more light on whether the Kusunda practiced agriculture earlier. Thus far, credible Indo-Aryan and Trans-Himalayan etymologies have been established for vocabulary such as "cow," "dog," "goat," "millet," "buffalo," and "mortar."

22. Khas includes the high-caste Bāhun (Brāhmaṇ) and Chētrī (Kṣatriya) castes, with the Ṭhākurī traditionally counted among the latter.

23. As one of the anonymous reviewers of this article pointed out, such recognition does not constitute evidence. We merely wish to point out here that in Nepal, and particularly in the areas of western Nepal where the Kusunda used to live, people who know about the Kusunda generally consider them the most indigenous population.

24. Only in recent years, after the Kusunda were provided with citizenship certificates in the first decade of this century, has the ownership status of the often-small plots that some of the Kusunda occupy become regularized.

25. With the demise of Gyani Maiya Sen Kusunda in early 2020, this knowledge was lost forever, as she was the last Kusunda to actively search mushrooms and medicinal plants in the forest.

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Festivals, Rituals, and Fish-Shaped Streamers

Changing Perceptions of Japan's Children's Day

For more than 250 years, Japanese families have celebrated the birth of a male heir by hoisting large fish-shaped streamers called *koinobori* (carp streamers) at or near their home throughout the weeks leading up to the boys' festival day (now Children's Day) on May 5. But with recent demographic shifts and changing lifestyles, the tall *koinobori* displays have become noticeably fewer, and with them, public knowledge about this once important ritual and its role in the communal and spiritual life of Japan's families is on the wane. This article seeks to investigate the history of this ritual and its various facets of meaning, along with the changes it has undergone throughout its history and its substantial shift from what was once an outdoor, communal event to a private affair within the confines of the family home.

Keywords: *koinobori*—Children's Day—*tango no sekku*—folk religion—family structures

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One of the remarkable features of living in Japan is the frequent encounter of seasonal references, be it in poetry, personal letter writing, or in more mundane contexts such as listening to the news or doing the daily shopping. These references come in various forms; they can be food items, songs, or activities associated with a specific period or event in the annual calendar, and which can be purchased, heard, or observed only during or shortly before the event. Many of these references are visual markers, namely images of items that relate to the particular event or season. The number of markers for each of these events or seasons is relatively small, with most of them relating to natural seasonal phenomena such as the *akatombo* dragonfly, the red maple leaf, or the *sakura* cherry blossom. But a few markers are taken from the cultural sphere, and one of these is the event that follows the cherry blossom in the annual calendar, the *koinobori*.

The *koinobori* is the marker for May 5, Children's Day, and once the *sakura* season has officially ended, the ubiquitous depictions of that season's flower quickly give way to images of the three (sometimes two) *koinobori* fish. In the days leading up to Children's Day, the image of these fish, one above the other and all facing one direction, can be found on anything from gift wrappers to shop windows, advertisements, family restaurant menus, local buses, and cake decorations (see figure 1). Not surprisingly, the *koinobori* fish (next to a little yellow or brown pole) are also the Unicode emoji for Japan's May 5 holiday. The objects that gave rise to this seasonal marker, though, the colorful fish-shaped streamers flying from a flagpole high above the roofs of the surrounding houses, are progressively disappearing from Japan's landscape.

With the attention that Children's Day enjoys in the lives of Japan's preschoolers, it is fair to assume that most people in Japan are familiar with the story behind the custom of flying *koinobori* streamers around May 5. But when it comes to the finer details of the *koinobori* display, the meaning of its constituent parts, and its spiritual and sociocultural importance, not much of this is common knowledge anymore. With this in mind, this article looks at the characteristics of the *koinobori*, its historical development from beginnings in Edo's urban society some 250 years ago, its significance in folk religion, and the role that it plays as a tool to reconfirm or realign relations within and between the involved families and the local community.

Figure 1. The three *koinobori* carps on a bookmarker. Photograph by Andreas Riessland, 2024.

Figure 2. A present-day *koinobori* arrangement. From top: *dashi* decoration (*kaitenkyū* and *yaguruma*), *fukinagashi* streamer, and the three *koinobori* streamers (*magoi*, *higoi*, and *kogoi*). Drawing by Y. Ito, 2024.

Koinobori: A short description

When displayed as a visual marker, the simplified image of two or three fish in the colors black, red, and blue—or alternatively blue and red—is enough to communicate the seasonal allusion to the festival day of May 5. But with this focus on the fish, other core elements of the *koinobori* arrangement such as the *fukinagashi* streamer and the *dashi* decoration tend to get neglected. These elements are in many respects as important as, if not more important than, the fish streamers, therefore this article begins with a description of a regular *koinobori* arrangement with all its constituent parts.

The *koinobori* set consists of three or more streamers that are shaped and printed to resemble carp (the *koi* in the term "*koinobori*," see figure 2). The wide mouth of these carp streamers is held open with a slender polythene ring so that air can fill out the streamers, before escaping through the loose open tail end. With a string that runs from the mouth, the streamers are tied to a rope that allows them to be hoisted up a flagpole. Until the early 1960s, these *koinobori* were made from paper or, to a lesser degree, cotton (Hayashi 2018, 10), but today's material of choice is light synthetic fiber that allows the carp streamers to fill with air even in a light breeze. They are industrially cut and assembled, and they are printed with weather-resistant

chemical dyes, although a small number of *koinobori* makers still work the traditional way and paint them by hand.

The sequence of the top three streamers never varies, with a large black one, the *magoi*, at the top, followed by the somewhat smaller red *higoi*, and underneath, smaller again, the blue *kogoi*. Today, many *koinobori* sets have an additional number of *kogoi* in diminishing sizes, but for these, there is no determined color regimen. In the Kansai region, a popular variant of the black *magoi* carries an image of a small red boy resolutely holding on to the fish. This is Kintaro, the boy hero from Japan's folk tales.

Above the *koi* streamers is another streamer, the *fukinagashi*. This term translates simply as "windsock"; this streamer is not fish-shaped but consists of either five strips of fabric in five distinct colors, or it is printed with a colorful pattern. Usually, the *fukinagashi*'s seams run only for about half of the streamer's length, so that at the tail end, the fabric strips can flutter freely in the wind. On many of these *fukinagashi*, the head section is left white, with two blue stripes known as *nibiki* or *komochisuji* running around it. This symbol has been in use for a long time, and there are conflicting theories about its meaning, whether it constitutes a fertility symbol, a representation of dragons and rain, or a reminiscence to the parents-and-child trinity (Kitamura 2009, 140). The size of the streamers depends on the available space: the maximum length of today's popular front garden or veranda variants is around four to seven feet, but with the freestanding arrangements that can still be found in the countryside, the *magoi* and *fukinagashi* streamers can easily reach thirty feet or more.

Another essential element of the *koinobori* assembly is the *dashi*, the decoration at the top of the *koinobori* flagpole. The *dashi* has two components: at the very top of the pole, a ball-shaped pinwheel made from several gold-colored blades rotates around its vertical axis. This is the *kaitenkyū*. Underneath it are the *yaguruma*, two pinwheels whose wings resemble feathered arrowtails. Usually, the *yaguruma* are also gilded or in a color combination where gold and red predominate. Today's *kaitenkyū* and *yaguruma* are usually made from polythene or aluminum.

A wooden or light metal pole and a set of rigging lines complete the standard *koinobori* arrangement. Apart from a few local variants of the *dashi*, the *koinobori* setup is the same throughout Japan: three or more *koi* streamers hoisted on the pole, above them the colorful *fukinagashi* streamer, and on top of the pole the spinning *dashi* pinwheels. So what, then, is the link between hoisting carp-shaped streamers and the May 5 holiday? To figure this out, it is helpful to look at the origin of this holiday, and at the changes it underwent.

History of the *koinobori*

Until recently, the festival day we know as Children's Day (*kodomo no hi*) was celebrated under a different name that related back to the holiday's origin in China's cultural sphere. It was (and occasionally still is) known as *tango no sekku*, a seasonal holiday (*sekku*) to mark the first day of the horse (*tango*) in the month of the horse, namely the fifth day of the fifth month. Along with the other *sekku* holidays in the annual cycle, it had arrived in Japan around the Heian period, where it merged with indigenous seasonal festivities. In accordance with the lunisolar calendar that was in use in Japan

until 1873, the date of this holiday was about a month later than it is today, around the first half of June when the rice shoots were ready to be transferred to the rice paddies, one of the key events in the annual agricultural cycle. Also, this was the time just before the onset of the rainy season with its oppressive heat and humidity, and its potential damage to people's belongings and to their health. Accordingly, *tango no sekku* served as an event to prepare for the coming inclement weather; to ritually purify the house, its inhabitants, and their possessions; and to show due respect to the kami so that the community and everything it owned, and most of all the coming harvest, would be under the protection of their benevolent influence.

With the rise of the warrior class in the Kamakura period, this festival underwent a fundamental change in character. The erstwhile protection and purification rites were now joined by the warrior nobility's practice to entreat the kami specifically for the protection of their male offspring, on whom the perpetuation of their lineage depended (Kitamura 2009, 137). In order to give the kami an appropriate welcome and to offer them a suitable abode for the duration of the festivities, the clan's banners and halberds were erected at the family residence, many carrying an ornamental decoration at the top where the kami could settle and grace the festivities with their presence (see figure 3). In addition to offering the kami a resting place, this display of heraldry and weapons on or in front of the family estate also signaled to the surrounding community and any passers-by that this house had recently been blessed with a male heir.

Around the middle of the Edo period (1603–1868), this custom of publicly announcing the blissful state of the family began to be adopted by Edo's wealthy bourgeoisie. But as commoners were prohibited from displaying status markers such as the nobility's crested banners or weapons, they had to find ways to offer the kami a similarly impressive seat while not raising the ire of the authorities.[1]

Figure 3. Edo streetlife with celebratory decorations for the *tango no sekku* holiday. Source: Gesshin Saitō and Settan Hasegawa, *Tōtō saijiki*, Edo (Tokyo): Suharaya Ihachi, 1838.

Figure 4. The *shōki* flag. The triangular shape at the top left represents the bat. Photograph by Andreas Riessland, 2012.

One item that gained popularity around that time was the *shōki nobori*, a flag that carries the image of a stocky and muscular warrior with a thick black beard (see figure 4). This is Shōki (Pinyin: Zhōng Kuí), a figure from Daoist mythology, powerful vanquisher of demons and protector from evil. His clothing and the shape of his sword indicate his Chinese background, and he is usually depicted in a martial pose, battle ready, as he viciously pummels a markedly smaller red demon, or as he glares at a bat that approaches from the distance. Shōki's association with the bat goes back to a proverb that plays with the homophones "luck" and "bat" in Chinese, saying that Shōki gets angry when the bat/luck is late—a discreet encouragement to luck not to take too long to appear. Particularly in the Kantō region, *shōki nobori* can still be seen today, alongside the *koinobori* set.

For commoners, these *shōki nobori* were an uncontentious way of emulating the nobility's rituals. They had a distinctly martial quality, but with Shōki's character as a protective deity and his obvious Chinese origin, the authorities had no reason to restrict the display of his images. Accordingly, if mid-to-late Edo illustrations are anything to go by, *shōki nobori* were frequently employed in the city's *tango no sekku* celebrations. The first drawing of such a flag is found in the *Zokukiyoganna*, a collection of poems from 1745 (the year Enkyō 2). An illustration in this book shows *nobori* for the *tango no sekku*, although it is not clear whether they belong to a nobleman's household or that of a rich commoner. In this illustration, we see a flag with the two auspicious *nibiki* stripes and a stylized wave and one with the *shōki* motif. The other decorations for the occasion are also striking, the distinctive *higekago* basket at the top of the pole and, tied to the top of the crossbars of the flags, several small pendants known as *maneki*: an additional small flag, and a streamer shaped like a fish, the earliest currently known image of this kind.

As later Edo-period illustrations show, *shōki nobori* and the nobility's crested flags retained their visibility in town (see figures 5 and 6), but with time, the *koi* became progressively more prominent. In the later Edo period, the small fish-shaped appendage in the *Zokukiyoganna* had become a black *magoi* of substantial length,

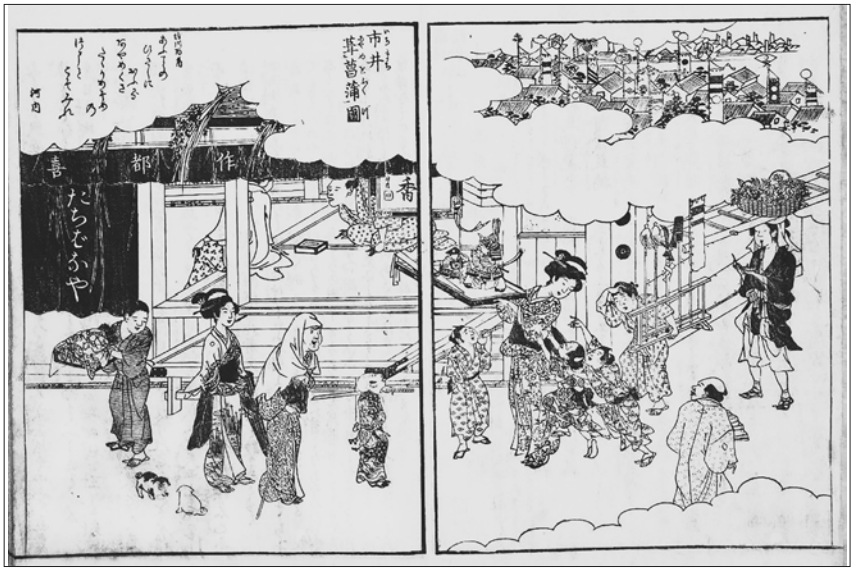

Figure 5. *Tango no sekku* celebration in the mid Edo period (1806). Source: Shungyōsai Hayami, *Nenchū gyōji taisei*, vol. 4, Kameyama: Sudajūemon, 1806.

fluttering from its own pole, highly conspicuous above the city's rooftops (see figure 7). The *koi* could now also be seen as a motif on other flags for the *tango no sekku*, as a powerful fish resolutely fighting its way up a waterfall (Kitamura 2009, 23–28).

The common explanation for the significance of the carp on this day relates to the Chinese folk tale of the carp that attempted over and again to swim up the river rapids at the Dragon Gate (Pinyin: Lóng mén; Jp.: Ryūmon), and when it finally succeeded, turned into a dragon. With the popularization of this legend in Japan, the carp from the Dragon Gate increasingly came to symbolize vitality, perseverance, determination, and ultimate success, and thus became a projection screen for everything that one wanted for one's child to achieve in life.

In the Meiji period (1868–1912), the custom of hoisting carp streamers had established itself countrywide, but from 1872 on, the number of *koinobori* displays

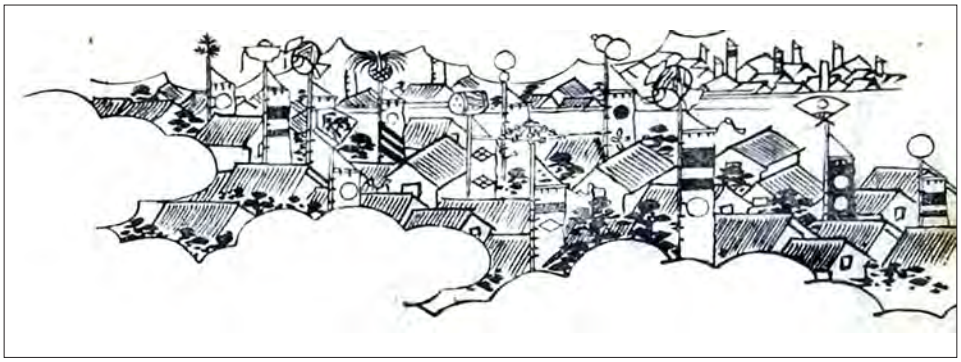

Figure 6. Closeup of the background of fig. 5. Crested flags of the nobility with various objects as *dashi* at the top, to celebrate *tango no sekku*. Source: Shungyōsai Hayami, *Nenchū gyōji taisei*, vol. 4, Kameyama: Sudajūemon, 1806.

Figure 7. *Suidobashi Surugadai*, woodblock print by Utagawa Hiroshige. *Magoi* streamers of the late Edo period (1857). Source: Utagawa Hiroshige, "One Hundred Famous Views of Edo," 1857. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_Hundred_Famous_Views_of_Edo

particularly in the cities dropped considerably. The reason for this sudden change was the formal abolition of the *sekku* holidays in this year, and it was not before 1894 that this custom was revived countrywide. Soon after, the black *magoi* came to be joined by a smaller red *higoi* (Ueda 2014, 3–6). Why this second carp streamer appeared and what it originally stood for is no longer known. With the popular 1931 children's song "Koinobori" that was sung in schools all over the country, the role distribution of the *koi* was also settled for good: the large *magoi* represented the father, and the smaller *higoi* stood for the son. In the postwar period, the *higoi* came to represent the mother, while the role of the son was now given to a newly added third fish, the *kogoi*. Around the time of the Tokyo Olympics, the number of *koi* rose further to an average five streamers, but according to Hayashi Naoki (2018, 10), the popular story that this was inspired by the five Olympic rings is an urban myth. Rather, the rise in the number of *koi*, with one for each of the family's children, is said to be due in equal parts to the changing perception of family roles and to the marketing skills of the *nobori* manufacturers.

It has already been mentioned that in the Kansai region, there is a *magoi* variant with a vermilion child clinging to it, the boy hero Kintarō. With this image on the *koi*, two folk tales intertwine: the *magoi* still stands for the story of the carp at the Ryūmon rapids, but this is now linked to the tale of Kintarō, who, among many other heroic deeds, distinguished himself by battling with and defeating a giant carp. Both components of the *nobori*, the *koi* as well as Kintaro, are thus a visual expression of the wish for a bright and successful future for one's own son. Kintarō's deep red body color is attributed to the formerly widespread belief that vermilion was an effective remedy against the periodically rampant smallpox. The red Kintarō, just like the frequently red Shōki images, comes to express the desire to see the child protected from this disease (Kitamura 2009, 137–38). With the disappearance of such folk beliefs, the perception of Kintaro is also changing. In today's Kansai region, most people would still be able to identify the little red boy on the *magoi* as Kintarō, and many would still be familiar with the story of Kintarō's struggle with the big *koi*. But hardly anyone would probably know much about the protective qualities of Kintarō's

vermilion hue. And as with Kintarō, so it is with the rest of the spiritual rationale behind the *koinobori* display: much of it has disappeared from common knowledge.

