HOW PEOPLE COMPARE

Edited by
Mathijs Pelkmans and Harry Walker

How People Compare

This book focuses on comparison in anthropology, turning an ethnographic lens onto the diversity of comparative practice. It seeks to understand how, why and with what consequences diversely situated groups of people – many of whom operate on radically different premises to professional anthropologists – make comparisons, above all, between themselves and real or imagined others. What motivates people to compare, what techniques or logics do they employ, and what are the most likely outcomes – both intended and unintended? How do comparative practices reflect, reinforce or refuse uneven relations of power? And finally, what can a rejuvenated comparative anthropology learn from the anthropology of comparison? The volume develops a dialogue between scholars with long-term ethnographic engagement in a variety of contexts around the world and is particularly valuable reading for those interested in anthropological methodology and theory.

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Acknowledgements

1 On the act of comparison

An introduction

Mathijs Pelkmans

Swiping through …

With each swipe, a new profile picture appears, showing men or women posing as the beautiful, funny, interesting, cool, or tender individuals that they surely are. Most are swiped away to the left to make room for a new profile, but when there is a spark of interest additional pictures of the same person can be perused, possibly even swiped to the right, allowing for the possibility of a future match. Much has been written about Tinder, how it epitomizes recent trends in dating or even signifies the end of romance, and about how swiping exemplifies our newly mediated existence. But Tinder is also an excellent example for thinking through the complexities of the comparative act, precisely because it encapsulates various modalities of comparing and hence offers a useful starting point for this introductory chapter.

Routinized swipers may not even be aware that they are comparing as they are swiping through a database that has placed pictures and texts in a standardized grid that makes them eminently comparable. The grid is designed so that users can form quick impressions and make fast and painless decisions. The detachment produced by the grid gives it the feel of a game, with some swipers feeling as if they are 'looking through some kind of weird catalogue' (Wygant 2014). Such acts of comparison are often made offhandedly and remain incomplete,[1] as the lone swiper may learn to regret after having swiped the potential love of their life accidentally to the left, now lost forever.

The detached perspective collapses when instead of swiftly swiping left, the user looks at a profile in more detail (up to six pictures and a short bio can be uploaded). This prolonged attention allows the act of comparison to partly escape the grid, and to take on different qualities. These may include the pondering of apparent similarities or differences with persons already known to the user, musings about how the pictures (and texts) would compare with their real-life versions, and how the selected individuals would compare to the self, prompting thoughts about compatibility. The comparative act is further transformed when Tinder is made part of social events. Whether as part of a comedy show[2] or simply in the company of friends,

jokey comments to the effect of 'you can do better than *him*!' or smirks implying total and utter incompatibility demonstrate that comparison serves numerous purposes.

Starting with the example of Tinder highlights, perhaps, the darker side of comparison. The standardized grid that foregrounds appearances and the mechanics of swiping may be objectionable to those who hold that ultimately each person is unique. It also challenges romantic notions of true love, which, if it originated in Tinder and was delivered through the grid, often requires to be rapidly removed from that setting. Moreover, for those whose involvement with Tinder was unsuccessful, the mechanisms of comparison may well produce a feeling of utter rejection: 'I have been judged by the world and found wanting'. But although Tinder may exemplify the standardizing and objectifying effects of comparative framing, it is noteworthy that users still find ways to express and detect personal particularities. Placed within such a forceful grid, the smallest details may become especially significant, and in surprising ways.

So, what can we learn from Tinder about comparison? First, that the act of comparing is associated with a range of epistemic techniques (e.g. generalizing, contrasting, juxtaposing, ranking, translating) which are variously employed, with greater and lesser intensity, by those who compare. Second, that there is a frame within and against which comparison proceeds. This prompts discussion of how the grid (such as the technical features of the Tinder app) and the applied values (such as attractiveness) shape the units of comparison and influence outcomes. Such grids and values vary in terms of rigidity, and engagement with them is not uniform. Third, there is the relational aspect of comparing, comparing as a form of association and dissociation between elements, through which positions are established and the world is ordered. This introductory chapter will discuss these key issues further to argue in favour of an anthropology of comparative practices. But before we get there, it will be useful to briefly (and incompletely) discuss debates on comparison in anthropology, even if these debates have by and large ignored the empirical study of comparative practices in the world.

The LSE Anthropology Department's website is hardly unique in introducing the discipline with the line 'Anthropology is the comparative study of culture and society'. In fact, together with a holistic approach and reliance on long-term intimate fieldwork, comparison is habitually depicted as one of anthropology's three central pillars. At times, these pillars are taken for granted and risk losing their edge, while at other times, they are subject to critique and revision. Holism, long assumed to be a key strength of anthropology, came under attack in the 1990s for its association with wholes and totalization but found new strength in ideas of context, entanglement, and interdependency (Marcus and Fischer 1999; Otto and Bubandt 2011). Anthropology's hallmark fieldwork practices, too, have come under fire recently, with critics focusing their ire on the term 'ethnography', while

simultaneously emphasizing the values of 'participant observation' or of 'fieldwork' (Ingold 2014; Rees 2018; Shah 2017). The recent flurry of anthropological writings on comparison fits this pattern (e.g. Iteanu and Moya 2015; Candea 2019; van der Veer 2014; Schnegg 2020), with the qualification that more so than the other pillars, comparison has seen waves of criticism and defence ever since the discipline's origins in the late nineteenth century. The reason for this, as Webb Keane puts it in a recent book commentary, is that 'anthropology has long been haunted by the sense that comparison is impossible yet indispensable'.[3]

Because of anthropology's cross-cultural approach, comparison is an inherent part of the discipline,[4] but it has been enlisted to serve rather different, and oftentimes contrasting, agendas. First, there is the generalizing agenda. Early anthropological debates on comparison revolved precisely around the desire to formulate generalized laws. Systematic cross-cultural comparison resonated particularly strongly with those who saw anthropology as a science rather than an art.[5] As Radcliffe-Brown stated: 'It is only by the use of the comparative method that we can arrive at general explanations. The alternative is to confine ourselves to particularistic explanations similar to those of the historian' (1952: 113–114). The 1950s and 1960s saw sustained attempts to perfect the comparative method, whether it was by finding the best ways to *control* comparison (Eggan 1954) or by trying to produce the best *sample* for comparative purposes. The development of the Human Relations Area Files and the associated 'standard cross-cultural sample', described by its co-creator George Murdock as a 'representative sample of the world's known and well-described cultures, 186 in number' (Murdock and White 1969: 329), epitomized these systematizing efforts. But it is telling that they never led to significant intellectual breakthroughs in anthropology. Apart from filling anthropology textbooks with curious correlations, the works of Murdock et al. have been more influential in cross-cultural sociology and psychology than in anthropology. No surprises here. The reifying and decontextualizing tendencies of systematic comparison make most anthropologists uncomfortable or suspicious.

Criticisms of systematic comparison have been almost as old as the discipline itself. When Franz Boas famously commented on the 'limitations of the comparative method' (1896), he was warning against the false certainties of similarity, which derived from the mistaken 'assumption that the same phenomena are always due to the same causes' (1896: 904). His warning that, to put it differently, correlation does not equal causation did not discredit the comparative approach as such, just bad applications thereof. A persistent critique has been that systematic comparison relies on objectifying the units of comparison, a process with potentially distorting, decontextualizing, de-historicizing, and essentializing effects. For example, when we compare the level of corruption across a range of countries, we end up not only objectifying and essentializing 'corruption' (as measurable through fixed indicators) but also affirm the reality of the units that

are compared, in this case countries. Although not always equally bluntly, these kinds of operation are logically necessary for systematic comparison. They involve decisions about the comparable (rather than unique) character of the compared phenomena and moreover risks disconnecting these phenomena from the larger context in which they are entangled, a procedure based on the assumption that there are essences that are worth comparing. Responding to such problems, Peter van der Veer advises: 'one needs to steer clear from a universalizing approach that first defines some kind of essence, like "ritual" or "prayer" and then studies it comparatively across cultures' (2014: 2).

Comparison has been indispensable to anthropology not just because of the scientific need for generalization but also because of anthropology's desire to pinpoint particularities. After all, the particular is particular only in comparison to something else. This strand of comparative work emerges almost organically from the process of translation and communication that anthropology entails. Thus, Malinowski communicated the significance of objects exchanged in the *kula* by first differentiating them from money, to then point out their similarities to the British crown jewels, both of which have ceremonial functions and are displayed in properly governed contexts (1922).[6] Strategies for such dialogical or interpretive forms of comparison were elaborated on in later decades, not least as a response to the limitations of a generalizing comparison. The Dutch anthropologist Anton Blok argued, for example, that 'By decoupling comparison from generalization and instead placing it in the service of a better understanding of individual cultures and cultural elements, the usual objections against comparing elements from different cultures are no longer relevant' (1976: 81). This resonates with Geertz's technique of juxtaposing two cases of religious change in the Islamic world in order to highlight both differences and commonalities, suggesting that these 'form a kind of commentary on one another's character' (1968: 4).[7] It is not accidental that several authors favouring this approach (including Blok and Geertz) found inspiration in Wittgenstein's concept of 'family resemblances'. It suggests a form of comparison that is less direct, more probing and open-ended, and thereby more in tune with the complexities that we face when comparing across contexts and through complex phenomena.[8] These suggestions seem to move away from large-scale comparison and towards mutually illuminating 'dialogues' across a few cases.

Which is not to say that such trends towards 'particularizing comparison' have been roundly accepted. Objections have been made not only by those who lament the retreat of systematic anthropological comparison (e.g. Schnegg 2014, 2020). They have also been made by those who hold that dialogue, interpretation, and commentary do not solve the deeper problem of generalization. As Candea (2019: 80–84) points out, before we even get to the point where we can compare cases, we have constructed those cases through description, a process that entails generalization based on

comparisons within the case. This does not mean that such procedures are without value, but that a dialogical/interpretive approach cannot fully overcome the liabilities of generalization, objectification, and translation that are inherent in comparison.

Attempts to address these problems have reinvigorated debates about comparison in recent years. Most of these attempts fit within what Matei Candea has usefully rubricked as a shift from typological to topological approaches (2019). That is, instead of trying to perfect anthropological comparisons through proper categorization, generalization, and contextualization, they zoom in on the relational logics and epistemic techniques of comparison. Marilyn Strathern, in a thought-provoking piece (1988), dwells on the intriguing idea that to overcome limitations we need to 'cancel the basis of comparison', a move designed to release the critical and destabilizing potential of comparison. Viveiros de Castro similarly challenges the stranglehold of academic comparative practices to offer instead a technique of ambiguous translation, or what he calls 'controlled equivocation', which resists the reductive (generalizing) effect of comparison by refusing to provide closure (2004). Bruno Latour, finally, understands comparison as a form of association that is radically contingent on the perspective from which it is applied (2015). If comparison has the tendency to stabilize, generalize, and flatten, then these efforts attempt to turn the table on comparison, meanwhile aiming to isolate the critical potential of bringing elements into some form of relationship. We could conclude from this that analytically speaking, the most productive comparisons are 'comparisons that object' or destabilize their own terms, while also acknowledging the governmental, managerial, and psychological benefits of conformist comparisons.

Not unlike seasoned Tinder users, I have quickly swiped through more than a century of productive discussions on anthropological comparison, paying virtually no attention to its nuances, and only picking up on a couple of snippets that stood out. But no apologies here. The recent wave of writings on anthropological comparison still needs to sediment in the discipline. And rather than making further contributions to this wave, the aim here is to bend discussions about comparison in anthropology away from our own practices, to instead illuminate and analyse how comparison manifests itself in the world.

As Candea rightly points out but never seriously addresses in his impressive anthology of comparison in anthropology, 'however much anthropologists may be dubious about their own comparative devices, comparison is already in the world – the people anthropologists study are themselves constantly comparing' (2019: 141). In acknowledging yet largely ignoring the question of 'how people compare', Candea is far from unique. While anthropologists have extensively written about their own comparative practices (not dissimilar to their colleagues in say comparative literature), they rarely have

paid more than passing attention to the way that their interlocutors compare, or to the role of comparative practices in shaping social life.

This is a shame for at least two reasons. First and foremost, the study of 'comparative practices in the world' is intrinsically important and interesting. As the contributions to this book testify, comparative practices are essential for people to orient themselves in and make sense of the world, while they are simultaneously affected by the comparative practices of others. Because anthropologists are people, some of the quandaries that bedevil 'anthropological comparison' are similarly experienced by the people whose practices they analyse: the tension between generalization and particularization, the issue of objectification and essentialization, as well as questions surrounding comparability and commensurability. But although similar, outside the academic context these issues often take on different qualities. Moreover, in anthropology's obsession to 'get comparison right', insufficient attention is paid to aspects that are more easily observed and acknowledged outside the academic context. Central amongst these aspects are the affective and instrumental dimensions of comparison. Of course, many have pointed out that 'scientific detachment' is partly a myth, one that extends to academic comparative practices. But the features of 'attachment' are more easily visible when studying comparative practices in which those who compare and those who are compared are directly affected by the act, thereby also revealing different cultures of comparison. This then foreshadows the second reason, namely that the 'study of comparative practices' stands to shed new light on the comparative practices of anthropologists. Whether it is because fine-grained ethnographic study will reveal epistemic techniques not employed by anthropologists, or because the drives, purposes, and effects of comparison will reveal themselves differently outside the academic context, there is much to gain from broadening discussions on comparison this way.

Unstable grounds

Comparison does not happen by itself. Whatever else the act of comparison may entail, it requires someone (or something) to perceive the relative position of things. And crucially, such perception requires 'shared ground'. To quote Thomas Kuhn, 'Talk about differences and comparisons presupposes that some ground is shared' (1982: 670).[9] We can take comparing apples and oranges as an example, a comparison that in spite of the saying does not have to be problematic in the least. The *usual* precondition for comparison is that 'things' are compared as members (that is, as 'units') of a larger category, which in this instance could be 'fruit' or 'food' or a broad one like 'objects'.[10] This procedure allows apples and oranges to be positioned in relation to whatever value is deemed relevant, be it 'vitamin C content' or 'shape', or 'price'. This could produce all kinds of comparative claims, including the relatively uncontentious ones that 'oranges are more expensive than apples (in my local supermarket)', that 'oranges contain more

vitamin C than apples', and that 'apples and oranges have a similar shape but different texture'.

So, why the saying's dismissive attitude towards 'comparing apples to oranges'? One reason is that in everyday speech 'comparing' suggests similarity (as visible in the word 'comparable') and thereby may be seen to improperly distract from the fruits' dissimilarity. But another, and related, reason is the suspicion that such a comparison indicates an absence or mix up of a larger category. Apples and oranges can be validly compared as members of a larger category to which they both belong (such as fruit), but not in absence of such a category, as this could lead to thinking of apples as odd oranges, or vice versa. Meanwhile, any larger category may be considered biased or inappropriate, seen to do injustice to (at least one of) the compared objects. What we see here, then, are some of the objections to comparison. Judgements about taste, price, acidity, shape, and so on would be nonsensical if there is no agreement about the ground on which the comparison stands. To complicate matters further, the categories are not necessarily pre-existing and stable but are (re)produced in the act of comparison. The grounds of comparison can be treacherous.

Whether or not anthropologists embrace comparative methods, on a personal level it often is the fieldwork experience that carries the comparative dimension home. In post-Soviet Georgia in the 1990s, when foreigners from capitalist countries were still a novelty and life in 'the West' captured people's imagination, much of my fieldwork time went into answering my interlocutors' comparative curiosity. Do children in the Netherlands take care of their ageing parents, as they do in Georgia? Where does fruit, and fruit liqueur, taste better? And most frequently: How does the typical monthly salary of a teacher, factory worker, or shop assistant compare?[11] Aside from the discomfort this occasionally produced in me – even my PhD stipend was much higher than the typical Georgian salary at the time – was this not comparing 'apples and oranges', of the problematic kind? Was it not deceptive to compare salaries by simply applying the currency exchange rate, given that this would not account for the difference between the currencies' local purchase power? And how insightful was such a direct comparison, when expenditure patterns were very different, for example because teachers and shop assistants in rural Georgia were also part-time farmers? On the other hand, it would be problematic to avoid making such direct comparisons because they highlighted deep global inequalities, which should not be covered over.

At times, I responded to such questions by broadening the comparison to also bring in the cost of say accommodation and transport, and to discuss the differential role of the state, and the workings (and failures) of the welfare system. That is, I tried to attend to the ground of comparison, making it more textured, thereby allowing for a more fine-tuned and contextual understanding of similarities and differences. But although this could lead

to productive discussions, it also risked missing what these off-handed comparisons were all about. As it turned out, some of my interlocutors used the (decontextualized) contrasts to make value judgements about the political economic crisis in Georgia and the perceived failures of their government, while for others, the comparison of salaries energized aspirational projects that included plans to find work in Western Europe.

Such issues are carefully addressed in Nicholas J. Long's chapter 'In Defence of Bad Comparisons' (this volume, Chapter 2), which asks what to make of logically faulty comparisons. He presents various examples from his fieldwork in Indonesia, one of which features schoolteachers who compared the perceived slow pace of their pupils' English-language acquisition to Nicholas's faster speed in learning Baha Indonesian. Long quickly identifies the logical faults in this comparison but then draws attention to the more productive task of exploring the purposes of making these comparisons, which in this case were motivational and disciplinary ones. The ground of comparison, while problematic, was in fact carefully set up by the teachers. By putting one exemplary language learner on a pedestal, the teachers could portray their pupils' efforts to be inadequate and admonish them to work harder. Ignoring context or tilting the scales can allow the comparer to convey starker messages. But if the immediate affective force of comparison stands to benefit from decontextualization, such forms of comparison also tend to be more fragile. The Indonesian pupils may have not only been impressed in the moment but upon reflection also more likely to dismiss this ultimately unfair comparison. Along similar lines, those of my Georgian acquaintances who migrated to Europe in pursuit of better paid jobs (usually low-skilled ones), also came to realize that the salaries' bare numbers did not translate straightforwardly into better standards of living.

If the 'ground of comparison' can be treacherous in personal projects and face-to-face encounters, then this is certainly also true for larger comparative projects, such as those we find in governance and development. It is not difficult to conjure examples of grids, frameworks, and blueprints that disregard context. This is, after all, integral to the logic of 'high modernity', which operates by making society legible through standardization, abstraction, and quantification (e.g. James Scott 1998: 27–30, 219). In this volume, Gardner and Huang (Chapter 8) show how development projects often proceed from thin but confident projections that offer solutions to poverty and inequality of various kinds. And although these projections are bound to clash with reality, this does not necessarily lead to their collapse. The chapter features young rural Bangladeshi women who are enrolled in a project to provide advice and assistance to other women, and whose performance is constantly compared to 'exemplary entrepreneurs', a technique which brings together the affective qualities of 'best practices' with the regulatory push of 'benchmarking'. These modernist manipulations of reality do not, however, ensure success in the longer term. As the young women start to discover that

the odds are stacked against them, this type of 'modernist comparison' is bound to lose its vibrancy.

If acts of comparison can reveal cracks in the 'shared ground', it is because these acts impact on this very ground, potentially (re)shaping it in the process. To further reflect on this process, it is useful to stick with the world of development and Gardner and Huang's chapter (Chapter 8). In one of its main sections, they trace what happened to the radical insights of feminist development specialists, who advanced practice-based insights as an antidote to male-biased blueprints. And yet, in the process of scaling up, these specialists produced their own templates that were increasingly detached from reality. Generalizations are rooted in comparative descriptions of particularities, used to measure and assess other particularities. Comparison here produces a 'normal', a benchmark that serves to structure and stabilize the work of development.

These generalizing and particularizing tendencies and tensions are central to Deborah James chapter (Chapter 6) on debt advice interactions. The advisers and their clients both attempt to understand the relevant debts in a comparative perspective, but they come to this effort from contrasting positions. The advisors bring a broad palette of tools to the meetings that allow them to slot their clients into categories, and thereby to decide on which remedies to prescribe. But as they proceed, some advisors may empathize with the unique circumstances of their clients and come to realize the inadequacies of the comparative grid. Meanwhile, the trajectory of the clients is almost diametrically opposite. In fact, one of the reasons for why they seek advice is that they are so immersed in their predicament that they have difficulties seeing patterns in the incoming and outgoing flows of money and do not recognize the forces that perpetuate their predicament. By learning about the difficulties and strategies of other debtors, they potentially come to grips with their own situation and be able to chart a way forward. To summarize the contrasting directions, if the debtors learn to decipher the ground on which they stand, the advisors come to realize how treacherous the ground of comparison really is.

It is vital to pay attention to the 'lines of flight' away from the comparative grid. Mitchell W. Sedgwick's study of overseas Japanese salarymen in this volume (Chapter 7) is a case in point. These professionals, who are products of a competitive schooling system and job market, are constantly aware (and are made aware) of their relative standing vis-à-vis their colleagues. Finding themselves encased in in a forceful comparative grid that extends laterally as well as temporally – measuring career progress since graduation – these men are keenly searching ways forward. If some disengage by dropping out of the rat race, many others try to beat the grid and establish direct connections to upper management, for example, by cultivating unusual but admired fields of expertise such as knowledge of French wines. This will not allow them to fully escape the comparative grid, but by leaping ahead of their peers they demonstrate that acts of comparison are about more than mapping

exercises, they also establish connections. If in anthropology the analytically most productive comparisons are comparisons that surprise, then this is a logic that resonates beyond the discipline. Destabilizing the comparative grid, or challenging the terms of comparison, can have transformative effects for the relationships involved.

These examples demonstrate the dynamic relationship between acts of comparison and the ground on which they stand. If we agree with Kuhn's previously quoted statement that comparison 'presupposes that some ground is shared', then we have also seen that this shared ground is not necessarily a stable one. Some comparative acts may proceed without, or in opposition to, established frames of comparison, but these will only stick if they manage to touch ground. The grid, the framework, and the blueprint – including those that are newly designed – 'territorialize' and thus stabilize the relational dimension of comparison.

If we briefly return to the objections surrounding 'comparing apples to oranges', then sometimes these objections are inspired less by suspicions of a category *mistake* than by awareness of the consequences of bringing phenomena ('things') together under a common category. Creating 'shared ground' flattens particularities and foregrounds generalities. Because such an epistemic move may be seen to do injustice to the unique features of a phenomenon, the involved may insist on its incommensurability. Feuchtwang and Steinmüller (this volume, Chapter 9) offer vivid examples of such a protective stance, as they reflect on their experiences with teaching the MSc course 'China in Comparative Perspective'. It was quite common for their Chinese students to initially resist the central idea of the course. Although they were interested to discover how outsiders looked at China, these students had difficulties to think about presumed unique Chinese features in broader – comparative – terms, as this threatened to reveal these features to be not so unique after all. Nevertheless, the authors show that even where 'shared ground' is rejected, this does not mean that it is non-existent; and even where explicit acts of comparison are rejected, the rejectors rely on implicit comparisons in their thinking and talking about China. To explore the sensitivities that surround acts of comparison further, it will be useful to shift perspective, backgrounding the ground of comparison to foreground the relationships that acts of comparison bring into being.

Prickly connections

The act of comparison establishes a connection between two or more 'things'. Indeed, if we agree that the compared things do not contain comparison in themselves (Saussy 2019: 1), then the act necessarily begins by linking them. We can also postulate that in comparative acts, this force of convergence – the linking – is counteracted by a force of divergence. The converging force may well remain dominant when comparison is motivated

by a desire for alikeness, but unless comparison morphs into full-blown identification or assimilation, the diverging force will continue to push out-wards. The net directional force can also point outwards, such as when an incompatibility or contrast is revealed that had not been apparent before the comparative act brought it to light. We might even think of this inter-play of forces as analogous to Schopenhauer's 'porcupine dilemma'. This parable imagines porcupines 'huddling together for warmth on a cold day in winter'. The porcupine's dilemma is that they will freeze if they keep their distance and will hurt themselves if they get too close (2000, chapter 31, paragraph 396). The parable has primarily been taken up in psychology to reflect on the problem of intimacy and identity (amongst others by Freud),[12] but it also usefully illustrates the sameness/difference tension in the com-parative act, especially where the comparer is an interested or affected party. We are driven to comparison because we need to know where we stand, wishing to associate ourselves to others in acts of identification and aspir-ation, while using the act to carve out our own unique position and to dis-tinguish ourselves.

At least two interventions are needed to move beyond porcupines. One is that whereas in the parable similar creatures with similar drives find each other on even ground, many comparative practices occur in more uneven conditions featuring dissimilar creatures with different drives and interests. The other one is that it is crucial to consider the *kinds* of relationships that are established, in different acts of comparison. This will reveal how the specific ways in which the positive potential of extension and connection is being counteracted by the negative possibilities of losing singularity and integrity. This section argues that the specifics vary depending on the used comparative techniques, but also that notwithstanding variation, the com-parative act is necessarily a prickly one.

Acts of comparison are comprised of a range of variously deployed epistemic techniques, which can be provisionally placed along an objectification/subjectification axis. The objectifying techniques include juxtaposing, categorizing, ranking, and benchmarking, each of which allow the compared 'objects' to be mapped onto a canvas. Whereas these objectifying techniques create distance (between the compared elements), in subjectifying techniques of comparison such as those of recognition and translation this distance between the elements is partly collapsed. It should be emphasized, however, that the objectification/subjectification distinction is somewhat artificial, because these techniques are modified by the position of the comparer. And as we saw in the previous sections, including in the Tinder vignette, 'mapping' activities that stay within the confines of the grid can be enlisted into the 'relational' technique of translating. Here we start at the relational end of the spectrum, with the techniques of recognition, possession, and duplication, as foregrounded by Michael W. Scott in his con-tribution to this volume (Chapter 4).

Situated in a Melanesian context, Scott wonders how his Arosi interlocutors engage with strangers. They employ various comparative techniques but do so without invoking the familiar categories of us versus them – Arosi versus foreigners – a categorization that would allow for a ricocheting of perceived similarities and differences between the groups. Instead, they zoom in on the physical features of individual bodies (such as hand palm lines) in search of signs of recognition by which a foreigner could be proven to be a (lost) member of one of the Arosi matrilineages. This 'totemic' mode of comparison avoids the mapping of differences, to instead explore them relationally. By directly connecting with outsiders and absorbing them into the matrilineages, the lineages reproduce themselves while simultaneously metamorphosing. As Scott puts it, these relational comparative practices seek to sustain 'trajectories of becoming' by finding the 'Goldilocks zone' between isolation and conflation, between stasis and rupture. This careful manoeuvring acknowledges both the creative and destructive potentials of comparison. But while different from 'modernist' forms of mapping, these relational techniques are equally prickly. There is always a violent element to comparative practices relying on translation and possession, in that the integrity of the compared elements is at stake.