The spiritual aspects of the *koinobori*

The custom of displaying distinctive decorations for *tango no sekku* in front of or next to the baby boy's home served several purposes:

- it answered to the expectations among the local community and the family of what is right and proper to do,
- it publicly communicated the family's wishes for their offspring's bright and successful future, based on the popular folk tale of the carp fighting its way up the Ryūmon rapids and becoming a mighty dragon, and
- it served as an invitation to the divine powers, offering them a locale to settle on and bless the event with their beneficial and protective influence.

The first two functions are still relevant with the *koinobori* display, but the spiritual dimension plays a much-diminished role in the public perception of the Children's Day celebrations. How little of this remains can be seen in *koinobori* seasonal markers on consumer goods (see figure 1): often, they focus on the carp streamers and neglect the two other essential parts of the *koinobori* arrangement, the *fukinagashi* streamer and the *dashi* decoration on top of the mast, the two elements that in spiritual terms are the more important ones.

In the *koinobori* ensemble, the main site of divine presence is the *dashi*, the assembly of pinwheels on top of the hoisting pole. They serve as a *yorishiro*, as an object that represents the seat of a divine power. They are one among the many ritual objects of Japanese folk belief that are used on festive occasions to provide the kami with a temporary abode high above the heads of the revelers, from where they can witness the festivities in their honor and exert their beneficial influence. A variety of objects can be raised as *yorishiro*, such as woven baskets, fabric or paper ornaments, bundles of tree branches, or the flashing pinwheels on top of the *koinobori* assembly.

With the small scale of today's *koinobori* sets for the urban front garden, visualizing the *dashi*'s spiritual quality becomes difficult, but at the foot of one of the impressively tall *koinobori* in the countryside, where high above the pinwheels are flashing in the sunlight, it is much easier to picture them as a seat of divine power. In the Kumamoto area, as well as in Ibaraki or Fukushima (see figure 8), the heritage of this spiritual quality is yet more apparent, as the pole decorations there are closer in design to the seats of the divine that the warrior class deployed during the Edo period (see figures 3, 6, and 7). The Kumamoto variant, which with an overall height of about forty feet is the tallest in Japan, carries several indications of its character as a *yorishiro*. Underneath a short flag with the child's name, the pole tip has a single *yaguruma* wheel, together with a bundle of evergreen branches and a large basket made from split bamboo with numerous long, loose bamboo strips hanging from it. In Japanese folk religious contexts, such bundles of evergreen branches are often employed as a *yorishiro*, conspicuously so in several of the festival floats for Kyoto's Gion Matsuri (Soejima 1995, 156). Kumamoto's unusual bamboo basket serves a similar function.

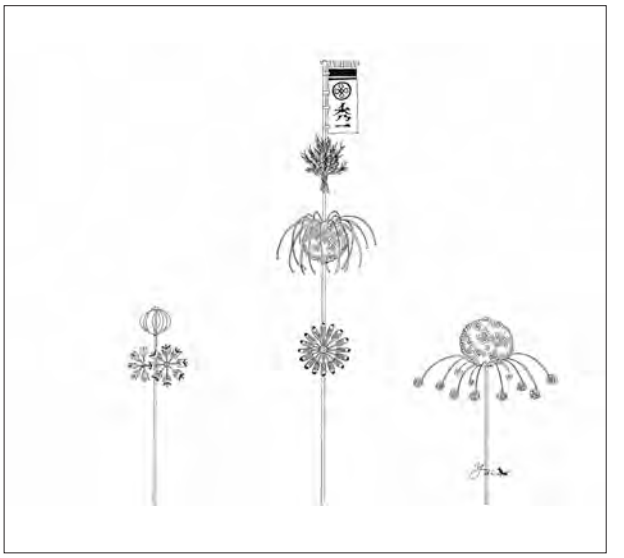

Figure 8. Present-day dashi styles. Left: customary *dashi* with *kaitenkyū* and *yaguruma*. Middle: Kumamoto-style *dashi* with top flag, evergreen branches, *baren* basket, and single *yaguruma*. Right: Ibaraki-style dashi, a large *kagodama* basket. Drawing by Y. Ito, 2024.

Locally, it is known as a "*baren*" (commonly written in katakana), but the generic term for this is "*higeko*" or "*higekago*" ("beard basket"), due to its "beard" of hanging bamboo strips.[2] In Ibaraki and Fukushima prefectures, one comes across similar baskets used as *dashi*, the *kagodama*. Here, split bamboo is woven into a large spherical basket with long bamboo strips protruding, each of these strips carrying small woven bamboo ball at the tip.

During the Edo period, these baskets were a popular tool for offering the kami a temporary abode, and throughout the festivities, they were the spiritual focal point of the festive decorations. In figures 3 and 6, they can be seen on top of the flags that the warrior nobility had put up in front of their residences to celebrate *tango no sekku*. As Ueda Nobumichi (2014, 6–8) points out, *koinobori* displays also carried *kagodama* instead of the *kaitenkyū* until at least the end of the nineteenth century. But in today's *koinobori* assemblies for the balcony or the front garden, this spiritual aspect of the *dashi* plays a very marginal role, and the *kaitenkyu* and *yaguruma* on top of the pole represent little more than an entertaining detail, turning merrily in the breeze.

This also applies to the *fukinagashi* streamers; they too carry a more complex meaning than is generally perceived today. According to the traditional layout, a *fukinagashi* should consist of strips of fabric in the following five colors: blue, white, red, black, and yellow. This color combination goes back to the Chinese doctrine of the five elements (Pinyin: *wǔxíng*; Jp.: *gogyō*) and represents perfection in the interplay of the five virtues. The wish to secure the very best of luck for the newborn also plays a role here, through the hope that the five essential virtues should interact as harmoniously in the child's life as the interplay of colors suggests. Today, however, such notions hardly ever play into the choice of *fukinagashi* design, and regarding their color and pattern, a considerable proportion of *fukinagashi* no longer have anything to do with the complexities of the five-element doctrine. This also holds true for the

nibiki, the two blue stripes around the head of the *fukinagashi*; their purpose to invoke fertility or the dragons' presence has also been lost from common knowledge.

The one element in the *koinobori* setup that seems to have no connection to the spiritual world is its main defining feature, the *koi* streamers. But with the unique character that the carp's story takes on in Japan, the question needs to be asked whether there isn't more to the *koi* than just the tale of the carp at the Ryūmon rapids. After all, artists in China have reproduced the carp-at-the-rapids motif for centuries (see figure 9), but I have yet to come across any carp-shaped streamers like Japan's *tango no sekku* displays.

For ethnologist Kitazawa Masakuni, there is no doubt about the spiritual quality of the *koi* streamers. To him, *koinobori* are in a category with the wind-driven fixtures that the warrior class used in battle, such as *fukinagashi*-style streamers or the windblown capes of the medieval cavalry known as *horo*. In all of these items, says Kitazawa, the spirit of *araburu megami* ("the raging goddess") was believed to be manifest, and through them the warrior nobles hoped to secure the protection of this goddess of war. Also, together with the catfish, the carp was regarded as an embodiment of a powerful earth and water deity, whose presence and protection were also invoked by hoisting *koinobori* (Kitazawa 1995, 135ff.). It should be critically noted, though, that Kitazawa does not provide any proof to support these assumptions, and his theories, however plausible, remain purely speculative.

Figure 9. Late seventeenth- or early eighteenth-century plate with carp and dragon motif. National Palace Museum, Taiwan. Photograph by Andreas Riessland, 2024.

The *koinobori* in a social context

In Japan, purchasing a *koinobori* set and gifting it to the child is an act of great interpersonal and interfamilial importance. Also, the public display of *koinobori* at or near the child's residence is prone to cause a reaction from the local community that directly impacts the concerned family's position in this community. This reaction can vary greatly, depending on the particular local situation.

On the one hand, there is the difficult issue of trying to follow this custom in a contemporary urban setting. Hoisting a set of *koinobori* is a highly visible statement directed at the local community (and beyond) about this particular family's domestic situation, namely the fact that this family has been blessed with a son and heir. Yet in the relative anonymity of today's *manshon* and *apāto* neighborhoods, the *koinobori*'s public message about the family's internal affairs meets a society where this message is at best irrelevant if not outright unwelcome, as shown in the many instances where the rulebook of the home owners' association expressly prohibits the display of *koinobori* on the outside of the building.

In village or small-town societies, on the other hand, or in urban areas where long-term residential interaction has fostered a close-knit network of interpersonal relationships, the situation is markedly different. Here, familial events such as a wedding or the birth of a child are of significance not only for the involved families but also for the wider community of neighbors and local acquaintances. Leaving aside the profound disruption that such an event poses for the lives of those directly affected, it also offers the involved families a rare opportunity to consolidate or readjust their position within the competitive arena of local hierarchies. In this respect, the birth of the oldest son and future heir to the paternal family line is particularly important, and the *koinobori* deliver a very efficient tool to achieve the wished-for publicity on this occasion. Their primary function is to visibly convey the family members' pride and joy over this happy event to the greater community. But on another level they also speak about the relationship between the involved families, their respective positions within the local community, their attitudes toward local customs and traditions, and, given the high cost of purchasing the *koinobori*, also about their financial situation.[3]

In view of this, it becomes understandable why this issue is of such significance to the two involved families. According to custom, it is the family on the mother's side who takes care of the *koinobori* set. They purchase it and present it to the baby boy. This is a crucial act in the two families' ongoing effort to balance out the relationship between them. To understand the full scope of this, it is helpful to take a look at the relational framework of the two families' relationship.

With the 1898 Civil Code, Japan's lawmakers had decreed that all matters concerning the arrangement of the nation's households should be conducted in accordance with the precepts of the *ie seido*, an adaptation of the former samurai class's patrilineal and paternalistic system of family organization and succession rules (Linhart 1984, 546; Danwerth 2012, 100). Within this system, the decision-making power over all matters concerning the household lay with its male head, who was also legally responsible for anything that happened within this household. As the family's primary heir and its future head, the family's oldest son, his wife, and their children lived at the family residence together with his parents, and it was his

(or primarily his wife's) responsibility to ensure that the parents were well taken care of in old age. For the wife, marrying an oldest son meant taking on his surname, moving into his family home, and submitting to his mother's authority in all matters concerning the household and to his (or his father's) decision-making authority in everything else, including all matters concerning their children. Formally at least, her relationship with her own blood relatives came to a virtual standstill.

With the 1947 revision of Japan's Civil Code, the legally binding status of this system came to an end. Also, the continuing urbanization and the spread of the nuclear family further weakened its predominance in Japan. However, in many areas of society, particularly those where the family comprises the primary economic unit (such as agriculture or the country's many family-run businesses), the paternalistic, patrilineal household model continues to represent the social norm.

But even under the prewar system, the rules of family adherence were rarely ever enforced as strictly as the letter of the law suggested. Local communities amended the body of government laws with their own informal conventions and frequently accommodated inheritance arrangements where the heir's task of maintaining the *ie* fell to younger siblings or other relatives, or to nonrelated individuals who would be adopted into the family (Goldfarb 2019, 184–85). Also, in the case of marriage, they would often grant the bride's side of the family, in particular her parents, a modicum of involvement in the affairs of her married life. Many of these conventions are still in place today, including those concerning the purchase and gifting of the *koinobori*.

In general, it is the grandparents on the mother's side whose responsibility and privilege it is to purchase the *koinobori* streamers and to present them to the baby boy. For the father's side of the family, this gift to their future heir is a clear statement from the mother's kin that they, too, have a viable interest in the wellbeing of both mother and child. What is more, the *koinobori* gift is also a useful tool for conveying to the husband and his relatives (and, with the public character of the *koinobori* display, to the wider community) one's view about the relationship between the two families.

Assuming that the two families are on reasonably amicable terms, a suitably generous *koinobori* present will be a helpful asset in deepening the friendly relationship between them. If, however, issues relating to status or a mutually competitive mindset were to play into the relationship between the two families, then this offers an opportunity to at least partially subvert the societal framework of the *ie* system. The *koinobori* are a gift from the grandparents to the grandson (not to his parents), and to not acknowledge the present and not hoist the *koinobori* at the boy's residence would be perceived as a serious breach of social protocol. With this, the *koinobori* gift offers a handy tool in the two families' competitive relationship; it does not matter whether the gift happens to be distinctly substandard or inappropriately lavish, the intended message about this relationship will be open to witness by everyone, both within the two families and in the wider community.

However, this last, very confrontational scenario describes an approach that would be at best rare and exceptional. It is safe to assume that in most cases both sides interpret this gift with a more amicable focus on its many positive connotations: as a contribution by the mother's side of the family to the child's happiness, as a public expression of joy over the birth of a baby boy, as an appeal to the kami to bless this

child with their benevolent and protective powers, and as a gentle reminder that the mother's parents also have a vital interest in participating in, and contributing to, the healthy life and upbringing of their grandchild.

Conclusion

In 1948 Japan's May 5 holiday was amended to include all children, but the day's prior denotation as a holiday for boys is still very much in place today. This is evident in the items and activities that mark this seasonal festival, such as the carp-shaped streamers used to celebrate the birth of a family's male heir. As a seasonal marker and graphic design element, they are still very much in use. But with the changes in Japan's demographics and in the lifestyle patterns of its people, the actual custom of displaying the *koinobori* is increasingly moving indoors, with room-size versions taking the place of the traditional large outdoor ones. Consequently, the purpose of the *koinobori* is also undergoing fundamental changes, as one of its primary intentions, the public celebration of the family's male offspring, is becoming redundant. In Japan's towns and villages, the tall poles with their distinctive streamers and pinwheels are less and less frequently seen these days, and along with them public consciousness of their ritual, spiritual, and social significance is also in decline. To counter this trend, the members of the Nihon Koinobori Kyōkai, Japan's association of *koinobori* manufacturers, strive to keep this culture alive. But as the growing number of small-scale and indoor variants on their sales pages show, they are well aware that the *koinobori* custom is increasingly losing its public character and turning into an indoor, private affair.[4]

Until today, a large conspicuous *koinobori* display is a powerful public statement, particularly wherever the old *ie seido* structure is still a relevant factor in social and familial relationships. But attitudes in society continue to change, and with today's reduced-size *koinobori* sets the grandparents can meet their expected familial duty at a much-reduced cost. So even where the family's property size would allow for a large *koinobori* display to be set up, there is clearly less incentive for them to do so than in earlier times. It remains to be seen whether this erstwhile important custom will survive, or whether it will develop into an anachronism that only a tradition-conscious and wealthy minority is willing to hold on to.

Notes

1. According to Ueda (2014, 3), these prohibitions affected not only commoners but also a large number of lower-ranking members of the warrior elite.

2. For a detailed discussion of the *higeko* baskets in the context of Japanese folk religion see Orikuchi 2006.

3. The average cost for one of the professionally mounted large-scale *koinobori* sets that still dot the countryside in spring is above one million yen.

4. In the public sphere, the *koi*-shaped streamers can still be encountered in the mass displays that have started to appear throughout the country. Here, preferably above a riverbed in or near town, hundreds of streamers are hoisted on long steel cables that cross the river valley below.

But the purpose of these municipally organized displays is mainly to enhance local tourism; they do not serve any particular social or spiritual purpose.

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Culinary Trends at Hindu Weddings That Contribute to Perceptions of Middle-Class Identities among Indian South Africans

Marriage ceremonies and celebrations globally are often celebrated with pomp, exuberance, and glamor. Hindu wedding ceremonies in the diaspora purposefully contribute to the sustenance of Hindu rituals and lifeways. The Hindu Indian community in Durban, South Africa has sought to uphold its marriage traditions and rituals, which have also been influenced by both local and Western cultural trends. Contemporary global and local influences are evident in the culinary consumption trends at Hindu weddings. Food consumption patterns and preferences have evolved to serve as identity markers of sociocultural patterns and social class positions amid middle-class Indians in Durban. This qualitative study based on twenty-five in-depth interviews reflects on the ways in which food is used to celebrate and represent Hindu traditions and beliefs at Indian South African Hindu weddings, how food reflects on status, how conditions have changed, and various reasons for such change. The study contributes to the lacunae in scholarly literature concerning critical appreciation of Hindu weddings in contemporary South Africa.

Keywords: consumption—Durban—Hindu weddings—Indian South Africans—middle-class—wedding foods

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Marriage is perceived to be one of the most important life-cycle rituals (*saṃskāra*) for all Hindus for two primary reasons, one of which is to physically reproduce. The other reason is that marriage is seen as a structure or institution through which one perpetuates cultural, spiritual, and religious practices (Mullatti 1995; Singh 1989; Lal and Vahed 2013; Singh and Bhoola 2016, 2018). Indeed, it is virtually compulsory for all Hindus to marry, since it allows for the preservation and continuity of religious and cultural practices and philosophical values of Hinduism (Singh 1989). "For Hindus, marriage is for life, a purificatory ritual and a sacrament," according to Leela Mullatti (1995, 1).

The marriage ceremony therefore usually involves relatives from both the bride and bridegroom's paternal and maternal families and has become an elaborate event that aims to unite two families through a new relationship that becomes consecrated as a result of Hindu marriage pre-events, the wedding ceremony itself, and the post-ceremony events. The sustenance of Hindu practices within South Africa has been studied in a variety of contexts both in India and abroad (for example, Lal and Vahed 2013; Gopal, Khan, and Singh 2014). Naturally, such rites of passage must adapt to local contexts in order to survive. Thus, the localization of Hindu rituals in South Africa tends to be a process combining the will to practice traditional rituals with the challenges posed by modern sociocultural contexts. The marriage ritual has also become an important social event for many Indian South Africans because the Hindu philosophy of family values and reproduction are upheld by it. In addition, there are various sociocultural representations that emerge at these events. The collective beliefs and opinions embodied symbolically in the performance of a Hindu marriage are showcased, and social conduct in relation to cultural and traditional practices are reified as a result.

This article includes a descriptive overview of contemporary Hindu weddings in Durban, which serves as the background for understanding the context of the study. Contemporary global and social influences are evident in discussions that describe culinary consumption trends at weddings. The modified and acceptable foodways at such weddings are described in relation to current food trends, the accepted practice of blending cuisines at weddings, vegetarianism and nonvegetarianism, as well as the consumption of alcoholic beverages at wedding festivities. Through these perspectives, we attempt to identify certain markers that assist in understanding what constitutes good hospitality practices among Indian South African middle-class

people in Durban. The sociocultural and class representations of food at a Hindu wedding are brought to the fore through a qualitative methodological approach. The authors conducted twenty-five in-depth interviews to serve as primary data. The aim of our study is to fill some of the existing lacunae in the preexisting literature that contextualize and analyze the sociocultural and class representations of food practices at Hindu weddings within the South Asian diaspora. The way in which food is used to celebrate and represent the traditions and beliefs of Hindus at Indian South African weddings has been relatively undocumented.

Diversity in the world has illuminated the differences in the way people connect to food, rituals, symbols, and belief systems. In his concept of the "culinary triangle," for example, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) explains that the study of food enables an anthropologist to understand a society's unconscious attitudes toward the meals it consumes. He notes that culinary study is of greater value when one's palatable taste and food preferences have been emplaced in specific social and ethnic traditions (see Counihan 1998). Following his logic, we proceed to study the fluid food consumption patterns of ethnic groupings within a globalized context in order to attempt to determine if consumption patterns are still being shaped by influential social structures, such as religious and educational institutions, as well as the impact of collective residential communities or influential individuals within the target communities under study.

Anthropological research (Douglas 1972; Kaplan 2013; Jagganath 2017; Kumar 2003) has focused on the interrelationships between food and cultures globally and the impact of modernization and globalization on food consumption (Singh and Bhoola 2018). In our case, each caste and ethnolinguistic group originates from a variety of geographically specific locations in South Asia, and their differing income levels have been considered. Such groups perceive or imagine their "real" identities based on the development and evolution of their beliefs concerning which foods are appropriate to serve at Hindu religious events such as weddings. From a consumerist perspective, the food, location, décor, music, and attire of the bridal families are markers of social identities that are ratified by public engagements during spectacular wedding events (Singh and Bhoola 2016).

Hindu weddings within the Indian diaspora

Publications that focus on Hindu weddings, marriage, and family life within the Indian diaspora around the globe discuss themes such as patriarchy, feminism, arranged marriages, the dowry system, and tradition versus modernity (Sheel 2008; Biao 2008; Pande 2021). The wedding as a cultural performance among transnational South Asian communities surely contributes to the ongoing development of Hindu identity by celebrating the wedding itself as an integral aspect of culture and tradition for diasporic Indians living in locations like Houston, Texas, which was studied by Gail Sutherland (2003), for instance. However, very few scholarly studies articulate and discuss the sociocultural context and anthropological interpretations of Indian meals served at diasporic Hindu weddings. Scholars such as Hannah Bradby (2002) discuss the symbolic aspects of the exchange of food among Punjabi people living in Glasgow,

Scotland. She describes how food sharing at events like weddings gustatorily and olfactorily demonstrates various aspects of one's identity. Her study pays special attention to perceptions of what a celebratory meal at such an event should include as well as descriptions of an average, daily Punjabi meal in Glasgow. More recently, the popularity and commodification of "authentic" Indian cuisine being packaged for home consumption in the United States has also been analyzed (Srinivas 2006).

Comparatively, southern African studies (Erlank 2014; Kuper 2016; White 2017) focus mostly on bride wealth and Caucasian Christian weddings within different racial groupings that take into account kinship. There are a few studies that pay attention to the cultural attributes of South African weddings, where the role of indigenous songs at weddings in modern times is analyzed (Mulaudzi 2013). The marriage ceremony as a representation of love and desire is often depicted as being an achievement among South Africans (Pauli and Dawids 2017). The multiple sociocultural influences and symbolic meanings of selected wedding practices have also been elaborated upon. Amid Africans in Namibia, for example, weddings represent varying notions of modernity within different class and social groupings. Such studies further explain that weddings in Namibia have become an indicator of eligibility to belong to the middle class (Pauli and van Dijk 2016).

Julia Pauli and Rijk van Dijk (2016) contend that marriage in South Africa has been on a decline in the early twenty-first century. According to a 2023 survey, more and more South African couples are opting to practice conjugal relationships outside of marriage by simply living together. The survey proves that fewer marriages took place in the year 2020 than in previous years. Moreover, in 2021 there was a 13 percent hike in the number of divorces recorded (Statistics South Africa 2023). However, none of these local studies focus on food practices and preferences or culinary trends at South African weddings. Scholarly work on Hindu marriages and practices in relation to customs, cuisine, and traditions within the Indian South African community has been minimal. Karen Fernandez, Ekant Veer, and John L. Lastovicka (2011) describe the sociocultural meanings of the gifting of gold jewelry between family members during Southern African marriages, in particular from the matriarch of the groom's family to the newly wedded bride. Aashistra Babulal (2011) specifically focuses his study on Hindu marriage and the law, whereas the dissolution of Hindu marriage is detailed and described in a case study authored by Jacqueline Heaton (2008).

There are two publications that focus primarily on Hindu marriages within South Africa. In 1956, Hilda Kuper published a descriptive paper of a Hindustani marriage ceremony in Durban. Her foundational paper provides a brief description of the wedding meal served, but its anthropological significance in relation to the meal's social meanings is excluded. Fifty years later her study was usefully analyzed by Anand Singh (2007). He emphasizes the need for an anthropological study in the contemporary era to update Kuper's findings. In comparison, Kuper (1956) makes reference to the traditional criteria utilized for spouse selection within the Hindu community in Durban, which include caste, ethnicity, and family reputation. Singh (2007) discusses how this community was socialized after apartheid during the democratizing era in South Africa. The birth of a new South Africa in the year 1994 was indicative of egalitarian values such as equality for all, as well as the role

of integrating ethnicity and concomitant cultural elements that could symbolize a newly united nation. Therefore, in his discussion of unmarried Hindustani youth and the emerging patterns of change in romantic courtships, he includes partner selection preferences and wedding dynamics among Hindustani couples in the twenty-first century. This study, too, excluded culinary preferences and modern trends in cuisine that have infiltrated Hindu weddings in Durban (Singh 2007). Newspapers such as the weekly *Sunday Tribune*, which includes a subsection titled "Herald," nonetheless focus on local Indian communities. They regularly feature weddings in Durban to highlight the featured couples and their selection of wedding attire, the venues for events, the weddings themselves, décor artists, caterers, and confectioners.

Aside from those already discussed, contemporary studies that focus on the lifeways, cultural practices, and food and its consumption patterns among Indian South Africans in Durban are few. Gerelene Jagganath (2017), in a study based on Indian women immigrants residing in Durban, states that food has become a "significant cultural marker of identity in contemporary societies and provides a means to comprehend a multitude of social dynamics amongst people, cultural relations and lifeways as well as class and consumption" (2017, 1). Sophie Chevalier (2015) published on food and consumption patterns of people of all race groups living in Durban, which contributes to the categorization of South African middle classes. She explains that consumption patterns no longer define large groups of people, but rather the individuals living middle-class lifestyles. Henning Melber (2022) adds that these social contexts contribute toward dissecting the preferences and identities of the new middle class. The view conveyed by the essays just mentioned is that early socialization and cultural influences within the home have assisted anthropologists in understanding and analyzing the food preferences made by middle-class citizens of Indian descent, as well as how they have incorporated food into their holistic identity.

Similarly, Chevalier (2015, 119) indicates that "eating is also a principal vehicle for sharing social life and for expressing a range of lifestyles." Therefore, food in some contextual settings can be a pointer to indicate social status. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) had earlier posited that eating habits and food choices tend to reproduce class distinctions and reinforce differences between people based on social, ethnic, and religious grounds. A number of sociocultural meanings are evident in the food choices individuals make, and these choices are influenced mostly by accessibility, availability, and resources. The value in understanding the role food plays within a social setting like a wedding is that it is an indicator of cultural consumption patterns and their correlates. This understanding therefore contributes to an appreciation of traditional and nontraditional practices in ethnic minority communities such as the Indian diasporic ones located around the world (Bourdieu 1984).

The Hindu community in KwaZulu-Natal

Indians were brought to Colonial Natal from "British" India to work as indentured laborers on sugar plantations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thereafter, other Indians migrated to South Africa as "passenger" Indians with the

initial intention of supplying commodities to indentured and "free" Indians. Indians were mainly of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or Christian religious backgrounds. Hindu immigrants originated from all parts of India, such as the north, south, and west. As a result, vernacular and caste identities varied tremendously, since the cultural heritage from these different regions was so diverse. Among Hindus, the languages that were spoken were Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, and Gujarati. Within each of these languages, dialectal diversity was also indicative of regional influences and origins (Kumar 2013). Bringing Hindu religious practices and ideas mainly from India to Durban and other South African provinces is still ongoing. South Africa currently has immigrant populations from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka also, but their exact locations and numbers are yet to be documented (Jagganath 2017).

Hinduism is still practiced in Durban, albeit with distinct South African characteristics. This is evident in the numerous temples that now dot the landscape, for the diasporic Hindu community began to erect new structures of worship within a few years of the arrival of the first Indians in 1860. Some of these temples have adjoining halls that serve as venues for bridal couples to host their weddings. For instance, The Umgeni Road Temple's adjoining halls, the Hindu Sanskruti Kendra's adjoining halls, and the Merebank Temple halls have been available to the community for social, religious, and cultural events since the year 2001 (Kumar 2013).

Study participants

Six heterosexual married couples and thirteen additional individual respondents were interviewed for our study. Of these study participants, nine were relatives, such as parents of the bridal couples and maternal or paternal aunts and uncles (see table 1). All interviewees were practicing Hindus but from different linguistic groups. Seventeen of the study participants were from the Hindi-speaking group, six were from the Tamil-speaking group, and two were Gujarati speaking. The remaining three study participants were comprised of event coordinators and caterers. One participant was a vegetarian, and the rest followed an omnivorous diet. The six weddings that are described by study participants (that is, six young couples and family members) are reflected upon in the analysis and discussions that follow. Table 1 indicates the detailed demographics of the participants.

Overview of contemporary Hindu weddings in Durban

Hindu marriage ceremonies can be marginally or widely distinct from one another due to regional practices, traditions, and the vernacular variations spoken. For instance, Tamil wedding customs differ from Gujarati weddings in the sequence of Hindu deities that are worshiped, the offerings made, and the language in which the prayers are conducted. But central to all Hindu weddings are common rituals practiced by all Hindus irrespective of their dialectal, regional, and customary diversity. Central Hindu wedding procedures follow what has come to be known as *sanātana dharma* ("eternal duty"), which is the reformist version of traditional Hindu law that prescribes much of the teachings and practices within the Hindu diaspora

Table 1: Demographics of 25 Study Participants

Occupational Category	Male	Female	Younger than 35 years	Older than 35 years
Caterers	3			3
Event coordinators		2		2
Engineers	2		2	
Medical doctors and radiologists	2	3	5	
Accountants	1	1	2	
Graphic designers		1	1	
ICT/Information technologists	2		2	
Housewives that have small businesses or part-time employment		5		5
Businessmen based in Durban	3			3

(Dimitrova 2007).[1] The weddings have been theoretically unmodified but clearly differ via vernacular, regional, and customary diversity. Thus, the Sanskrit terminology used during wedding rituals by Hindu priests in Durban still more or less adheres to Hindu precedents set in India prior to the indenture period.[2] English, however, has also been incorporated into most Hindu nuptial ceremonies, so that rituals and their symbolic value are more easily understood by communities who largely no longer speak the vernacular or comprehend the liturgical Sanskritic *mantra*s recited during *pūjā*s ("worship services") of various sorts, including weddings.

The key rituals structurally include the offering of food and water to the groom and *kanyadān* ("gift of the virgin").[3] It is also widely believed that during these rituals the parents of the bride give away their *lakṣmī*, which suggests that the new bride becomes symbolically equivalent to the Hindu goddess of wealth whose name is Lakshmi. A gift of food from the father to his daughter also takes place, after which family members and guests present the new bride with cotton clothes, brass and silver trays, fruits, chocolates, and sweetmeats. This is followed by igniting a fire in a pit reminiscent of the Vedic *yajña* (fire sacrifice). Fire is revered as the Vedic deity Agni ("fire personified"), who is considered to be one of the highest forms of Hindu divinity, as he is a mediator between humans and the pantheon of deities. The fire then bears witness to the seven promises the couple makes to one another while encircling the fire. This process is known as *saptapadī*, the "seven steps" of marriage undertaken by the couple.[4] The couple promises to grow together in happiness and spirituality, to attain prosperity and personal growth together as well as live long, healthy lives, while being true in their commitment to each other. The climax of the wedding is when the groom applies *sindūr* (vermilion paste) along his new wife's hair parting (Kuper 1956). This sequential set of ritual practices is also documented

to be the normative wedding nuptial procedure among various diasporic Hindu communities, for example in Houston, Texas (Sutherland 2003).

Other prewedding rituals are practiced at ceremonies days before the actual wedding takes place. They include customary celebratory dancing, symbolic cleansing, and prayers to invoke the presence of God (*bhagvān*). Couples also tend to host reception parties on the same day as the wedding but after the nuptial rituals have been completed. At times, the reception party is hosted a day later, depending on the personal preferences of the couple and bridal families. Each event is usually a colorful, ritual-based affair attended by extended family members and friends.

The women of the bride's family are usually involved in the preparation of prasad, the food offerings made to Hindu deities at the prenuptial ceremonies. But the food and snacks served to invited guests are prepared by caterers. Traditionally, the food served to the guests at the prewedding events and the weddings was sometimes prepared by the women of the family. The famous Durban cookbook published in 1961 titled *Indian Delights*, for example, details recipes like *biryānī* and other popular dishes in the quantities of ingredients that are required to cater up to eight hundred wedding guests (Vahed and Waetjien 2010, 112).[5] Cookbooks and personal photographs of women preparing food in the past during wedding festivities suggest that food preparation used to largely be the traditional task of women.

Contemporary food trends at Hindu weddings

Menus at wedding ceremonies still tend to include both traditional dishes and contemporary dishes that have been influenced by international or other local cuisines. There are traditional regional customs that are sometimes still maintained and influence the types of dishes served at weddings. Hindustani families tended to serve vegetarian food (Kuper 1956) to their guests, while the South Indian families incorporated a variety of nonvegetarian dishes into their menu (Wilson 2010). These historically based regional food traditions are no longer practiced because of the constantly increasing number of intergroup marriages between Hindus who have different linguistic and cultural roots. In the 1950s, the cuisine type would have been traditionally reflective of the geographical location from where the families originated in India. This was a common practice, especially if the bride and groom shared the same place of origin, cultural roots, and traditions. For instance, the meals served would be prepared in the appropriate cuisine type that articulated the unique flavors of North Indian cuisine, South Indian cuisine, or Gujarati cuisine. Nowadays, it is an accepted "breach" of normative practice in Durban for a Tamil- or Telegu-speaking individual to marry a Hindustani- or Gujarati-speaking person. Hinduism in Durban does not prescribe any ceremonially specific rituals and food practices for interfaith, intercaste, or interregional marriages, and it is the individual families' responsibility to make decisions related to religious and customary practices (Khan and Singh 2015).

Food served at prewedding events, wedding ceremonies, and reception parties, therefore, has been largely reflective of the bridal couple's personal preferences and familial customs. Menus consist of a wide variety of dishes that have originated

from a blend of cuisine types including "authentic" Indian cuisine,[6] Durban Indian cuisine,[7] or dishes that are borrowed and adapted from other local or foreign cultures. Examples include foods such as pastas, puddings, and especially the wedding cake. It has become common and trendy for couples to celebrate their union after the marriage ceremony by cutting and sharing a wedding cake with each other and with their guests, then proposing a toast with alcoholic beverages, champagne and sparkling wines being the most popular. Often at reception parties, selected alcoholic beverages are available to guests. The consumption of various cuisines at public events allows people to make connections and explore controversies that exist in blended cultures, modernized societies, and the gradual demise of traditional practices (Singh and Bhoola 2018). The bridal family's values are echoed through the type and choice of dishes they choose to serve at their weddings or prenuptial functions. In contemporary times, food has possibly come to be a representative of class status of the bridal couple and their families, since the consumption of decadent meals has become a common practice for people from the middle and upper classes in Durban (Chevalier 2015). Such gastronomic feasts are often rich in flavor and high in calories, being prepared with high-cholesterol ingredients such as clarified butter (*ghī*). The indulgent versions of curries served at weddings are most often prepared with ingredients such as creamy dairy, sugar, and butter. These same ingredients are also utilized to prepare the sweetest and finest of desserts, pastries, and cakes, which are also served at the ceremony to present a plethora of gastronomic delights.

The blend of cuisines at Hindu weddings in Durban

Two of the six couples that were interviewed hosted their weddings at four- and five-star hotels in Durban. They were constrained by contractual agreements to use their in-house catering services, so clients could not recruit independent caterers who specialize specifically in Indian cuisines. Such instances present couples with an opportunity to serve their guests a blend of different types of cuisines at their weddings. The buffets can consist of a variety of salads, breads, pasta dishes, vegetable *biryānī,* grilled meats, and steamed vegetables served alongside curries, fragrant rice dishes, and an array of Western and traditional Indian desserts, such as *kṣīr* (sweet vermicelli prepared with milk, sugar, saffron, cardamon, and nutmeg) and *sūjī* (semolina).[8] The wedding cake is served together with tea and coffee. Often the vegetable *biryānī* is incorporated into the elaborate menu along with other dishes. In addition to that, caterers that specialize primarily in Indian cuisine have ventured into preparing dishes from other cuisines too, such as creamy pastas made with locally available fresh vegetables, soups, along with both vegetarian and nonvegetarian lasagnas and Chinese noodles. Bradby (2002) provides three perspectives of wedding meals that emerged from his qualitative study of thirty-two Asian women from Glasgow. The majority of his study participants agreed that the wedding meal needs to be special and rich in comparison to daily food. It must also be plentiful and include dishes with meat.