This issue of integrity, along with that of judgement, is the focus of Harry Walker's chapter (this volume, Chapter 5) on 'comparing for equality', based on his research among the Urarina people of the Peruvian Amazon. There, acts of comparison that would reveal dissimilarity and inequality are generally avoided. This need of avoidance is even encoded, to an extent, in the grammar of the Urarina language, which lacks comparatives or superlatives that enable explicit ranking. So, instead of saying 'Jose is bigger than Manuel', one would have to say 'Jorge is big, exceeding Manuel' – but even such circumspect statements are rarely made. By contrast, ideas of similarity and sameness are frequently and straightforwardly expressed, thereby reflecting Urarina values of equality and of avoiding judgement, at least as these take shape in public life. Instead of applying direct and upfront techniques of comparison, Urarina make abundant use of analogy to make sense of the world and their position in it. And as Walker points out, such analogical comparisons do not need a third term, a common standard of measure, to be effective. Because they don't require shared ground, they don't violate the integrity of the compared elements; this also means that the comparisons remain situational and cannot be scaled up.

What we see in both the Urarina and Arosi case studies is a rejection of objectifying techniques and broader lateral categories, by which elements can be made commensurate. But the cases show variation in the subjectifying techniques on which they rely. Scott shows for the Arosi that while avoiding objectification, the invasiveness of the relational techniques of recognition and translation may end up transforming the compared elements. The Urarina, by contrast, avoided such violations of integrity by relying on 'respectful' techniques of association and analogy. In that sense,

they are a reminder of what Mair and Evans refer to as incommensuration – the 'process by which things are kept within different registers of judgment' (2015: 217).[13] This act of resisting both assimilation and differentiation can also be seen as an acknowledgment of the epistemically violent nature of comparison.

In the Urarina and Arosi worlds, avoidance of 'objectifying' comparative techniques is rooted in local value systems, but this is under threat by modernist logics that increasingly assert themselves in everyday life. The affinities between objectifying comparative techniques and modern governance and market competition mean that objectifying modes of comparison become more prevalent. Such processes potentially undermine (or transform) the destinies of other modes of comparison, whether they compared for equality, as in Walker's study, or aimed at assimilation and duplication, as in Scott's.

Here it is useful to briefly return to the 'porcupine dilemma' and the parable's convenient simplification of reality – featuring identical creatures driven by identical concerns. To understand how the comparative act unfolds in more complex situations, thought must be given to differentials in the relative weight, impetus, and positionality of the elements. This brings us to the question of how comparative acts are entangled in, and how they affect, larger social fields. We can start with Feuchtwang and Steinmüller's discussion of their Chinese students' reluctance to consider their country in a comparative perspective (this volume, Chapter 9). By avoiding or dismissing a lateral comparative perspective in which Chinese features would be compared to (similar) features found in other contexts, these students can maintain the idea of Chinese uniqueness. Feuchtwang and Steinmüller observe this comparative reluctance in the Chinese academic community more broadly, for example in the insistence on the untranslatability of various Chinese concepts. Such reluctance tends to parochialize scholarship, but this may not be of great concern to the academics involved given the size and rising clout of Chinese academia. A parallel can be seen in Detienne's (2008) critical discussion of the comparative reluctance among classicists, who insist on the incomparability and incommensurability of Greek and Roman civilizations, thereby of course attempting to preserve the elevated status of their own discipline.[14]

Positionality matters. It is one thing to try and *preserve* a sense of exceptionality from a position of strength, and quite a different one to try and prove one's exceptionality to the world, especially from a marginal position. In my chapter 'Recognizing uniqueness' (Pelkmans, this volume, Chapter 3), I explore the involved tensions by analysing the World Nomad Games, an event that the Kyrgyzstan government had launched in an effort to boost the country's international visibility and standing. The Games were envisioned as a platform to display the country's cultural and sport traditions, and thereby to communicate its authentic and unique features. But for the event to be

successful and to be noticed, this cultural heritage needed to be presented in recognizable forms to foreign audiences, a process of translation that threatened to undermine this very uniqueness. The porcupine dilemma was palpable here: by making the World Nomad Games commensurate with other 'international games', it risked losing its distinctiveness, whereas to insist on cultural uniqueness bore the risk of remaining ignored or being ridiculed.

Additional tensions come into play when organizing competitive international games. To compare the performance of participants, such games resort to or create grids that do not just flatten unique characteristics but reproduce existing inequalities. The Olympics are a case in point. As an *inter-national* competitive event, it favours the largest *national* sport communities, especially those that can make large financial commitments. Even a brief glance at the Olympics medal table confirms that the largest and richest countries win the largest number of medals. The appeal of the World Nomad Games was that it presented itself as a critical alternative to the Olympics, one that featured 'unusual' sports and presented itself as non-commercial, drawing on the concepts of 'wildness' and 'sustainability'. But while this produced a sense of liberation among spectators and participants, it also introduced new inequalities. The blatant Kyrgyz bias in a range of competitions prompted wry remarks from foreign participants, instead of the desired mark of international recognition.

Acts of comparison do not only affect the individuals who compare or are compared but also order the wider social field. These ordering effects of comparative work are the focus of Mitchell W. Sedgwick's chapter (Chapter 7) on overseas Japanese salarymen. As already mentioned, these salarymen are entangled in a highly competitive grid by which their performance vis-à-vis their peers is constantly measured. Simultaneously, as expatriates they are also drawn into comparing 'Japanese' things with what they encounter while stationed abroad. Juxtaposing these internal and external acts of comparison, Sedgwick reveals how the dynamics of association and dissociation depend on context and directionality. Simply put, when comparisons are made with other groups, this serves not only as a means of relating to and differentiating from such 'out-groups' but also positively affects the cohesion of the 'in-group'. Meanwhile, acts of comparison that are internal to the 'in-group' serve to position its members, thereby affecting horizontal and vertical differentiation and connectedness.

When 'things' are compared, they are not only juxtaposed but also brought into relationships of varying intimacy. In lateral comparisons, the engagement between the compared elements tends to be rather limited. Consider performance reviews where the line manager compares the teaching scores of academic staff against specified benchmarks as well as against each other, picking up on scores that fall below the benchmark or that contrast with the

average, thereby producing rationales for granting or withholding bonuses, nominations for promotion, and so forth. But such detached comparisons always have the potential to become more intimate. This happens when the analysis becomes more fine-grained ('what does colleague A do differently from colleague B in terms of providing feedback?'), or when the comparer becomes a part of the comparison, possibly due to identifying with those who are compared.

In his article 'Odious Comparisons', George Steinmetz (2004) reviews the various distortions and violations produced by the comparative act. In the act of comparison, reality is simplified, templates are imposed, incommensurability is denied, and originals are misunderstood. Hence, it is tempting to conclude that even if comparison is indispensable, 'all comparisons are odious' (Cervantes quoted in Steinmetz 2004: 371). Here, we seem to have come full circle to the start of this Introduction where we reflected on comparison as anthropology's impossible yet indispensable method. But as was emphasized throughout, the goal of this volume is not to develop 'non-odious' forms of comparison – if that would even be possible – but rather to study how acts of comparison unfold in the world. Comparison is indispensable not just in anthropology but in all life as lived. And, we suggest, this is not *in spite of* its 'odious' qualities; comparison makes a difference *because* of its odious qualities.

The reasons for why anthropologists (and other qualitative scholars) are uncomfortable with comparison resonate with the reasons for why people generally are wary of comparison, and especially of *being* compared! After all, comparison affects the compared object. The chapters in this volume illustrate this abundantly. Thus, comparison compromises the uniqueness of China (Feuchtwang and Steinmüller) and it misrecognizes the efforts of impoverished school children in Indonesia when they are flatly compared with those of a resource-rich foreigner (Long). Yet, it may be precisely because of this distortive potential that people are driven to engage in comparison. To compare is to reach out, to produce associations between things, and in the process running into its contradictions, producing difference through dissociation. Here we can reference Michael Scott's conceptualization of comparisons as 'complex forms of network association' through which all things maintain their 'continuity through discontinuity' with other things. But as he also emphasizes, there is an 'inherently agonistic' and perhaps even predatory element to comparison, which has the potential to upset the network (Scott in this volume, Chapter 4). Perhaps, then, this is a main reason for comparison's indispensable yet odious nature. Comparative acts often bandwagon on the templates and frameworks through which they work, in the process working to dominate, streamline, and simplify reality. But the agonistic element also has the potential to upset these very templates, transforming the grid such as to sketch out new horizons.

Comparing acts of comparison?

As alluded to earlier, one reason for developing a book on *How People Compare* was that in contrast to the proliferation of works on how anthropologists (ought to) compare, anthropological studies of the comparative practices of others have been few and far between. This lack of empirical attention to comparative practices is felt more broadly across the social sciences. The most notable exception is the so-called social comparison theory tradition in (social) psychology.[15] Starting from Leon Festinger's (1954) article 'A theory of social comparison processes', social psychologists working in this tradition have studied how individuals compare themselves to others in projects of (self-)evaluation and orientation. Their findings show that the practice of comparing oneself with others intensifies in conditions of uncertainty (Buunk and Mussweiler 2001). This confirms that such comparisons play a navigational role, allowing individuals to carve a space for themselves and to chart forward trajectories. They have also documented the varying effects of acts of comparison on the comparer. For 'confident' individuals, upward comparison (that is, comparison with those at a higher standing) is aspirational and energy-boosting, while downward comparison has a soothing effect on them. By contrast, for 'insecure' individuals, upward comparison is more likely to be depressing and downward comparison anxiety-inducing (e.g. Suls and Wheeler 2000; Lee 2014).

These insights resonate with several contributions to this volume, including James' analysis of how debtors use comparison to find a way out of their predicament, Gardner and Huang's point about how development agencies use 'exemplars' to incentivize entrepreneurs, and Long's reflections on how young Indonesian men and women use comparison in envisioning their futures. But there are important differences in approach. Psychology's 'social comparison theory' focuses exclusively on the perspective of the individual comparer, leaving unseen various other actors and factors that impinge on the comparative practices concerned. By contrast, the anthropologies of comparison collected here do not limit the comparative act to the mental activities of individuals, but see these as situated within broader networks. The insights they offer in this direction include the following: (a) The outcomes of acts of comparison are partly determined by comparative 'grids' or 'frameworks', but these too can be challenged; (b) Different comparative techniques differently affect the 'things' that are compared, which is also why they may be deployed or avoided; (c) Indeed, comparative techniques are never neutral; they need to be understood in relation to the values that undergird them; (d) Studying all these aspects in a range of social and cultural settings reveals the complexity of the seemingly simple act and demonstrates how central comparison is to human existence.

The consequence of our 'holistic' approach is that it reveals comparative practices to be diffused and distributed, rather than fixed and clearly

defined. The chapters do not adopt a singular definition of comparison but instead explore what it means to compare and be compared, what kinds of epistemic techniques this entails, and how these are mobilized for specific purposes. Future research will possibly allow for more solid cross-situational or even cross-cultural comparisons of comparative practices, but this has not been the primary aim of this volume (but see Walker's concluding contribution, Chapter 10). Rather, the mode of comparison we have employed ourselves is more dialogical, showing variation in comparative practices, and revealing their significance for governmental, aspirational, and ethical projects. In short, rather than producing systematic comparative claims, this volume aims to dig a bit deeper, and reach a bit further, in our understanding of what it means to compare, and to be compared.

Because this book is an edited volume, it unavoidably compares acts of comparison. After all, putting such a volume together is an (incomplete) act of comparison in that it juxtaposes the ideas and findings of a set of authors, having made them commensurate by placing them in a textual grid. To say that edited volumes follow a Tinder-like structure may be a bit of a stretch, but they undeniably draw on the same logic. As is typical of academic volumes, this one has a table of contents, an index, and short bios on the authors, who were asked to produce chapters of similar length, addressing the same topic, written in a similar style. All of this allows the reader to compare chapters and authors. Moreover, the comparative grid of this volume is entangled in the grids of academic hiring and promotion, and of measuring academic performance at subject and university level, such as through the Research Excellence Framework. Having semi-voluntarily placed ourselves within this elaborate grid, we are complicit in the objectification of our own work. And yet, it is vital to emphasize that this is not all.[16] The mentioned objectifying practices undeniably affect scholars and their research, but they are not fully defined by them. As is true for all comparisons: the ground is unstable, and the connections are prickly.

The chapters in this volume show that when comparative grids become increasingly rigid, they lose their efficacy, and prompt those who are negatively affected to ignore, resist, challenge, and circumvent the comparative straightjackets, which they do with varying effects. It is also clear that 'objectifying comparisons' form only a subset of comparative techniques. They are accompanied and sometimes replaced by the 'subjectifying techniques' of recognition and translation, techniques that establish more direct and intimate connections between the compared elements. Which is not to say that such techniques are necessarily more benign or more likely to do epistemic justice to that which is compared: the violence of abstraction gives way to the violence of appropriation.

But this is too negative. It fails to do justice to the creative potential of comparison, a potential that I commented on above, and is evident in the chapters ahead. What I am hinting at can be clarified with reference

to Michael Lambek's (1991) distinction between first-, second-, and third-person comparisons, doing so rather liberally. Third-person comparisons are made from an external and privileged perspective, mapping differences and similarities between that which is compared, with objectifying effects. First-person comparison 'translates' to the self, and its self-centred dynamic is both intimate and possessive. Second-person comparison (which includes second-person plural) is the space of dialogue, of conversation, and of exploration. This more tentative space of comparing is unhelpful to those who govern (in a modernist vein), and it is unsatisfying to those who require an intimate sense of belonging. But it is clearly a part of many comparative practices that we find in the world, one that provides a creative space in which differences and similarities can be explored. Even if as mentioned, an edited volume such as this one relies on its own fair share of objectifying and subjectifying comparative techniques, it hopefully has retained sufficient second-person qualities to offer a productive exploration of comparative practices, resisting closure while stimulating creative conversation about How People Compare.

Notes

1 Haun Saussy (2019: 23) labels this un-reflexive comparison, as contrasted with reflective comparison in which similarities and differences are actively considered.
2 Several stand-up comedians have made good use of Tinder's dynamics of objectification. An example is: www.nytimes.com/2017/06/21/arts/tinder-live-lane-moore-dating-app.html?searchResultPosition=6
3 In formulating the issue as such (on the back cover of Candea 2019), Keane may well have taken his cue from a statement attributed to Evans-Pritchard: 'There is only one method in social anthropology – the comparative method – and that's impossible' (quoted in Needham 1975: 365).
4 Lambek writes that 'anthropology without comparison would be the sound of one hand clapping' (1991: 43).
5 Anthropology's cross-cultural dimension makes the generalizing comparative effort particularly apparent, but it is also true that that all inductively produced scientific generalizations rely on comparison.
6 This comparison between *kula* objects and crown jewels is thought provoking because the observed similarities concern objects from very different contexts, thereby challenging assumptions of incommensurability.
7 And because comparison always involves translation, it helps us to penetrate the 'other', just as it helps us to produce a mirror through which we see ourselves with greater clarity, as the authors of *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* famously demonstrated (Marcus and Fischer 1999).
8 Wittgenstein had initially followed Galton's 'composite portraits' in trying to identify what is 'typical' in a metaphorical family, but later adopted a much looser notion of family resemblances (Ginzburg 2004: 539), one that emphasized the complex crisscross of similarities between the members of a 'family' without erasing differences, and instead acknowledged the 'flexible, blurred, and open ended' relations between those members (2004: 549).

9   This is taken from a discussion of (in)commensurability, a topic to which we will turn later. But to offer the full quote: 'Talk about differences and comparisons presupposes that some ground is shared, and that is what proponents of incommensurability, who often do talk of comparisons, have seemed to deny' (Kuhn 1982: 670).

10 Although employing broader categories is a *common* precondition of comparison, there are ways to circumvent categorization, at least in part. These relational or topological modes of comparison will be addressed in the next section.

11 As Walker shows in this volume (Chapter 5), such comparative inclinations are not equally present everywhere, and asking such comparative questions may be avoided because it risks revealing one's ignorance of how and why things may be done differently elsewhere.

12 When Freud picks up this the parable (1975[1921]), he discusses it in relation to 'narcissism', offering various examples the clearest one of which is: 'Of two neighbouring towns each is the other's most jealous rival'. In later work, he refers to this idea as the 'narcissism of minor differences'.

13 As Mair and Evans go on to write, 'It is not that incommensurables are not translated … it is that they are left untranslatable' (2015: 218).

14 The position of comparer and 'compared object' influences the affective value produced by the act of comparison. It explains, for example, why classicists hold on to the incomparability of Greek civilization (Detienne 2008), and why German right-wing groups insist on viewing the Holocaust as comparable to other conflicts (Saussy 2019).

15 Another and recent exception is Willibald Steinmetz's edited volume *The Force of Comparison* (2019). He similarly argues, for the discipline of history, that comparative practices in the world have rarely received explicit attention.

16 Objectification, inescapable in our modern world, is not necessarily problematic. As Hastrup has usefully written, all (academic) writing involves 'a temporary objectification of relational knowledge, from which others may then proceed' (2004: 458). Problems arise when temporary objectifications become permanent and fixed.

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Part I
The art of comparing

2 In defence of bad comparisons?

Comparisons and their motivations in Indonesia's Riau Islands

Nicholas J. Long

> *The comparative act, in enabling a new form of recognition along one axis, perpetrates dire misrecognition along another.*
>
> R. Radhakrishnan (2013: 19)

The 'bad comparison', sometimes known as the 'faulty comparison', is a principal scourge of Euroamerican philosophy. It features recurrently in handbooks of logical reasoning and in compendia of errors that the careful thinker should avoid. In *Logically Fallacious: The Ultimate Collection of Over 300 Logical Fallacies*, Bennett (2018: 122) gives the following as a prototypical example of 'faulty comparison':

> Example #1: Broccoli has significantly less fat than the leading candy bar!
>
> Explanation: While both broccoli and candy bars can be considered snacks, comparing the two in terms of fat content and ignoring the significant difference in taste leads to the false comparison.

Perkins (1995: 47), meanwhile, draws the reader's attention to 'faulty analogies', a logical fallacy in which a faulty comparison is intrinsically embedded:

> DAD: I don't see why you can't ride your bike to school, Jimmy. When I was a kid, that's what I did, and it was fine.

This, Perkins explains, would only be a good argument 'provided that Dad's situation and Jimmy's are not dissimilar in relevant ways' (1995: 47). Jimmy's journey may be quite different to what Dad's had been; if so, this too is a bad comparison. For Damer (2013: 164), such sloppy reasoning demands to be 'attacked', 'blunted' through the use of effective counteranalogy, or exposed as fallacious. 'Above all', he urges, 'do not allow a clever user of false analogies to think that simply pointing out interesting similarities between two cases qualifies as acceptable evidence for a claim about *one* of them'.

The fear of bad comparisons also haunts many anthropologists. As Miller et al. (2019: 284) note, while anthropology was initially conceived

as a comparative discipline, it is increasingly 'characterised by a powerful particularism that implies not just cultural relativism but even incommensurability, because of our emphasis upon the specific cultural and historical context of each ethnographic case'. To compare – indeed, to even generalise a 'fieldsite' as a unit that can be compared – may thus be seen as a 'betrayal of specificity' (Miller et al. 2019: 283) comparable to that evident in Bennett and Perkins' 'faulty comparisons'.

Indeed, anthropologists have often used their deep knowledge of local specifics to problematise the 'bad comparisons' underpinning dominant ideologies. For example, while discourses of 'meritocracy' attribute differentials in academic attainment to divergences in innate ability or effort and motivation, anthropologists have highlighted the meaningful cultural and structural differences that shape students' pathways through education (see e.g. Bartlett, Frederick-McGlathery, Guldbrandsen & Murillo 2002; Davidson 2011; Fordham 1996; Koh 2012; Willis 1981; Wilson 1991). In some cases, such interventions even result in comparative propositions of their own, such as Bourdieu's (2000) argument that those with a grip on the present are most able to change the future, while the disadvantaged and dispossessed oscillate between unrealistic fantasy and despair, thereby failing to obtain the social mobility they may crave. Drawing attention to such particularities allows anthropologists to substitute a *bad* comparison with what is believed to be a *better* comparison: one that embeds a circumspect attention to cultural difference and structural inequality into its very framing. Given the symbolic violence levelled against those who do not conform to hegemonic visions of 'success', such policing of comparison is far from a matter of particularist pedantry: rather, it is seen as an integral part of an engaged anthropology that speaks truth to power.

Yet, despite widespread scholarly and political aversion to bad comparisons, 'faulty' reasoning is commonly in evidence amongst the people with whom anthropologists work. Indeed, such fallacies as the myth of meritocracy may be actively embraced by the very people that anthropologists hope to rescue from their disciplining force. So what should we do when we encounter in the field forms of comparative practice that we would roundly critique if we saw them being propagated within governmental or social science discourse? Should we attempt to actively 'attack' or 'blunt' these fallacies, as Damer (2013) recommends? Do we listen to them with gritted teeth, dutifully documenting them as evidence of how profoundly the bad comparisons circulating in dominant ideologies have shaped public consciousness? Or could we in some way 'take them seriously' – a response posited within some scholarly quarters as the quintessential and proper anthropological reaction (e.g. Viveiros de Castro 2011)? Could we even see them as offering alternatives to our own epistemological traditions?

Refusing the polar extremes of either embracing or dismissing 'bad comparisons', this chapter proposes a middle ground, advocating an

anthropology of comparisons that understands them to be significant *affectively* as well as epistemologically. It does this with particular reference to ethnographic materials gathered in Indonesia's Riau Islands Province. This borderland region has a complicated (post)colonial history that has led its residents to experience a lifetime of comparing themselves (and being compared to) diverse others, from the Singaporeans and Malaysians who live a short distance across the water to their counterparts in other parts of Indonesia – comparisons in which they, as Riau Islanders, often emerge unfavourably. Numerous additional comparisons also saturate their lives – from those at the heart of everyday kinship practices to the comparative evaluations of citizen-workers routinely enacted by both local employers and the Indonesian state.

I draw on fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2018 to show how such local and personal histories of comparison, shaped by colonial legacies, globalisation, economic inequality, and kinship structure, have profound implications for the affective consequences of specific comparative acts. Such an analysis not only explains why 'bad comparisons' might routinely be made – indeed, might prove vital and be worthy of 'defence'. It also presents a challenge to the universalising and evolutionary assumptions evident in the subfield of psychology known as 'social comparison theory'. I propose that comparison and its affects are better treated as objects of intensive person-centred ethnography and analysed through the psychoanalytically inspired frameworks that have been central to that person-centred tradition. I conclude by reflecting on the implications that this discussion might have for narrative strategy within anthropology itself at the dawn of what some have dubbed the discipline's 'new comparativism' (Weisman & Luhrmann 2020: 134).

Initial motivations

It was 2005 when I first began conducting ethnographic research in Tanjung Pinang, the capital of the Riau Islands Province. As I went about the business of settling into a new and unfamiliar place, the town's teachers were amongst the most welcoming and supportive of my new associates. Yet their friendship came at a price: a few days, hours, or even minutes after numbers and addresses had been exchanged would come a phone call, text message, or knock at the door, summoning me to a local school. The most typical request was that I step into a few lessons and 'give the students motivation'. But what did this mean in practice? I had no idea.

I came up with an improvised motivational speech – don't feel you have to be perfect at everything; follow your interests; play to your strengths; there's more to education than a school curriculum – and delivered it with what I hoped was zest and verve. But although the pupils usually listened politely, the stony looks on my teacher friends' faces made it clear

that I had not delivered the 'motivational' performance they had been expecting. Eventually, one teacher, Fatimah, decided to take matters into her own hands.[1] She led me to a classroom and asked me to speak to the students. I started with my usual spiel. A few sentences in, Fatimah cut me off.

'Mr Nick has only been learning Indonesian for five months, and he can already speak Indonesian as fluently as that!' she barked. 'How long have you lot been learning English? And are you fluent yet? No! The pupils in this school are lazy! Lazy! So lazy! You need to study hard like Mr Nick'. The students were silent. A few stared straight at her, most looked down at their desks. Fatimah turned to me. 'Come on', she said icily, 'let's go'. *That*, she explained as she whisked me out the classroom and towards the school canteen, was going to give them motivation.

In 2018, I was back in Tanjung Pinang, catching up with many old friends. Amongst the most determined to meet me was Suhardi, a man I had first met during a beauty contest for which I had served as a judge (Long 2007). He had turned out to live fairly close to my boarding house and we had several friends in common; our paths had crossed intermittently over the years. Suhardi was now doing very well for himself: he had married the daughter of a prominent local politician, was father to two healthy children, had a good job in the civil service, had completed a Masters degree at a prestigious Indonesian university, and had since been accepted by another prestigious institution to commence a PhD. Over dinner, he told me how surprised he had been to discover that, at 33, he was the youngest of the PhD students in his cohort. 'Actually', he said, laughing a little bashfully, I was inspired by you, Nick. When I saw that there was someone in my neighbourhood, living pretty close to me, who already had a Masters degree and was studying for his PhD, it gave me motivation. I thought "if he has been able to, then I should be able to". And I have.'

This was a poignant, celebratory moment, made all the more powerful by the unexpectedness of Suhardi's revelation. But similar narratives, shared before my friends' goals had been fully realised, had – in my eyes – a more tragic cast. I recall, for instance, the day that Iyan, a charismatic, computer-obsessed school caretaker from one of the poorest regions of the Riau Archipelago, shared the effects that our friendship was having on his life. 'Meeting you has given me motivation, Nick', he began. 'One day, I will get to England. I thought to myself yesterday, "If Nick can get over here, then I must be able to get over there." I can do it!' As he smiled beatifically at me, the improbability of this dream was heartbreaking. Colleagues to whom I subsequently narrated this encounter have sometimes suggested that Iyan was attempting to mobilise my sympathies in order to secure financial assistance. But Iyan, a man who was not averse to asking for money when he needed it, was speaking with the passion and conviction of motivation incarnate. His narrative seemed not cynical but sincere, a prelude to his

informing me of the radical plans he had developed to catapult himself on a pathway to cosmopolitan success.