Other study participants also described the extravagant buffet stations at weddings, which include cuisine variations that are not usually included on Hindu

wedding menus in Durban. These include cuisines such as Mexican, Chinese, Thai, and selected delicacies from South Indian cuisine. These consumption patterns are closely aligned with Dana Kaplan's 2013 discussion of middle-class consumption patterns, which are showcased through events such as weddings. The omnivorous type of diet includes the mixing and matching of a variety of dishes and foods that he indicates as contributing factors that mark class and social distinctions.

The majority of our respondents indicated that they believed having a variety of cuisines and dishes for their guests to select from reflected generous hospitality, which is to say they were being very considerate wedding hosts. The combination of cuisines available at a wedding also represented a competitiveness between the hosting families and their guests. One participant explains it as follows: "My mother decided that the wedding had to be different to my cousin's wedding in more than one way. This meant that even her selection of foods served to guests on the wedding day had to be different and far more decadent than my cousin's wedding. This did mean that we had to allocate a bigger budget for food for 450 guests."

Kaplan (2013) states that new middle-class couples want to be perceived as good hosts by their social circles and the broader community at large. They can achieve this task by hosting a wedding that is different from the norm. She explains that representation of too much individuality can be seen as presumptuous and elitist. Table décor trends for these weddings depict both influences from the West and the East and often include table decorations and eating utensils predominantly utilized by people of other cultures. Candles, candelabras, under plates, wine glasses, and champagne glasses sometimes accompany the blended cuisine menu and the traditional Indian menu. A culture of a cosmopolitan South Africa is represented in these instances. However, there are Indian South Africans who have a preference for upholding tradition in their choice of décor, tableware, and meals served at their weddings.

Caterers explained in detail during the interviews that there is a tendency for people, especially within the same social circles and families, to be in competition with one another. The avenue to outdo one another was to have elaborate and expensive meals served at weddings accompanied by extravagant decorations. One caterer said that some bridal families believed that a simple vegetarian menu would indicate that the hosting family or couple is of a poor financial background, stingy, or has low standards of hospitality.

A Western tradition: Cutting the wedding cake

Three of the six couples interviewed indicated that they had cut and shared a cake after the wedding ceremony. The caterers and event coordinator stated that this has become a very popular trend in the early twenty-first century. The cakes have mostly been described as elaborate. Simon Charsley (1988) explains that the fancy two- or three-tiered wedding cake had its birth in the nineteenth century among urban middle-class British people. Cakes have become a global phenomenon in both simplicity and extravagance in the early twenty-first century. Kuper (1956) and Singh

(2007) make no mention of the wedding cake in their publications, but in Charsley's (1988) research it is mentioned that this trend has become increasingly common.

The three couples that opted not to have a wedding cake had various personal reasons for their decision. One couple explained that fancy tiered cakes were expensive, and because they had many guests at their wedding, a large three-tier cake would have been required. Another couple explained that it was not important to them and that it would prolong the wedding formalities. The last couple explained that they opted to have a wedding cake after they returned from their honeymoon and shared it with their family and friends at their parents' home. Convenience, cost, and practicality were determining factors for them. The consumption of nonvegetarian dishes and alcohol at Hindu weddings in Durban has also become more prevalent and even quite common. "Wedding food is perceived as constructing, integrating, reproducing and transforming social identities and communities," according to Kaplan (2013, 218). The symbolic representations of the food presented to guests are numerous, one of which is the building of a collective identity, which can impact the merging of cultures.

There are conflicting perceptions about the permissibility of the consumption of meat dishes at Hindu weddings, however. Hindu South Africans whose origins can be traced to southern India often eat meat at weddings, even though many of them increasingly prefer vegetarian food at weddings. At the same time, those claiming to be from northern India, although they may be omnivorous, prefer vegetarian dishes at weddings. Vegetarianism in both the north and south of India tends to reflect higher social status, and the practice is apparently rooted in such hierarchical notions. These preferences are nonetheless influenced by familial heritage and practices, individual beliefs, and contemporary social influences of the community (Bradby 2002). Mary Douglas (1972) classically exclaimed that food is a communication system, with particular foods or choices of foods and cuisines having the ability to transmit information about the self to others. Within diaspora societies it is often the case that food regulations governed by religious, traditional, and cultural sanctions have been reformed through migration, adaption, and the process of acculturation (Singh and Bhoola 2018).

Most of our respondents indicated their preference for having both vegetarian and nonvegetarian menus at the prewedding events and wedding ceremony. However, of the six couples interviewed, four of them opted to have a vegetarian and nonvegetarian menu on the wedding day, even though they served vegetarian food at their prewedding events.

Bradby (2002, 125) explains that having "plentiful . . . meaty and other rich dishes at a marriage meal was essential to demonstrate good hospitality." Perceptions of stinginess are strongly associated with simple Indian vegetarian dishes like everyday *dāl* and potatoes. Serving only them is also seen as a meal enjoyed by lower economic groups by the Punjabi Hindu community residing in Glasgow. Chicken and lamb curry have been documented to be the most favorite dishes among middle-class Indian South Africans living in Durban (Chevalier 2015).

A vegetarian diet has been historically encouraged by religious beliefs of high-caste Hinduism globally. Despite that, a large proportion of Indian South Africans consume

nonvegetarian foods regularly. Study participants indicated that most Hindus consume poultry, seafood, and lamb with the exception being beef. Other Hindus choose to consume beef, too, despite the fact that it is still considered to be taboo (Bradby 2002). The consumption of beef is considered taboo among Hindus because of the cow's significance as a revered and respected animal and its association with particular deities (Korom 2000).

Most Hindus in Durban opt to not consume meat on days of religious festivals and special days of prayer. The consumption of chicken, fish, and lamb, with the exception of beef, has been the typical diet of most Hindus residing in diaspora communities globally, whereas vegetarian diets are still more prominent in India itself among upper-caste Hindus (Saunders 2007). The event coordinator and the caterers interviewed stated that weddings and celebrations have become more about representing the couples' personal preferences and their meal choices. One caterer elaborated by commenting that "meat dishes such as mutton *biryānī*, or chicken, or fish curries have been primarily served at reception parties that take place after the wedding ceremony. These are often accompanied by both alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks. However, families are often in conflict about this, as in many instances, the Hindu rituals are completed in the same venue and the after party begins."

The consumption of alcohol has become a norm among mainly men at prenuptial events and weddings. The six bridal couples indicated that they all served alcohol at their prenuptial events as well as on the wedding day itself, alongside vegetarian menus. They further stated that alcohol consumption has become part of the family foodways, because it was expected that intoxicating beverages should be available for family and guests at such events. One couple elaborated during the interview by explaining that "sometimes alcohol is served in a discreet manner while the ceremony is being performed at wedding venues. Men leave their seats at their dining tables to socialize outside the hall and have a drink. In most cases, the alcohol is served in an adjoining hall, or from the boot of a car in the parking vicinity."

The majority of the respondents indicated that they believed the consumption of alcohol is indeed permissible at Hindu weddings, but only half of them noted that they preferred to consume alcohol at a celebratory wedding event. The other half of respondents indicated that they would prefer to drink alcohol at the prewedding events and the wedding reception only, but not at the wedding ceremony itself because of its religious nature. Another study participant indicated a more orthodox view by insisting that "it is very disrespectful to enjoy an alcoholic drink in the company of elderly people at weddings." So, even though it is common knowledge that family members consume alcohol, it is still considered a sign of respect not to do so in front of elders. Five participants mentioned that they believed once the wedding ceremony is completed and the *yajña* has been removed from the wedding venue, it is acceptable to serve meat and alcohol to guests. Literature indicates that Punjabi Hindus in India as well as in the diaspora serve and consume meat at all wedding events (Bradby 2007). It is not clearly articulated, however, if the consumption of alcohol is permitted during the wedding ceremony or only upon completion. This study reveals that the consumption of both vegetarian and nonvegetarian meals and alcohol are common practices at both pre- and post-Hindu wedding events in Durban.

Vegetarian food trends and the upkeep of the traditional meal

Global Indian and South Asian diasporas generally differ in the ways they sustain traditional meals at wedding celebrations. Bradby (2007) documented that food is mainly vegetarian at Punjabi Sikh and Hindu wedding events in Glasgow, and that consumption of alcohol at these events is prohibited. At a Hindu wedding in Houston, Sutherland (2003) notes in addition that although the bridal families had a preference for Western cuisine, the family served a vegetarian Indian meal to their guests on their wedding day.

Two out of six bridal couples indicated that they only had a vegetarian menu at their weddings. These vegetarian menus were also a blend of a variety of cuisine types, such as Durban Indian, "authentic" Indian, and Italian. Participants indicated that popular vegetarian menus included vegetable *biryānī* with all its accompaniments, such as *dāl* (split pigeon pea or chickpea lentils blended with cooked tomatoes, onions, and spices), *dahī* (cultured yogurt spiced with fresh coriander or mint), and *sūjī* (Parbhoo 2008). Additional accompaniments would include plates of fried snacks like vegetarian *samosās*[9] and *paṭṭa* (deep-fried *madumbe* leaves battered in a mix of yogurt, chickpea flour, and aromatic spices).[10] Other popular accompaniments include salads, pickles, and a variety of battered fried vegetables (*pakauṛā*).

A menu like the one just described is perceived to be traditional vegetarian wedding fare in Durban by a majority of the study participants. The anthropological study of traditional foods has the capacity to contribute toward the analysis of cultural and religious practices of ethnic minorities. People's value systems are studied in relation to the types of diets they prefer, either vegetarianism or omnivorous diets (Singh and Bhoola 2018). This is also affirmed by the caterers and event coordinator interviewed. Yet, the consumption of vegetarian food has been a traditional and respected practice at Hindu weddings by Indian South Africans for decades. The wedding menu at a Hindustani wedding in Durban in the 1950s was purely vegetarian, consisting of five different vegetable dishes inclusive of sweet delicacies, which were served on banana leaves (Kuper 1956, 214). The extent of Westernization and localization is therefore clear in our current findings that are backed up by much of the cited literature.

Caterers told us that the bulk preparation of *biryānī* in a large pot on a fire makes the dish unique, something valued at weddings. The cooking process on the fire contributes to a distinct smoky, savory flavor, with an aroma other than that normally prepared on a stove or in an oven at home. More than half of the participants indicated that this traditional menu is still popular today at wedding ceremonies in Durban. One participant opined, "I look forward to eating that wedding *biryānī* because it is cooked on a fire. It just tastes so much nicer." Another participant said, "The *biryānī* is enough. How much can people eat? Also, food is a costly affair." Participants made reference during the interviews to historical narratives that support the belief that the preparation described above has been a traditional practice for more than five decades in Durban. A modernized version of the vegetarian menu served at Hindu weddings in Durban includes diverse vegetarian curries (for example, a combination of beans, a fresh vegetable, potato, and *panīr*, a soft cheese that is formed through the coagulation of milk), along with the *biryānī*. *Panīr* is perceived to be a delicacy because of its rich creamy texture and its unique flavor. These curries are accompanied with

unleavened Indian breads and rice. The caterers indicated that there is a growing demand for *panīr* curries and different varieties of the dish. This creamy cheese has become representative of opulence in a meal, because it is expensive in comparison to the other dishes. Italian foods served at two weddings we observed included pastas, lasagnas, a variety of green salads, as well as bread rolls and the wedding cake.

Notions of class representations in relation to food

We have argued that food served to guests at weddings is perceived to be an indicator of good hospitality and class classification. Traditionally, the quantity of food consumed by people was used as an indicator to differentiate one class from another. However, contemporary food trends that include the consumption of a variety of exotic, expensive cuisines in lesser quantity are associated with middle- to upper-class food consumption patterns (Melber 2022).

"Class-based culinary tastes are distinguished according to food quantity, quality and presentation," says Kaplan (2013, 247). For instance, Punjabi weddings in Glasgow include a ritual of food exchange from the bride's family to the groom's family. It is within this context that the food offered is discussed, critiqued, and even compared to previous weddings. "Hierarchies of prestige and honor are rehearsed and reworked," according to Bradby (2002, 112). The wedding feast has traditionally been indicative of class and social status within South Asia as well as in the diasporas stemming from there. Cultural spaces and platforms always contain conflict and class competitions. Cultural events are used as spaces where dominant classes can demonstrate their middle- to upper-class lifestyles and affirm their sense of superiority over others (Bourdieu 1984).

Interviews revealed that three of the six couples with whom we spoke shared the wedding festivity expenses with their parents. This financial contribution allowed them to make decisions about food served to guests during the festive days leading up to the definitive event. However, two participants explained that their parents had pressured them into spending money on elaborate menus and decor for their events, as they believed that the overall occasion would be symbolic of their class status as a family. One participant even stated, "my parents somehow wanted to prove to their social circles that they could still afford a lavish lifestyle, which they once had over a decade ago, when my father was hugely successful in his business."

Chevalier (2015) explains that eating is a principal vehicle for expressing a range of lifestyles, and that middle-class measures for analysis includes an individual's source of income and property evaluation. Julia Pauli and Francois Dawids (2017) indicate that the hosting of an extravagant or lavish wedding can be an important indicator that a person is a member of the middle class. Weddings in Namibia, for instance, and in other areas have become key identifiers of middle-class belonging for people. This fact is affirmed by Natasha Erlank (2014). She discusses the wedding rituals of an African Christian wedding that highlight the social aspirations and limitations of a middle-class society. Globally people aspire to be classified as middle or upper class.

Two couples indicated that they had self-financed their wedding festivities and spent lavishly on food and décor. The occupations of these four participants

included engineers, medical practitioners, and accountants, which determined their source of income, spending, and consumption patterns. They also felt compelled to demonstrate their middle-class membership by serving their guests elaborate menus at their weddings. One participant explained that elaborate events became the norm among their social circles, and they too felt compelled to maintain this standard. Another respondent explained, "A luxurious wedding celebration says that I am successful in my lifestyle and can earn a good living."

The remaining couple interviewed stated that their parents financed their wedding festivities, and that their wedding events included elaborate foods and decorations. Five couples explained that their largest bills for the wedding festivities were for food and alcoholic beverages. Both caterers interviewed indicated that almost 40 percent of their clientele have a preference for elaborate décor and extravagant food menus for their wedding festivities, while other guests desire to spend less. The event coordinator stated that "for many people, their financial status is evident in the manner or style in which they host guests for their children's wedding."

Concluding remarks

Wedding celebrations of the Hindu Indian diaspora have significance in the modern, economically stratified society, since they can serve as conscious indicators of class position and social status. They are also indicators of the effort that minority communities make to sustain traditional and customary practices of Hinduism in the diaspora. They can be identifiers of change, whereby interethnic and interreligious marriages among Hindus and those of other religions have become permissible and even embraced in the contemporary milieu of South Africa. These events also serve as a lens through which we can see ourselves and identify with peers to articulate the cultural changes that diaspora communities experience over time. The practice of Indian South Africans consuming meat, alcohol, and cake at Hindu weddings reflects the amalgamation of cultural practices shared between Hindus and people of other cultures and faiths in Durban.

All of the aforementioned elements have contributed toward continual change, the loss of traditional practices, and the adoption of new ones combined with challenges of recreating new universal standards of what should prevail to be the norm among Indian South Africans (Bradby 2002). We can conclusively argue that the development of the blended identity of Indian South Africans has indeed influenced ritual practices associated with weddings. Hindu customs of meal preferences as indicators of social status suggest to us that class is gradually replacing caste in an era of conspicuous consumption.

Perceptions evident from this qualitative study reveal that wedding food is associated with one's perceived class position and the extent of cultural assimilation, which includes the demise or continuance of traditional practices. Similarly, for the Indian Punjabi diaspora community in Houston, food at weddings demonstrates the possession of wealth and the family's capacity to be hospitable (Bradby 2002). Food has thus become a viable nonverbal medium to communicate good hospitality to

guests. We suggest that cosmopolitan food preferences are closely associated with middle-class membership among Indian South Africans living in Durban.

In conclusion, qualitative data analysis reveals that wedding rituals and practices among our interlocuters reflect a combination of modern and traditional food practices, the result of ongoing processes of cultural assimilation in a multicultural, capitalist society. Hindu weddings in Durban have been influenced by current social trends, "mixed" marriages, financial means, class categorizations, and perceptions of aspirations to become middle- or upper-class members. The foodways we observed and in which we participated at the Hindu weddings discussed are unique to the Indian South African community, whereas the class element is more universal, as can be witnessed in diasporic South Asian communities worldwide.

NOTES

1. The term was coined by Dayananda Saraswati (1824–1883), a charismatic Hindu holy man who founded the Arya Samaj, which was very active in the revival of a reformist version of Hinduism during the nineteenth century. In addition to its missionizing work in India itself, it was very active in diasporic Indian communities as well.

2. The ancient Indo-European language of India that has been utilized in classical Hindu scriptures and philosophy from the oldest Vedas down to the present. It is used ritually both in India and the contemporary diasporic context. Sanskrit is recited primarily by Brahmin priests in the form of *mantra*s.

3. The symbolic act of the father handing over his daughter to the groom to be nurtured and protected for the rest of her life.

4. It consists of the bride and groom making seven circumambulations (*parikrama*) around the fire pit. Once the seventh circumambulation is completed, the marriage is thought to be solemnized and legally irrevocable.

5. It is a seasoned rice that is prepared with either meat, seafood, poultry, or vegetables.

6. Authentic Indian dishes that are prepared with similar ingredients and techniques as utilized in India.

7. A distinct variation of Indian cuisine that is influenced by local cuisines within Kwa-Zulu Natal, Durban, South Africa.

8. A rich buttery pudding that is made with ground wheat, *ghī* (clarified butter), sugar, cardamom, and nutmeg.

9. *Samosā*s are one of the most renowned Indian snacks around the world. The variations are many. However, in South Africa, one variation is mostly consumed. The *samosā* that is popular among South Africans can be described as a flatly folded triangle of pastry that is stuffed with a variety of fillings such as potatoes, mixed vegetables, brown lentils, chicken mince, mutton mince, and so forth (Parbhoo 2008).

10. *Colocasia esculenta*, taro root leaves.

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Reviews

General

Levi S. Gibbs, ed.
Social Voices: The Cultural Politics of Singers around the Globe

Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2023. 272 pages, 8 photographs. Paperback, $30.00; ebook, $19.95; cloth, $110.00. ISBN 9780252087387 (paperback), 9780252054761 (ebook), 9780252045240 (cloth).

How do individual singers become global symbols of cultural politics? This question lies at the core of *Social Voices: The Cultural Politics of Singers around the Globe*, edited by Levi S. Gibbs. The book explores how singers from diverse genres and regions come to embody broader cultural and political narratives. These singers don't just perform; they shape and challenge ideas of identity, power, and social change. Featuring individual contributions from scholars across disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, literature, music, ethnomusicology, and performance studies, this interdisciplinary volume reveals how singers can become the living, breathing embodiments of regions, nations, and pivotal historical moments. Through their voices they redefine what it means to belong.

The book is structured into four parts, each foregrounding different aspects of the relationship between singers and cultural politics. The first part, "The Politics of Authenticity and Iconicity," explores how singers achieve iconic status through claims of authenticity and authority and how they craft public personas that resonate with diverse audiences. Anthony Seeger's chapter on his uncle, American singer Pete Seeger, and Andrew Simon's chapter on Egyptian singer Shaykh Imam illustrate how these artists used their voices to challenge political narratives and connect with audiences through alternative media channels. John Lie's chapter on K-pop examines the dynamics of K-pop fandoms, revealing how fans actively construct and deconstruct the genre's icons. Lie shows how these fandoms empower individuals, providing a sense of inclusion, especially for those who feel marginalized. This empowerment extends beyond the social realm, as fans organize to influence broader cultural narratives and assert their voices as active participants in the political and cultural landscape. A delightful example is the role of K-pop fans in disrupting a 2020 Trump rally in Oklahoma by organizing to drastically reduce attendance.

The second section, "Race, Gender, Ethnicity, and Class," explores how singers navigate and challenge societal norms. Nancy Guy's chapter on American operatic soprano Beverly Sills and Christina D. Abreu's chapter on Afro-Cuban icons like Celia Cruz consider how these artists used their platforms to address issues of representation and equality, turning music into a powerful medium for social commentary. Treva B. Lindsey's chapter on Beyoncé offers a striking example of this dynamic, analyzing how Beyoncé's work epitomizes Black female superstardom. Lindsey examines how Beyoncé's exploration of Black womanhood, particularly within the context of the US South and the Global South, transforms her music and public persona into a potent commentary on race, gender, and class. Through these narratives, the section reveals how singers reshape the cultural landscapes around them and how their art represents a battleground for broader societal struggles.

The third section, "Multiplicities of Representations," emphasizes the concept of "multivocality," through which singers craft performances that resonate with diverse audiences. This section spotlights female singers who have challenged traditional norms and forged new cultural narratives. Carol Silverman's chapter on Romani singer Esma Redzepova and Carol A. Muller's exploration of South African artists like Thandiswa Mazwai showcase how these women have used their voices to redefine cultural boundaries. Michael K. Bourdaghs's analysis of Teresa Teng, the Taiwanese singer who became an iconic figure during Asia's Cold War era, further exemplifies this theme. Teng's music received an enthusiastic response among audiences across China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. Her ability to sing in multiple languages and styles enabled her to navigate complex political landscapes, transforming her into a symbol of cultural unity and resistance. Multivocality, thus, allows singers to become powerful conduits for cultural connection and change.

The final section, "Singers and Songs as Interweaving Narratives," explores how songs and singers become integral to ongoing social conversations with performances that can either unite or divide audiences depending on the context. Katherine Meizel examines how two singers—one American, one Syrian—bring distinct interpretations to the Arabic song "Ya Toyour," highlighting how personal lenses can reshape a single song. In contrast, Natalie Sarrazin considers how a single singer can lend her voice to thousands of songs and, in doing so, navigate a complex terrain of gender and politics. Sarrazin's chapter on legendary playback singer Lata Mangeshkar, whose voice became a cultural touchstone in India over her eight-decade career, explores how Mangeshkar's voice often served as a unifying force, resonating with diverse audiences while embodying ideals of femininity and national pride in a male-dominated industry. Together, these chapters suggest a dynamic interplay between singers and their songs and demonstrate how individual performances shape broad cultural and political dialogues.

A strength of *Social Voices* is its thoughtful organization and thematic unity. The chapters cycle through key themes such as race and class, struggle and resistance, the tension between elite and popular culture, and the adaptability of the human voice. Central to the book is the act of listening, emphasized repeatedly as a crucial component of understanding cultural dynamics. While each chapter sings out on its own, their collective impact is even greater, making this book an ideal textbook resource for courses on global popular culture and related fields. This book is more than a collection of essays. It is a cohesive exploration that invites readers to listen deeply and think critically about the world's most influential voices.

The book is tied together by a lovely framing structure. Each of its four sections is introduced by a scholar who provides an autobiographical interlude, sharing their academic journey and personal connection to the topic. For instance, in his introduction to the fourth section, Kwame Dawes reflects on his engagement with the aesthetics of reggae, particularly the profound influence of Bob Marley. Dawes's interlude reveals how his personal background has shaped his academic focus and deepened his understanding of the political dimension of song. This framing structure humanizes the academic discourse and also highlights the power that singers have over listeners. Scholars, like the singers they study, are deeply affected by the cultural politics of song.

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China

Thomas David DuBois
China in Seven Banquets: A Flavourful History
London: Reaktion Books, 2024. 256 pages, Cloth, $25.00. ISBN 9781789148619.

This book tackles an ambitious project—distilling over five thousand years of Chinese food history into under three hundred pages of prose—with a light hand and humor. Focusing on two central questions, "What was the food?" and "What did it mean to the people?" (13), the author invites his reader along to eat their way through Chinese history. Thomas DuBois presents both descriptions of Chinese foods and their backstories, both big-picture transformations and intimate details, and both "real" and "imagined" foods depicted in philosophy, literature, and film. The word "banquet" in the title apparently indicates authorial focus on "haute cuisine" and luxurious living but fails to do full justice to the dazzling array of dishes included, varied as they are in ingredients, cooking methods, occasions of consumption, class associations, and cultural significance as well as in time and location. Nonetheless, it is a useful organizational principle to unpack six major shifts in Chinese foodways through six chapters: ancient Chinese philosophies embodied in discourses on food; new ingredients and techniques imported from China's neighbors; the perfection of culinary techniques in late imperial China, by his account from Song through Qing (tenth to nineteenth century); the introduction of Western cuisines and industrial food production in the early twentieth century; new foods and fads during China's economic boom of the 1990s; and tech-driven food globalization of the 2000s.

In each chapter, "banquet" also serves as an effective narrative device to weave together different strands of food production and consumption, enabling DuBois to tread lightly back and forth until the climatical food events that hold people's imagination even today, such as the Eight Treasures feast of Zhou (1046–221 BCE), the Tail-Burning Banquet to present newly promoted high officials to the court of Tang (618–907), the New Year's Eve dinner from the eighteenth-century classic *Dream of Red Mansions*, or the mouth-watering family meal from the 1994 film *Eat Drink Man Woman*.

Following a succinct introduction that discusses its scope, perimeters, approach, and sources, the book progresses chronologically, though also looking back as necessitated by featured themes in each chapter. Chapter 1, "Of Meat and Morality," outlines ancient Chinese philosophies constructed about and through food, encompassing cosmology,

medicine, music, rituals, and ethics. While hyperbolic depictions of foods from Chinese classics feed and stretch the imagination, they are grounded in "real" foodstuffs and utensils discovered through archeological excavations and tested through "reverse engineering" of ancient recipes (25). In chapter 2, "By Silk Road and High Sea," DuBois adopts the same approach of integrating textual and material manifestations, describing China's exchanges with neighboring countries through various venues, such as the overland Silk Road, the seafaring trade routes centered on Southeast Asia, and the Columbian Exchange. Similarly, chapter 3, "Gardens of Pleasure," delineates the concrete economic, political, and sociocultural forces transforming premodern Chinese foodways, such as the rise of urbanization and print culture, even as he offers literary representations from *Dream of Splendor in the Eastern Capital*, *Plums in the Golden Lotus Vase*, *Water Marsh*, and *Red Mansions*.

Starting with chapter 4, "Fancy Foods and Foreign Fads," the author takes his reader into the "modern" era. DuBois features a New Year's set-meal at a Western-style restaurant in 1929 Shanghai as the central "banquet" of the chapter, illustrating new food items and ways of eating made possible by trade and commerce across national borders. An equally, if not more, impactful historical event was the industrialization of food production, whose effects would be experienced beyond the early twentieth century. We continue to see the impact of globalization and industrialization on Chinese foodways in chapters 5 ("Life's a Banquet") and chapter 6 ("Franchise Fever"). DuBois illustrates how changing ways of branding, sale (from roadside stalls to supermarkets), and purchase (in-person to delivery) of foods transform Chinese people's foodways with no turning back, culminating in the remarkable success of the hotpot chain Haidilao, whose business relies as much on takeout as dining in.

So, what lies in the future for Chinese foodways? In the last chapter, "And Beyond . . . ," DuBois paints three scenarios: deepening globalization that would bring "the whole world" to a Chinese dinner table, a "Cold War–style" food security due to supply chains truncated by sanctions and a limited number of production bases, and a techno-dominant world taken over by algorithms in food production and consumption. Dystopian tales aside, DuBois also identifies China's efforts to develop alternative protein, its aggressive policy thrusts for food security, and ultimately, change as the only constant in Chinese food history, which may signal resilience and hope. As a book intended for nonspecialists, it does an admirable job parsing complex issues through revealing vignettes chosen from five thousand years of history. DuBois brings to life the rich and sometimes perplexing evolution of Chinese foodways in comprehensive and accessible ways and opens up the field to general audiences. Read in totality, the book gives an extensive survey of Chinese food history, while each chapter can be picked to illustrate certain themes, suitable for undergraduate instruction. For those eager to "get their hands dirty," it also provides abundant recipes to cook through Chinese history. It is no trivial act to include tried-and-true recipes of historical dishes. Not only does this testify to DuBois's erudition and years of meticulous work, but it is also vital to the success of a book for general audiences, for it helps them experience and enjoy Chinese food in all ways possible.

Since all narratives are driven by data, DuBois accentuates urban and higher-class Chinese foodways drawing on available records. However, the necessary omissions also spotlight underexplored areas for future scholarly endeavors. As he rightly points out, an "update in Chinese food studies" is due (11), and more conversations between historians and anthropologists are called for. Ultimately, DuBois skillfully canvasses a

wide span of Chinese foodways with a deceptively simple, charming style, even though occasional typos and a misreading of the family relationship in *Eat Drink Man Woman* in chapter 5 (216), where the author misidentifies the little girl as Chef Chu's granddaughter (rather than the daughter of his oldest daughter's best friend), suggest more thorough copyediting would not have gone amiss.

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Li Guo, Douglas Eyman, and Hongmei Sun, eds.
Games and Play in Chinese and Sinophone Cultures

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2024. 302 pages, 13 illustrations, 2 tables. Hardcover, $110.00; paperback, $35.00. ISBN 9780295752396 (hardcover), 9780295752402 (paperback).

This collection of thirteen chapters was designed to fill in the blank of "no systematic studies of game cultures in the Chinese and Sinophone worlds" in English-language scholarship (1). While readers will appreciate the originality and analytical approaches of the individual chapters, they may also have some general questions in mind. First, the use of "systematic studies" raises the issue of multidisciplinarity, as most chapters are rooted in sociological *ludic theory*. Second, the distinction between "Chinese" and "Sinophone" in the book title is unclear. Semantically, "Chinese" culture encompasses broader aspects like China's history, religion, and language, and that of overseas Chinese communities, while "Sinophone" culture specifically refers to the use of the Chinese language. Lastly, the collection lacks representation of ordinary people of different age, gender, and occupation, particularly children, who engage in games in various settings, besides digital games, in today's everyday life, since the book title highlights "games" and "play." Nearly all articles focus on games described in classic or elite literature and digital or internet games targeting specific age and gender groups.

The introduction effectively serves its purpose by outlining the genesis of this collection, explaining the usage of certain terms, and addressing the ethical aspects of gameplay. It connects the two primary themes: gender performance as ludic heroines in gameplay (*youxi*) depicted in classic literature, and emerging digital culture in China. The editors aimed to demonstrate how gameplay has shaped "people's everyday life experiences in private and public spaces" (1) and contributed to "the creolization of ludic theories in a transtemporal, transnational context" (3), but the predominantly literary and sociological/anthropological interests of the authors have somewhat hindered the goal of developing "systematic studies." This is evident in the absence of psychological and folkloristic perspectives, among others, on the role of games and gameplaying in shaping individual and group identities.

The chapters can be grouped into several themes. The first theme explores historical and archaeological cases of board game playing and migration. Chapter 1, using examples from classic texts, connects Confucian ethics of the particular gentleman (*shi*) culture to the symbolic representation of the *weiqi* game in the Neo-Confucian period. It traces the game's evolution from a symbolic cosmic representation in self-cultivation to an art of personal identity reconstruction and ultimately a form of gambling. Chapter 2 examines newly discovered game boards (variants of Nine Men's Morris, a traditional board game in Europe) carved on stones in Hong Kong, contrasting them with similar sites in

Macau. The author argues that these game boards were imported from Europe through commerce and intercultural exchange during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, rather than being prehistorical carvings (41). Although there is no evidence of how these board games were played or if they are still played today, the author reasonably hypothesizes that they were intended for entertainment or gambling and enjoyed by both local working men and women, demonstrating the intersection of leisure pursuits and East-West contact or extension of relations (52). Readers are reminded that Macau and Hong Kong served as the frontline of contact and conflict between China and the West for the past five centuries.

The second theme focuses on board game invention by an elite individual (chapter 3) and kickball game playing depicted in the unique *sanqu* song genre of literature (chapter 4). Chapter 3 is a case study of board game design by Yu Yue, a nineteenth-century literatus. While English readers might struggle to grasp Yu Yue's significance due to the chapter's exclusive focus on his two board games, it is important to note that he was a *jinshi* in 1850, having passed the highest level of the civil examination and holding an imperial appointment. Therefore, the games he designed were not intended for winning or gambling but rather as a means of achieving "success" through role-playing and practicing Confucian ethics. Chapter 4, through the lens of gender studies and literary analysis of *sanqu*, explores the depiction of courtesans in representative songs by three elite playwrights of the Yuan Dynasty (1234–1389). These songs revolved around the game of *cuju* (kickball), a precursor to modern football. Since the specific rules and context of the game remain unclear, the author infers that playing *cuju*-kickball held the promise of a more egalitarian relationship between courtesans and their male patrons, despite the underlying gender asymmetries (84). Readers will undoubtedly notice the vivid descriptions of courtesans with golden lotuses (bound feet) and jade bodies, along with the references to goddesses or fairies in myths, all enhanced by the author's literary and aesthetic analyses.

The third theme, explored in the next three chapters, focuses on games and gameplay depicted and invented in erotica, a prominent literary genre from the sixteenth to nineteenth century. Chapter 5 looks at the drinking games and erotic card games described and invented in erotic literature during this period. Applying the sociological theories of play, the author examines the understudied techniques and conventions of these games. Drinking games are considered as rule-based games similar to real-life ones, while role-play card games are seen as context-specific inventions. Chapter 6 applies similar theories to analyze drinking games centered around courtesans—ludic heroines—in a specific nineteenth-century erotic novel. Additionally, the author incorporates Bakhtin's notion of the carnival mode, highlights the Buddhist concepts of *qing* (feelings, emotions) and *kong* (emptiness), and mentions the use of certain folklore genres. Chapter 7 examines gambling and games between humans and ghosts depicted in three short stories by representative authors from the sixteenth to nineteenth century. These stories typically warn against the dangers of gambling addiction, echoing the ethical themes discussed in chapter 3.

The fourth theme, somewhat distinct, is explored in chapter 8, perceiving that the journey of human life can be likened to a game, or that literature writing itself is a game. By analyzing the roles of Monkey, Pig, Sandy, and Monk/Tripitaka in the popular sixteenth-century novel *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji*), and their various media representations, the author examines the transgressive nature of the narrative (157).

This chapter serves as a bridge between the preceding chapters and the subsequent ones on games in the digital world, transcending boundaries of space, time, and culture.

The fifth theme, gameplay in the digital world, is addressed in the final five chapters. Chapter 9 employs anthropological concepts of play and deep play to analyze a treatment camp for internet game addicts who were minors and emerging adults heavily invested in *League of Legends*. The author analyzes a scenario where the campers created new card games by reimagining the roles within the existing game to symbolically represent the camp staff and their own experiences. This altered the nature of the game, making it more reflective of Chinese social and ethical life than the competitive aspects of the original. Chapter 10 focuses on the senior group, exploring how male and female players engage with games during retirement and how the digital game industry caters to this demographic. By examining their involvement in e-sports, use of WeChat, and addictions to *Pokémon Go*, the author discusses the interplay between work and play, the gamification of later life, and the process versus goal-oriented nature of gaming. This challenges existing economic and cultural theories about profit and the perceived "waste" associated with gaming.