The vignettes set out above share many features in common. They are all structured around a comparative manoeuvre in which the achievements of particular Indonesians are found wanting when contrasted with those of a visiting British anthropologist. Moreover, the realisation of that mismatch, and a desire to correct for it, serves, in each case, as a purported wellspring of 'motivation'.

And it is here that a puzzle emerges. These are all, by conventional academic standards, bad comparisons. By presuming equivalence between the individuals concerned, they gloss over the many structural inequalities that make it much easier for me, as a British citizen, to learn a foreign language, get a PhD, or travel to another continent than is the case for my interlocutors. Indeed – and remember here the downcast looks of Fatimah's students – these comparisons may be bad in both an epistemological *and* a morally normative sense. They seem to perpetrate both analytic and symbolic violence, responsibilising and admonishing the underperforming subject ('Lazy! So lazy!') for outcomes that have more complex, social origins. The immediate assumption amongst many of my colleagues that Iyan was somehow trying to draw attention to his disadvantage proves interesting in this regard, suggestive of their (and, perhaps, a disciplinary?) desire to construct Iyan as a 'critical' subject. That he might willingly commit such flagrant symbolic violence against himself seems difficult to stomach. And yet he did, as did Suhardi, claiming to find in those masochistic comparative operations an affectively powerful 'motivation'. Their testimonies have, in turn, motivated *me* to think more deeply about the *affective* role comparison plays in human sociality and to reflect on what implications such an enquiry has for how we as anthropologists should go about comparison in our fieldwork and in our writing.

The psychodynamics of comparison

That comparisons can be affectively charged is intuitively obvious to anyone who has ever felt a twinge of envy, the thrill of being declared 'the best', or inferiority's painful gnaw. Indeed, comparison is increasingly being indicted as a mental health issue – a toxic habit of which we need to be 'cured' (Sheridan 2019) – the juxtaposition of carefully curated social media feeds with the sheer mundanity of viewers' everyday life having been found to provoke deep plunges in self-worth and to trigger or exacerbate depressive episodes (Hoge, Bickham & Cantor 2017). Such comparisons are tragically bad; not just epistemologically flawed, but psychologically harmful. However, given that my fieldwork sometimes found comparison to be motivating, rather than deflating, the question arises as to whether there are

any *systematic* or *predictable* associations between comparative practices and the feelings they yield.

This question has been most extensively explored in a subfield of social psychology known as 'social comparison theory'. Through psychological experiments – primarily conducted with school and college students in the United States – social comparison researchers have identified several patterns in the affective dynamics associated with specific comparative acts. Firstly, they claim that subjects set about comparisons with others in an *anxious* attempt to evaluate the appropriateness of their conduct. This was one of the key principles set out by Festinger (1954) in his seminal work on social comparison, and also finds some support from ethnographic studies (see e.g. Miller 2001). Secondly, they have found that such comparisons often have an *aspirational* quality: U.S. high school students tended to compare themselves to peers who were performing 'better' in a manner that led to sympathetic identifications: they thought it was nice for the other person to be doing well and hoped that they would be able to get such good grades in future, too (Buunk, Kuyper & van der Zee 2005).[2] Thirdly, though, when 'confronted with someone who outperforms them', individuals often adopt various *defensive* postures (Buunk & Gibbons 2007: 5). These include 'biasing the reconstruction of one's past' (Klein & Kunda 1993), deflecting the comparison by emphasising aspects of one's identity that differentiates one from the standard (Mussweiler, Gabriel & Bodenhausen 2000), labelling a better performing rival a 'genius', or in some other way distancing oneself from the comparator (Alicke, LoSchiavo, Zerbst & Zhang 1997; Tesser 1988). All of these strategies work by suggesting that the comparison is unrealistic.

Such findings are important for the present discussion because they illustrate not only that comparisons are emotionally charged in complex ways, but also that such emotional charge can, at least sometimes, leak into epistemological claims about whether a comparison is 'fair' or 'faulty'. They also, at first glance, offer a plausible explanation for the 'motivation' attested to by Suhardi and Iyan. 'Bad' though their comparisons may be, social comparison theory invites us to understand them as aspirational, sympathetic, 'upward' comparisons of the kind that people around the world make every day.

There are nevertheless limits to the value of social comparison theory for understanding how people compare. For social comparison theorists, comparison and its affects stem from features of human psychology that are presumed to be universal. Festinger (1954: 117, 135–6), the founder of the field, believed that human beings had an innate drive to evaluate themselves: for him, sociality was ultimately a quest for counterparts against whom one could compare oneself – and, since 'satisfying' comparisons could only be made with those who were relatively congruent in opinions or abilities, the urge to compare preceded and indeed led to 'social segmentation'. More recent work has buttressed this universalising outlook with a turn to evolutionary psychology. Claiming that 'social comparison is a

central feature of human social life [and that] the need to compare the self with others is found in many other species as well', for instance, Buunk and Gibbons argue that comparative urges have 'evolved as a very adaptive mechanism for sizing up one's competitors' (2007: 3; see also Gilbert, Price & Allan 1995; Workman & Reader 2015: 196).

The problem with such approaches is that they conflate human propensities for (self-)evaluation, which most anthropologists would concede are fundamental to the human condition (see Laidlaw 2014: 3), with particular social orders. They thus present competitiveness, segmentation, and the ability to determine 'congruence' as straightforward, natural, and psychological in origin, rather than as the contestable outcomes of sociopolitical systems that could have been otherwise. That so much social comparison research has been conducted in the competitive and highly segregated context of educational settings in the capitalist United States has doubtless helped sustain the illusion. Ironically, then, research in the field of 'social comparison' is itself an example of poor comparative practice, though the fallacy in question here is less that of the faulty analogy than that of hasty generalisation. Regardless, given anthropologists' anxieties about the 'betrayal of specificity' in cross-cultural accounts (Miller et al. 2019: 283), it is clear that a more circumspect and contextually sensitive framework is required for an anthropology of comparison.

I therefore propose turning away from social psychology and towards psychological anthropology, specifically the tradition of 'person-centred ethnography', which examines how 'the individual's psychology and subjective experience both shapes, and is shaped by, social and cultural processes' (Hollan 2001: 48). As Chodorow (1999) outlines in her manifesto for a relationally psychoanalytic anthropology, the conceptions that we acquire during our lives always carry two layers of meaning: 'cognitive' or 'cultural' meaning, which delineates the *content* of the idea, and 'emotional' or 'personal' meaning, which derives from the lived relations through which we acquired the conception, and which shapes the way we will feel about, and react to, it in future. In the words of Throop (2003: 118):

> The present moment of immediate duration is always infused with the lingering traces of past experience which help to pattern the contours of our conscious (and non-conscious) life. There is a persistence and coherence to these residues of past experience that, although not necessarily shared between individuals, does often persist across time and across situations in the organization of a single individual's thought patterns, feelings, goals and motivations in everyday interaction.

From this perspective, the affects associated with any comparison will be shaped by the personal meanings attached to the objects being compared, the very act of comparison, and the comparative frame in which one is being held.

This final point – the affective significance of the comparative frame – is worth emphasising since much existing work on social comparison assumes the subject to be driven by an urge to perform 'well' within the context of a self-evident reference group. There are of course many contexts where this assumption holds, schools and universities being prime examples. But more conflicted feelings can surround the comparative frame in which one is held. I recall an impassioned presentation I witnessed at an academic conference on democratisation, at which Hiba, a speaker from Tunisia, voiced her frustration with Tunisia being described by political scientists as the 'best democracy' in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA). This, she argued, was a comparative manoeuvre that lumped Tunisia together with what she saw as the world's 'very worst' nations. She implored us to instead speak of Tunisia as the worst democracy in the Mediterranean. The emotional resonance of being labelled 'best' or 'worst' was, it seemed, less significant to her than the feelings surrounding the comparative frame within which she, as a Tunisian citizen, was spoken of.

Hiba's request reminds us that the very act of holding an entity beside another in a comparative frame, and presuming an equivalence between them, can be affectively powerful in itself, especially if the comparator is a particularly charged personal symbol. These affects, and the potency of the personal symbols involved, were inseparable both from Tunisia's specific history of colonialism, class, and race (see e.g. Jankowsky 2010), and from the power dynamics surrounding the discursive figuration of 'Middle Eastern' nations in the early twenty-first century. By extension, I argue, the affects driving the comparisons made by Riau Islanders must be understood in light of the specific national and postcolonial histories of this region, as well as the specific personal and familial histories that unfolded within this context. Paying attention to such histories allows us to understand why 'bad comparisons' might sometimes feel intuitively compelling. It also challenges us as scholars and anthropologists to confront the power dynamics embedded in our own impulse to debunk such comparisons as 'faulty' and to insist on alternative comparative frames that we feel are 'better': more 'critical' or more appropriate. It suggests that if we are to develop forms of comparative framing in our writing that can feel rigorous and satisfying to both *us* and our interlocutors, we must first consider closely what is at stake in comparison within our fieldsites.

Comparison in the Riau Islands

Riau Islanders have long found themselves on the receiving end of unflattering comparisons. The Riau Archipelago was once the political and economic epicentre of the Riau-Lingga sultanate, a hub of international trade. This status dwindled during the nineteenth century as nearby Singapore became the region's primary entrepôt and the Riau Islands became a 'quiet backwater' (Touwen 2001: 90–1). Its marginal status was further cemented

following Indonesian independence, when it was annexed to the Eastern Sumatran mainland and governed from the city of Pekanbaru. With the notable exception of Batam, an island close to Singapore that was selected by the national government to be a manufacturing hub within the Indonesia-Malaysia-Singapore Growth Triangle (IMS-GT), most of the islands received little investment during this period, leaving their residents with a profound sense of being left behind. They compared themselves to their counterparts in mainland Riau, on Batam, across the border in Singapore and Malaysia, and in the Riau Islands of the precolonial past, and they found themselves wanting. The resentments these comparisons engendered helped drive a campaign for provincial secession, resulting in the Riau Islands Province separating from the Sumatran province of 'Riau' in 2004 (see Long 2013). Yet not even this could quell the suspicion amongst many of my interlocutors that their province was one of the most backward in Indonesia.

Such anxieties were compounded by Southeast Asia's long history of prejudice against Malays – the Riau Islands' autochthonous ethnic group. Colonists in the region decried the 'indolence' of Malays as they refused to cooperate with colonial orders, a theme that persisted within postcolonial projects of nation-building, most especially in Malaysia (see Alatas 1977). Prime Minister Mahathir had concluded in his 1970 *The Malay Dilemma* that the stark inequality in asset ownership between Malays and Chinese reflected biological differences between the two races. Tropical 'abundance', he argued, had allowed 'even the weakest' Malays to survive and reproduce; by contrast, the hardships of life in China had led to the 'weeding out of the unfit', such that Chinese migrants to Malaysia were racially 'hardy' – pre-adapted to be entrepreneurial, tenacious, and to blow Malays out of the water (Mahathir bin Mohamad 1970: 21–4). These narratives became influential in Indonesia as well. Though the term 'Malay' has a narrower meaning in the Indonesian context, referring to a specific 'ethnic' group (*suku etnis*) rather than a broad racial category, Riau Islanders internalised the idea that Malays were at a natural disadvantage to other ethnic groups (Long 2013: 98–126). This perception was only corroborated when the lucrative employment opportunities offered by the IMS-GT were overwhelmingly offered to migrants from Java and Sumatra, rather than local-born Riau Islanders. My interlocutors spoke widely of the need to change the local 'mindset', insisting this was the only way to overturn the pernicious legacies of both structural neglect and what they perceived to be 'Malay' patterns of thought.

These political-economic factors ramified through Riau Islanders' subjectivities, and their practices of comparison, in complex ways. Their influence can be seen in the embarrassed, defensive reactions that my presence in the Riau Islands sometimes elicited, as my interlocutors projected their own negative apprehensions of the province's comparative standing onto my international eyes. ('I bet there's no forest in Britain, is there?' laughed one civil servant awkwardly as she drove me through a wooded area during

a trip to the coast, 'Just city everywhere'.) It could be discerned in the way that teachers such as Fatimah readily put their students into a common reference group with a visitor such as myself, the key difference being our respective 'laziness' and 'motivation'. Indeed, it could also be discerned in the way Fatimah herself described striving for success. She had hopes of supplementing her income as a schoolteacher by establishing a private after-school education business. To be successful in this endeavour, however, she was convinced she needed to learn how to stop herself 'thinking like a Malay' and emulate Chinese Indonesians instead:

> Not in social terms, or with family — then I will still be a Malay. But in business terms, I will be like a Chinese. When I open my course, I won't be like usual Malays or other Indonesians. I have watched the Chinese, and I have learnt from their experience. I had to do that if I wanted to succeed. When I run my course I will behave exactly like a Chinese.
>
> (in Long 2013: 123)

Fatimah justified her approach by claiming it was 'common knowledge' that Chinese people were more successful than Malays and that this was evident both in her school and in the town's economic landscape, where Chinese-owned businesses were far more visible in the central marketplace than those owned by Malays. This was a bad comparison: one which invoked differences in 'mindset' and 'behaviour' to account for attainment differentials that can easily be attributed to settlement patterns and longstanding forms of structural disadvantage within the town centre and her school's catchment area (Long 2013: 115–26). That Fatimah made such a comparison doubtless reflects both the broader discursive environment in which she lived and her own personal history. She described being mercilessly bullied as a teenager for being stupid and for not having made it into a 'good school'. Chinese students from the local accounting and secretarial school had been amongst her most vindictive tormentors. To prove her equal worth, she had devoted much of her life to proving that she, a Malay of poor rural background, could be a success. She had already shown that going to a dimly regarded school was no obstacle to becoming a respected teacher. Now she would prove she could do everything that a privileged urban Chinese businessperson could. Yet doing so required her to distance herself from those aspects of herself that others deemed 'Malay'. As in the U.S. case described by Fordham (1996: 236, 248), racist discourse led to a subjectivity 'riddled with self-doubt and friction', at once 'raceless' (obtaining acceptance and legitimacy by disavowing her Malayness) and yet compelled to compare in ethnoracial terms.

The internal battle that Fatimah's self-mortification involved, with the 'lazy' impulses she coded as 'Malay' waging war against a fantasised entrepreneurial Otherness, could also explain the distinct affective tonality of her own attempts to 'motivate' her students. For if the 'laziness' that she

disparaged in them was not merely the invocation of a colonial stereo-type, but also a reviled aspect of herself that she was struggling to disavow, then this could readily explain her anger and her coldness.[3] Regardless, her introjection of derogatory attitudes towards her as a Malay, coupled with her projection of similar disregard onto her students (of whom many were Malay), risked the perpetuation of the very insecurities that her efforts to 'motivate' her students – and her decision to become a teacher – had intended to overturn.

(Post)colonial power dynamics, including the psychic ramifications of political and racial comparisons, are thus profoundly implicated in impel-ling and naturalising destructive forms of comparative practice in the Riau Islands. These are comparisons that an anthropologist might well want to subject to critical scrutiny. Fatimah's comparative practice is bad not just epistemologically, but in terms of what it does in the world: she is left filled with self-righteous anger; her students feel cowed; there was little evidence of anyone feeling the 'motivation' her comparison was intended to produce. A critical account could allow Fatimah and others like her to better under-stand how structural oppression has shaped her interval world, affording the opportunity for her to think about herself and those around her in other, and perhaps newly generative, ways.

But against such a backdrop of persistently humiliating and shame-saturated comparative practice, in which the Riau Islands and its inhabitants have been repeatedly positioned as the worst of the worst, how should we understand the positive testimonies of motivational power attributed to ostensibly similar forms of 'bad comparison'? And what implications might that have for whether and how anthropologists should police comparison in and through their work?

Comparison's motivations: person-centred perspectives

In July 2011, I was invited to discuss my research with students at a satellite campus of a local university, situated in the south of the Riau Archipelago. Ramadan closures left only one option available for breakfast – a noodle joint run by an elderly Chinese man. As I was eating, two young men in the corner seemed to be taking an intense interest in my presence. Hearing me order another round of coffee, the younger of the two asked me if I could speak Indonesian. When I replied that I could, he immediately invited me over to his table.

This was Iyan, the school caretaker I introduced at the start of this chapter. He was there having breakfast with his housemate Yanto.[4] In his subse-quent recollections of this encounter, Iyan told his friends that we instantly 'connected' (*nyambung*). The conversation had certainly flowed very easily as we discussed everything from my research plans, to his parents' historic relocation from Java under the government's ill-fated 'transmigration' pro-ject, to Yanto's enterprise in trapping the wild pigs that were devastating

transmigrant agriculture. Before long, I was invited back to Iyan's house to meet his family.

Iyan's mother had died some years previously, after a short-lived battle with cancer. His father, Husrin, was an alert, sinewy man, who had recently retired from a stone quarry. He introduced himself to me by immediately comparing himself to the other Indonesians he had worked alongside. All the other workers at the quarry had been jealous of him, he told me, because he was the manager's favourite: the 'golden boy' (*anak mas*). His big break had come from alerting his supervisor when his manager inadvertently left a large pile of cash in his car. As a reward for this honesty, Husrin was given a monthly bonus throughout his final four years of employment and was immediately moved from the back-breaking work of sand shovelling to a less onerous job in the packing department. He was also repeatedly called on for special jobs, such as chauffeuring guests, for which he would be given small bonuses. Other workers might have wondered why they weren't offered such opportunities, but Husrin felt they had made trouble for themselves, always thinking they knew better than their foremen and therefore not doing what they had been told. Husrin, by contrast, carried out instructions to the letter; he had earned his status as a favourite by repeatedly proving himself to be competent and trustworthy.

It was on a similar comparative basis that Husrin had decided Iyan was his least favourite child. He revealed this unprompted to me one day when Iyan was late arriving home, running through each of his children in turn. His first-born, Saskia, had impressed him with her frugality and generosity. She had been such a good person that after her heart failed, hundreds of people came to see the body – even the local subdistrict head. His one surviving daughter, Sinta, was also a good person, although he had little else to say about her. Fio, his oldest son, who worked as a primary school teacher on the remote island of Delapan[5] was 'the brains of the family'. Husrin pointed to a computer. 'Fio's the one who's good with this'! he told me proudly. There was then an awkward pause. He knew I was closest to Iyan. 'Iyan's started getting into computers now', he conceded, 'but he only got interested in them because of Fio. In truth, Fio's the one who knows how to use them'. I smiled blandly. Husrin went on to explain how he had tried to convince Aras, his youngest son, to learn about computers too. Aras, however, had shown little interest in technology. His passion was for foreign languages. This had disappointed Husrin: he wanted his sons to have skills that were appropriate for the times they were living in. But he had let it be. It had been a surprise when, several years later, Aras was deemed to have good enough English to work as a waiter in a privately-owned island resort. This was no mean feat – few locally-born workers were ever employed in such businesses – and it had rendered Aras the family's biggest earner by far. Yet Husrin seemed, if anything, rather put out that Aras's wages were greater than Fio's. That didn't make sense. Fio was the talented one! All Aras had going for him was that he was hard-working; perhaps, Husrin reflected, it was his sheer doggedness that had allowed him to get ahead.

Iyan, however, was neither talented nor hard-working in his father's eyes. He was a disappointment. The crunch point in their relationship had come when Iyan was studying for his bachelor's degree at a university in mainland Sumatra. The degree had been expensive, a pressure compounded by the costs of renting a house (it was a mistake, Iyan said in retrospect, to rent more than a single bedroom). Perhaps there were other profligacies too: Iyan occasionally referred to his student days as a time of drinking until he 'lost control'. Regardless, he was struggling to pay his fees. He had asked at the campus for bursaries and had received them. After two years, however, he decided that his financial situation was hopeless. He dropped out.

From Husrin's perspective, this turn of events was difficult to explain. Neither Fio nor his daughters had encountered such problems when studying. Besides, he had sent Iyan 'a lot of money' when he first went off to Sumatra. Nevertheless, Iyan seemed to be constantly phoning to complain that it wasn't enough. Eventually, Husrin had drawn on (and thereby jeopardised) his good standing with his managers at the quarry, asking for several months' advance payment in order to support Iyan in Sumatra. Life at home had been marked by hunger and hardship as Husrin raced to clear the debt. And yet, despite everything, Iyan had returned home without a degree. Husrin 'told' me (but in an enquiring tone that suggested he was seeking corroboration of his conjecture's plausibility) that there must have been a lot of corruption at that university. He rubbed his thumb and forefingers together whenever he spoke of the institution. And yet his need to preface every other sentence in his account with 'Oh, that Iyan' suggested that he considered his second son as culpable for his failure as the situation with which he was grappling.

Upon getting to know the family better, I discovered aspects of the children's life histories of which Husrin appeared unaware. He seemed not to know, for instance, that Iyan had helped support his older brother Fio while they were both studying in Sumatra, nor that Fio, his own 'golden boy' (in whose attainments and qualities I suspected Husrin saw a reflection of himself), had supplemented his income by taking on morally murky jobs of which he now felt ashamed. Nevertheless, Husrin's apprehension of his children's relative merits and faults had embedded Iyan firmly in a comparative matrix in which he emerged as deficient, however much Husrin rubbed his thumb. This was the evaluative gaze that Iyan was subjected to every day as he lived alongside his father, and of which his status as a mere high-school graduate proved an especially potent reminder.

The affective force of this intrafamilial comparison was only compounded by the government's declaration, shortly after Iyan had abandoned his studies, that all schoolteachers must have at least an undergraduate degree. Iyan's hopes of following in the footsteps of Saskia and Fio were dashed. He might never be anything more in the school system than a janitor. The new system, he argued, had led to him being 'completely undervalued and overlooked'. He told me he knew lots of people who felt the same way: they

were looked down on because they were 'mere' high-school graduates, regardless of their potential and skills.

Iyan's complaint chimed with my own observations. My interlocutors – especially the most educated – would often talk of being 'S1' (i.e. with a bachelor's degree) or 'S2' (with a masters degree) in an almost caste-like way: graduates, they said (themselves included), had little interest in socialising with those who had not been to university (see also Schut 2019). These were people who thought in fundamentally different ways to each other; they would 'not connect' (*tidak nyambung*). Iyan, by contrast, considered it important to judge people not on their certification, but on their knowledge and potential. He had received As and Bs in the exams he had taken before dropping out and felt many people who had graduated from his course knew far less about the material than him. He and Fio had even raised money for their studies by writing dissertations to order for other students. With nothing more than a title, a few key words, and their own research prowess, they had been able to produce work in a wide range of disciplines besides their own, all of which had received satisfactory scores – easily high enough to pass.

Given that he inhabited a social system that routinely disparaged him because of his relative lack of qualifications, Iyan's repeated narration that our first meeting involved an instant 'connection' takes on a distinct significance. Whereas I, who had also sensed a 'connection', was inclined to attribute it to something mysterious – a 'click' or 'chemistry' that marked Iyan out not just as an 'interlocutor' but a prospective friend – I now suspect that for Iyan, this 'connection' warranted persistent announcement less because of what it said about the closeness of our friendship than because it attested to his ability to 'connect' with a highly educated person: someone who also 'connected' with (or at least spoke to) academics and politicians, introduced him to other educated people (such as the lecturers at the satellite campus), and thereby allowed him to put himself in a different comparative frame to that through which he was habitually viewed in both his private and his public life.

It is against this backdrop that we must also interpret his claim that meeting me had given him 'motivation'. He had seen, he said, how I had studied, 'increased my awareness' (*tambah wawasan*), and consequently been able to travel the world. If I could do it, so could he. This was not, however, a claim made by someone oblivious to structural disadvantage: Iyan was all too aware of it – if also, perhaps, conscious that some of his difficulties stemmed from his own decisions over how to spend the money his father had sent him. His was a wilful comparison, fuelled by a determination not to let his present predicament define him. Rather than comparing his prospects to those in a similar situation to his own, he wanted to keep his frame of comparative reference wide. 'These days we don't get a chance because we've only graduated from high school', he elaborated, 'but when I was at primary school, I had dreams and ambitions just like anybody else'.

By insisting on his essential sameness – to me, to his former schoolmates, to the university students who had graduated by submitting dissertations he had written – he not only defied the cruelty of the comparisons around him that deemed him of low value. He also conjured a 'figured world' (Solomon 2012) in which it was still possible for his potential to be fulfilled, and in which he could frame his life as one of participation in a global cosmopolitan ecumene: an enterprise which, as Luvaas (2009, 2010) has documented, is a key grounds on which contemporary Indonesian youth find a sense of value and purpose in their lives.

Iyan had a plan for how this might be done. First he would move to Delapan – a small island with no mobile phone signal, where Fio currently worked as a teacher in the island's only school. At the time, this only provided education to junior-high level, but the head teacher wanted to expand the school so it could have a senior high school offering. The Department of Education had approved this plan but had found it impossible to recruit teachers for such a remote location. The head teacher had therefore agreed to employ Iyan, despite his lack of an undergraduate degree. There was nobody else who could teach computing to senior high school standard (not even Fio, whatever Husrin might have thought) and so Iyan would be the new computer science teacher. Iyan was delighted – this arrangement, he said, had 'already allowed him to become a kind of civil servant', and he had acquired it, he emphasised, on the basis of his skills. Once in the job, he hoped that his natural potential would shine forth, so that, within five years, he would be offered a permanent job in the Ministry of Education. In the meantime, he would set about saving his salary to fund a diploma in computer hacking, which he planned to undertake, if possible, at the London School of Economics. There were no designated programmes in computer hacking in Indonesia, he explained, but he figured that in the United Kingdom there must be lots. Having acquired the diploma, he would return to the Riau Islands, hack the local government network, and make every civil servant's computer screen go black.

'It's like this, Nick', he said with deadly earnestness. 'If I've hacked their systems, then let's see whether the people who are employed in the district government can fix the hacking and get the system up and running again! If they can't – and I bet they can't! – they're going to have to admit they're employing the wrong people. Actually, as a hacker, I will have information that I'll be able to share with people, and that I can use to make Indonesia more advanced!'

Finally, Iyan hoped he would be compared with others on the basis of his skills, knowledge, and potential – and come out on top.

In *The Power of Feelings*, Chodorow (1999) draws on clinical case studies of various white, heterosexual women from the United States to show that gender is both cultural and personal. It is personal in that every woman's experience of gender is shaped by her specific lived history of social relations.

But it is also cultural, insofar as every woman 'emotionally particularises' selected aspects of shared gender scripts and symbologies and, most importantly, has her inner world profoundly shaped, albeit in different ways, by the gender inequality running through U.S. society. Similarly, the ways that Riau Islanders relate to and are affected by comparison are personal and idiosyncratic, yet recognisably moulded by common features, notably the experience of marginality and the psychic burdens associated with the problematisation of 'human resource quality' within Indonesia's contemporary ideologies of development (Gellert 2015; Indrawati & Kuncoro 2021; Long 2013: 173–205).