In contrast to the foreign-made games discussed previously, the following three case studies focus on games created within China that are based on Chinese culture and history. Chapter 11 uses the video game *Chinese Parents* to explore its political potential, as well as other relevant factors such as the age, gender, and roles of the players. This game, unlike competitive titles or e-sports, is a role-playing simulation that mirrors the daily challenges faced by Chinese families, demanding knowledge of Chinese realities to be played effectively. The author highlights the game's ambiguity in comparison to the overt ideological and political issues often associated with other video games. With its political implication, *Chinese Parents* also reflects the social and cultural realities of China, ironically demonstrating a path for parents to raise successful children through the seemingly time-wasting act of playing a child-rearing simulator (230). Chapter 12 addresses the understudy of Chinese gaming culture in comparison to other cultural contexts, examining the mobile game *Honor of Kings*, which is rooted in Chinese history and folklore. The chapter analyzes public discourse surrounding the game, including its categorization as mobile e-sports, e-opium, antihistory narrative, new digital lifestyle, resistance, consumption, and digital nationalism. It suggests that the localization and globalization of such games should be considered as key factors in digital game studies.

Through a different lens, chapter 13 tackles the complexities of translation within the localization and globalization of digital games. By comparing *World of Warcraft: Mists of Pandaria* and the Chinese-designed *Genshin Impact*, the author discusses issues of linguistic translation, cultural translation, and transcreation, as well as bullying, racism, and diasporic nostalgia—crucial topics for translation and game studies. Interestingly, the more recent phenomenal debut of *Black Myth: Wukong* (late August 2024) might be better understood by drawing upon the ideas discussed in this theme group. This new role-play game, designed by and for Chinese audiences, highlights challenges such as retelling traditional stories, using Chinese language and narration, translating cultural nuances (for non-Chinese/Sinophone players), and reconstructing players' personal and national identities through role-playing.

Overall, this collection makes a valuable contribution to cross-cultural studies of games and gameplay as seen in classic Chinese literature and the contemporary evolution of digital culture. The individual chapters offer significant insights on specific

topics, despite the aforementioned general questions regarding the common limitations of essay collections. For example, as a collection, it lacks consistent intertextuality and cross-disciplinary connections, and misses discussions of some traditional gender-, age-, and occupation-based games widely played by ordinary people such as *xiangqi* (Chinese chess) and mahjong, as well as nondigital competitive sports and various indoor and outdoor games. The inclusion of a useful glossary of Chinese terms, detailed chapter notes, references, website links, illustrations, and book cover images depicting females engaged in board games and digital games will undoubtedly aid interested students and scholars in their pursuit of systematic studies of games and play in Chinese culture.

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Chuen-Fung Wong
Even in the Rain: Uyghur Music in Modern China

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2023. 264 pages, 1 map, 12 illustrations. Hardcover, $70.00; paperback, $28.00; eBook, $24.99. ISBN 9780824895013 (hardcover), 9780824895617 (paperback), 9780824897116 (ebook).

Chuen-Fung Wong's *Even in the Rain: Uyghur Music in Modern China* joins a small but distinguished group of monographs as well as a few excellent but as-yet-unpublished doctoral dissertations on Uyghur music and music history produced since the beginning of the twenty-first century by ethnomusicologists based outside of China. These studies draw on fieldwork conducted from the late 1980s to 2017, when China's intensifying repression of Uyghurs and suppression of Uyghur culture made ethnographic fieldwork in the Uyghur homeland all but impossible. Wong addresses the current situation head-on in the first two sentences of his book: "This book is being published at a time when over one million Uyghur and other indigenous peoples in their homeland have disappeared into mass internment camps or suffered from other forms of incarceration, torture, forced labor, and family separation—including a number of individuals anonymously mentioned in the text. Having contact with foreigners and even family members living abroad would be grounds for arrest and detention" (ix). Wong notes that the majority of his own fieldwork was conducted between the early 2000s and the late 2010s, and that he "made many trips to various locations in the Uyghur territory, as well as a number of specific visits to Uyghur musicians and other informants in Kazakhstan, the United States, Hong Kong, Germany, Turkey, and China" (22).

While previous monographs on Uyghur music largely focus on *muqam*, the sprawling genre commonly glossed as "classical" that has been serially reconstructed and re-reconstructed within the context of China's ever-shifting cultural politics, *Even in the Rain* views Uyghur music through a wide-angle lens that captures not only *muqam* but also contemporary singer-songwriters, pop, film soundtracks, and hybrid fusion music. Wong is conversant with all of these musical idioms, and his narrative traces their evolution and entanglement since the 1950s, with a focus on the period of his own fieldwork. He does this by using close "readings" of specific musical pieces to support evidence-based inferences about the interaction of music, identity, and cultural politics in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, as the Uyghur homeland is called in official Chinese parlance, as well as in China more broadly. Throughout the book, Wong advances an original hypothesis that, in a nutshell, explains Uyghur musicians'

embrace of various forms of stylistic modernity as a conscious strategy of subaltern empowerment and self-representation that pushes back on official and popular attempts to exoticize and Orientalize Uyghur music as an uncontaminated form of indigenous cultural heritage. At the same time, Wong describes how Uyghur musicians have deftly used the "original ecology" (*yuan shengtai*) movement in China to maintain a connection to their own traditions as well as to transnational networks of indigenous sounds. Wong explains that "The notion of 'original ecology' has its root in the late 1980s as a part of the liberalization of cultural expressions following the end of the Cultural Revolution" (181), and that the "original ecology" style "celebrates a variety of loosely defined premodern and folk practices often understood in an environmental frame, such as uncontaminated musical species and original, natural performing habitats" (182). Wong remains skeptical, however, that the "original ecology" movement can serve as a panacea for the precarity of Uyghur performing arts. "Despite optimistic analyses and speculations," he writes, "the sanctioned expression of Uyghur performing arts remains tightly regulated by the state and aligns closely with the changing preferences of mainstream Chinese audiences. . . . As the Uyghur continue to be dispossessed of their heritage, musicians ask crucial questions about what it means to be indigenous as they struggle to reclaim their musical place" (195).

Several different narrative registers interweave throughout the six substantive chapters of *Even in the Rain*. The first of these, introduced in chapter 1 ("Ethnography and Music Scholarship") and appearing episodically throughout the book, is reflexive. Wong handles reflexive writing with nuance and sensitivity, inserting himself into the narrative at key moments to provide verisimilitude in his descriptions of musical life amid ubiquitous government surveillance and to describe his anxiety about "colonial ethnography" and his role in it as a Hong Kong–born cultural outsider to Uyghur music. The second register comprises historical narrative, in which Wong draws both on oral sources from his fieldwork and on written sources in Chinese and Uyghur languages as well as on photographs, films, musical scores, and recordings to synthesize an account of Uyghur music and musical life from the early modern period to the late 2010s. The third register is ethnomusicological and strives to encapsulate the author's rich ethnographic and historical material within contemporary culture theory, particularly in relation to conflicting constructions of cultural modernity. Wong is a strong writer and succeeds in integrating the different registers into a cogent narrative that moves briskly and purposefully.

If there is one element that I wish could have been added to the book, it would be a companion website with links to the many musical items discussed in the text, some of them in great detail (e.g., two songs performed by the well-known singer Shir'eli Eltékin, who offers pop reinterpretations of *muqam* songs) (118–28). Wong does provide a discography of his audio sources, and while Uyghur music specialists and enthusiasts may have access to these CDs, others are likely to be stymied in their attempt to find the songs and specific performances Wong discusses, not only on CD but also online. Given the potentially disastrous consequences for Uyghur musicians residing in China of having their recordings included on a website for a book like *Even in the Rain*, not to mention the complexities of licensing recordings of Uyghur music from China-based media companies, it's understandable that Wong demurred. This means, however, that course instructors who want to adopt Wong's soundly researched book for classroom use should be prepared to hunt down audio or video recordings to make the contents truly

come alive for their students. Such an effort would be well worth it, for *Even in the Rain* offers a superb model of how to write simultaneously for scholars and nonspecialists in a way that is at once engrossing and illuminating.

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Xiao Ma
South Korean Migrants in China: An Ethnography of Education, Desire, and Temporariness

Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2024. 190 pages. Hardcover, €104.00. ISBN 9789463726252.

While there is significant literature on the Korean diaspora, most of this research focuses on historic migrations and subsequent generations of Koreans raised abroad. These earlier migrations stemmed from historical circumstances driven by economic hardships, domestic turmoil, or forced migrations. Fewer studies have looked at the more recent, twenty-first-century phenomenon of comparatively well-off Korean families and individuals who go abroad for novel economic reasons (i.e., Koreans who move abroad to live as expatriates working for Korean conglomerates) or those who move abroad as a protest against South Korea's sociocultural or work norms (i.e., Koreans who go on working holidays and stay abroad to avoid Korea's harsh work culture). Xiao Ma's ethnography *South Korean Migrants in China: An Ethnography of Education, Desire, and Temporariness* offers an important look into the lives of Koreans who move to China and how they and their children navigate education systems in China and South Korea. The book situates these Korean expatriates within the context of twenty-first-century China's internationalization (the internationalization of education in particular) and investigates various aspects related to their educational experiences and aspirations.

Chapter 1 sets the conceptual and ethnographic context of the work. Ma adopts "in between" as an analytical framework to understand the positionality of these Korean education migrants, ultimately suggesting that this offers a "more flexible" alternative than others to make sense of this mobility (14). The chapter also explains the concept of education migration relative to Koreans who go abroad to study and uses the concept of "educational desire" (16) to frame the actions of the ethnography's interlocutors. Ma also situates Korean education migrants in the broader context of China's internationalization (18–22). The chapter ends with an extensive explanation of Ma's "multi-scalar" ethnographic approach (25–31).

Chapter 2 explains the historical context of Korean migration to China starting from the 1990s and discusses the emergence of "Koreatowns" around Beijing. Ma gives considerable attention to the development of the Wangjing area of Beijing and the factors that drove Koreans in (and out) of this area in the early 2000s. Later in the chapter, Ma explains some of the economic challenges Koreans encountered in the late 2010s, which drove them to leave this area. The chapter ends with a conceptual discussion of ethnic incorporation, ethnic networks, and ethnic categorizations of expatriate Koreans relative to Korean Chinese, among others.

In chapter 3, Ma discusses various types of education institutions in China. The chapter discusses internationalization of Chinese schools and Chinese higher education. Most pertinent to the topics of Koreans expatriates in China are sections on overseas Korean

schools in China (84–89) and a discussion about Korea's "education exodus" (89–92). In doing so, Ma explains the factors shaping these different educational institutions and how some Korean interlocutors conceptualized them.

Chapter 4 is arguably the most interesting chapter in the book. It is also one of the most ethnographically dense. The chapter looks at the diverse ideologies and practices of Korean parents in China and relates these back to Koreans' "obsession" with English education. Ma presents vignettes from several Korean mothers who take different approaches to their children's education. In doing so, Ma suggests that most of these desires reveal the "cosmopolitan outlook" of Korean parents—an outlook grounded both domestically and internationally (120). The chapter also includes a Bordieuan discussion of how social status and schooling practices manifest in the form of Korean parents' educational aspirations for their children.

Chapter 5 focuses on Korean high school students abroad who try to enter universities in South Korea—a "desirable homecoming" as Ma describes it. The chapter contains a lot of very interesting factual information about this process and how Koreans students pursue this pragmatically. Here, Ma touches on various pertinent issues for education migrants, such as parents' perceived importance of alumni networks at elite universities, the extent to which applicants pursue extracurricular education to prepare for entrance exams, and what tensions arise during the application process.

Chapter 6 then explores Korean students who try to enter elite Chinese institutions after attending Chinese high schools. This is another ethnographically dense chapter that explains how these Korean students are given special admissions treatment that is generally unavailable to Chinese students, and how Korean students themselves conceptualize their desires to enter these universities. Interestingly, the chapter explores how these students pursue Chinese higher education because of their personal interests and desires to not engage with the traditional tertiary education institutions. This is also the chapter of the book that casts the greatest light into the social and educational structures in South Korea that may propel Korean students to remain in China and pursue education in the country.

The final chapter concludes the book with a summary of its main arguments: Koreans in China exist as people "in between" both countries, the ambivalent nature of the temporality of South Koreans in China, "educational desire" as a driving force behind these pursuits, and Chinese internationalization as a "process involving a variety of [contradictory] stakeholders."

South Korean Migrants in China offers an interesting look at a recent and still underexplored topic. The ethnographic data in the later chapters is especially interesting, and Ma has done a good job of discussing this topic from multiple emic and etic perspectives. In doing so, Ma also does a fine job of explaining some important contextual aspects of this phenomenon and offers concise history lessons on some crucial topics presented in the book (such as international and Korean schools in China and the emergence of Beijing's twenty-first-century Koreatown, among others). The breadth of topics the book touches on is a major strength, as other researchers on this topic can likely find something pertinent to their research area in this book. This book is thus a crucial source of information on South Koreans in China, and it will likely remain so in the immediate future.

Nevertheless, there are some issues with the book. First, the conceptual approach seemed rather unfocused and broad. I initially thought the concepts introduced in

chapter 1 would be the conceptual and analytical focus of the book, but then more concepts were introduced in the subsequent chapters. These new theories related back to the original concepts to varying degrees; some were relevant, while others seemed to be just namedropped with little relevance to the theories discussed in the first chapter. This gave the book more the feeling of a dissertation rather than a manuscript (a point further exacerbated by the abstracts at the start of each chapter). It seems that only the theme of being "in between" resonates throughout the book, and even this could have been further unpacked conceptually. Second, the book could use more ethnography. It isn't until chapter 4 that any substantial ethnographic data is introduced. This is unfortunate, because in the eighty-plus interviews Ma conducted, I am sure there would have been more interesting insights to be gained and discussed.

Lastly, from a Korea studies perspective, I would have liked to have seen more discussion about domestic push factors compelling these diverse educational ideologies and practices. While the book focuses extensively on the Chinese receiving side of this migration, a more substantive discussion on the push factors that compel expatriation, individual internationalization, English education, and social status *within* contemporary South Korea would have been immensely beneficial. Ma also notes that she conducted fieldwork in South Korea, but some of the most crucial aspects of the sending nation fail to come through in the book. The fact that South Korea is an unapologetically status-centered society (of which expatriation and internationalization are closely connected) is not unpacked in sufficient detail. Relatedly, more focus back on South Korea's higher education system would have been insightful and helpful to readers unfamiliar with contemporary South Korea; the brief references to these issues in chapter 6 are somewhat informative, but more attention should have been given here. Closely connected to Koreans' obsession with social status is university education—being admitted to SKY (Seoul National University, Korea University, or Yonsei University) or an elite art or science university is a direct status symbol in Korean society. More discussion of this status-centered educational phenomenon would have been interesting. Additionally, the reason why English itself is a symbol of elite cosmopolitanism in Korea is also not really unpacked. This is why, from the point of Korea studies, this book is only of nominal interest; it is much better placed within the context of transnational studies and migration studies.

These issues notwithstanding, *South Korean Migrants in China* provides one of the most comprehensive studies to date of the phenomenon of South Korean expatriates in China. Ma's work touches upon many different facets of this migration phenomenon, and anyone who is interested in this topic will likely find this book helpful in some way.

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Japan

David H. Slater and Patricia G. Steinhoff, eds.
Alternative Politics in Contemporary Japan: New Directions in Social Movements
Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2024. 360 pages, 14 illustrations. Hardcover, $70.00. ISBN 9780824897437.

Compared to increasingly polarized conflicts in Europe and the United States, Japan's political landscape has remained remarkably calm. What some might value as political stability, many others interpret as apathy: the result of a suffocating dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and a lack of civic engagement, let alone activism in a rapidly aging society. At the same time, several recent book-length publications focus on new directions in social movements and political activism that emerged in the aftermath of the triple disaster on March 11, 2011. *Alternative Politics in Contemporary Japan: New Directions in Social Movements* adds to this growing literature with a compilation of ethnographic studies on alternative forms of political engagement in Japan between 1990 and 2021.

The main strength of this edited volume is its coherence. Together with the book's ethnographic methodology, a consistent analytical framework provides a solid foundation that ties the contributions together well. Using Patricia Steinhoff's concept of Japan's "invisible civil society" in the aftermath of the Anpo protests in the 1960s and 1970s as a starting point, the introduction elegantly frames "alternative politics" as a term that carries a double meaning. It describes a form of political engagement beyond established formal channels, but also the attempt to seek an alternative to political activism in the 1960s and 1970s, commonly associated with radical ideologies, rigid hierarchies, and violence.

Within this framework, the following twelve contributions offer detailed accounts of different social movements that have emerged (and at times disappeared again) over the past thirty years, with a focus on the post-3/11 period. The contributions cover a broad range of topics, from workers' rights, homelessness, and "fleeter" movements (Kojima, Cassegard, Day) via alternative energy movements (Nishikido) and post-Fukushima mothers' activism (Morioka) to new right-wing movements (Asahina), changing approaches to anti-racism (Shaw), and the massive SEALDs protests (Slater).

Despite this diverse array of topics and movements, the contributions are held together nicely by their focus on how different generations of "alternative" political activists try to come to terms with the past—the stigmatizing "burden of Anpo" (8), as well as forms of dogmatic and violent activism that appear unappealing to "normal" citizens. The volume illustrates this vividly and shows how the effort to reinvent more inclusive, playful, and ultimately "normal" political activism can translate into a lack of organizational and political coherence and, ultimately, impact. At times, new or "artistic" approaches to activism have clashed with more traditional objectives and practices, as Carl Cassegård's chapter on homelessness shows. Also, attempts to rebrand existing groups have not necessarily led to success—as exemplified well by the futile efforts of younger members to give the veteran New Left group Chūkaku-ha a more colorful image (Furuie). But the volume also highlights productive links between the generations: Steinhoff's chapter shows how networks and practices of Japan's post-Anpo

"invisible civil society" have directly informed more recent alternative politics. Several other contributions reveal how both established and emerging actors (often including women) have benefitted from a "normalization" of political protest in the post-3/11 period (Shaw, Iida, Morioka). Vivian Shaw's chapter on anti-racism, for example, offers a fascinating account of how an initiative led by a female victim of hate speech transformed a movement hitherto dominated by Japanese men in the specific historical context of the post-3/11 protest wave.

At times, some of the themes and core arguments that run through the volume overlap to an extent that it feels slightly repetitive. This is a small price to pay for a strikingly coherent edited volume, and it does not take away from the individual contributions. Yet, for some readers the volume may also feel repetitive in a different sense: the contributions all revisit previous research from the post-3/11 years or even earlier—much of which has been published before in some form or the other. Rather than updating earlier work, each chapter instead comes with a postscript that briefly covers more recent developments. This is, of course, a conscious editorial decision that may well be taken as a strength, as the editors argue themselves: Instead of "collapsing the past into our present concerns," the contributions capture the "distinctiveness of the moment" in which the research was conducted (6–7). Yet, at least for readers who are familiar with the topics and the work of the authors, the takeaways from revisiting past research can be somewhat limited.

This being said, *Alternative Politics in Contemporary Japan* is an edited volume that clearly succeeds to be much more than the sum of its contributions. It showcases the strengths of ethnographic research on social movements and—taken collectively—helps to understand the diverse manifestations of "alternative politics" in post-3/11 Japan and the challenges they have been facing in the specific historical and political context of postwar political activism in Japan. As such, the volume is a useful resource for teaching, and not least a productive point of departure for future research. After all, the postscripts—many of which report the demise or decline of the groups covered in the chapters—raise urgent questions about the state of contemporary political activism in the *post* post-3/11 era.

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Ryo Morimoto
Nuclear Ghost: Atomic Livelihoods in Fukushima's Gray Zone

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023. 355 pages, Paperback, $29.95. ISBN: 9780520394117.

Nuclear Ghost: Atomic Livelihoods in Fukushima's Gray Zone examines the aftermath of Japan's 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster. Ryo Morimoto focuses on individuals who decided to stay or to return to Minamisōma (a coastal city in Fukushima Prefecture), despite the potential risk of radioactive contamination. Morimoto traces "the residents' hopes and desires to live and die well in the city" (22), asking how affected individuals attempt to live in Minamisōma, especially amidst narratives that rely on "technoscientific definitions of radiation exposure as the only legible metrics of the nuclear accident" (ibid.). These questions are explored via different case studies, such as an examination of

life amidst decontamination practices (chapter 7) or the changing relationships between humans and contaminated fauna (chapter 9).

Morimoto's aim is to go beyond the "collective enchantment with radiation exposure" (22), which, according to the author, overshadows the picture of Fukushima, while victimizing residents of Minamisōma in their recovery. As the author argues: "*Nuclear Ghost* is a call for us to suspend our fixation with radiological damage in order to narrate the ongoing livelihoods under threats of chronic low-dose radiation exposure" (22). In terms of praise, the book provides unparalleled views of the everyday life of Minamisōma's residents through rich ethnographic description. Morimoto is also a skilled writer who provides a vivid description of the catastrophe. As opposed to academic works couched in scientific jargon, the book is pleasurable to read and can attract a wider readership. However, as a scholar equally working on Fukushima, I have come to disagree with the theoretical position championed by this work (Polleri 2021). These disagreements surround a limited conceptualization of victimhood, as well as the unintended consequences of Morimoto's call to suspend radiation damage focus, which too closely align with the aims of the nuclear lobby.

First, Morimoto starts his book by claiming that he has failed to encounter people who defined themselves as "victims" (4). This led him to argue for a shift from the "study of 'nuclear victimhood' to 'atomic livelihoods'" (25). In doing so, Morimoto creates a dichotomy between nuclear victimhood and atomic livelihoods, where the former becomes associated with negativity. However, it is important to remember that nuclear victimhood is not de facto a passive state, but also a productive force that historically generated demands for radical political changes, especially within Japan. A deeper exploration of the texture of victimhood *within* post-Fukushima Japanese society, such as highlighting the role of committed victims (*tōjisha*) trying to evacuate from Fukushima (see Löschke 2021), would have allowed a more nuanced complexity of nuclear victimhood. Furthermore, the absence of "victims" is a direct consequence of methodological choices, stemming from the author's focus on elderly people who decided to return to Fukushima and for whom radiation health risk is not always the main factor of concern. As such, I see a discrepancy between the book's main argument and the empirical data that support it. In other words, do ethnographic materials *only* gathered from a community that wishes to remain in Fukushima provide the grounds to sustain a general call for suspending radiation-damage focus? I do not believe they do. As with most ethnographies, the extreme local focus of the book is what provides a strong contextual understanding, but it also represents a double-edged sword that hampers the theoretical ambitions and claims of the author.

Second, a call to suspend focus on radiation damage too closely aligns with the aims of the nuclear lobby to normalize the aftermath of nuclear disasters, even though the author disavows this position. Similar calls already exist within the notion of "radiophobia," which claims that the fear of radiation is more damaging than radiation. Radiophobia has long been promoted by members of the nuclear lobby to downplay the consequences of contamination, while impeding financial compensations for victims (Stawkowski 2017). By stressing the fact that radiation is "extremely harmful socially, politically, and psychologically" (239), it remains unclear as to how Morimoto's work differs from the narratives of the nuclear lobby, which argues for a similar thing. At times, Morimoto reproduces a similar ideology, by writing that the "actual primary health effects have not come from radiation itself" (8), or that "the physical risks of living in the area are

lower than anticipated and there are no medically and statistically significant cases of chromosomal damage" (239). At other times, he distances himself from this logic, by claiming that "my stories might appear to some to be underplaying the decision of those who left the region and the potential adverse effects of radiation exposure and thus spreading a radiation-tolerant, pronuclear perspective. That is not my intention" (6).

However, beyond typical phrases claiming that his goal is "not to downplay the harm from the routinized low-dose radiation exposure" (9), Morimoto never goes on to fully develop the danger of the similarity between his call and the nuclear lobby's. While he attempts to put accountability back on the nuclear actors, by calling the Fukushima disaster the "TEPCO accident"—the electric utility holding company responsible for the disaster—the aim of his naming convention still "signals the core of [the author's] ethnographic project, which aims to decenter the radiation-centered narrative to instead explore the local, more granular conditions surrounding 3.11" (2). Again, such a position has historically been endorsed by members of the nuclear lobbies who equally stressed the importance of local connections after a disaster to avoid costly policies of evacuation. Not theorizing the dangerous similitudes between these positions remains the major shortcoming of the book. In the end, the book should be read as a situated ethnography of the daily life of Minamisōma residents and their effort to navigate the disaster. Yet, a call to suspend radiation damage might not find a strong match with some anthropologists working on nuclear-related issues.

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South Korea

Olga Fedorenko
Flower of Capitalism: South Korean Advertising at a Crossroads

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2022. Xi + 282 pages. Figures, appendixes, references, index. Hardcover, $68.00; paperback, $28.00. ISBN: 9780824890346 (hardcover), 9780824893248 (paperback).

Before the new millennium, I often found adults in South Korea to be exceptionally frugal. While invariably generous to friends and guests, they would rarely splurge on something for themselves, however small. I put the habit down to either Confucian values or Park Chung-hee's developmental state, the importance of saving for the next generation. Indeed, in her *Measured Excess: Status, Gender, and Consumer Nationalism in South Korea* (2000), Laura Nelson describes how the Park and Chun Doo-hwan administrations, in

their efforts to curb the import of foreign consumer products and avoid a chasm between households on vastly different budgets, promoted frugality as a moral obligation. Beyond the scope of her study is the effect this had on commercial advertising. Considering the emphasis on economic growth at the time and the strong ties between conglomerates and the government, one might wonder what norms the former had to conform to in promoting their products to this frugal domestic audience and who would hold them to account if they strayed.

To my knowledge, there is no study in English that examines the history of commercial advertising in South Korea. Olga Fedorenko's *The Flower of Capitalism: South Korean Advertising at a Crossroads* deliberates the main developments in commercial advertising in Korea, and based on thoughtful ethnography it examines how advertisers, governments, and the public have viewed its responsibilities and sometimes clashed over it. It ultimately demonstrates how a unique concept of commercial advertising—a blend of neoliberalism and serving the interests of the public—took shape in South Korea. The main title of the book is a metaphor that Koreans have often applied to commercial advertising and "acknowledges advertising's intrinsic connection to capitalism but obscures any unfavorable implications of this connection or critiques of capitalism itself" (7), while the crossroads refers to the radical transformation that the advertising industry has undergone in the early twenty-first century. Although she relates the more recent developments briefly at the end, the focus is squarely on earlier advertising, through terrestrial channels and periodicals, from the mid-1950s to the Lee Myung-bak administration (2008–2013). The advertising landscape will be quite different today, and yet I do not expect the norms around commercial advertising to have changed much. The findings should, therefore, apply equally to the production and consumption of advertising in contemporary South Korea.

The book comprises an introduction, five chapters, and an epilogue. In the first, Fedorenko explains that historically, Koreans have expected advertising to serve the public interest, *kongik*, a concept she argues is often conflated with "*kongkongsŏng*" or "publicness" (3). For many years a vast censorship apparatus provided some protection of this ideal, but in the 1980s, and especially in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis, the ruling elites came to adopt a decidedly neoliberal agenda that implied the abolition of marketing constraints (4–5). While subsequent debates over the role of advertising commonly acknowledged the purpose and importance of commercial advertising, they continued to view it as subordinate to publicness. Cautioning against blindly universalizing the phenomenon of advertising and underscoring the importance of understanding the historical contexts of a particular culture (16), the focus then shifts to the role of advertising in places around the world and the historical development of the Korean advertising industry, including the role of conglomerates (*chaebŏl*) and agencies (25–28).

Chapter 1 opens with a discussion of an article that argued against government interference with advertising, published during Park's authoritarian Yushin Constitution (1972–1981). Translated by Shin In Sup, a longtime advocate for the liberalization of commercial advertising, it appeared in the national daily *Dong-A Ilbo* in January 1975, shortly after the paper had been forced to lay off journalists critical of the administration. The controversial matter provides a segue to an analysis of efforts in postwar Korea to regulate Korean advertising and hold it publicly accountable. Following a historical overview of advertising channels and the expansion of marketing during times of major

economic growth in South Korea (39–44), Fedorenko examines the "*Dong-A Ilbo* White Paper Incident," which constituted the government's suppression of advertising in the newspaper in retaliation for journalists rallying against the oppression of free speech in October 1974. Fedorenko argues that it was through this measure and the many efforts by activists to counteract it, that "advertising became implicated in realizing a democratic public sphere and in protecting civic freedoms" (48).

In the subsequent chapters, Fedorenko delves deeper into the mechanics of advertising production. In chapter 2 she discusses the status of advertising professionals in South Korea over time, what they understood their role to be, and what the everyday realities of their occupation were like (87–96). In chapter 3, she examines censorship as applied by both past governments and the KARB, the industry's own Review Board, and shows how the latter had to often weigh up the freedom of advertisers against the experiences of audience members (104). These members, the consumers, are the focus of chapter 4. The number of survey respondents whose experiences she draws on here is nevertheless small, and while she complements her data with anonymous comments posted on blogs, she draws rather a lot on the comments made by one informant (143–46, 148–51). Chapter 5 analyzes another important protest movement, a round of boycotts organized in 2008 and 2009 by the National Campaign for Media Consumer Sovereignty against the oppression of press freedom, this time by corporations. The activists argued that withholding advertising in left-wing dailies (166–70) was undemocratic and, ironically, in conflict with "the corporate freedom to advertise as businesses see fit" (189). Noting that it was common for corporations to withdraw advertising in response to criticism, Fedorenko argues that in Samsung's case the decision whether to advertise or not had a greater effect on the revenue of the affected newspapers than on that of the company itself (173).

Flower of Capitalism provides a thorough overview of the advertising industry's developments over time and demonstrates convincingly when and why the ideals of commercialism or neoliberalism, on the one hand, and publicness, on the other, clashed. I was surprised that apart from a brief note on page 224, there is no mention of the role of the KARB's predecessor, the Korean Ethics Committee for Performing Arts. While I believe it merited inclusion, future deliberations of its role are unlikely to challenge Fedorenko's carefully drawn conclusions. What may challenge a few readers, however, is the style of writing. Due to her habitual use of long, subclause-heavy sentences, with some pages (e.g., 135, 195) comprising no more than eight or nine sentences in total, I often struggled to follow the train of thought. But the research is excellent and apart from a few typos (e.g. *kongkong/konggong*, 3, 21; *kwengjang'i/koengjanghi*, 113; *Kukmin K'aimp'ein/Kungmin K'aemp'ein*, 166), the romanizations are accurate, too, though I wish they included the Korean names of the various institutes. Like many of my peers, Fedorenko adopts the unrevised version of the McCune-Reischauer system that makes all instances of the sound "she" appear as *si* ("see"). And yet, presumably because it is a more natural representation, she uses the revised system's *shi* in a few instances herself (266, 269). Whereas many of the blog posts referred to have now disappeared (229n41, 235, 236n14, 238n23, 238n24, 238n26, 240n33), most of the commercials discussed are available on a special YouTube page created by the publisher. I strongly recommend this book to anyone interested in advertising practices, public culture, and the history of democracy in South Korea.

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South Asia

Tharindi Udalagama
Women's Lives after Marriage in Rural Sri Lanka: An Ethnographic Account of the "Beautiful Mistake"

Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2024. 237 pages. Hardcover, $129.00; ebook, $99.00. ISBN 9783031554117 (hardcover), 9783031554124 (ebook).

In this rich ethnography about family dynamics in Sri Lanka's dry zone, Tharindi Udalagama explores concepts of marital happiness and the ways women seek to achieve a "good enough" life within the constraints of their patriarchal rural village (5). The work reveals women's views on respectability, sexuality, marriage, domestic violence, householding, and motherhood. Udalagama's deep familiarity with Sri Lanka and her native fluency in Sinhala allow her to convey the voices of her interlocutors strongly and clearly. The book draws on fieldwork done in 2015–2016 for Udalagama's PhD dissertation. The researcher insightfully discusses her positionality as a "daughter of the village" (28) of Divulvæva—her propriety-imposed behavioral expectations restricted her range of interactions in ethnographically complex ways. Divulvæva village is located in the Mahaweli area, a large-scale irrigation development in the North Central Province.

In chapter 1, Udalagama introduces traditional arranged marriages, authority-challenging elopements, and a middle ground of companionate marriages in which sweethearts marry with the approval of both sets of parents. Women call elopements mistakes, but beautiful ones because they lead to having husbands, children, and houses. Extramarital affairs, domestic violence, abuse, and separations cause ruptures and discontinuities in marriages. Kinship forms the basis of community. The author presents the concept of *baendima* (18)—connections or bonds between people that spread out from the marriage relationship to encompass larger networks and organizations.

Chapter 2 investigates local ideas of a righteous society and precolonial and colonial patterns of farmer interactions with land and water. Udalagama also discusses the strong military presence during Sri Lanka's twenty-six-year-long civil war and the area's rapid, politically motivated development after the war. Within the village, complex relationships govern the selling, buying, and leasing of land.

In chapter 3, Udalagama explores Divulvæva women's ideas about sexuality. The women of Divulvæva feel that women's sexuality should be passive, and post-menopausal wives should be celibate. In contrast, interlocutors consider male sexuality a strong force; women should not say "no" to their husbands, especially if they want them to stay faithful. Married women consider sex as a wifely duty akin to cooking and taking care of the sick. Udalagama suggests that women form their expectations of love and romance as they watch teledramas, discuss the plots widely with their friends, and look for lovers

in the real world. Mobile phones create new opportunities for intimacy, relationships, and sexual and emotional interactions, some of which, if they occur after marriage, border on "virtual infidelity" (33, 85). Women despise "robber-women" (78) who engage in transgressive infidelity with married men as the "antithesis of a 'good' wife" (79).

Chapter 4 addresses the situation of unmarried women. Udalagama explores the Sinhala concept of "shame-fear" (*laejja baya*) (92), or respectable demeanor. This concept dictates that girls should never engage in premarital sex; at puberty they enter a "bad age" (94) that lasts until marriage. Mothers take the responsibility for their daughters' behavior, and infractions weigh more seriously on girls than on boys. Udalagama discusses the complex tie between premarital sex, respectability, elopement, and self-harm. Elopements, though romantic, upset families and create long-term community suspicions about virginity and morality.

In chapter 5, Udalagama shows that the house is a "metaphor for the [social bonds] within" (115). Houses symbolize women's efforts to be good wives and mothers and reveal the family's wealth and well-being. Good houses, built on inherited land, indicate successful marriages. In such houses, women handle ample finances without conflict. In contrast, in "problem houses" (116), people have eloped with unsuitable spouses, daughters-in-law fight with their mothers-in-law, husbands drink to excess, teenagers elope or attempt self-harm, and women experience domestic violence. Udalagama claims that Divulvæva villagers may see problems as a result of the woman's bad karma or blame the wife for not rehabilitating her drunkard husband. Although villagers blame women for household problems, women blame the physical house. They resort to the "science of architecture" (127), a form of astrology by which rearranging house architecture can ameliorate the relationships of the people who live therein. Women publicly demonstrate their efforts to address their family's social issues by spending money on renovations.

To discuss marital difficulties, in chapter 6 Udalagama introduces Lakshmi, an interlocutor whose husband Upul has an affair. The lengthy case study provides details of domestic violence, separation, family interventions, a court case over child support, the problematic behaviors of children, and an eventual unhappy reconciliation. The author discusses the role of the extended family, the community, the police, the courts, and various religious authorities, many of which pressure Lakshmi to tolerate suffering and keep her marriage intact without seeking a divorce. Villagers also form relationships with local deities and supernatural powers.

In chapter 7, Udalagama considers Lakshmi's use of supernatural resources. Villagers interpret Lakshmi's mental difficulties as a result of sorcery done by her husband's lover; Lakshmi engages in counter-sorcery to cure the problem. Ritual practices help Lakshmi come to terms with her suffering and restore her family life. Despite the strength of the ethnographic data, the book lacks a critical lens. The theory is thin and dated, the analysis is inconsistent and undeveloped, and the discussion makes few connections with global conversations. The conclusion introduces some topics and theories that would have been interesting to see integrated throughout: political economics, gender theory, and the anthropology of emotion.