Strikingly, and despite living in a province where there are widespread discourses of neglect, cultural inferiority, and backwardness, Iyan – unlike Fatimah – never spoke of his difficulties in terms of what it meant to be a Riau Islander, or to have been raised in a Malay cultural environment (his ancestry was Javanese, but he claimed that growing up in the Riau Islands had made him Malay). His narrative of himself was not grounded in difference. He did not, as others might, attribute his problems with money management to the 'live-for-the-moment' mentality stereotypically associated with Malays; he saw no need to emulate or internalise aspects of a thriftier Other. Nor did he frame his opposition to current political arrangements in terms of the additional support (sponsorship, bursaries, fee waivers, etc.) that should be given to university students from disadvantaged backgrounds such as his own. This was not to say that his outlook was either disconnected from Indonesia's postcolonial history of developmentalism, or in any way depoliticised. Iyan's quarrel with the state was precisely that it put him in a category of difference ('mere high school graduate'), overlooking his essential sameness, even superiority; overlooking his potential. Tellingly, this was a form of political disregard that echoed the contempt he received from his father, for whom Iyan's status as the 'least favourite' had been cemented by his failure to secure an undergraduate degree. And cruelly, that self-same failure had also deprived Iyan of straightforward pathways to the respectable employment through which he might achieve some form of redemption in his father's eyes.

Although Iyan's circumstances gave him multiple grounds on which to take issue with state policy, the political discourses surrounding him had become particularised in ways that reflected the emotional currents animating his relations with his father and siblings. These currents appeared to result, at least in part, from Husrin projecting the fantasised split between obedient 'golden boys' and obdurate workers who thought they knew better (the comparative frame that had become so integral to his own sense of status and value) onto his own three sons. They led to Iyan himself conducting 'bad comparisons' in ways that he found necessary to sustain his sense of himself, to 'motivate' him to continue. His sense of whether any given comparison was fair or unfair, of whether it was motivational or deflating, of whether it should *even be made* was – just like those of Fatimah and Suhardi and,

one presumes, the participants taking part in the experiments conducted by social comparison theorists – not reducible to evolutionary dynamics, or a desire to size up one's competitors. It was profoundly shaped by intertwined postcolonial, national, and personal histories. What comparison meant for him, and which comparative frame felt apposite or necessary, emerged from a specific matrix of intersubjective relations that was at once irreducibly individual and patterned in ways reflective of his prevailing political and social context. It is such intricate interconnections between the psychological and the political that ethnographic methods – particularly those conducted in a person-centred tradition – are ideally placed to excavate, and that need to be foregrounded in any account of how (and why) people compare.

Implications for anthropological practice

Having understood the complex cultural and personal meanings underpinning what ostensibly appear to be 'bad comparisons', how should anthropologists respond? A person-centred approach allows us to think of them not as epistemological crimes, fallacies that need to be policed, attacked or blunted (cf. Damer 2013), but rather as important moments of self-cultivation and social action, undertaken for particular reasons, shaped by specific histories, and consequential in particular ways. This is not to say that they should be straightforwardly endorsed. As ethnographers, we can expose the consequences of these comparisons, trace their genealogies, and reveal the interests vested in them; as anthropological writers we can suggest alternative comparative frames. If, for instance, we conducted a longitudinal comparison across Iyan's life, we might notice that he never seems to finish the projects he begins. (Indeed, his time on Delapan was cut short when he fell in love with a woman over Facebook – although their eventual marriage itself ran aground a few years later.) That could lead us to a conclusion not unlike Husrin's – that he really does have a character flaw. But we might also note a repeated tendency to emulate his older brother, and speculate whether that might stem from the constant comparisons visited on him by his father. The failure of his aspirations might stem not only from his socioeconomic marginality, but also, as in Lemelson and Tucker's (2017) study of Estu Wardhani, a decision to pursue pathways to which he was not best suited in a desperate search for parental regard. These analyses – grounded in the kinds of comparisons that a psychoanalyst or therapist might make – could prove helpful insofar as they could lead him to reflect more critically about the patterns in his life. For Iyan, such insights may be as illuminating and valuable as it would be to call Fatimah's attention to the structural racism that shapes her own comparative practice. Nevertheless, many anthropologists might be perturbed by the way these analyses ultimately hold Iyan – or, perhaps, his father (who can easily emerge as a villain despite making many sacrifices to support his son) – responsible for the difficulties he has encountered.

We might therefore prefer to embed Iyan in a comparison attentive to dynamics of class and privilege. Such a comparison would see him as just another 'working class kid' who got a 'working class job' (following Willis 1981) because he and his family lacked the capital (psychological, social and economic) to get him through the challenges of his degree programme, and whose fantasy of redemption exemplifies Bourdieu's (2000) portrait of the wild fantasies of the dispossessed: a narrative resource that might restore some dignity to his life but offers little prospect of actual social mobility. This reading might help stoke 'critical consciousness' amongst readers; highlighting the injustices that inequality can produce. But it would dismiss as 'fantasy' the very truths that Iyan might want to assert: that he is a being of considerable potential, even if that must be performatively reasserted to himself and others through both daydreams and felt 'connections' in the face of pernicious systems of disregard; and that he is, for all his disadvantage, still a participant in a globalised world.

What becomes clear from this discussion is that any comparative frame involves a necessary 'simplification' – in Callon's (1984) sense of the term. Complex social actors are reduced to the qualities that are most relevant to the comparison. In this sense, all social comparisons are 'bad'; by bracketing out relevant details, they risk 'dire misrecognition' (Radhakrishnan 2013: 19). Insistence on one particular comparison as the best way to understand an ethnographic puzzle may thus reveal more about the sublimated desires that the anthropologist is seeking to gratify through their comparison than it does about the complexities of the case study in hand (see also Weiss 2016: 633–4). It is a risky strategy, especially when we are writing of emotionally volatile subjects such as inequality. On the one hand, we face the prospect that our interlocutors might find our comparisons demeaning or injurious (recall here Hiba's fury that academics classified Tunisia as a MENA nation); that our interlocutors' lifeworlds and modes of reckoning are recklessly violated in pursuit of our own comparative gratifications. On the other, we may unwittingly play into public metanarratives that overconfidently attribute the responsibility for unequal outcomes to singular factors or variables (bad parenting; individual choices; essentialised differences of race, class, and culture), with the result that, far from encouraging people to take more considered, self-reflexive approaches to the world, we inadvertently help reproduce cycles of toxic comparative practice. This is neither politically nor intellectually sound.

As anthropology bounds towards a 'new comparativism', allegedly full of 'epistemological confidence' yet nevertheless wondering how we can compare without losing sight of the lessons of our self-critique and the implicit bias of our categories (Weisman & Luhrmann 2020: 132–5), we would do well to remember the key insight that a person-centred exploration of comparison can afford: that any single individual or group is enfolded in multiple frames of comparison, each of which operates at a different scale, and each of which carries distinct intellectual, political, and emotional

stakes, not just in its own right, but because of the personal meaning each comparative framing takes on in relation to others. How we compare is always a choice, and one that we can consider making differently.

This insight has implications for comparative anthropology's narrative strategy. It points to the value of adopting a textual format in which – not unlike my discussion of Iyan in this paper – different comparative frames are held side-by-side, with the emotional logics underpinning them laid bare. That way, readers – whether our interlocutors, our colleagues and students, or the public – can not only adjudicate the respective merits of these parallel accounts but also, and no less importantly, reflect critically on the impulses that dispose them to compare themselves and others in particular ways, and on the affective and social consequences that particular forms of comparison could have for others. In this regard, a 'person-centred' analytic orientation is not only concerned with unpicking the relations, histories, and psychodynamics that shape how people compare in the field, but also bringing a sensitivity to comparison's ramifications into the way we advance and debate comparative propositions within our own scholarly discourse. Rather than acting as 'the comparison police', demonising 'bad comparisons', and insisting on either 'critical comparisons' or ethnographic particularism, anthropologists are ideally placed to use their writings to encourage more mindful, self-reflexive comparisons, allowing every work of comparative anthropology to also be an anthropology of comparison itself.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 All personal names are pseudonyms.
2 Intriguingly, such sympathetic dispositions correlate with actual improvements in performance, leading some to theorise 'upward social comparison' as adaptive (e.g. Blanton, Buunk, Gibbons & Kuyper 1999).
3 See Layton (2014: 164) for a discussion of how a comparable process of 'splitting' may underpin public contempt for the struggles of the poor.
4 Though both were Muslim, neither was observing the fast: they were doing heavy labouring work and needed energy and nutrients to keep going. Strict observance of the fast was, Iyan explained, a privilege of the rich.
5 This is a pseudonym, to help protect the family's identity.

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3   Recognizing uniqueness

On (not) comparing the World Nomad Games

Mathijs Pelkmans

The World Nomad Games, a six-day event consisting of competitions in nomadic sports such as eagle-hunting, archery, wrestling, and horse-racing, and embedded in an extensive 'cultural' programme, were held biannually in Kyrgyzstan from 2014 to 2018. They were created with the explicit aim to offer an alternative to the Olympics, one that would put Kyrgyzstan on the world map. Irrespective of its successes in these grand aims, the World Nomad Games (hereafter also referred to as 'the Games' or 'WNG') generated palpable enthusiasm among participants and spectators, and it is by quoting two such instances that I wish to introduce this chapter.

- 'This is Kyrgyzstan! No one is strong like us. *Real* men! You don't have this in Europe'. The claims were made in excitement by a middle-aged Kyrgyz man, just after we had watched a game of *kok boru*, a violent form of polo, in which the Kyrgyz team had decimated its opponent.

- 'You *really* cannot compare this to anything else'. Seated around a campfire at night, the American expat who thusly characterized the World Nomad Games went on to praise its 'authentic' and 'organic' feel.

The idea of the World Nomad Games as a 'one of a kind' phenomenon resonated widely among participants, spectators, and commentators. In conversations, online posts, and news reports, they cited the extraordinary nature of the featured sports, the unique qualities of its competitors, and the incomparability of the whole thing. Such invocations of the Games' uniqueness and incomparability provide us with an interesting puzzle. While the statements (quite literally) rejected the possibility of comparing the Games to anything else, *communication about* the perceived unique characteristics was unavoidably based on (implicit) comparisons with that which lacked these characteristics.[1] Instead of seeing this as some sort of epistemic fallacy, it will be more productive to explore what the denials of comparability reveal of the 'prickly' nature of comparison.

When the American expat proclaimed the incomparability of the WNG, she referenced the spontaneous and organic way of organizing a festival,

which in her view was clearly 'for the people'. Without making it explicit, she thereby communicated that these features had been absent from other events she had experienced or knew about. But even if this meant that she *was* comparing, we should consider why such comparison needed to remain implicit and be denied. I suggest that denying the possibility of comparison served to emphasize difference, and thereby placed the Games in a category of its own. It also presented the (non-)comparer as a connoisseur who cared about authenticity and spontaneity, meanwhile increasing the value of having attended these – unique – World Nomad Games. Clearly then, the denial of comparability is useful even when unavoidably being part of comparative practice.

Speaking from a different position, my Kyrgyz acquaintance was unconcerned with 'authenticity', but he was exalted that the Games revealed, as he saw it, the 'incomparable strength' (*nesravnennaia sila*) of the Kyrgyz. I quoted my acquaintance from a longer monologue in which he highlighted the uniquely masculine qualities of Kyrgyz horsemen, which purportedly had long been lost by all other people, and certainly by Europeans with their guns (and other machinery).[2] This invocation of 'incomparable' strength unlocked a different meaning of comparison. As documented in the Oxford English Dictionary, while the verb 'compare' is derived from the Latin *comparare* (to bring together), phrases such as 'beyond compare' are probably derived from the now obsolete term 'compeer', which refers to an 'equal' or to 'someone of equal standing or rank'.[3] The 'compeer' logic resonates with the Russian term for comparison (*sravnenie*) used above, which has as its root in the word 'equal' (*ravnyi*, *rovnia*). In this view, to compare is to test for equality (and thereby establish standing). And surely, the best proof of being in a 'league of one's own' is to overwhelmingly defeat opponents in a competition where the relevant strengths and skills are tested – thereby providing proof of being 'incomparably' better.[4]

These etymological details underscore the diversity of the logics and purposes that inform acts of comparison, and of non-comparison. If the expat rejected comparability to thereby preserve the *integrity* of the object (which a 'bringing together' would undermine), for my Kyrgyz acquaintance the purpose was to highlight its *superiority* (in other words, to deny equality). And yet, these two aspects (which are linked to the *comparare* and *compeer* logics of comparison) could not be fully disentangled or separated. In fact, their intersection enabled a temporary agreement on the uniqueness of the World Nomad Games, which thereby also offered a partial escape from dominant comparative frameworks. I emphasize the temporary and partial nature of such a joint challenge to established frameworks, not only because of the unstable meaning of 'incomparability', but also because the desire to have uniqueness *recognized* depends on making the associated ideas public, a process that necessarily implies comparison.

This tension is a central aspect of recognition. As Webb Keane points out, to the extent that recognition is dialogical, it is fundamentally unstable

because it 'cannot be entirely in my hands' (1997: 14). We can observe this tension in all human relations, at least if we accept Hegel's point that self-consciousness exists only in being acknowledged as well as his assertion that 'people *recognize* themselves as *mutually recognizing* one another' (Hegel 1977 [1802]: 111–112). One of the key issues here is that for subjects to feel recognized, it is insufficient to be noticed or seen; they need to be noticed and seen in ways that resonate with their self-perception. As Axel Honneth puts it, recognition is a complex communicative process between sender and receiver, which is only genuine when the recognizer has identified and acknowledged as positive a contrastive value with which the recognized subject identifies (2007: 339–345).

The complexity of social recognition is also due to its concrete manifestations always, and necessarily, being entangled in larger webs of relations. Recognition travels, as it were, along different social axes and across scales. If we started by zooming in on how individual athletes are motivated at least in part by a desire for recognition, then we see how in a sport such as *kok boru* these motivations converge in a collective in pursuit of victory, with the value of such victory dependent on its reception by an audience. We would also need to change perspective to see how audiences are constituted. Perhaps zooming in on supporters – such as my acquaintance who lauded the skills and strength of the Kyrgyz players – to observe how a sense of achievement spreads among supporters the moment an opponent is defeated. But the desired recognition is still dependent on its ability to resonate with the view of others. Will the other team agree to have been defeated fairly? Will the Nomad Games manage to attract broad – global – attention? And will viewers – especially those that matter – properly appreciate what they see?

While the desire for recognition is probably universal, its intensity fluctuates, and its features vary. Charles Taylor documents how 'recognition' only emerged as a *generalized problem* in modern times, when the age of democracy ushered in 'a politics of equal recognition', based on the notion that all citizens are equally deserving of respect (1994: 27).[5] In the next section, I describe parallel developments in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), paying particular attention to the creation of a federal framework within which ideas of 'national culture' were expressed and exchanged. The disintegration of this framework in the post-soviet period caused considerable uncertainty and disorientation (see also Grant 1995), which in Kyrgyzstan translated into a (politicized) desire to assert its cultural traditions onto the world stage. Emerging within this context, the World Nomad Games embodied the promise of global recognition for a people who found themselves on the margins of an imagined global community.

As a deliberate attempt to gain global recognition, the World Nomad Games expose the tension between projection and reception. This tension will be explored in the chapter's subsequent sections, emphasizing both its fragile nature and transformative potential. Assertions of uniqueness are

fragile because, to paraphrase Keane (1997) once more, 'recognition is not entirely in my hands', and hence dissonance always lurks around the corner. A good example was when foreign commentators embraced the Nomad Games' uniqueness but did so in an exoticizing and stereotyping manner. Describing the Games as fascinatingly out-of-time, they suggested it was an event at which Genghis Khan would have felt at home, and that if he had still been alive, he 'would have wanted to be a *kok boru* captain', as one of many Genghis-Khan-posts had it.[6] Here, recognition risked slipping into ridicule. But while fragile, assertions of uniqueness do have transformative potential. If we acknowledge that *genuine* recognition is irreducible (as it fully acknowledges the authenticity of the recognized subject), then it potentially breaks open social space. When the views of organizers, participants, and spectators converged, they thereby not only produced a critique of hegemonic structures (e.g. the dominance of the Olympics in the field of sport), but potentially transformed the playing field.

In this introduction, I meandered from comparison to recognition and back, to thereby test the ground in which to stake this chapter's twofold analytical contributions. The first is to use the concept of recognition to illuminate the affective dimensions of comparative work. Specifically, I argue that the need to be seen, and be seen in particular ways, influences which kinds of comparisons are pursued, and which are resisted, as well as the comparative techniques that are put into play. And second, I use the prism of comparison to explore aspects of recognition that do not usually receive attention. Drawing on the differences between the *comparare* and the *compeer* mode of comparative practice, I argue that recognition is about integrity as much as it is about standing, and that it is by paying attention to the interplay of both dimensions that we may come to understand how the dilemma of 'recognizing uniqueness' is solved.

I will return to these issues in the concluding section but wish to emphasize that it is the World Nomad Games that will do the heavy lifting in making these analytical points. The Games' trope of incomparability pinpoints the tension between projection and reception that always troubles recognition. The tension exists because recognition depends as much on familiarity as on difference and is charged as much by expectation as by novelty, features that skew cognition and hence complicate the workings of *re*cognition. It is partly because of this that genuine recognition is rare and that comparisons are prickly. These tensions were particularly pronounced in the case of the WNG, with its promise to counteract Kyrgyzstan's marginal position and claim its rightful place on the world stage. To unravel and demonstrate these points successfully, we first need to see how the Nomad Games came about.

Celebrating cultural uniqueness on the world stage

In her book *The Spectacular State*, Laura Adams asks the important question of how citizens of small and peripheral countries 'understand their nation's

greatness' (2010: 38). As members of a group, to conceive of such greatness, we all need to have *our thing*. The issue is not straightforward. Claims to historical authenticity that make the 'thing' *ours* and outward projections that make the thing a *thing* are fraught with tension. The 'thingness' of the Kyrgyz nation had developed parallel to its position within the USSR, and was shaped by the Union's principle that its constituent groups could be 'national in form' but should be 'socialist in content'.[7]

As the titular nation of one of the fifteen Soviet Socialist Republics, the Kyrgyz were firmly locked into an elaborate institutional framework that defined the scope and means by which their national idea could be advanced. Politically and culturally, Kyrgyzstan was represented at Union level, and endowed with its own linguistic, educational, and cultural institutions. Obviously, in a federal socialist state, 'culture' needed to be apolitical, needed to be classless, and needed to be irreligious. To the extent that this vision was put into practice, public expression of culture became 'folklorised', a process that entailed the selective appropriation of cultural forms for representative purposes and was conducive to the production of standardized and secularized national traditions (see Cash 2011; Pelkmans 2007). The effects were certainly also seen in the realm of sport, for example in the emergence of national – e.g. Kyrgyz, Kazakh, and Tajik – 'wrestling traditions'.[8]

The Soviet ethno-cultural framework, discursively expressed as the 'friendship of nations', enabled communication about these secularized 'national' traditions. It was an essential feature of the Soviet system that members of the Republics learned about each other. As Maxim Gorky, the 'father' of Soviet literature put it: 'It is important for all union Republics that a Belorussian knows what a Georgian or a Turk is like, etc'. In practice, this meant that among the most visible aspects of official Soviet culture were the tours by dancers, orchestras, and athletes from each Republic to all other Republics (Slezkine 1994: 447–448). It was by means of this elaborate system of 'secular pilgrimages' that distinctly Soviet ideas of culture gained broad currency, shaping expectations concerning 'national' repertoires of art, custom, and leisure. And whatever its inadequacies, the framework facilitated mutual recognition within a fixed set of audiences.[9]

The above clarifies, somewhat, why the issue of recognition had become so central, why it obtained the characteristics it had, and why it became so problematic after the collapse of the USSR. Whereas the confined and highly regulated framework of the Soviet Union had guaranteed some level of cultural representation and acknowledgment, none of this continued to exist when the framework came undone. There no longer was a guaranteed audience for cultural displays; in fact, as many Kyrgyz became painfully aware, most people outside the former Soviet Union had never even heard of Kyrgyzstan or the Kyrgyz people. And importantly, all of this happened at a moment in world history when nations felt increasingly compelled to present themselves to global audiences, not just inspired by a Hegelian desire for mutual recognition, but also because 'brand recognition' came to be seen

as a precondition for national success in the global economy.[10] In response, the newly independent Republic of Kyrgyzstan oriented itself towards the European Union and the United States. In the mid-1990s it styled itself as the 'Switzerland of Central Asia', in which the qualities of democracy, stability, and mountainous landscapes were supposed to come together. As part of a nation branding effort, such projections were aimed at attracting foreign investment and tourism, something that proved rather difficult to accomplish (see Pelkmans 2017: 23–31).

Since independence in 1991, the Kyrgyztani government made several attempts to reach into its past to retrieve, and then project onto the world, its 'thing'. These efforts relied heavily on the registers that had worked during Soviet times, especially those of 'tradition' and 'high culture'. Thus, in the 1990s elaborate steps were taken to promote its most famous novelist, Chingiz Aitmatov, by making him Kyrgyzstan's ambassador to the European Union and by turning his books into films and by subsidizing translations into many languages. Another effort that stood out was the active promotion of the Manas epic – which centres on the words and deeds of medieval tribal leader Manas – as the world's longest epic poem that continues to be orally recited. As part of these efforts a mass-celebration of Manas's supposed 1000th birthday was organized in 1995. But neither the claim to longest epic nor the wisdoms of tribal leader Manas resonated very strongly with foreign audiences. Wider recognition remained elusive; moreover, these early efforts failed to deliver tangible benefits, such as increased tourism.

The World Nomad Games, by contrast, managed to appeal to a global audience and thereby offered a means by which Kyrgyzstan could find a way out of its perceived irrelevance. It promised to be a tool or mechanism by which 'some people can make their marginality central', as Sarah Green put it (2006). The concept for the Games had developed in several stages. When president Atambaev first pitched the idea during a regional meeting of Central Asian leaders (in 2011), the plan was to name it the 'Turkic Games', and to have it circulate among the ten or so Turkic-speaking countries and autonomous regions. Presumably to broaden its appeal beyond Turkic-speaking populations, the event eventually emerged as the World Nomad Games, with the explicit aim of celebrating Kyrgyz history. As president Atambaev put it during the opening ceremonies of the first edition: 'The Kyrgyz people, with their rich history, culture, and traditions, were among the early nations that founded nomadic civilization. Let us follow the good legacy of our ancestors in joining ranks and building our future!'[11]

The plan to have the Games rotate among countries fell through when Kazakhstan declined the honour of organizing the second edition. Not wanting the initiative to die an early death, Kyrgyzstan's government decided to organize the event again in 2016 and then also in 2018, at which point it was announced that Turkey would organize the 2020 edition.[12] The president had staked his credibility on making the Games a success,

and thus the summer of 2016 saw tremendous activity, which included the upgrading of potholed roads, the construction of a grand hippodrome and a new sports complex, and the provision of accommodation and facilities for the thousands of participants and invited guests. Compared with the relatively modest try-out in 2014 when 568 athletes from 19 countries participated, the subsequent editions of 2016 and 2018 were much larger, hosting, respectively, 1,200 and 1,976 competitors from, respectively, 62 and 74 countries, with significant representation from most former Soviet Republics, as well as China, Hungary, Turkey, Afghanistan, and the United States, amongst others (Maksüdünov 2020: 587).

These feats had been achieved through a governmental injection of 30.5 and 67.5 million US dollars in 2016 and 2018, respectively, which had paid for the construction of a new hippodrome, the upgrading of roads, and additional infrastructural improvements (Maksüdünov 2020: 587–588).[13] Apart from the funds provided by the government, there were many other contributors. Of the various sponsors, Russian energy company Gazprom had been the largest. In 2016, it had constructed and donated an arena for indoor sports. Moreover, it had brought in a television crew capable of producing live coverage of the most popular games, which were broadcast in Kyrgyzstan as well as Russia. Different from sponsors, many of the local 'partners' had been summoned to make appropriate contributions. Although the specifics remained unclear, virtually all holiday resorts along the northern shore of Lake Issyk Kul agreed to host, free of charge, dozens or even hundreds of guests. Moreover, all local municipalities in the region, and regional administrations from further afield, had been ordered to contribute to the Games by setting up fully equipped yurt camps to host guests and take part in various cultural contests.[14] Acquainted municipality workers complained to me about the sacrifices expected from them and expressed scepticism about the use of state funds for organizing a grand spectacle when most public services lacked adequate funding. But they also spoke in amazement about the renovated roads and newly constructed buildings. In the words of one administrator, after he had returned from a visit to Cholpon Ata, which was being prepared for the opening of the Nomad Games: 'It is as if you enter a different country!'

Speaking during the main opening ceremony in the new hippodrome in Cholpon Ata in 2016, president Atambaev announced that in the context of globalization, 'unique cultures and peoples risk disappearing'. He warned that we forget history at our own peril and emphasized the values of nomadic ways of life in an age of environmental destruction. What is so important about the World Nomad Games, he continued, is that because of it 'the entire world is now learning about the history of nomads' (*Vechernyi Bishkek* 3 September 2016). This central message had evolved by 2018. When I asked the secretary general of the Games about its new slogan 'United in strength, united in spirit', he explained that it referred to a larger vision:

> So that in the 21st century, we don't end up being a generation of idiots; idiots who are [glued to] their computers and don't know how to communicate with actual people … we shouldn't forget that we are human, that we have a history; we shouldn't forget our traditions.

The idea was dramatically performed at the opening ceremony, during an interlude when the hundreds of dancers and musicians who had populated the stage suddenly disappeared to make room for a single, lonely person. The colourful lights had turned monochrome, dramatizing the loneliness of the single person, who was standing in the middle of what appeared to be an endless desert or wasteland, hooked to phone and computer, but completely disoriented and lost. This sense of disorientation could, however, be reversed. As the subsequent musical and dance performances convincingly showed, the cure lay in returning to the roots of Civilisation, to nomadism with its organic connection to nature, as exemplified by Kyrgyzstan's traditions.

Seen from this perspective, the World Nomad Games are an attempt to counteract the perceived homogenizing effects of globalization and modernity. In the field of sport, the adversary is the modern Olympics, which prides itself on creating a level playing field in which individuals (and countries) can test their skills and strengths, but whose structures (and European roots) end up reproducing global asymmetries. Not only does it favour large and rich countries as evidenced by the Olympics medal count, but it marginalizes sport traditions that are not part of the Olympic menu. Kyrgyzstan is not the only country where there is frustration with the Olympics. The role of Turkey, especially after its own Olympic bids were repeatedly rejected,[15] has regionally been particularly significant. It has promoted various alternative international sport events and reportedly took on a significant portion of Kyrgyzstan's organizational expenses for the World Nomad Games, as this 'became the main event of Asian anti-Olympians' (Kylasov 2019: 7). Within this larger anti-Olympic movement, there is a distinct emphasis on ethnic variation, historical roots and, indeed, cultural uniqueness.[16]

In practice, however, the critique of asymmetry was blunted by the desire for international recognition. To gain such recognition, the organizers of the World Nomad Games agreed to the regulation and standardization of its various sports, a process that potentially undermined the claim to uniqueness. The issue extends beyond that of receiving formal recognition from international (sport) organizations; it is also about gaining resonance with larger audiences. In essence, celebrating tradition on a grand scale requires such celebrations to be cast in recognizable form. This process is so common that some compromises went virtually unnoticed. For example, there is no reason to assume that all nomadic groups identify with a nation state. But the idea of 'national teams' has become such an integral part of large-scale sports events, that during the opening ceremony very few people in the audience seemed to notice that all participating men and women walked behind the flag of their designated country.[17] Having national teams,

it appeared, was an accepted and necessary ingredient to be seen as a worthy inter-*national* event.

    In view of the above, it will be no surprise that organizers and residents were preoccupied with how the Games were seen by foreigners. To them, it may have been reassuring when a major Kyrgyz newspaper headlined: 'Two billion people came to know about the Nomad Games', and went on to say that not only was two billion a conservative estimate, but also that '99% of those who saw the Games were overwhelmingly impressed and astonished by what they saw' (*Megapolis*, 9 September 2016). Another newspaper stated that with the World Nomad Games the country had crossed the Rubicon, to have become an acknowledged member of the international community (*Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, 9 September 2016). It thus appeared that the female villager, who before the start of the Games confided in me, 'I just hope that we will live up to international standards', no longer needed to worry. The prospect of living up to international standards did, however, raise the question of what was lost in this 'living up to standards', thereby once again pointing to the tension that is at the heart of this chapter, and which requires further unpacking.

Projecting uniqueness and seeking recognition

The most popular team sport in Kyrgyzstan, by far, is *kok boru*. It is played in and between villages on special occasions as well as in a national competition between regional teams, drawing large crowds. It was also the biggest event of the WNG, with each match being watched by thousands of mostly male spectators, and the hippodrome completely packed for the semi-finals and finals. The basic rules of the game are rather straightforward. It involves two teams of four horsemen each, who compete for possession of a goat carcass, which they then need to throw into the opponent's goal. It is a true spectator sport with tremendous action: the struggle for the goat carcass, the speed horse racing while escaping and chasing opponents, the team strategies to open or block paths, and all of this laced with frequent accidents that include falling horses and catapulted men. As a seventy-five-year-old 'officially invited' Kyrgyz man put it when he was asked what he enjoyed best at the WNG:

> I am especially captivated by *kok boru*; men on horses, they wrestle, show each other their strength, their bravery, their skills. It is a very dangerous game. [In that sense it is] like hockey and boxing. But [additionally] it shows that man and the environment/nature are one;[18] that it is necessary to befriend nature, to live with nature.

Judged by his reflections on environmental harmony, this elderly gentleman (and former coalmine director) was well steeped in the official WNG discourse. The same ideas of 'wildness' and 'purity' also surfaced in less

diplomatic assertions, such as this one by a male denizen after one of the Kyrgyz team's victories:

> People talk about Genghis Khan, but if you look, you'll see that the Mongolians don't know how to properly ride a horse. Only the Kyrgyz know how to, because of the mountains [which require special riding skills][19]. … If there hadn't been tanks, then the Kyrgyz would have knocked everyone down.

Though the Kyrgyz men I spoke with were in broad agreement about the unique qualities of the game, some commented that the team version of *kok boru* was a watered-down version of the 'original' game. In that version, there are no spectators and no teams, but dozens if not hundreds of men on horses who to greater or lesser degree participate in the attempt to grab the goat and run off with it to put it in a designated spot (this version is also referred to as *ulak tartysh*, literally 'goat grabbing'). Part of the excitement is that everyone attending the game is somehow involved, manoeuvring their horses in line with the rhythms of the game and seeking out opportunities, even if it is only a handful of strong and devoted participants who are likely to win the game. Masculinity and virility are at centre stage. As a player put it:

> Especially when you are inside the crowd, it is *azart* [exciting], trying to grab the carcass. It is really a test. When I play I don't pay attention to anything besides grabbing the goat. People don't feel it when they are hurt. They lose themselves in the game, they lose their mind. It's really crazy.
>
> (quoted in de Boer 2016: 22)

This version of *kok boru* has only two basic rules (one concerns the weight of the goat, and the other having a fixed spot where the goat needs to be delivered), with no restrictions in terms of field size, number or age of participants, or even time duration. My acquaintances often emphasized this virtual absence of rules in the 'original game', as to them it indicated the game's roughness and underlined the skill and bravery of its participants.

The team version of *kok boru* was not a new invention – in some regions of Kyrgyzstan it had been played all along – but it was popularized and became standardized under the direction of the Kök Börü Federation, which was founded in 1994 as part of the post-independence emphasis on national traditions. As De Boer describes in her thesis (2016), the responses to the increasing institutionalization of *kok boru* have been mixed. Some of her informants regretted that it had become less manly, precisely because it was more regulated, whereas others emphasized that the added element of group tactics made the game more interesting to watch. During the Nomad Games I heard some grumbling about further regulations, including the wearing of helmets and the playing time of three periods of twenty minutes.

The adjustments were not only needed to turn *kok boru* into a spectator sport, one that could be watched in a stadium and broadcasted on television, but also to produce a playing field in which the strengths and skills of teams from various regions and countries could be tested. In this sense, the adjustments also offered a route back to uniqueness, now through active comparison. Instead of the *comparare* logic of comparison (with its link to integrity), this route followed the *compeer* logic, which would ideally reveal that no other team was of 'comparable standing'. Indeed, the 'incomparable' superiority of the Kyrgyz team could only be demonstrated through comparison with other teams, preferably by being compared with as many foreign teams as possible. Although never explicitly stated, this is probably what was behind the invitation of *kok boru* teams from unusual places such as France and the United States. Nevertheless, inviting such foreign teams produced new tensions. This was brought to my attention in relation to a different branch of sport, when the captain of the German wrestling team told me: 'the only reason that we are invited, is so that we give their [the Kyrgyz] victory cachet'. His statement was partly made in jest, but there was a serious undertone when he added: 'They want us to join, but they don't want us to win'.[20]

With *kok boru*, the stakes were particularly high, as this was deemed to be a uniquely Central Asian sport, which according to many denizens 'only the Kyrgyz and Kazakhs can play well'. Several of the other teams were 'genuine', such as the Uzbek, Tatar, and the Moscow-region team (made up of Kyrgyz migrants to Russia). But some of the other teams, including the poorly performing French and the U.S. teams, appeared to exist purely for the purpose of enhancing the Nomad Games' international profile. In fact, the teams that came from further afield, such as the U.S. team, were not playing on their own horses, something that minimized their chances of success. Scott Zimmerman, captain of the U.S. team, took the invitation by the WNG committee in 2018 (second time in a row) as a sign of appreciation. He attributed the invitation, in part, to the nomadic vibe of his team, which consisted of self-styled cowboys (dressed in fitting attire) from Wyoming. What also might have helped is that Scott went along with the logic of Kyrgyz superiority, at least during camera-facing interviews, such as when he told me in one such interview:

> We would love to win, that's the goal in any competition, but the common understanding is that we are 2,000 years behind these Central Asian cultures at this game. Our expectation is not to win – it is to have a good time, and to show our respect for these cultures.

Scott's well-rehearsed statement was insightful. For one, it suggested that the projection of uniqueness was not necessarily doomed to fail. Rather, it worked for as long as those who were drawn into the event, such as Scott Zimmerman, acknowledged and respected the special nature of the

Kyrgyz, and of the World Nomad Games. But while his cultural explanation preserved the 'integrity' aspect of recognition, it put the 'superiority' aspect in quotation marks. After all, it is unlikely that Zimmerman would use his cultural logic to explain success and failure in certain other competitions, such as the Olympics.

Let me bring this section to a close by briefly reflecting on the point that the projection of uniqueness involves a form of reaching out that requires the unique element to be made commensurate. *Kok Boru* had to be cast as a 'recognizable type', because 'people recognize actions and identities in terms of things of which they *already* have some understanding' (Keane 1997: 14). There are two obvious tensions. By making the game recognizable, a spectator sport, it may lose its distinctive qualities to the extent that those wanting recognition don't recognize themselves in it anymore. And by actively drawing others into the spectacle (with the understanding that those others are not supposed to win) there is the risk that it will become seen as a farce, as a 'mere' performative act, thereby undermining the claim to superiority. Still, judging by the excitement of the tremendous crowds attending the *kok boru* finals between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbek team on the closing day of the Games, and the elation when the Kyrgyz team made one goal after the other and convincingly won (with 32 to 9), a temporary balance had been found.

Seeking uniqueness and recognizing it

Acting as an accredited media representative in 2018 – I was the fixer and interpreter for a Dutch TV journalist for three days – turned out to be worthwhile. I had already started my fieldwork on the Nomad Games but decided to take the five-hour bus ride back to the international airport near Bishkek to observe (and experience) how foreign journalists arrived at the Games. It didn't disappoint. The WNG welcoming party was slightly confused when I wasn't on the same flight as my 'colleague', but once he was guided through the customs and I joined him, we were treated to refreshments, given an elaborate welcome pack (including a jacket, cap, blanket, water bottle), and then, together with journalists from the New York Times, Tajikistan TV, and several others were transported back to the Issyk Kul region, where we were offered full board accommodation in a luxury resort, free of charge. Although it is not uncommon for NGOs or even governments to facilitate the work of journalists when it is in their interest to receive media coverage, the journalists I spoke to were amazed by the extensive, according to some 'over the top', display of hospitality.[21]

It will be obvious that foreign journalists were crucial for turning the Nomad Games into a significant event. In fact, the number of foreign journalists was seen as an important indicator of success, and hence often emphasized in official statements. Reportedly, during the 2018 version, there were 'over 500 representatives of foreign mass media organizations

from 58 countries, of which there were 50 television channels, 12 radio channels, 48 newspapers, and 50 bloggers'.[22] Equally interesting is that so many journalists considered the World Nomad Games to be an event that was worth their while. Among these were globally recognized brands such as the New York Times, Al Jazeera, Associated Press, and BBC Radio (the Guardian was absent in 2018 but had reported on the first two editions of the Games). Far more numerous, and at least as relevant for the discussion here, were the freelance photographers, writers for travel magazines, documentary makers, and travel bloggers. They all came with the expectation of finding something unique, or at least sufficiently different, that could be sold to their respective audiences. There was an interesting tension here, which can be profitably looked at through the lens of authenticity.

One of the many ironies of 'authenticity' is that even though it is supposed to refer only to itself – 'of undisputed origin and not a copy' as mentioned in the Oxford English Dictionary – its everyday use relies on a whole series of comparative connotations. As Fillitz and Saris put it, the claim of authenticity always 'presupposes that there is a down market variety of what is on offer' (2013: 1), a variety that is less genuine, pure, traditional, or sincere than the authentic version. Because foreign visitors (media representatives and others) frequently used the term to refer to the World Nomad Games, I asked them what authenticity meant to them. The answers were perhaps unsurprising but nevertheless insightful:

• 'The way people used to live in the past. Actually everything that you see around here' (Belgian male tourist)
• 'Authenticity is about hospitality; that you are invited to eat their food. This is a value that we have lost in Europe' (Swedish female NGO worker)
• 'That they do it for themselves, rather than turning it into a performance' (English female journalist)
• 'That it is really different; you could say exotic; and not as polished as festivals that are set up for tourists' (American female expat)

These brief responses suggest that for these Western observers, authenticity is indeed about 'referring to itself', but they also revealed that this is judged through an Orientalizing gaze that emphasizes temporal and spatial difference. Moreover, the desire to have an 'authentic' experience is perceived to lead to its demise. Lisette, a Dutch visitor, elaborated as follows on the authenticity of the Nomad Games:

> It is very pure, the people are still really themselves; there are far fewer tourists; the landscape is wild; yes, it really feels like being in a place that hasn't been discovered yet … by tourists, by the large masses. … I do think that this is something that you cannot experience anywhere else in the world.

Lisette had the feeling that she had arrived just in time: 'I think that if you come back here twenty years from now, it will be lost'. And she spoke from experience. She had travelled the world, visiting festivals across Latin America and Africa. But for her, the World Nomad Games stood out.

Some of the reporters, however, were not so sure that the Nomad Games were sufficiently authentic. A journalist for National Geographic (travelling with his colleague) said, 'We don't find it authentic at all. This is clearly meant to preserve the culture, to promote it, a mix of traditional sport and education'. The main problem for them was that their readers look for 'a more authentic experience … while *this*, it's between authenticity and [an archaeological museum]'. Hence, after having spent a day at the WNG, the two men decided to travel deeper into the mountains, in search of more authentic experiences. Many other journalists, whatever their personal views, found ways to present the WNG as sufficiently different or special to their various audiences. They achieved this by resorting to the technique of zooming in on the exotic and the 'authentic', while excluding from their photographs and stories those elements – Western tourists, other journalists, the slick new sports hall – that would make the Nomad Games resemble other festivals or sport events.[23]

The search for uniqueness also revealed a basic miscommunication between foreigners and Kyrgyz, as centred on the concept of authenticity. Although the term exists as a loanword – *avtentichnost'* – it is not widely used. The words that are used instead, such as 'purely' or 'really' Kyrgyz, or 'our customs', do not have the same temporal connotations. The miscommunication was revealed when 'my' journalist asked several Kyrgyz visitors and vendors how authentic the various items sold on the Ethno Bazar were. After I had translated the question into 'purely' Kyrgyz, respondents insisted that *of course* these products were genuinely Kyrgyz. One man picked up a miniature handmade *shyrdak* (felt carpet) and explained: 'this is a traditional Kyrgyz design; we make it as we do; sure, we made it smaller so that tourists can easily transport it, but that doesn't mean that it isn't purely Kyrgyz'. While the foreign gaze judged 'uniqueness' through the othering register of authenticity, 'uniqueness' from a Kyrgyz perspective was about reproducing, and displaying their traditions in the present moment, and presenting these to the world. This outwardly oriented display was exactly what the Western search for authenticity tried to avoid or deny.

This section discussed how foreigners were attracted by and engaged with difference, as reflected in the image of 'Games' that were wilder than the Olympics, of a culture not usually visited by western tourists, of an event that felt to belong to the past and was staged not for tourists but organized for 'the people'. The attraction of difference reflects MacCannell's (1976) classic characterization of tourism as a quest for authenticity, in which value is placed on purity, originality, and genuineness. Whether or not the desire for authenticity constitutes an 'impossible quest' (Bruner 2001: 898), its contradictory features suggest that it is based on a fantasy (Knudsen, Rickly,

and Vidon 2016) and as such cannot help but continue to circle around the 'real' (van de Port and Meyer 2018). Even so, it derives value from that circulation. Given that 'authenticity is, in a sense, in the eye of the beholder' (Garland and Gordon 1999: 280), it depends on a deliberate process of editing and curating, as seen in the selective attention of journalists, and the creativity of other foreigners in imagining their object. This process of curation produced an object that was rather different from that which was seen by Kyrgyz people. This disconnect ironically enabled mutual appreciation between foreigners and Kyrgyz (cf. Mair and Evans 2015), even if it also prevented genuine recognition to be realized.

Recognition, by comparison

For people situated on the margins, the quest for recognition is riddled with tensions. To attract attention, they need to project difference, but to be taken seriously requires conforming to standards. This last section examines the intersection of these centrifugal and centripetal forces. It does so through two concrete examples that successively illuminate the 'integrity' and the 'standing' dimension of recognition, as related to the *comparare* and *compeer* modes of comparison.

> Foreign reporter: 'The fact that a dead goat is involved, does that make it extra authentic?'
> Foreign tourist: 'Yes, that does make it extra authentic, absolutely. Those are the things that are really different; and it is a different culture, so I simply accept that'. (recorded 7/9/2018)

> Scott Zimmerman, the captain of the U.S. *kok boru* team, 'does not expect the sport to get picked up by the Olympics any time soon'.
> New York Times reporter: 'Why not?'
> Scott: 'We use a dead goat' (*The New York Times*, 15/9/2018)

> Anthropologist in reporter mode: 'Why is it that you use a dead goat for kok boru?'
> Male Kyrgyz denizen: 'Because a goat is very sturdy, much sturdier than a sheep. A sheep's skin would simply tear open'. (recorded 8/9/2018)

Goat carcasses clearly capture the foreign gaze, making *kok boru* (and by extension the WNG) authentic to outsiders, while also opening it up to potential ridicule and critique. For the quoted Kyrgyz villager, by contrast, dead goats hardly mattered. It was just that their weight and consistency – being sturdier than sheep – made goats useful objects to play with. These contrasting perspectives were neither monolithic nor immune to each other, and so it will be useful to unpack them.

Though less evocatively than the sturdy-goat-quote, several other Kyrgyz villagers similarly took the goats for granted, saying that this was simply the way *kok boru* had always been played.[24] But in other Kyrgyz circles, there was awareness of the foreign sensitivity to goat carcasses. In fact, the country's successful 2017 bid to have *kok boru* inscribed in UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage had stated in writing that 'nowadays, the goat's carcass is replaced by a moulage' and featured a video which explained that this was done out of respect for other cultures.[25] This was a message tailored to a UNESCO audience; very different from how the WNG audience was engaged. No matter how the decision to play with actual goat carcasses at the Nomad Games was reached, it clearly spoke to the foreign fascination with wildness, difference, and authenticity. It was also in this spirit that a Kyrgyz official repeated the following meme at the start of the *kok boru* competition: 'If Genghis Khan were alive, he'd be here' (see Putz 2016).

As we have seen, most foreigners responded positively to the message of wildness and authenticity, while at the same time being aware of goat carcass sensitivities. The tension was evident in the quoted *New York Times* dialogue, which anticipated an international backlash. It is interesting, though, that such a critique never gained momentum. I managed to track down one online petition set up by an animal rights groups, but it gathered only 3,712 signatures over three years.[26] Another potential line of critique could have focused on the Nomad Games' blatant celebration of masculinity and the underrepresentation of women in many of the sports. Kyrgyzstani scholars Kim and Molchanova, for example, criticize the WNG for failing to 'decolonize' local women and for asserting a new patriarchal ideology (2018). But this message was lost on foreign reporters, possibly because their expectations of Central Asia were such that they were favourably impressed by the relatively vocal role of women during the Games. There also appeared to be little appetite among journalists to criticise a peripheral country (one which had so generously hosted them), and so they resorted instead to the kind of neutralizing logic that I quoted above: 'it is a different culture, so I simply accept that'.[27]

Kyrgyzstan's quest for recognition took place 'under the evaluating gaze of a wider world' (Keane 1997: 14, 17). It projected an image of difference and uniqueness, but the outcome of the resulting politically laden and evaluative interactions was anything but certain. Rather, it was at this intersection of projection and reception that lines of integrity, compromise, and critique were provisionally drawn and redrawn. Emphasizing uniqueness and incomparability was a way of taming external evaluations, giving breathing space to the celebration of culture, while counterbalancing criticism and ridicule. However, while assertions of uniqueness were thus relatively successful, they inadvertently triggered paternalizing attitudes and revealed the fragility of recognition.

The projection of difference helped to attract attention, but some conformism was required to ensure this attention would be respectful. The

implied tensions were especially clear in Kyrgyzstan's effort to move beyond cultural celebration and assert its superiority in the field of sport. That is, claims of 'incomparability' did not only project difference, but also superior standing. And this, as noted, could only be demonstrated through active comparison. A good illustration of this principle was in the counting of medals for each sport, which culminated in the final WNG medal table (See http://worldnomadgames.com/en/medals/).

The first point to emphasize is that there is nothing special about the way in which this medal table is composed. As such, it is 'instantly recognizable' as a medal table. In line with common practice in most modern sports, the medals are divided into gold, silver, and bronze. Moreover, medallists are categorized by country, rather than nomadic tribe or group, or regional affiliation. As such the table reflects the pull towards standardization. But what also stands out is the unusual ranking. Despite being represented by significant numbers of athletes, the largest sport nations – the United States and China – rank twenty-third and fourteenth, respectively. By contrast, the most prominent positions were occupied by countries that hardly feature in the Olympics. Kyrgyzstan proudly on top, followed by other Central Asian countries (as well as Russia), then Hungary and Iran.

To many Kyrgyz in the audience, the table demonstrated the superiority of nomadic culture. It was an obviously attractive message, as reflected in the high frequency with which this table was displayed on national television channels. Most foreigners however – athletes, journalists, and tourists alike – remained unconvinced. Some voiced suspicion of manipulation or corruption, others pointed out that the 'playing field' was uneven and unduly benefited Kyrgyz players. A German archer insisted: 'The only reason we are here is to allow the Kyrgyz to give their victories legitimacy, to show that they are the best', not just of five neighbouring countries, but of all eighty or so participating countries. Obviously, the presence of foreign athletes was required to turn the event into the *World* Nomad Games. Such sceptical attitudes revealed that the assertion of dominance had the potential to backfire and did not produce the *genuine* recognition that was so desired.

As was pointed out earlier in this chapter, frustration with the Olympics had been a motivation for organising the World Nomad Games. Indeed, the Games embodied a challenge to a hegemonic comparative framework that was rightly seen to reproduce inequalities. But rather than displacing the framework, the WNG selectively borrowed elements from it and integrated these into an alternative framework, which generated new inequalities. Nevertheless, I suggest that the challenge was valuable in and of itself, because it made visible (to those who cared to look) that terms of comparison are never neutral, even (or especially) when they are presented as such. The resentment of peripheral groups towards mainstream international competitions is not just understandable but sometimes justified.

In these final paragraphs, I return to this chapter's title, and central theme, of 'recognizing uniqueness'. We saw how the WNG were created with the aim

to claim a spot on the global stage, while drawing attention to the country's cultural traditions. Significantly, the projection of cultural uniqueness resonated with foreign visitors in search of unique experiences. Perceptions about the 'unique object' certainly differed, but as long as these differences were left untranslated, mutual appreciation developed. Foreign visitors were positively disposed towards the Games' unusual features and the hospitable and organic atmosphere, and Kyrgyz denizens enjoyed the competitions and performances, as well as the unprecedented foreign interest in their cultural practices and sport traditions. Still, various pressures pushed towards explicating these differences: the Kyrgyz sought evidence of recognition against a global scoreboard; visitors turned their 'authentic experience' into exoticized representations. This raised the stakes of comparison, resulting in a situation in which comparability was denied by those whose claims depended on comparative acts.

The implied vagaries of recognition were illuminated by dissecting the modes of (non-)comparison involved and differentiating between the *comparare* and a *compeer* modes. When foreigners emphasized difference and authenticity, they used the *comparare* mode, which resonated with the Kyrgyz desire to celebrate the uniqueness of Kyrgyz culture. The denial of this type of comparability emphasized difference, thereby counteracting the 'prickliness' of comparison and safeguarding the integrity of the recognized object. But the quest for recognition also entailed a desire for status and standing, which resonated with the *compeer* mode of comparison and was especially visible in competitions. For the Kyrgyz athletes and their supporters, the WNG was an opportunity to claim their spot on the world stage and overcome their experienced marginalization. This required producing evidence of superiority, something that could only be produced by making differences commensurate. Perhaps unavoidably, this opened the Nomad Games to critique, and prevented Kyrgyz uniqueness from being fully recognized.

Notes

1 As I suggested in the introductory chapter, 'the particular is particular only in comparison to something else'.
2 The idea here is that after the invention of the gun, Europeans no longer engaged in honest fighting, with the result that they lost their 'manly' qualities of bravery, virility, and mastery.
3 I am grateful to Nicholas Long for drawing my attention to these etymological nuances.
4 The first recorded uses of the Kyrgyz term for 'comparing' (*salyshtyruu*) were in reference to horses, such as in the phrase 'let the horses compete' (*zhorgo salyshtyr*), which similarly points to the 'testing for equality' meaning. However, as with the Russian and English counterparts, the term is used flexibly in everyday communication, where it can refer not just to standing but also to other similarities and differences.

5 In his sweeping analysis, Taylor suggests that when the vertical networks of belonging of medieval society started to be replaced with horizontal ones of the modern nation state, there was a concomitant shift from the value registers of honour and loyalty to those of dignity and equality (1994: 25).

6 As circulated on Twitter and Instagram, http://ift.tt/2bWFr3x, last accessed 3 April 2021.

7 This principle has been widely discussed in regional scholarship; for an insightful analysis see Slezkine (1994).

8 I highlight the example of wrestling because the most detailed and convincing analysis of how sport traditions developed in the USSR is by Petrov (2014), who focuses on the emergence of national styles of wrestling.

9 Joachim Otto Habeck (2011) makes a related point about the importance of Soviet cultural programmes for inclusive purposes at the local level, arguing that the institution of the House of Culture (*dom kul'tura*) – the locus for communal activities – served to give people a sense of belonging and dignity.

10 See Dzenovska (2005) and Fauve (2015) for discussions of nation-branding in the post-Soviet contexts of Latvia and Kazakhstan, respectively.

11 As reported by Alisher Khamidov, 14 September 2014, https://eurasianet.org/kyr gyzstan-hosts-first-world-nomad-games-but-can-they-unite-the-nation

12 In 2018, it was rumoured that Turkey paid a significant sum of money to Kyrgyzstan for this privilege. The 2020 Turkish edition was postponed twice, now scheduled to be held in 2022 in Iznik. In April 2021, Kyrgyzstan's minister of foreign affairs advocated to return the WNG to Kyrgyzstan in 2024. See: http:// en.kabar.kg/news/4th-world-nomad-games-in-turkey-postponed-to-2022/

13 The more modest 2014 edition had come at a cost of only 3 million US dollars. The risen costs were a sensitive issue, and it's probably not a coincidence that when I interviewed Prime Minister Isakov in 2018 he claimed that the total cost was only 4 million, a number also printed in WNG communications.