The book touches on older work done in Sri Lanka on kinship and ritual but offers little connection to anthropological literature on sexuality or agency. Overall, the work reads as a promising dissertation under-revised for its transformation into a book. The work

will interest scholars in Sri Lanka and South Asia studies who seek rich case studies about kinship and marriage.

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Tibet

Martin Brauen
Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism

New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2023. Reprint. 262 pages. Hardcover, $65.00. ISBN 9783897907065.

This beautifully illustrated volume was published in conjunction with the exhibition "Mandala: The Perfect Circle" presented by the Rubin Museum of Art in New York City (2009–2010). It updates the author's iconic *Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism* (1997), which was the English translation of his original German work published in 1992. This reprint of the 2009 updated version contains forty-seven new color plates analyzed by eight wonderful scholars of Tibetan art and culture. Brauen's earlier edition had appeared toward the end of what might justly be called "America's decade of the mandala," engendered in the fall of 1991 when His Holiness the Dalai Lama conferred the Kālacakra Tantra initiation at Madison Square Garden's Paramount Theater. Its thousands of participants were transfixed by the nine-foot multicolored particle *maṇḍala* (*dkyil-'khor*) comprising the majestic palace of the Kālacakra deity; it was, said one journalist, "a revelation." Subsequently, the *kālacakra* ("wheel of time") *maṇḍala* was created in the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the IBM Gallery in New York, and the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe. Mandala exhibits were not limited to the *kālacakra maṇḍala*. At scores of small-scale university events, throngs of silent spectators held their breath as monk-artisans channeled sand through copper funnels (*chak-pur*) to create impossibly detailed deities dancing at the center of jewel-bedecked palaces. At Cornell University, new computer graphic technology enabled the Vajrabhairava *maṇḍala* to rise from its two-dimensional picture plane and take shape in its spinning, three-dimensional visualized form. Amidst the accompanying surge of *maṇḍala*-related publications, Brauen's erudite yet lucid work emerged as the *locus classicus* for clarifying and celebrating these remarkable works.

This spring, when I was gifted the updated 2009 version, I jumped at the chance to write a review. Since Brauen's first edition, the academic landscape has been transformed by the material turn's attention to the reciprocity between humans, objects, and the built environment. What had once been an intellectual experiment conducted by a handful of art historians is now a fixture in sociology, religion, history, and literary studies. Would the new *Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism* reflect and support this kind of work?

The answer is a qualified yes. The book has six chapters, at the center of which are forty-seven deeply saturated color plates accompanied by descriptions by eight leading scholars of Tibetan art and culture. It is these images, paired with expert visual analysis and rich historical contextualization, that will mesmerize material scholars. At the center of an eighth-century painted "Five-Deity Mandala of Amoghapāśa," collected by French

explorer Paul Pelliot (1878–1945) in his 1906 mission to Dunhuang, a seated, four-armed deity gracefully extends an arched foot. His tight leggings and jewelry, explains Karl Debreczeny (Rubin Museum of Art), speak to the new Indian models entering Central Asia in the eighth century. A closed gilt copper lotus ("Cakrasaṃvara Lotus Mandala," 126–27) miraculously opens to reveal a *saṃvara* ("stoppage") deity embracing his consort on a lotus platform, surrounded by an adoring celestial entourage standing on eight tiny petal thrones. The ring of symbols at the base, "[a]s in the gesture of offering," is the mechanism by which the lotus is opened. Amy Heller (University of Bern) highlights the aesthetic and political resonances of "Four Mandalas of the Vajrāvalī" spread over four plates (99–105), tracing their creation in 1375 to a ceremony honoring the abbot of the Sakya and de facto ruler of Tibet. A densely populated *thang-ka* ("something rolled up") featuring a deep-green Buddha Amogasiddhi in a sea of red (90–91) is shown by Christian Luczantis (School of Oriental and African Studies) to have "puzzling" stylistic elements; perhaps we should rethink the established date of composition? From Jeff Watt (Himalayan Art Resources) we learn that a tiny orange *mañjuśri dharmadhātu vāgīśvara* is nothing less than "a coded visualization that contains all essential Buddhist teachings from Pali and Sanskrit sutras" (112–13). I have already made several of these eloquent picture essays into class handouts.

From a "material turn perspective," the original six chapters are informative yet feel less current. The text is largely identical to the earlier edition, although the first chapter on "Approaching the Mandala" offers a new taxonomy of *maṇḍala*s into "one of four main categories on the basis of its center," which is better suited to nonspecialists. Chapter 2, "Center of the Buddhist Wheel of the Teaching," combines routine summaries of Mahāyāna Buddhist basics with more turgid expositions of *anuttarayoga* tantric teachings. While scholars of the "lived object" will appreciate the images of woodblock *yantra*s, paper amulets with strings and thread-cross palaces, they might wish for a fuller discussion of their affective capacities and agency—their status as what political theorist Jane Bennett (2010) calls "vibrant matter." "Outer Mandala: The Person" explores different models of the Buddhist cosmos with the help of computer-generated diagrams that visually translate two-dimensional images into three dimensions. Yet its subsequent treatment of the *stūpa*—burial sites for the ashes of the Buddha that develop into centers of worship and pilgrimage—feels oddly lacking. Here, I thought, is a moment to apply Bruno Latour's (2005) actor-network theory and frame the *stūpa* as a node in a vast network of interconnected actors, whereby every pilgrim, stone, artisan, prayer flag, and carving is a participant in the *stūpa*'s story, including the Buddha himself.

Chapter Four, "Inner Mandala: The Person" shines in its treatment of the correlations and parallels between cosmos and the human, especially in the *kālacakra* tradition, yet "material turn" scholars might welcome a deeper discussion of the ontological status and shared agency of that person-cosmos relationship. When the deities of the *kālacakra* were ritually invited to reside in the *maṇḍala* at Madison Square Garden, they were present in ways that transcended "the Platonic habits in which we imagine the material world as a mere projection of something more meaningful beyond it" (Roberts 2017, 65). When the initiates marched past that nine-foot masterpiece, they were not mere spectators viewing an inert object; they were, in the thinking of art historian Michael Yonan, getting "out of the cave" (Yonan 2011, 245). Brauen's concluding chapter, "The Mandala and the West," surveys the way that the *maṇḍala* has been (mis)understood by Western analysts, especially Carl Jung. *Maṇḍala* meditation is perhaps most valuable as

an antidote to the "numerous rites of violation" of our human-centered, technologically oriented, and consumerist world. Two decades later and 0.36 degrees warmer since his first edition, it is hard to disagree.

Brauen's new *Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism* is a substantive update to his iconic 1997 edition. Its lucid text and new color plates, complemented by the erudition of eight leading scholars of Tibet, make this an invaluable addition to any public or university library.

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Per Kværne and Dan Martin
Drenpa's Proclamation: The Rise and Decline of the Bön Religion in Tibet

Kathmandu: Vajra Books, 2023. Xiv + 656 pages. Hardcover, $50.00. ISBN 9789937733304.

The publication of this volume has been anticipated for several years, not only because the text is among the most important for an understanding of the Bon tradition, but also because the authors are among the most erudite and respected specialists on Bon. The volume does not disappoint in any way. Throughout its more than six hundred pages, readers are offered superb scholarship, beautifully presented in a finely designed hardback binding on excellent paper. It is not only the authors, but also the publishers, who should be congratulated on this magnificent production.

Drenpa's Proclamation: The Rise and Decline of the Bön Religion in Tibet, or to give it its Tibetan title, the *bsGrags pa gling grags* (henceforth *GLG*), describes at length, and from a Bon perspective, the rise and decline of the Bon religion in the context of the advent of Buddhism. Probably first appearing around the late twelfth century, it is attributed to an earlier eighth-century sage, Dran pa Nam mkha'. Unlike various Buddhist narratives that glorify the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet, the *GLG* describes these events in much more pessimistic terms, because it believes they entailed the large-scale alienation of Tibetans from their ancestral religion of g.Yung drung Bon. Hence Buddhism's heroes can be described as Bon's villains, and Buddhism's triumphs as Bon's disasters, while Buddhism itself is often portrayed either as derivative of Bon, or as a corruption of an earlier and more pure original Buddhism.

The *GLG* has never been translated in its entirety before, so the appearance of this volume greatly enhances our capacity to understand the history of Tibetan religions. One of the most important aspects of the *GLG* is that it presents a detailed explanation of

why, when, by whom, and for whom Bon *gter ma* (rediscovered Treasure teachings) were buried. For students interested in a holistic understanding of Tibetan history, the *GLG* can therefore very fruitfully be read in parallel with its closely contemporaneous Buddhist counterpart, Myang ral's *Zangs gling ma*, which performed the same functions in relation to Buddhist *gter ma*, and which acted as a template for the subsequent *bKa' thang* genre. The differences and similarities between the two narratives are highly instructive, but regrettably, cannot be investigated in a short review such as this.

The main part of the volume consists of the translation of the *GLG*, but this is preceded by a scholarly introduction of eighty-six pages that is a major work of scholarship in its own right. Particularly valuable for a wide readership is the preliminary discussion (1–8) of the different usages of the polyvalent term "*Bon*," a topic that has been much debated for many decades, but which, I believe finds its clearest answers in the fourfold but often intertwined classifications proposed in this introduction. University teachers would do well to rely on this source when introducing the complex notion of Bon to their students. "Eternal Bon" or *g.yung drung* Bon is introduced as the leitmotif of the *GLG* (8–11).

The introduction continues with a discussion (11–14) of the date of the *GLG* and its possible origins. Although often thought of as a *gter ma* or rediscovered Treasure teaching, the *GLG* does not usually describe itself in such terms. Rather, it is structured as a commentary on some short root verses occurring right at the beginning of the text. Interestingly, these root verses are the same as those found at the start of another text similarly attributed to Dran pa Nam mkha', the *rNam 'byed 'phrul gyi lde mig* from the *Gal mdo*, a famous collection of Bon texts that has already attracted scholarly attention in relation to its innovatory use of philosophical reasoning to establish the view of rDzogs chen (see *Gal Mdo* 1972). Per Kværne and Dan Martin further suggest that the *GLG* is one of a group of texts attributed to Dran pa Nam mkha' that first appeared among the rMa clan in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

Then comes a very useful overview (14–19) of the narrative of the *GLG*, presented in clear and simple headings, along with location references to the main translation, making it much easier for the reader to navigate this complex text. The introduction then proceeds with a learned analysis (19–30) of nine "central topics" in the *GLG*: Mount Tise and Lake Mapang; Zhangzhung; Śākyamuni and Dharma; Nyat'ri Tsenpo, the first king of Tibet; King Drigum Tsenpo and the first suppression of Bon; King Songtsen Gampo; the three Indian beggars and the *stūpa* Chari Khashor; Padmasambhava, Śāntarakṣita, and King T'risong Detsen; and King T'risong Detsen and the second suppression of Bon. Pages 30–62 are devoted to a valuable discussion of the *GLG*'s understanding of the ancestral religion of Tibet. While there is no reason to suppose that the authors of the *GLG* had any direct knowledge of the non-Buddhist religion of the empire, the construction that the *GLG* puts on this topic is instructive. A salient feature is the portrayal of Buddhism as a potent pollutant, the slightest presence of which in Tibet is enough to make the ancestral deities withdraw their protection from the king and his realm, with catastrophic consequences for the entire country (33–35).

Pages 37–42 provide an erudite analysis of the various terms for priests not only as used in the *GLG* but also looked at comparatively, using a wide range of textual sources such as Dunhuang manuscripts, as well as more recent ethnographic sources. This is followed by a similar analysis of the privileges and compensations the priests received. Pages 44–50 continue with an equally erudite study of rituals, both in the *GLG* and in a wide range of other relevant sources, both historical and ethnographic. Pages 50–58 continue with a

similarly erudite and comparative study of supernatural powers, deities, and demons; pages 59–60 discuss eschatology and funerary rituals; and pages 61–62 describe religious buildings, monuments, and places.

Pages 62–83 are devoted to textual matters, describing questions of authorship, sources for the text, extant texts of *GLG* in manuscript or printed form, previous studies and translations, the title of *GLG*, and the authors' editorial and translational policies. Pages 62–66 discuss issues of authorship, both actual and ascribed. It seems likely that *GLG* was the hand of a single individual, since the narrative is sufficiently coherent and well organized to suggest that likelihood. However, the text seems to date from the eleventh century, so its notional ascription to the complex, plural, and ostensibly much earlier figure of Drenpa Namkha cannot hold. Pages 66–68 discuss earlier sources repurposed in the *GLG*, notably, the root verses (*rtsa tshig*) that also exist in another earlier Treasure text also attributed to Drenpa Namkha. Similarly, the Tibetan translation of the Indian *Lokaprajñapti* is used for the *GLG*'s cosmological sections.

Pages 68–75 discuss in detail the extant manuscript and printed witnesses of the *GLG* that were used for the edition and translation. These include five manuscripts and six printed versions. Pages 75–76 detail the seventeen secondary sources that have already quoted extensively from the *GLG*, eight of them being authored by Per Kværne, and one by Dan Martin. Pages 77–81 collate the various titles given to the *GLG* in the above and other sources, in both the Tibetan and Zhang zhung languages. Pages 81–83 describe the protocols followed in preparing the diplomatic edition, which has used the five manuscript editions, but not the six printed editions. The Dolanji manuscript (of the five manuscript editions above) has been reproduced as the base text, with all variants in other versions given as notes on the right-hand margin, or when necessary, in indented italicized small print below the main text. The Wylie transcription has been used throughout, which is convenient for Western academics and for the typesetters too, but which probably makes the book a little less accessible to most Tibetans. Scribal contractions (*bsdus yig*) have been written out in full, although numerals have been retained where they are used in abbreviations. Proper names have been capitalized, and the text conveniently divided into paragraphs. A photograph has images of sample pages of the five manuscripts used. Pages 83–85 introduce the translation itself.

The English translation of the *GLG* (87–334) comprises the bulk of the book. The translation is on every page heavily annotated with erudite footnotes, which are absolutely essential to the scholarly reading of a highly challenging work such as this. We can therefore be grateful that the authors chose to publish with the scholar-friendly Vajra Academic series, rather than choosing one of the many academic publishers that privilege cosmetic values over scholarly values and would thereby have forced these indispensable aids to reading into considerably less accessible endnotes.

The *GLG* is long and complex, and I will not attempt to provide a detailed precis here. At the beginning of the work come the short root verses found also in the *rNam 'byed 'phrul gyi lde mig* (87–91). It should be noted, however, that as well as its central narratives such as the decline of Bon at the hands of Śāntarakṣita, Padmasambhava, and Khri srong lde btsan, the very much longer *GLG* commentary follows Tibetan literary convention in locating these events within their greater frameworks.

Thus, the commentary itself starts with the cosmology of our 'Dzam bu gling universe complete with a geographical description of the known world (92–120). This is followed by a description of the successive appearances of the 1,002 and Seven Enlightened Ones

(*sangs rgyas*) (120–29), and the Four Ages (129–30). Shenrab Miwo's life and enlightened activities are described next (130–52), followed by the Bon interpretation of Śākyamuni as his emanation (152–56), the subsequent transformation of Bon into Buddhism (156–58) and their consequent close relation (158–59), and the duration and degeneration of the doctrine (159–61). Pages 162–236 provide a fascinating account of the Tibetan religious scene in the centuries before the reign of King T'risong Detsen, as understood by a g.Yung drung Bon author of probably the late twelfth century. Starting with the visit of Tonpa Shenrab to Tibet, it describes the divine ancestors of the Tibetan royal house, and how they descended to earth (162–82). The privileges given to ancient priests are also described. The problematic reign of Drigum Tsenpo is dealt with at considerable length (187–216), followed by the reinstatement of Bon and the reigns of a number of subsequent kings/.

The final part of the *GLG* tells of the complex series of events leading to the eventual decline of Bon. In essence, the decline of Bon came down to "Three Indian Beggars." These three had accumulated a vast stock of merit by constructing a great *stūpa* called *Bya ri kha shor*. This occurred at the time when the kingdoms of China, India, and Tajik were sorely oppressed by the Tibetan kings, who had been rendered invincible through the support of their Bon priests. The kings of China, India, and Tajik formed an alliance to try to contain the Tibetans, but knew they could not do so while the Tibetans remained invincible through their Bon priests. One wonders if this might be a reference to the actual historic alliance made by the Pallava monarch Narasimhavarman II (r. 695–728) with his Tang counterpart Emperor Xuanzong, to repel the powerful Tibetan Empire's military raids into India and China alike. The *GLG* continues to describe how the "Three Indian Beggars," now at the end of their lives, offered a solution to the anti-Tibetan alliance. Their accumulation of merit had given them the power to have any aspiration come true; hence they made the aspiration to bring Buddhism to Tibet, to undermine the Bon religion that had made the Tibetan kings invincible. They duly reincarnated as Śāntarakṣita, Padmasambhava, and King T'risong Detsen, and, after various vicissitudes, went on to fulfil their past aspirations by successfully displacing Bon with Buddhism. Thus, the grand and mighty Tibetan Empire was ultimately laid low by three common beggars.

This section has an interesting retelling of the famous Indian Buddhist narrative of the taming of Rudra from the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha* tantra: through the evil acts of two incestuous fallen gods, half of Buddhism in India had degenerated from the pure and faithful calque of Bon first created by Shenrab's representative Śākyamuni, becoming a false doctrine with many evil spells. The followers of the perverted Buddhism fought and defeated the true Buddhists of India. The latter, in desperation, requested a military intervention by the virtuous Bonpo Tibetan kingdom, who indeed managed to defeat the perverts for a while (240–44). Shortly after, the demon Rudra again subverted Indian Buddhism, which was once again saved by the intervention of Tibetans, this time Bon priests, who were the ones who actually subjugated Rudra, rather than the Buddhist *heruka*s of Buddhist mythology.

In summary, this is a work of rare scholarship that provides an invaluable basis for the understanding of Bon and wider Tibetan history. It cannot be recommended too highly, and it should be considered essential reading.

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