14 This form of outsourcing by decree is very common in Kyrgyzstan and is referred to as a typical 'Soviet way of organizing events'. It usually triggers feelings of resentment, which in this case were particularly strong among those who do not identify with Kyrgyz culture, such as members of the Russian minority.

15 Istanbul made bids to host the Olympics in 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2020, but did not succeed.

16 In challenging these global sport asymmetries, the WNG can be compared to the equally new World Indigenous Games (first held in Brazil in 2015), and the slightly older World Games (for Non-Olympic Sports).

17 I should note that in some instances regional variation was expressed. The Buryati and Kalmuks, as well as the *kok boru* team from Wyoming, waved their regional flags, but they were still encompassed within their respective Russian and American national teams (with concomitant flags).

18 The man used the Russian word *priroda*, which translates as both environment and nature.

19 This is based on the misguided stereotype that Mongolia is a largely flat country.

20 A wrestling judge from the Netherlands (born and raised in Chechnya) told me: 'the culture here is that the host should win; that we should help them'. To him, this was typical of sport events in the former USSR.

21 My justification for having accepted these benefits is to actually have coproduced a 10-minute television item which was aired during prime time on a main Dutch

channel – the kind of production that the WNG organization would have appreciated. Readers with knowledge of Dutch can check this out at: https://een vandaag.avrotros.nl/item/nederland-scoort-op-world-nomad-games/

22 Adopted from an official hand-out to all journalists on the final day of the Games: 'III Vsemirnye igry kochevnikov: tsifry i fakty' [The 3rd World Nomad Games: numbers and facts].

23 In the television reportage I coproduced, the 'authentic' was found by zooming in on two Dutch wrestlers of Chechen origin, who presented their journey to the World Nomad Games as a sort of homecoming, in which they elaborately commented on those aspects that reminded them of their youth.

24 In the more distant past, it may have been played with a wolf (*kok boru* translates as blue/grey wolf) but this is beyond human memory; in any case the game's village version is often called *ulak tartysh*, or 'grab the goat'.

25 The various documents can be found at https://ich.unesco.org/en/11b-represe ntative-list-00939

26 https://forcechange.com/514370/ban-goat-carcass-polo-and-other-cruel-nomad-games/

27 An American *kok boru* player expressed the same logic when saying that dead goats are 'part of the culture that we are here to experience', adding that the winning team gets to eat the goat (*New York Times* 15/9/18).

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4 Totemic comparisons; or, how things compose in Southeast Solomon Islands

Michael W. Scott

A young couple is told they cannot marry; they share too much ancestral substance. A man who purchased land from the winning party to a land court case is killed by a tree-fall in the disputed area, and the loser quietly takes this as vindication of her claim. The people of a coastal village say they live and grow their food where they do because, several generations ago, a recognized chief settled their ancestors on the land. A man has a dream in which he is chased by something with a bright light 'like a torch' after visiting an old pre-Christian funerary shrine containing human bones. A woman inspects the hands of a visiting anthropologist for signs that he may be a long-lost member of her matrilineage, returning to his ancestral land.

All of these situations are drawn from my research with the Arosi, a population of Austronesian-speaking Melanesians whose home region, also called Arosi, lies at the northwest end of the island of Makira in the nation-state of Solomon Islands. Admittedly, there is little in these incidents – apart from the simile 'like a torch' used to describe a bright light experienced in a dream – that self-evidently involves the making of comparisons. Yet it will be my aim in this chapter to show how these and other scenarios from my field research are indicative of how Arosi compare. Each in its own way, I will argue, entails a specific method of comparison conditioned by the ontological premises that constitute the distinctive Arosi variant of totemism I call poly-ontology.

As this thesis statement announces, my approach to the comparative study of how people compare locates that enquiry within the wider project of comparative ontology that has always been the focus of my research (Scott 2007b: 3–36). It has been my longstanding conviction that much of what anthropologists call cultural difference flows from differing collectively held and resilient yet mutable primary assumptions about the number and nature of existents and the relations that prevail within and/or among them (Scott 2014b: 32). Building on the neo-structuralism of Marshall Sahlins (1985), I have argued that such primary ontological premises both inform and are transformed by human social practices. With respect to any particular practice or social form, I have urged that anthropologists must ask whether it indexes assumptions about the deepest stratum of ontology

(that which is posited as given and therefore potentially resurgent) or assumptions about secondary or even tertiary strata of ontology (that which is posited as achieved and therefore potentially in need of maintenance). Described by others as the comparative study of 'deep ontologies' (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: 55–65), my approach to comparative ontology clearly has much in common with the work of Philippe Descola (2013; cf. Scott 2014a). Like Descola, I look for the different fundamental ontological premises that make consistent and systematic practical differences among the worlds composed by different historical collectives. And, as I will explain, I see mutually corroborating findings between my analyses of Arosi poly-ontology and Descola's reconstruction of totemism as an ontology. Hence, my title – 'totemic comparisons' – which declares an intention to theorize how the ontological premises of totemism inflect comparative practices.

Like any comparative study, this one must begin with a coherent account of the comparandum (that which is being compared) – in this case, comparison itself. What is comparison and how do we recognize it? Drawing on the work of Bruno Latour (2010, 2013), I seek first of all to outline a methodological meta-ontology (cf. Scott 2014b) that enables me to do two things: develop an account of comparison as the universal means of composition and redescribe the comparison of deep ontologies as the comparison of modes of comparison. These modes of comparison, I will argue, are not more or less accurate cultural representations of a given and objective nature; they are worlds premised on deep comparisons and sustained by further acts of compositional comparison. This approach helps us to recognize *as comparisons* even the simplest associations between entities of every kind, whether human or otherwise.

With this compositionist methodological meta-ontology in place, I provide ethnographic support for the generalization that the totemic world Arosi compose displays as its primary mode of relation (*sensu* Descola) a form of exchange I call 'adumbration'. Adumbration leads, I contend, to a lived Arosi situation of entanglement among matrilineal categories that motivates at least four analytically distinguishable methods of comparison. Illustrating each with examples from my field research, I designate these ways of comparing 'reckoning relations', 'determining alterity', 'recognizing identity', and 'ranking relations'.

Deep ontologies as modes of comparison: a compositionist approach

In one of the most ambitious and potentially transformative comparative projects of the twenty-first century, Bruno Latour (2013) has redescribed the Moderns as a collective that composes a pluriverse of fifteen (so far recognized) 'modes of existence' (e.g., 'law', 'technology', 'politics', 'religion', 'fiction'). Further developing his earlier actor network theory, Latour argues that each mode of existence is a network of associations that institutes and

delivers *a specific kind of being*: the beings of law, technology, politics, religion, fiction, etc. (2013: 31–3). To pursue an analysis of any of these networks of association, he says, is to explore 'the entities required for the existence of another entity' (2013: 35); it is to encounter and trace out the reality that, in order to persist, every kind of thing must connect with unexpected heterogeneous others. To cite one of Latour's own examples: in order for a being of the mode he calls 'reference', such as a scientifically demonstrated constant about a yeast culture, to exist, it must 'pass through' diverse others, such as 'a photograph, a table of figures, a diagram, an equation, a caption, a title, a summary, a paragraph, and an article', sometimes repeatedly (2013: 39; cf. 1999: 24–79).

But as this example intimates, such processes of association are not radically free associations; every kind of thing is composed – *by* associations – so as to associate in its own definitive way. Although every mode of existence is similarly a network of associations, each exhibits a distinctive 'prepositional' manner of associating that indicates 'the type of connections that allow its extension' (Latour 2013: 62). Like the grammatical concept of preposition, Latour's concept of preposition describes relations rather than terms. But he also suggests that each mode of existence, in order to remain viable, requires a particular relational pattern. To extend the analogy with grammatical preposition, it is as if there could be ways of being that require, respectively, relations of 'with-ness', 'after-ness', 'between-ness', etc. (Latour 2013: 57). Thus, whereas the mode of existence Latour calls 'reproduction' depends on relations that enable the beings it institutes (e.g., mountains, lineages, societies) to remain relatively stable, the mode of existence he calls 'metamorphosis' depends on relations that enable the beings it institutes (e.g., influences, divinities, psyches) to be experienced as other and to make a difference to others (Latour 2013: 488–9). Or, to anticipate the analysis towards which I am building, the form of totemism I call Arosi poly-ontology depends on relations that enable the beings it institutes (i.e., autonomous matrilineal categories and persons and polities as sites of inter-lineage entanglement) to achieve a balance between isolation and confusion. This, I will show, is what the totemic comparisons previewed above are pre-positioned to do.

I read Latour as saying that preposition marks the trajectories of beings in each of his modes of existence in at least two ways. First, the preposition of each mode 'announces' (Latour 2013: 264) a proclivity to find ways of associating with others by presenting certain affordances (rather than others) and finding certain affordances (rather than others) presented by others. This first proclivity conditions and is conditioned by another: a proclivity to associate extensively with certain kinds of others (rather than other kinds of others) owing to the affordances they present. To use Latour's language, the preposition of a mode specifies not only its 'felicity conditions' (the network of particular associations that best sustains a trajectory of associations in that mode), but also its 'hiatuses' (the kinds of entities that trajectories in

that mode find harder to connect with or pass through); too many hiatuses, or a hiatus that proves impassable, can create trajectory-threatening 'infelicity conditions' (Latour 2013: 56–8, 100–2).

By Latour's criteria, network and preposition are both modes of existence in themselves, but together – in a mode-configuring 'crossing' – they compose every mode as unique. And this trans-modal yet always singular crossing is what 'authorizes' his inquiry as a comparative study; it is what ensures that each of the modes is a differently composed kind of network of associations (Latour 2013: 62, 63).

Latour is at pains to stress, however, that each mode is more than simply a network-preposition crossing. Prepositions, he tells us, 'indicate the direction of a trajectory' (2013: 264) by signalling what kinds of association are felicitous for a particular network, but they do not thereby generate the associations that come to constitute a network as a trajectory of continuous associations. The latter, he says, is the work of the mode of existence he calls 'habit' (2013: 264–5). Informed by but also obscuring preposition, habit – the unreflexive, routinized repetition of particular associations – is what enables each mode of existence to become entitative, to hold its shape while passing discontinuously through many other entities. Habit is nothing less, in fact, than the mode through which all things acquire their essence. Accordingly, like network and preposition, habit is a trans-modal mode constitutive of all the modes as networks that institute particular types of beings.

In theoretical discussion, the constitutive elements of each mode of existence (network, preposition, habit) can appear as if given. But it is crucial to remember that Latour presupposes the methodological meta-ontology he dubs 'compositionism' (2010). As this name suggests, a compositionist ontology is one in which there are no given wholes at any scale and 'things have to be put together' (2010: 473) or composed. Everything is thus subject to recomposition and decomposition at every turn, and the important question is not whether something is given or made but whether something is well or badly composed (2010: 474). And it is not just humans who do the composing. Compositionism treats meaning and materiality as coeval and inseparable and recognizes that signification is universal, beyond the human. It recognizes that to be at all is both to have been composed by means of significations and to compose by means of significations. Compositionism ignores, that is to say, the nature-culture distinction central to Cartesian dualism (a feature of the ontology Descola calls 'naturalism'; see below). But it is not, for that, either monistic or pluralistic, as these presume one or many given wholes. Compositionism posits only an infinite regress and expansion of particular compositions and offers no account of ultimate origins. Neither does it identify any compositional entity as the consequence of any particular cause. Latour makes no attempt to theorize how the 15 modes of existence he describes for the Moderns came to be composed as things in themselves. As a compositionist anthropologist, he composes them as beings

of the mode he calls reference, inferring their composition from how they compose. He reduces them in parallel to a set of useful constants offered as social scientific knowledge about the Moderns (see esp. Latour's 'pivot table', 2013: 488–9).

My suggestion at this juncture is that Latour's networks of association can be redescribed – or, indeed, recomposed – as networks of comparison. This redescription facilitates two others. First, it enables me to redescribe the kinds of deep ontologies Descola and I have sought to compare as modes of existence in their own right – as networks of comparison differentiated by distinctive deep prepositional comparisons. So redescribed, they appear comparable to Latour's modes of existence as beings of reference: beings instituted, in this instance, as social scientific knowledge about diverse collectives. This chain of redescriptions serves, moreover, to redescribe the comparative study of deep ontologies in compositionist terms.

It is not difficult to rethink networks of association as networks of comparison. As the sites of connection that enable entities to pass through one another on their discontinuous trajectories of continuity, associations imply the making of distinctions, acts of differentiation between entities, or aspects of entities, that may afford easier or better passage and those that may not. Even the seemingly smooth pathways of habit are composed by myriad selection/deselection events signalled by prepositions which have themselves been composed by such events. To redescribe association as comparison is simply to highlight this process as the fundamental mode of composition. Comparison is the universal relative constant, the process in which everything engages, differently. And, if networks of association are networks of comparison, then modes of existence, as networks of association, are networks of comparison.

Once it is recognized that the kinds of deep ontologies – such as totemic poly-ontology – that Descola and I have theorized are likewise networks of comparison, announced by definitive prepositional comparisons, then these deep ontologies come into view as modes of existence with their own habit-supported historical trajectories. And Latour's concept of preposition comes into view, at the same time, as deep comparison – as the deepest stratum of comparison that informs subsequent habit-based trajectories of comparison in any particular ontology/mode of existence.

In my approach to the comparative study of ontologies, I have built on the philosophy of Roy Bhaskar (e.g., 1994) to suggest that ontologies, as lived worlds, may be thought of as stratified, multi-layered. They exhibit primary ontological premises, such as 'everything is fundamentally one' (monism), or 'there are many fundamentally different entities' (pluralism), or 'there are no given wholes at any scale, only particular networks of association' (compositionism) as their deepest stratum of ontology. But they also exhibit secondary ontological premises, such as 'differences are made over against a given unity and must be continuously remade', or 'relations are made over against a given atomism and must be continuously remade', or 'networks

compose over against other networks and recompose one another'. And these in turn may shape tertiary ontological premises, such as 'too much differentiation can lead to isolation', or 'too much relating can lead to the confusion of categories', or 'too much recomposition can lead to decomposition' (cf. Scott 2007b: 18–24).

What I have called the deepest level of ontology implies, I now see, fundamental comparisons, primary determinations about whether and how things are related and how they may best continue to relate. As I will explicate more fully below, I have analyzed Arosi discursive and non-discursive practices as indicative of an ontology I call poly-ontology. By this, I mean that Arosi life appears to be informed by a primary premise that socio-cosmic order is composed by and as a plurality of radically distinct categories of being (what Descola might call totemic classes), all of which comprise both human and non-human entities, including land. Note that although this premise correlates with a socio-cosmic order that must be made, Arosi poly-ontology is not a compositionist ontology, as it is predicated on a plurality of given wholes with discrete punctiliar origins. Socio-cosmic order depends on the formation and re-formation of external relations among these categories, which Arosi treat as having no intrinsic pre-relations. Put another way, Arosi poly-ontology is constituted by a set of two preliminary or deep comparisons: one made across a series of parallel fundamental categories that finds them wholly dissimilar, and one made among the entities within any such category that finds them essentially the same.

What I have called the deepest level of ontology corresponds, that is to say, with what Latour calls preposition. Both entail deep comparisons that propose the felicity conditions and hiatuses characteristic of a mode of existence as a network of ongoing comparisons. As prepositional comparisons, the first-order premises of Arosi poly-ontology signal that, in order for the beings of poly-ontology to thrive as ongoing trajectories in that mode, they must compare in ways that strike a balance between remaking external relations among autonomous categories and sustaining the integrity of each category. In the pursuit of this balance, the absolute alterity of the (totemic) categories vis-à-vis one another continually presents hiatuses not only to cohesive socio-cosmic order but also to the integrity of each category. Yet, as my ethnography below elaborates, these mutually exclusive categories are also the beings through which each category habitually passes when this mode of existence is successfully instituting pure Arosi categories, on the one hand, and mixed multi-category persons and polities, on the other.

Comparing my approach to that of Descola (2013), it is even more evident that the deep ontologies he calls 'modes of identification' can be redescribed as networks of comparison defined by deep prepositional comparisons. Descola theorizes four different modes of identification – animism, naturalism, analogism, and totemism – as four different ways in which any human being may compare itself to other entities, human and non-human. Each mode describes a determination as to whether self and

other are ontologically continuous or discontinuous with respect to two aspects of being: 'internality' and 'physicality'. Humans, I take Descola to be saying, are so composed as to compose in any of the four following ways. Animism posits continuity of internality between self and others but discontinuity of physicality; naturalism posits discontinuity of internality between self and (non-human) others but continuity of physicality; analogism posits discontinuity of both internality and physicality between self and others; and totemism (like Arosi poly-ontology) posits continuity of both internality and physicality between self and others *within* each of several classes or categories (Descola 2013: 115–25).

But, like Latourian preposition, Descola's modes of identification do not generate or cause trajectories of ongoing comparison. Rather, each of the forms of identification 'defines a specific style of relations with the world' (Descola 2013: 309). By engaging in these styles or 'modes of relation', human beings compose animistic, naturalist, analogistic, and totemic trajectories of comparison as *lived worlds*. It could be said, in fact, that like Latourian 'habit', modes of relation that become dominant for particular collectives give those collectives their essences as historical realities. Dominant modes of relation are what further differentiate among collectives already differentiated from others by the same mode of identification (Descola 2013: 310).

To sum up, then: what Descola and I have referred to as ontologies may be recomposed as modes of existence in the Latourian sense. As such, ontologies are networks of association and thus of comparison. More specifically, they are networks defined by primary comparisons that lead on to secondary and tertiary comparisons. They entail deep prepositional comparisons, or modes of identification, that point the way for further habitual comparisons, or modes of relation; and it is these layers of comparison that institute ontologies as the diverse worlds of actual collectives.

It is comparison all the way down, in other words. Everything is composed by and as comparison; compositional becoming is comparison. Accordingly, for the ethnographer, the relevant questions are not what is comparison and how do I recognize it, but what kind of comparison am I encountering? What trajectory of becoming does it extend or fail to extend? What deep prepositional comparisons does it imply? What hiatuses is it negotiating? Bearing these kinds of questions in mind, I return now to the incidents from Arosi life with which I began.

Arosi: adumbration and its methods of comparison

The mode of existence/comparison I have analyzed as Arosi poly-ontology (e.g., Scott 2007b, 2016) may be further specified in the following terms: it is a non-Cartesian pluralist essentialism in which a variety of autonomously arising, heterogeneously autochthonous Makiran entities persist as and through mutually exclusive matrilineal categories. Being thus a form of

matrilineal essentialism (cf. Macintyre 1989; Thune 1989; Young 1987), Arosi poly-ontology differs not only from Cartesian dualism but also from the relationist ontology implied by the models of Melanesian personhood and sociality developed by Roy Wagner (e.g., 1991) and Marilyn Strathern (e.g., 1988), according to which (as in compositionism) there are no given wholes at any scale. What Arosi poly-ontology most resembles, as I have already suggested, is totemism as re-theorized by Descola.

In his re-description of totemism as an ontology, Descola (2013: 264) observes that a totemic class is a collective of humans and non-humans posited as 'an ontological totality rooted in a common space'. Each such emplaced collective is a primordially discrete, self-same consubstantiality, co-existing in radical discontinuity with a plurality of other such 'isomorphic and complementary collectives' (Descola 2013: 258). In many ways, this account, based primarily on the ethnography of Aboriginal Australia, is an accurate description of how Arosi view their matrilineal categories. But, as the term 'matrilineal essentialism' suggests, the continuity of humans through women, going back to diverse proto-human progenitors, appears to be more salient here than in Australia in defining and sustaining the whole of a category. Arosi experience matrilineal ancestors, and ancestral territory in a variety of forms, as same-category social agents, but most non-human beings and the means of their replenishment command little human attention.

Arosi say that the human members of a matrilineage are not related; they are 'just one' (*ta'i moi*). It might seem at first glance, therefore, that this identity of being precludes comparison within a matrilineal category. Descola argues, in fact, that there is no meaningful 'mode of relation' proper to totemic classes in themselves: 'no veritable relations can exist between the members of a totemic group' (2013: 398). For this reason, the chief mode of relation he ascribes to totemism is exchange *between* totemic classes, a mode of relation he describes as 'symmetrical'. '[I]t is hardly surprising', he writes

> that exchange should be the dominant schema into which their [inter-class] links are subsumed …. Exchanges of women, exchanges of services, exchanges of foodstuffs, and exchanges of resources: the round of transactions is incessant …
>
> (Descola 2013: 399)

'Exchange' is clearly an appropriate term for how Arosi matrilineal categories interrelate, and these categories may fairly be described as symmetrical – in the sense of being equal in the abstract. Yet this description may understate the way in which every kind of inter-lineal relation among Arosi involves the contextual overshadowing of one or several categories by another as part of the latter's efforts to maintain its own continuity of being. At every site of Arosi inter-lineal connection, there is always one matrilineal category that enjoys a situational ascendency to which one or

more others are submitting. In any Arosi village, for example, people from diverse matrilineages live together under the 'ruling shadow' (*marungi*) of 'the original matrilineage of the land' (*burunga i auhenua*) at that place. This kind of contextual asymmetry is fully reversible, resulting in a sense of general symmetry among categories. Every matrilineage is not only 'up' in some connections but also 'down' in others, and even though everyone hopes to be recognized as 'up' in his or her own matrilineal territory vis-à-vis people from elsewhere, no matrilineage is recognized as everywhere or always dominant.

In order, therefore, to capture a sense of how this totemic mode of relation relies on many multi-sited acts of overshadowing and being overshadowed, I call it 'adumbration' rather than exchange. In so doing, I repurpose what has become a relatively rare connotation of this word available from its Latin etymology; rather than using it to mean either 'to foreshadow' or 'to give a vague outline', I intend it to mean 'to overshadow', 'to shade', or 'to obscure'. Arosi adumbration, as I will explain, entails at least four subsidiary methods of comparison: those of 'reckoning relations', 'determining alterity', 'recognizing identity', and 'ranking relations'. These methods of comparison are all complex forms of network association; each, according to its own set of criteria, works to overcome hiatuses and achieve passes for the ongoing trajectories of Arosi matrilineal categories and their inter-lineal polities. Engaged with the relations and non-relations that matter according to Arosi poly-ontology, they are how Arosi compare.

Arosi matrilineal categories depend on adumbration for their ongoing existence. The language Arosi use to talk about a matrilineage conjures up images of an unbroken line. Favoured Arosi figures for a matrilineage are a *waipo* (an umbilical cord), a *warowaro* (a sweet potato runner), and a *mwaa* (a snake, the chief form in which an ancestral power is said to appear). Yet, despite assertions that the power of each matrilineal category continues unbroken from mother to daughter, the fact is that these lines of continuity achieve their continuity through discontinuity: through intersection with one another. To return to the terminology of Latour, one of the many 'hiatuses' faced by every matrilineage is its inability to reproduce autonomously. In order to achieve a 'pass' over this hiatus, every matrilineage must enter into adumbrating relations of exogamous reproduction with others. Exogamy is always the rupturing impact of one category upon another. But it is the ruptured category that adumbrates its assailant. The woman's category allows itself to be 'cut' by the man's, but in so doing, it overrides and uses the man's category for its own purposes of self-perpetuation (Scott 2007b: 141–52, 288–95).

Owing to these and other substance-imparting practices, adumbration resides *within* and defines the Arosi person. A person, according to Arosi, is a site of 'entanglement' (*haikawikawi* or *haia'ia'i*) among the diverse matrilineal continuities that have, over the course of several generations, fed into the production of his or her parents and come together to make

a new person. Additionally, a person's in-born inter-lineage entanglements may be reinforced or widened by sustained relations with people who have contributed to their formation: a midwife, a wet-nurse, someone who regularly fed them, or the person who named them. This entanglement is not limitlessly cumulative, however. Even as a matrilineal category gets extended from mother to daughter, the other categories with which it intersects and 'mixes' are said gradually to become diluted in subsequent generations. After a negotiable number of generations – sometimes said to be five – any particular entanglement ends.

It must be emphasized, furthermore, that, unlike the relational 'Melanesian person' theorized by Strathern (1988), the entangled Arosi person is not a 'composite' with no core essence (Scott 2007a, 2007b). Arosi assert that the component one receives matrilineally – which they speak of as the *mena* or 'power' of matrilineal blood – remains pure and overpowers all others, whatever their source. Like people from elsewhere who live under the ruling shadow of the original matrilineage of a place, the father's matrilineal category, along with all those still present from antecedent generations or other substance-imparting relations, converge within a person under the ruling shadow of the mother's category. A person is 'related to' (*haito'oranga'i*) all these other matrilineages but is 'simply one' with his or her mother's matrilineage. At the same time, there are always strangers to whom a person is not related at all – not by reason of matrilineal identity, but by reason of radical original alterity. Such strangers belong to categories with which one, or one's own category, no longer has, or never has had, any substance-mixing relations.

As already intimated, there is a basic formal analogy between an Arosi person and an Arosi polity. Both are constituted as sites of inter-lineage entanglement grounded in one ruling matrilineal category. The original lineage of the land in any particular place is like the adumbrating matrilineal substance within the person, and the people of other matrilineages who dwell in their land are like the paternal and other substances that are adumbrated within the person by their maternal category. This creates a simple order of precedence between the lineage of the land (*burunga i auhenua*) and the people from elsewhere (*sae bo boi*). And just as mixed persons are generated by relations of exogamy and other entangling practices, so also are mixed polities. Married men typically bring their wives to live where they have grown up, resulting in a common pattern of brothers and their wives raising families in close proximity. This system of patri-virilocality means that many people at any given place are *sae bo boi* rather than *auhenua* (autochthonous) where they reside. At the same time, there are other means of encompassing *sae bo boi* within a polity. A personal name, for example, can give its present bearer access to land where an earlier namesake lived and worked, regardless of the matrilineal identity of either party. And it is the prerogative of chiefs, deemed to act on behalf of the *auhenua* of a place, to welcome and settle strangers on the

land. Given that every person is a site of entanglement, every community is thus an entanglement of entanglements.

Taken together, the four methods of comparison I am about to describe are means by which Arosi seek to occupy what we might call the space of adumbration (cf. Viveiros de Castro 2004: 10) – the poly-ontological Goldilocks zone between the chaos of sequestered categories and the chaos of centreless complex interconnections. All four serve one or both of two equally necessary yet sometimes competing ends: they sustain the integrity of discrete matrilineal categories and/or they sustain the cohesion of entangled social polities.

Much of Arosi social life is organized by the method of comparison I call 'reckoning relations'. This mode of comparison reinforces the entanglements without which Arosi polities would face the hiatus of frayed and inactive inter-lineal connections, leading to centrifugal breakdown. The reckoning of relations involves comparing the multi-category make-ups of two or more people (usually inclusive of oneself), who are known to belong to different matrilineages, and affirming that, as a result of past adumbrations, they share some common substance, sometimes referred to as 'love' (*haita'ahi*). When two previously unfamiliar people meet and, in comparing themselves this way, reckon a relation, this is a source of great satisfaction and can form the basis for ongoing contacts and mutual support. This happens infrequently, however. Generally, in everyday village life, people operate with an adequate awareness of their inter-lineal connections and do not need to re-reckon them with every interaction. Even if adults cannot fully rehearse their often multiple links with others, they are expected to have acquired a good sense of their local entanglements.

This kind of kinship knowledge is crucial for proper Arosi sociality. It informs such things as people's assumptions about from whom, outside their respective matrilineages, they may freely seek hospitality and to whom they are most obliged to give it. It guides how they recognize and treat those, beyond the members of their own matrilineage, with whom they may not marry. It conditions their participation in the pooling of resources for projects like building a house, discharging a debt, or gathering a brideprice payment. And it can influence whether a person feels comfortable approaching one, but not another, of the many pre-Christian burial sites known as *hera* that still dot the Arosi landscape.

This last situation highlights something important: this inquiry into how Arosi compare must acknowledge that it is not just humans who compare. Certain kinds of events – or, rather, non-events – within the land of any given matrilineal category may be interpreted as signs that the category, in one of its other-than-human forms, has compared itself to a particular entangled human and reckoned a relation. The ancestral powers known as *adaro* appear, in fact, to be the very best reckoners of relations. Even though Arosi adhere to various forms of Christianity, they assume that *adaro* remain integral to their land. Said to be especially active near *hera*,

adaro are credited with an infallible ability to discern who among the living belongs to their own matrilineal category and who is still related to their category through past adumbrations. These people they will protect, or at least leave unperturbed. They will recognize the children and grandchildren of lineage males, for example, and remain quiescent if these non-matrilineal descendants approach one of their *hera*. People who understand themselves to be entangled with the matrilineage of a place can thus feel confident of safety even if they stumble across one of these often overgrown and obscured burial sites.

At the same time, there is an obvious counterpart to this mode of comparison, namely, the mode of determining alterity. *Adaro* are also infallible at this. They are credited with the ability to detect strangers in their land – people with no previous or abiding connections to their category – and repel or even kill them. Arosi say that, if a stranger goes near a *hera*, even inadvertently, or takes things without asking, or disregards the authority of the matrilineage of the land, then 'something will happen'. The ancestral *adaro* of the matrilineage may cause an intruder to fall ill or become confused; or they may appear as snakes or some other threatening manifestation. One man who helped me with my research experienced this in a dream after taking me to inspect an old coastal *hera*. The next morning, he told me he had not slept well; he had woken from a dream in which someone was coming towards him with a strong light 'like a torch'. This told him he had been scrutinized and warned off from the *hera* by *adaro* who regarded him as other. If people think that the living have wrongly reckoned a relation – especially a relation to place – where none exists, they may look to the judgement of *adaro* for the last word. A woman I got to know well was bitter at having lost a land court case against a party she deemed to be strangers to her matrilineal land. She interpreted the fact that the winning party sold the land as an admission that they were usurpers; in her view, they did not want to work the land for fear of reprisals from *adaro*, so they took the money instead. When the man who bought the land was soon killed there by a falling tree, the woman was confident that it was the wrath of the *adaro* that had fallen on him because he too was an alien usurper.

Humans, of course, likewise engage in this mode of comparison. Arosi employ it, for example, in order to propose and approve marriage partnerships. It must be determined that prospective marriage partners are not only members of different matrilineages but also unrelated through entanglement. Sometimes it takes several people or even a *sae aidangi*, someone noted for especially deep and broad knowledge of kinship relations, to agree that two people may marry. If enough people concur in reckoning a relation between the parties, the marriage will be strongly discouraged. Determining alterity is thus doubly crucial to Arosi sociality. Whereas *adaro* perform this kind of comparison in order to defend their categories against the hiatus of territorial take-over by outsiders, the living perform it, not to preserve their categories from the isolating implosion of true intra-lineal

endogamy, but to ensure that inter-lineal connections expand through new links rather than contract with repetitions.

A third mode of comparison – recognizing identity – also displays this double aspect. In order to maintain their continuity, Arosi matrilineages must constantly work to replenish their numbers in what they take to be their ancestral land. Owing to patri-virilocality, they must try to recall children to their land and, in a practical sense, disentangle them from their non-matrilineal ties elsewhere. Normally, people's knowledge of who belongs to their matrilineage and where they are dispersed is sufficient for this task. But because there is no generational time limit on consubstantiality within a matrilineal category, the existence of unknown matrilineage members, descended from matrilineal ancestresses of the distant past and dispersed beyond Makira, is a real and widely imagined possibility. The mode of comparison I call recognizing identity aims to reclaim such unknown people, should they return to Arosi, based on somatic and temperamental characteristics and ancestral knowledge said to distinguish one matrilineage from another. This method of comparison may look as though it is concerned exclusively with recouping lost members in order to reconcentrate the power of a matrilineage in its land, but as the following example shows, it can also be about positioning a matrilineage within global entanglements.

During my doctoral research in the early 1990s, one Arosi woman seemed certain that I was a member of her matrilineage (Scott 2008; cf. Fox 1924: 13, 35). She inspected the palms of my hands for lines she said were marks of her matrilineage and claimed to find them. She also implied that I knew the *ringeringe*, the customary ways and tabus specific to her matrilineage, and that, because I followed these ways, the ancestors were quiet and nothing bad happened to me. In addition to searching for signs on my body, that is to say, she also watched for signs that her matrilineal *adaro* accepted me in their land. It was her hope, I believe, that as a returnee, I might somehow help to restore what she saw as the threatened standing of her matrilineage in its land, but she had other motives as well. By recognizing matrilineal identity with me, she also sought to enhance the prestige of 'our' matrilineage by discovering its far-reaching entanglements with the people and places of Euro-American modernity.

The previously mentioned order of precedence between the *auhenua* (the autochthonous lineage of a place) and *sae bo boi* (people from elsewhere) within any particular Arosi polity drives the fourth and final mode of comparison I wish to discuss: ranking relations. This involves comparing people within a polity with reference to the question, do they live here because they are members of the matrilineage of this place or because they are entangled in some way with that matrilineage? Or, as one man put it, are they 'number ones' or 'number twos'?

This mode of comparison can be especially contentious. It is perfectly fine for people to self-identify as *sae bo boi*; in fact, to acknowledge that one owes one's disposition on the land to the benevolence of a matrilineage

other than one's own is considered proper *sae bo boi* comportment and is conducive to polity cohesion. In this spirit, many of the people I have known in the village of Tawatana, my fieldwork base, have called themselves *sae bo boi* and told me how a particular well-known chief of old settled their grandfathers on the land where they now live and grow their food. It is considered extremely high-handed and divisive, however, for anyone to self-identify as *auhenua* and presume to tell others that they are *sae bo boi*. Although many people quietly compare themselves to others in this way, few have the temerity to do so openly. Those who find they cannot remain silent see themselves as acting with good intentions. They hope to maintain the integrity of their matrilineage in its land not only for its own sake but also as the foundation for a well-ordered multi-lineal polity. But they are likely to find that others, rather than acknowledge their status, interpret such assertions as proof that the would-be *auhenua* are pretenders (Scott 2000). There is a strong disincentive, therefore, against comparing oneself to others as *auhenua* in adumbrating relations with entangled *sae bo boi*. Only the rare intervention of a disinterested outside party, or the deference of self-acknowledged *sae bo boi*, can peaceably declare the precedence of an *auhenua* matrilineage.

More often than not, however, deferential acts of self-comparison as *sae bo boi* in relation to others at any given place tend diplomatically to leave the implied *auhenua* matrilineage unspecified. To do otherwise would risk offense and overt controversy. This diplomatic reticence contributes to longstanding ambiguities and latent disputes about who is *auhenua* where and to a general sense that the customary structure of Arosi polities has broken down. Nearly everyone could generate an ideal picture of proper Arosi social order – predicated on an *auhenua* matrilineage in its land, entangled with others – but many would complain that this ideal is not being realized and that this leads to confusion and disputes. In the past, many would say, the relative rankings of people's relations to place were transparent, and there were strong chiefs who kept the privileges of the *auhenua* in balance with the entitlements of entangled *sae bo boi*. But I would suggest that this perception of disorder may be intrinsic to the order of Arosi poly-ontological sociality and that the avoidance of overt comparisons that rank anyone as *auhenua* in relation to others in a particular place is crucial to the maintenance of that order. By avoiding such comparisons, Arosi create the perfect conditions for the opaque co-existence of many competing realizations of their ideal social order. There are many muted comparisons at cross-purposes here, quietly thriving in uninterrogated competition (cf. Scott 2000).

Conclusion: no comparison without competition

I have argued in this chapter that the comparative study of how people compare best begins with a compositionist account of comparison as the

universal unit of composition itself, as the ubiquitous process of network association. And I have suggested that the comparative study of so-called deep ontologies is best understood as the comparative study of modes of comparison configured by different prepositional comparisons and sustained by the habitual reprise of comparisons facilitated by those primary determinations. This has enabled me to recognize and analyze as totemic comparisons a wide variety of Arosi practices that might otherwise escape ethnographic attention as comparisons. This, I hope, has contributed to the fuller theorization of totemism as a being of reference, a social scientific model composed to describe how some collectives, in Island Melanesia, Australia, and also elsewhere, compose their worlds.

I do not pretend, however, to have accounted in this way for all of the comparisons that Arosi make. That said, the compositionist methodological meta-ontology I have sought to employ yields at least two analytical benefits to the study of comparison. It allows us to identify, as I have done, the comparisons that remain crucial for the continuation of historically particular ways of gathering collectives (cf. Latour 2010: 490, n. 29). More broadly, however, it suggests a useful constant about comparison, namely, that every comparison works to facilitate the trajectory of something. This constant sets an agenda for further study. Any project framed as a critical comparison, and any analysis of the comparisons of others, should ask, what trajectory of becoming does this comparison serve and through what other trajectories of becoming does it pass on its way?

By thinking about comparison in this way, we come to appreciate its power. We understand why comparison is onto-genic – why the act of comparison, to the dismay of many would-be comparativists, seems to generate the terms it compares rather than discern their true essences (cf. Scott 2022; Strathern 2004). As the fundamental unit of composition, comparison – whether performed as a simple selection/deselection process or a complex verbal form – is the way everything recomposes others and is recomposed by others. We also learn to accept that there are no ways of comparing that are non-colonizing (contra Viveiros de Castro 2004). Even Arosi adumbration, a variant of what Descola describes as symmetrical exchange, depends on acts of reciprocal dominance and submission. If comparison enables one thing to persist by coming into relation with another, then there must be an element of self-sustaining parasitism in all comparison. Every comparison must involve the reduction of a host trajectory to whatever is situationally useful to the ongoing discontinuous continuity of a parasite trajectory. There is an inherently agonistic quality to comparison. And this must be true, moreover, even when the trajectory sustained by a given comparison is designed to advance knowledge, or create a work of art, or optimize ethical outcomes. All who compare use others as leverage in one way or another.

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5   All alike anyway

An Amazonian ethics of incommensurability

Harry Walker

> To be powerful is to resist comparison. To be great is to resist the ladder of sizes. Blessed be the one who lives in the new space which is not ravaged by the relation of order.
>
> Michel Serres, *Detachment* (1989: 92)

People everywhere constantly compare. But do they compare in the same way, or to the same ends? On some level, comparison is intrinsic to the process of thought: without it, abstraction and generalisation seem impossible. As we scale up to everyday social interactions, and to the ways in which people compare those around them – to themselves, and to each other – new uncertainties emerge, and the act of comparison often takes on a moral valence. It also becomes more emotionally laden. According to social psychologists, there is in all of us something like an innate drive to evaluate our own opinions and abilities by comparing them with the opinions and abilities of others, especially those close to us (Festinger 1954). This is something we do constantly; and it has far-reaching consequences. Generally speaking, people strive to reduce discrepancies between themselves and those others, leading to various forms of competition and cooperation. The effects of this process on self-esteem has been particularly extensively studied: 'upward' comparisons are thought often to promote a sense of inferiority or anxiety, for instance, potentially lowering self-regard (though occasionally promoting inspiration to improve), while 'downward' comparisons are thought to have positive effects on subjective well-being (even if also fostering arrogance). Either way, attention to how we differ from those around us is held to be a major source of self-knowledge.[1]

For all their purported ubiquity, however, such forms of comparison seem almost studiously avoided – publicly at least – among the Urarina people who inhabit the banks of the Chambira river and its tributaries in Amazonian Peru. In my experience, it is rare to hear people explicitly making the kinds of comparisons that focus attention on differences between the entities being compared in ways that could imply, or facilitate, some sort of value judgement. The exception to the rule is clandestine gossip, where

negative judgements of others are rife, but which is also a type of behaviour that is itself broadly construed as wrong. The kinds of comparisons that anthropologists routinely make – between groups or cultural practices, or forms of life – are rare. Instead, many explicit comparisons in everyday life assert general equivalences or draw attention to similarities between things and persons in ways that elide obvious discrepancies. There are, to be sure, times when comparing one person to another in terms of some relevant quality is virtually unavoidable; and people almost certainly compare them-selves – and their opinions and abilities – to others in private, in order to get a sense of how they stack up in some relevant measure of value. All the more so, perhaps, in recent years, given the steadily increasing presence of exter-nally manufactured commodities that can so visibly mark out differences in wealth. Yet for now, at least, such differences remain small. There is little material inequality in the average Urarina village; even abilities and opinions do not, on the whole, exhibit marked divergence. In theory, being surrounded by a community of similars could make social comparison even more prevalent – especially to the extent that group belonging is important to people. But Urarina people tend to be quite individualistic, and group identities are weak. What, then, should we make of an apparent reluctance to compare? How, why, and to what ends might some people resist com-parison, at least in some of its guises? Is it possible to identify an ethics of non-comparison? To what kind of thinking, or social practice, might alter-native ways of comparing give rise?

Life in a world of others

When I first arrived in Urarina territory in 2005, making pains to convey my well-intentioned interest in how Urarina people lived, I must confess that I expected many questions in return about myself and about life in my home country. I imagined piquing peoples' curiosity about all kinds of things I presumed they had never experienced or even heard of, from kangaroos to traffic jams to ocean waves. In time, once people got to know me and felt more relaxed – not only about asking questions, but also about revealing some of the limitations of their knowledge of life in far-flung places – they did indeed express some degree of curiosity about these things, and much else besides. On the whole, though, the many questions I expected never arrived.

The situation I encountered could thus hardly be more different from that described by Radhakrishnan (2009), whose regular visits to India would always see him and his local friends pose a series of heated questions to each other comparing life in India and in the United States, as they tried to get a handle on the many intriguing differences. Almost inevitably, he notes, such comparisons would turn into evaluations of relative superiority: his auto rickshaw driver is intensely interested in driving and road conditions in their

respective countries; and soon they are arguing over the relative merits of safe, orderly traffic lanes versus 'creative', free, proactive driving.

> What starts out as a neutral and disinterested comparison of modes inevitably turns into a comparison between life worlds and ways of being. Where and how does one draw a critical line between ways of being and ways of knowing?
>
> (Radhakrishnan 2009: 453)

At times, I wondered if the reluctance of Urarina people to ask me about my home country was due in part to some fear of embarrassment, that their naïve questions might reveal the extent of their own ignorance. After all, asking coherent and meaningful questions does require a fair amount of background knowledge. I also wondered, I must confess, if they were simply too self-centred to care much about how they compared to others, preferring just to get on with doing their thing, as it were. For they similarly seemed reluctant to indulge in comparisons between themselves and neighbouring ethnic groups, of whom they did, I believe, have some reliable knowledge. At the same time, the significance of the 'other' in Amazonian cosmologies is very well-established, a well-worn theme of the regional ethnography, and it is surely the case that Urarina peoples' senses of who they are and their place in the world comes through some form of reflection – not least in myth – on the position of the other. And yet in everyday life, at least, my Urarina interlocutors simply did not appear willing to make statements of the kind that would compare themselves, as Urarina, to other peoples such as the Cocama or Candoshi, or the mestizo population, or even the gringos.

There were occasional exceptions to this, for instance, in the form of offhand remarks in response to my leading questions about neighbouring groups, such as the Candoshi, who figure prominently in stories from the old times, routinely depicted as wild and dangerous warriors who arrive by stealth in Urarina villages to steal women and children and objects of value. Such discourse, it seems to me, frames an implicit comparison of sorts and arguably an implicit evaluation of the Urarina's own moral superiority. One man told me, with a possible note of envy and regret, 'Oh, the Candoshi? We don't fight them anymore …. Now they're all professionals'! By this, he meant they worked for a salary; Urarina people, as we both knew well, did not do this. In 2006, when this conversation took place, their subsistence lifestyles revolved around hunting, fishing and slash-and-burn cultivation, interspersed with occasional work for local mestizo bosses under the system of *habilitación*, through which they obtained access to manufactured goods. Other than the schoolteacher, no one in a typical Urarina village had any cash money. So I pressed for more details on why Candoshi were different to Urarina, and apparently wealthier, or at least lived in different circumstances. But my interlocutor appeared to retreat from the implicit

comparison he had just drawn. '*¡Igualitos son!*', he insisted. 'They're the same'. This was an expression I came to hear a lot, as it happened, in many different contexts. Sometime later, however, I heard another remark that further complicated this scenario. I was accompanying José and his wife and son in their garden, receiving instruction on how to plant manioc stems. 'Do it like this', he told me, demonstrating a gently curving motion as he slid the stem into the loosened soil, bringing the far end around upwards so it lay at a more oblique angle. 'Why not just push it straight in?' I asked. 'The Candoshi do it that way', he told me curtly, 'this is how we do it'.

Knowing little about manioc cultivation, I have no idea whether this comment reflects a genuine difference in farming practice or what if any the consequences might be, though I suspect they are probably trivial. Nevertheless, manioc cultivation is no small part of Urarina lifeways and the production of manioc beer in particular enables festive sociality. The ostensible difference in planting styles might stand in metonymically for some sense of ethnic and cultural divide. It should be pointed out that the grounds of ethnic difference are not at all ambiguous in this part of the world, largely because of the utterly different languages spoken, which make identification of a person with a group a relatively straightforward matter – at least in places as yet unaffected by language loss. And yet, precisely what the notion of the 'ethnic group' means for the Urarina is far from a straightforward question.

The relativity of ethnicity

Like so many other Amazonian peoples, the Urarina position themselves at the very centre of the cosmos, as the quintessential 'real people' (which is the meaning of their auto-ethnonym, *cacha*). They appear more or less to take for granted that their way of living is the best possible, and most representative of 'true' human existence. Those who live elsewhere, and do otherwise – eat different foods, for instance – are in some important sense less than fully human. They exemplify, we might say, the 'ethnocentric attitude' according to which '[h]umanity is confined to the borders of the tribe, the linguistic group, or even, in some instances, to the village' (Lévi-Strauss 1952: 11; see also Viveiros de Castro 1998: 474–75). After all, as Lévi-Strauss pointed out, 'the concept of humanity as covering all forms of the human species, irrespective of race or civilisation, came into being very late in history and is by no means widespread'.

As such, Urarina ethnocentrism (for want of a better term) differs to that found in some other parts of the world – such as the well-known Japanese genre of popular literature known as *nihonjinron*, for example, literally 'theories/discourses of Japaneseness': closely associated with a pervasive 'myth' of national uniqueness (e.g. Goodman 2008), discourses of this kind are quite different, not least because they assume a stable, bounded group (viz. 'the Japanese'), one kind of human being among many, and represented as to a considerable extent internally homogeneous, which is

to say, all members possess some characteristic in more or less to the same degree. The *nihonjinron* literature is thus sometimes accused of ignoring regional variation within Japan (usually in order to compare 'Japan' to an essentialised 'West'), along with the presence, in other Asian countries, of those characteristics thought to be uniquely Japanese. It is hard to imagine an analogous discourse of Urarina uniqueness – not only because the relevant comparisons are mostly downplayed, and left implicit; but also because of widely divergent underlying premises. Viveiros de Castro (2004) has argued that anthropological-type comparisons, which would compare one culture or people to another, are predicated on a historically specific ontological configuration that presupposes a plurality of 'cultures' superimposed on the metaphysical unity of 'nature'. The Amerindian conception posits instead (as he puts it) 'a spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity – or, in other words, one "culture", multiple "natures"'. The idea of common humanity – which essentially underpins the project of cultural comparison as we know it – dissolves in the face of this natural multiplicity, coming to mean something very different indeed: 'Any species of subject perceives itself and its world in the same way we perceive ourselves and our world. "Culture" is what one sees of oneself when one says "I"' (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 6). The perspectival mode of comparison focuses not on how some phenomenon, or aspect of a single underlying reality, is culturally represented and understood, in different ways in different places; but rather on how 'different kinds of bodies "naturally" experience the world as an affectual multiplicity' (2004: 7).

For my purposes here, I am less interested in exploring possible ontological divergences of this sort, than in how particular forms of comparison become more or less ethically laden. Nevertheless, the above does helpfully raise the question of how and why the salient axes of comparison might vary: that is, where and how Urarina people themselves might draw the (to them) more significant or interesting lines of difference. If the regional ethnographic literature is any guide, the more salient distinction is perhaps not between different ethnic groups, but between humans and nonhumans (acknowledging that other ethnic groups may also fall into the latter category). Yet here, too, to be clear, there is nothing resembling a discourse of direct or systematic comparison – even if Urarina do make disparaging remarks about, say, the disrespectful tendencies of jaguars. In fact, insofar as all beings are thought to share a common set of humanlike (mental or spiritual) attributes, many Amazonian peoples appear not to make a strong distinction between humans on the one hand and other species of animals or plants on the other. This is a processual and anti-essentialist ontology, where the distinctions between kinds of beings can be slippery and uncertain (in stark contrast with the essentialist and primordialist visions of discourses like *nihonjinron*). Descola (2001: 108) put it as follows:

> the multiple entities inhabiting the world are linked in a vast continuum animated by an identical regime of social and ethical rules. Their

internal contrasts are defined not by any essentialist assumption as to their natures but according to their mutual relations as specified by the requirements of their metabolisms.

Such contrasts between kinds of being effectively eclipse those between human males and females, which is why gender is not a salient differentiator in the region (in the way it is in, say, Melanesia). Membership of relevant groupings (such as species) is dynamic and (according to Descola) defined less by intrinsic properties than by relative position in a series of contrastive sets. What is needed is a more general analysis of the kinds of contrasts that become salient to people:

> The language of affinity qualifies relations between generic categories – man and woman, insider and outsider, congener and enemy, living and dead, human and natural kind, humanity and divinity – at the same time that it establishes the frontiers of these categories, that is, their relative content. Now, each culture appears to emphasize a small cluster of these contrast sets to the detriment of others, the outcome being that the actual diversity of cultural styles is subdued by the unifying effect of an underlying system of relationships.
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> (Descola 2001: 106)

Among the Jivaro, according to Descola, the significant contrasts are human/nonhuman and congener/enemy, which results in a series of structural homologies; among the Araweté, by contrast, the contrasts between living/dead and humanity/divinity are especially meaningful and productive, while the Arawakan peoples meanwhile draw a salient distinction between highland peoples and lowland peoples. In short, the contrasts between categories of being that are significant to people can vary, and only in some cases does the category of the human cultural or ethnic group become the significant contrastive element. To return to the Urarina, it may well be the case that there are certain distinctions that overshadow any comparison they might be inclined to make with neighbouring peoples such as the Candoshi: between themselves (as 'people', *cacha*) and mestizos (*aansairuru*), for instance, or between 'civilized' people and 'savages' (*taebuinae*, a category of which jaguars might be seen as exemplars). Yet even these contrasts are not clearly delineated, for reasons we must now explore.

Wither the third term?

Descola's analysis drew from the intellectual legacy of Claude Levi-Strauss, who sought to demonstrate that juxtaposed binary oppositions underpin Amerindian myth in particular, and (somewhat more controversially) human thought in general. Yet the binary nature of the contrasts points also to another reason why Urarina might resist comparisons of people or groups,

regardless of putative differences of ontology. As noted above, Urarina are in fact willing to make cultural contrasts between themselves and other groups, or kinds of being, even if (apparently) minor or even trivial: in terms of how they plant manioc, say, or treat their relatives. In other words, two-way analogical comparisons of what we ourselves might refer to as cultural differences do seem to exist. What appears to be absent, instead, is a common backdrop for the comparison of contrastive elements which could potentially extend to three or more: not necessarily 'nature' or 'humanity' specifically, but anything that could constitute common ground: a third term for rendering the other two terms equivalent and commensurable. A metaphysical benchmark, as it were, or transcendental horizon.

Comparisons made using a third term, or *tertium comparationis* (to use an expression from comparative literature), are associated with a stable and encompassing frame of reference and readily give way to forms of ranking or hierarchy. This is because they enable commensuration, through which different qualities are transformed into a common metric. At some level, like comparison itself, commensuration is crucial to how humans everywhere categorise and make sense of the world; and yet, it is clearly not deployed in the same way everywhere: Weber linked commensuration to rationalisation and thus to modernity, while Marx linked it to labour as a measure of value, and ultimately to money – the ultimate standard of equivalence in capitalist societies. As Espeland and Stevens (1998: 315) observe, commensuration is often taken for granted, to the extent that we forget just how much work, organisation and discipline it requires. How, in which ways, it permeates social life is an empirical question: '[w]e need to explain variation in what motivates people to commensurate, the forms they use to do so, commensuration's practical and political effects, and how people resist commensuration'.

It may be significant, in this context, that when I first began fieldwork in 2005, very few, if any, Urarina people possessed any cash money. This began to change just a few years later, with the introduction of the Peruvian government's conditional cash transfer programme, *Programa Juntos*. People had nevertheless for some time been familiar with money as a medium of value, because of how prices were used by the riverine traders who for decades have contracted Urarina labour under the system of *habilitación*. The standard local price of everyday items like machetes, shotgun cartridges and the like was thus well known to everyone; moreover, in many situations – pooling items together to form the minimum entry bet in local football tournaments, for example – people had no trouble rendering quantities of such items equivalent through the medium of money, even if they had never actually laid their hands on cash in their lives. Nevertheless, what Deleuze and Guattari (1983) referred to as the deterritorialisation of desire by capitalism was still only incipient: that is to say, many goods were sought out for use in specific relationships or situations, which were socially 'coded': gifts of cloth and glass beads from a man to his wife, say. Moreover,

some items were generally exchanged with specific other items, with little concern for their precise monetary value. The exchange of a good hunting dog for a canoe, for example, seemed to be fairly common, and widely recognised as appropriate and fair. As Marx (1976[1867]) demonstrated, capitalism creates a system of equivalencies, or exchange-values, between commodities such that they become abstract and quantifiable, detached from their individual use-value; at the same time, they become ever less embedded in the conventions or social 'codes' that guide their distribution. Limits to exchange are broken down, as people come to experience their desires as insatiable.

Comparison against a common benchmark or standard is also the kind of comparison that enables categorisation, and especially categories that are hierarchically ranked or nested within each other. Of relevance here, perhaps, is the striking shallowness of the taxonomies that comprise Urarina ethnobiology and ethnobotany. Like many other hunter-gatherers and hunter-horticulturalists, Urarina know and use a vast array of specific terms for individual species of animals and plants. Yet, there appear to be relatively few terms for higher-order categories that would correspond to the Linnean taxonomic ranks found in Western scientific biology: genus, family, order, class, phylum, and so on. There is no word in the Urarina language for 'tree', or 'animal', or 'fruit'. This is probably not unusual: life-form categories such as 'tree' do tend to be of low salience for people in small-scale societies (e.g. Witkowski, Brown and Chase 1981), and the taxonomies of hunter-gatherers do tend to be shallow with little evidence of subclassification (Brown 1986: 5). Hunn and French (1984) write, of the folk biology of the Sahaptin of the Pacific Northwest, that they *coordinate* taxa in direct contrast with each other, rather than *subordinate* less inclusive taxa to those more inclusive. Durkheim and Mauss (1963) famously argued in *Primitive Classification* that the conceptual recognition of hierarchy in a taxonomy is predicated on a prior experience of social hierarchy. Whether or not this is the case, it should be made clear that neither shallow nor hierarchical taxonomies are more closely associated with abstract thought or the capacity for it. What I want to emphasise here is that the formation of higher-order taxonomic categories would appear to be predicated on, and enabled by, precisely the kind of comparison involving (and in this case creating) a third term by virtue of which the equivalence and commensurability of two other terms is established.

In praise of likeness

Let us return now to examine in a little more detail how Urarina do actually go about making – and avoiding – comparisons in their everyday lives. I mentioned earlier my (mostly frustrated) expectations that my interlocutors would exhibit great interest in my home country, bombarding me with questions that in truth never came. To help satiate their curiosity,

I had brought with me a small hardcover book full of colour photographs of Australian wildlife, which (unlike its companion volume of Australian cities and cityscapes) attracted very deep and widespread interest. Children especially would crowd around, turning the pages together, commenting on each photograph in turn: almost invariably 'naming' the animal depicted; by which I mean naming its closest local relative. Thus a photograph of a salt-water crocodile would elicit cries of *dzakari!* ('caiman'); the wombat would without hesitation be named 'capybara'; the sugar glider 'red squirrel'; and so forth – despite the glaring differences between these species found on different continents. People might comment appreciably on, say, the impressive size of the teeth of the saltwater crocodile but would not voice any explicit comparison with the teeth of (what they deemed) its local equivalent.

It is interesting to note that there is, in fact, no morphological comparative in the Urarina language. There is no term equivalent to 'more' and no way of modifying an adjective in the way speakers of English can add the comparative suffix – *er*. In fact, there is no underived class of adjectives at all. Concepts that are typically represented by adjectives in other languages – age or colour, say – are expressed by nouns or verbs, respectively.[2] Accordingly, all comparisons are made through derived forms of verbs, such as 'exceed', 'be less', or 'be like'. In each case, the parameter of comparison is expressed by a clause, rather than an adjective, or word referring to quality. Thus to indicate that Jorge is bigger than Manuel, one could say for example, 'Jorge is big, exceeding Manuel'.

Yet, while there are a few different strategies that people can use to compare qualities, it seems quite rare for people to make comparisons that imply superiority or inferiority. This was not just my impression: the linguist Knut Olawsky (2006) found none occurring naturally in his text database and had to elicit examples from informants in order to study how the comparative works. I was struck that in everyday speech people rarely seemed to give voice to comparisons such as 'as good as', 'better than', 'the best among': what Radhakrishnan (2009) refers to as 'the positive, comparative, and superlative degrees of calibrating value within a single but differentiated world'.

What we do find, however, is a very large number of comparisons that liken or equate one thing to another. Indeed, there are many strategies for comparing in ways that involve equality: the suffix /-ni/, for instance, means 'as … as' (as in 'Manuel is as big as Jorge'; cf. Olawsky 2006). People can also use a reciprocal form, using the reciprocal marker /ita/, as in: 'Manual and Jorge, they are old (men) each other'. Still, more common is to use one of several comparative verbs that express 'be like'. These include *tokuania*, *rihiitca*, *rihitoa* and *rihitokoaka*: all transitive verbs which differ slightly in terms of being based on different kinds of perception (looking similar, sounding behaving similar, tasting or smelling similar, having a similar effect, and so on). Such verbs are exceedingly common in everyday speech. They also pervade ritual language: the songs of shamans, for example, sung

during healing sessions under the influence of psychotropics and (mostly) voiced from the perspective of the spirits who control them. These make very frequent reference to those who lived and drank these plants long ago, the ancestors esteemed for their expertise in shamanic practice: 'Just as they did it before, defending the living, so you too shall do it'. These assertions of equality take place against the backdrop of eroding cultural knowledge and a strong sense that, in actuality, the shamans of the present are but a pale shadow of their illustrious and powerful antecedents. When difference is taken for granted, claims of equality have rhetorical force.

Yet this is not just a question of grammatical structure compelling their use: as Olawsky (*ibid*.) also observes, '[c]omparisons that refer to equality are much more frequent, which implies that this concept is more significant than other types of comparison, in terms of cultural values'. Further evidence for this would be that such assertions of equality are also very prevalent when people are speaking in Spanish. Needless to say, this makes certain lines of questioning difficult for the anthropologist: thus whenever I asked after the difference between one thing, or practice, and another, as a way of trying to deepen my understanding, I would get the generic reply, '¡*Igualito es!*', 'they're the same!'.

Drawing assertions of comparative likeness, often through the creative use of similes and metaphors, are exceedingly common in the light-hearted teasing interactions that form a core part of everyday sociality. I will give a couple of brief examples by way of simple illustration. One day, I was sitting in José's house with a couple of others, drinking manioc beer when Napoleon walked past, wearing shoes, which was unusual, and essentially ignoring us. 'Martín Inuma!', called out José – that being the name of the local schoolteacher, and the only person in the village to regularly wear shoes. Or, to take another example: Antonio once cleared his throat overly loudly, emitting a rough growling noise that made those around him laugh. 'Howler monkey'! said someone casually – invoking a species of monkey notorious for its throaty call. Such use of creative analogies in joking interactions has been beautifully described by Rogalski (2016) among the Peruvian Arabela; the following is one of many examples that Urarina people would certainly also have appreciated:

> Artemio came to the abandoned house where I was staying. From my house we noticed the mosquito net of his brother and my neighbour. In spite of it being rather late in the morning, it was still out. His brother is an enthusiastic *masato* drinker and *minga* worker but he always needs a lot of time to recover from drinking. Artemio made a joke saying that Venancio was like an arowana fish. He explained to me that arowana – although of a considerable size – is one of the first fish to become stupefied once poisonous *barbasco* (*Lonchocarpus urucu*) juice is spread into the water. Immediately, he prompted me to call Venancio shouting *arowana*!

Such jokes rely on what we might, after Fogelin (2011), refer to as 'figurative comparisons': metaphors or similes which essentially state that 'a is like b' in some relevant but context-dependent way, and where the comparison can all too easily seem false: on standard, literal criteria, Venancio is not like the arowana fish at all. This mismatch is of course part of the incongruity that generates the humour: 'Figurative meaning arises, *in general*, through a (mutually recognised) mismatch of literal meaning with context, and, more specifically, this is how the figurativeness of figurative comparisons arises' (2011: 32; italics in original). Indeed, to the extent that such comparisons are figuratively true, they are typically literally false. Most importantly, figurative comparisons of this kind depend on canons of similarity determined by the context, and this is constantly shifting. The result is akin to a puzzle, insofar as listeners must arrive at the result themselves: in Fogelin's words, there is 'a transparent incongruity (oddness) that admits of resolution' (2011: 94). To say merely that Venancio looks like an arowana fish – whether true or false – would be to invoke a stable canon of comparison that is neither innovative nor context-dependent. In the figurative comparison above, by contrast, the remark 'arowana'!' encourages listeners to scan the relevant feature space and select those features of the arowana fish (the referent) that are applicable to Venancio (the subject), given specific (unspoken) details of the context (cf. Fogelin 2011: 84). The context must be 'trimmed' so that it fits with the utterance, because the framework of similarity is not conventionally established. The comparison is thus a mode of inventiveness: playful, creative and humorous, involving carefully timed coordination with an audience.

As Olawsky (2006) observes, the Urarina language has a number of different strategies for expressing comparisons, but these mostly focus on equality, rather than indicating that someone or something is of higher or lower rank than others. I noted earlier that people tend to avoid making comparisons of the kind that result in hierarchy, or a process of ranking. This means, for instance, that people would generally abstain from making evaluative (and especially appreciative) comments about other peoples' abilities or capacities. I cannot imagine someone making a statement (even in Spanish) along the lines, 'Antonio is a good hunter' (let alone 'Antonio is a better hunter than Manuel'). I got only at best half-hearted assent to my own probing assertions along such lines: 'Oh, Victor is good at football isn't he?', or 'Jorge is a good public speaker.' This may be in part a way of downplaying accomplishments – both one's own and those of others – as for instance people often reportedly do in societies characterised by a so-called egalitarian ethos: a hunter, for example, will tell people he only managed to catch a small and skinny animal, even if it's large and meaty, and his comrades will agree. Yet, I also think it reflects a more general reluctance to assume or assert knowledge of the capacities of others: a kind of evaluative abstinence, as it were, that could readily be interpreted as a form of showing respect to others (see Walker in press). This goes hand in hand with a sense

that it is wrong to essentialise, to turn a particular deed or even skill into an intrinsic attribute of a person. Thus, the only evaluations of ability tend to be negative and not made lightly: for example, describing someone as a poor or luckless hunter (*afasi*, in the regional Loretan Spanish dialect) is liable to cause serious insult, and to stick. I was present once when the daughter of my neighbour Pedro hooked up one night with a young man who was visiting from a neighbouring village. That they were still together the following day indicated their intention to marry. At first, Pedro consented to the union, but word soon reached him that the boy was *afasi*. No one wants an *afasi* son-in-law, and he voiced his opposition so vehemently that his daughter relented and returned home.

Similar kinds of tendencies appear to surround descriptions of other things, such as material objects. While people may scoff at an object made poorly, or express admiration at something made beautifully, it is rare to hear one compared directly with another. It is not even particularly common for people to express their appreciation openly: 'that's a beautiful canoe', or 'that's a nice house', for instance. Instead, people seemed more likely to comment on their acceptability, their basic conformity to an accepted standard or model. Not an endless series of more or less beautiful canoes, so much as a cluster of acceptable canoes around an ideal type. To the extent that some might be judged closer to, and others further from, that ideal, there might be grounds for arguing that there does in fact seem to be a standard of sorts emerging, a basis for value judgements. Yet, many evaluations appear fairly generic and binary in nature (conforming or non-conforming), and thus do not seem to result in the kinds of explicit comparisons that would entail relative value judgements by virtue of proximity to an ideal ('this one is better than that one'). Where such a comparison seemed inevitable, it might be left implicit: 'That Soldado was a good dog, he hunted well', someone might say while gazing at their new replacement dog, patently inept when it came to hunting. It is similarly rare to hear people express preferences for certain kinds of things: no one is likely to talk about their favourite foods, for instance. When I once tried asking someone which kind of meat they liked best, my question was received with a kind of mild incomprehension – rather as though all kinds of meat were equally good, and to be received with gratitude. Expressing a preference might even be seen as ungrateful, and for similar reasons, perhaps, food preferences among children, or dislikes of certain foods, are not tolerated in the slightest. People might express a fondness for certain popular musical ensembles (Peruvian cumbia is by far the most popular genre), but they would not be likely to voice a preference or relative evaluation, of the kind, 'Armonía 10 are better than Los Mirlos'.

Ultimately, the way material objects are evaluated for general acceptability through conformity to an ideal type seems the way evaluations of persons take place. It is a matter of general or common knowledge what the capacities of an adult male or female Urarina person is or should be; and

people either meet or, in a few very rare cases, do not meet, these generous and rather flexible criteria. This would seem to explain, among other things, the sense of easy interchangeability I detected when people spoke about finding a spouse, whether for themselves or for their children. That is, people seemed unconcerned about finding a spouse with particular characteristics or someone who excelled in a particular way. When I asked what people were looking for in a spouse, they would usually give a vague answer along the lines, 'Oh, anyone will do' – provided, of course, they meet the minimum criteria of acceptability. Similarly, when a friend told me I should find myself a wife, no doubt taking pity on me for having to cook for myself and sleep alone, I asked him good-naturedly who he thought might be a good candidate. 'Oh, just grab anyone, it doesn't matter'! he told me, quite seriously. This is an inclusive attitude in some ways. If there is a flipside, it might take the form of relative or apparent indifference to excellence. There are also unmistakeable limits to peoples' tolerance, and when people fail to meet basic minimum criteria, they will be judged negatively, and refused: a very poor hunter; a woman whose handiwork is ugly. Having some other skill or talent, outside the expected (conventional) spheres of expertise, is unlikely to be seen as adequate compensation.

The question arises: do Urarina therefore see people and things as genuinely and fundamentally alike? That is, does the propensity to compare on the basis of likeness, rather than difference, imply some kind of fundamental sense of underlying unity? The answer, I think, is no, for a number of reasons. Firstly, as noted, many judgements of similarity depend on a shifting frame of reference, and are fleeting. They are also not transitive: if a is like b, and b is like c, then a is not necessarily like c. Thirdly, judgements of similarity are commonly asymmetrical and non-reversible: to say that a is like b is not to say that b is like a. To return to the earlier example, Venancio may be like an arowana fish, but an arowana fish is not like Venancio (consider the claim 'This man is a lion': it is quite different from saying 'This lion is a man', cf. Fogelin 2011: 61). Finally, I suspect that it is in fact precisely because the things of the world are ultimately incommensurable that people are prompted continually to draw out surface similarities and likeness. A relation of difference is taken for granted, as it were: presupposed by the statement that 'this is like that', its logical precursor – just as comparison based on the orderly evaluation of difference is predicated upon an underlying unity, a stable common ground on the basis of which difference can be ascertained.

Desingularisation and the state

This insight helps us to understand the relatively fluid notion of the ethnic group. When people possess the regular range of capacities and behaviours, they are humans by definition; once they start to deviate from this implicit standard, their essential humanity is called into question. Hence, a certain

sense that Jivaroans and other neighbouring groups, for all their similarities to Urarina people, are still somewhat less than fully human. As noted above, Urarina do not have a strong sense of themselves as a people, or *ethnos*; no one really talks about Urarina identity or culture as something to be proud or ashamed of, displayed for others, conserved and so forth. In this, it should be noted, they are probably unlike most other indigenous peoples in lowland Peru, many of whom have a long history of mobilisation around their indigenous ethnic identities. To the best of my knowledge, the Urarina are the only sizeable ethnic group with no representative political organisation; attempts in the past few years to found one appear to be floundering. This corresponds to a general lack of interest (for now at least) in political struggles, campaigns and protests, again in stark contrast to neighbouring groups such as the Awajun, who have been involved in direct and sometimes violent confrontations with outsiders in recent years and are accustomed to leveraging their own ethnic identity to pursue their claims and demands.

I do nevertheless have the impression that a certain sense of belonging to a coherent, recognisable ethnic group is beginning to emerge among Urarina people. One reason for this is likely to be increased contact with outsiders, including small numbers of tourists who, over the past few years, have begun to arrive in Urarina villages, often expressing an interest in purchasing items of Urarina 'culture', such as woven baskets or fans. Another reason is likely to be a deepening understanding of the logic of the Peruvian state and its various institutions, which officially recognise 'the Urarina' as a coherent ethnic group.

To this extent, it is important to bear in mind how the very idea of the ethnic group already presupposes some larger, encompassing entity, namely the state. It is quite well established that the reification of tribal boundaries happened in many parts of the world as a result of colonialism, whereby the imposition of relatively neat systems of ethnic classification led to the reification of what were often quite subtle and shifting distinctions between peoples. As Vogt (2019: 38) put it, 'tribes with relatively fluid boundaries and varying degrees of internal cohesion became standardized, socially organized entities with relatively clear territories … European colonialism turned existing cultural communities into self-conscious ethnic groups'.[3] Rubenstein (2001) has similarly shown how colonialism in Amazonia often hinged on the transformation and multiplication of sociospatial boundaries: 'Whereas the precolonial spatial, social, political, and economic boundaries that characterised Shuar life were multiple, partial, and overlapping, colonial boundaries are organised hierarchically'. Echoing Eric Wolf's argument that geographically uneven development in the wake of European mercantile expansion has generated racial designations such as 'Indian' and 'Negro', Rubenstein shows how the expansion of the Ecuadorian state gave rise to the new categories such as 'Indian' and 'Shuar'.

A similar process has been described cogently by Terence Turner (1991), who shows how the pressures of contact and coexistence with the Brazilians

and missionaries imposed a number of changes on Kayapo life and culture. When he first began fieldwork in around 1962, they had no notion that their received customs, practices, values and institutions constituted a 'culture' in the anthropological sense, considering these simply the prototypically human way of living. Over time, as they were incorporated into an inter-ethnic social system, they came to understand their 'culture' as something that served to define them as an 'ethnic group' distinct from those around them: they came to see themselves, not as the prototype of humanity, but as one 'Indian' group among others, united through their common confrontation with the national society (Turner 1991: 295–96).

A similar process appears to be taking place among Urarina, aided in many respects by outward-looking local leaders who work hard to produce a sense of collective identity, at the level of the village and, ultimately, at the level of the newly minted 'ethnic group'. In their speeches at regular village meetings, specific grievances are 'desingularised' (Boltanski 2012), that is, scaled up and made commensurable with other, similar grievances, leading to the possibility of righteous action around a common framework of justice. The recent ingress of tourists and oil companies has begun to accelerate this process. The groundwork for a comparative approach to culture and ethnicity is being laid.

Conclusion

Comparison is essential for making meaning and producing understanding, of both oneself and of others. Yet there are different ways of drawing comparison, and they differ in their political and ethical implications. I have argued that the kinds of comparisons where one form of life is implicitly or explicitly compared to another, perhaps using some notion of 'culture' or 'ethnic group' as a basis for the comparison, are relatively rare among Urarina people of Amazonian Peru. This kind of comparison is arguably predicated on a multi-culturalist ontology, and we might further associate it with the logic of the state, which produces boundaries around groups at various scales, and thus effectively produces the possibility of their comparison.

Comparison across cultures requires a specific form of social consciousness, a meta-cultural awareness that inevitably relativises one's own position and worldview. This can be empowering, insofar as it undermines claims to universality and thus the inevitability of the status quo. As Stanford puts it,

> Comparison across cultures defamiliarizes what one takes as natural in any given culture…To learn through comparison that others see things differently is to recognize the constructedness of one's own frame of reference. … In other words, one effect of comparing cultures is to call into question the standards of the dominant precisely because it is unveiled as not universal.
>
> (Friedman 2011: 756)

But comparison can also, of course, be disempowering, not least for those subjected to the comparative gaze; and it can be uprooting of local meanings and specificities:

> comparison identifies similarities and differences, commensurability and incommensurability, areas of overlap and of discontinuity. In so doing, comparison decontextualizes: that is, it dehistoricizes and deterritorializes; it removes what are being compared from their local and geohistorical specificity. Consequently, one reason *not* to compare is the potential violence such removals can accomplish, the damage they can do to the requirements of a richly textured understanding of any phenomenon in its particularity.
>
> (Friedman 2011)

I have argued that Urarina refuse or at least publicly abstain from various kinds of comparison in which we commonly indulge; above all those that measure, rank and evaluate. Instead, where they do compare, it is often on the basis of equality or likeness: the idea that one thing, person or group is like another in some relevant way. Such assertions of similitude are in no way claims of identity or sameness. The notion of identity is misplaced here: to reduce likeness to identity would be a grossly inappropriate imposition. What people are concerned with is not identity but ways of sorting things together: clustering in networks of reciprocal belonging, through a kind of free association. Contrasting and differentiating also have their place, and can play an important role in generating understanding – what Levi-Strauss termed the 'science of the concrete'. Such analogical comparisons do not need a third term, a common standard of measure, to be effective. In both cases, we are dealing with an essentially juxtapositional mode of comparison: setting things side by side, not necessarily with any common standard of measure, in the form of the commensuration that allows people 'to quickly grasp, represent, and compare differences' (Espeland and Stevens 1998: 316).

Urarina peoples' lack of interest in comparing themselves to other groups is not common everywhere in Amazonia. It is perhaps instructive, then, that those areas where inter-group comparisons seem especially pronounced – in the Xingu park in Brazil, and in the Upper Rio Negro system (Hugh-Jones 2013) – is where objects have comes to play a key role in mediating relations between people of different ethnic and linguistic origin, and where one also finds relatively extensive regimes of equivalence, calculation and commensurability of values (Fausto 2016).

Is it a paradox, finally, that Urarina construe things as incommensurable, but then seem disposed to render everything equivalent? One possible line of interpretation – the ontological one – might point out that to declare apparently different people or things as 'the same' makes perfect perspectival sense: every being sees itself, and what it does, in the same way as every

other being; it is simply the world that it sees and acts on that differs. Thus perhaps Candoshi actually see themselves as planting manioc in exactly the same way as do Urarina (though their different bodies obscure this). I prefer, however, a slightly different explanation: that it is precisely because the things of the world are incommensurable and infinitely different from each other that people would be prompted to draw out their similarities and likenesses. As Mair and Evans (2015) have observed, the process of finding affinities that can overcome borders of alterity, is a powerful basis for ethics. The difference here, however, is that Urarina do not endorse commensuration, at least not in the terms they propose, as 'a process that enables disparate elements to be brought together under a common standard of value, rule, or governance' (Mair and Evans 2015: 213). The fluid, free association practiced by Urarina avoids precisely that, though it rests on an attunement to the poetic qualities of metaphor and analogy. Similarities and juxtapositions seem salient, and can be beautiful, odd or outright funny. Conversely, it would be the assumption of some underlying unity, some stable ground and advanced forms of commensuration that could potentially feed an obsession with the orderly evaluation and representation of difference.

Strathern's (2017) reflections on internal versus external relations might help to explore this further. Kin terms offer a good example of the former: a relation is implied in the term itself. There is no father without someone whose father that is. External relations link people or things as more or less self-contained entities with their own intrinsic properties. They hold things apart and at the same time hold them in place: in other words, they sustain identities. Thus in 'Euro-American cosmology', she writes,

> classificatory schemes commonly define entities in relation to one another according to their intrinsic properties that enable the classifier to commensurate— bring into a single relation—the sameness/difference of each with respect to the other. The (external) relation between them keeps the separateness of the terms in play. Tautology is evident: externality resides in the prior distinctiveness of the 'different' entities being related.
>
> (Strathern 2017: 17)

Amerindian perspectivism, by contrast, does away with the contrast between relational and non-relational substantives, or internal and external relations. A fish or a tree, like a father, is defined through its relations to something else: it is what it is, in other words, not because of its intrinsic properties (its 'fishiness'), but 'only by virtue of someone else whose fish it is' (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 472–73). We can see how in such a cosmos, comparison might be driven by a different set of concerns, other than seeking out external, contrastive relations between already existing entities, or a normative standard of measure by which the other can be known and judged. At the same time, the ways in which Urarina deploy ideal types (of objects as much as persons)

suggest a departure from Viveiros de Castro's analysis. All fish might be fish only insofar as they are fish for someone, but they are not all equally desirable or even equally fish from the Urarina perspective: some might be better exemplars than others. By the same token, potential spouses might on one level be 'the same'; but on another level, it cannot be denied that some deviate from the ideal (e.g. insofar as they are lacking in some gender-specific skill or form of prowess). There is, it seems, a standard after all – and it is here that ontology shades into morality. Jaguars might see themselves as human but they are simply not the moral equals of Urarina people: they lack respect. Similarly, the Candoshi's way of planting manioc might be right for the Candoshi, but from the Urarina perspective, it deviates from the ideal and is ultimately deficient. Recognition of the limits to perspectival exchange creates the space for moral judgement.

Despite or perhaps even because of their ethical burdens, explicit comparisons are for the most part avoided. While recognising the singularity of all persons and things, their absolute incommensurability, but also inter-dependency, Urarina are very quick to declare them absolutely alike. They prefer to compare for equality, to assert blithely, 'this is just like that', and so avoid bringing those two things together under a single, external standard, allowing their difference to be measured, reifying them in the process. This might amount to a form of respect, for things and persons and the limits to what can be known about them. The idea being not to judge, or rank, let alone establish dominance, but simply take pleasure in the way things cluster, if only for a moment.

Notes

1 See, inter alia, Buunk and Gibbons 2007; Suls and Wheeler 2000.
2 There are, for example, very many verbs referring to something's 'being white': to be a little white; to be very white; to become white; to move being white; to be white in various parts; and so forth.
3 Cohen and Middleton (1970) write:

> At first centralized states are brought into new nations as already organized units…unable to organize as a pressure group within the new nation almost from the very beginning, thus creating the very basis for ethnic politics… During this same time, the acephalous society has no means of articulating a traditional administrative hierarchy into that of the nation…there is little sense of identity as a corporate unit or ethnic constituency among the acephalous groups….
>
> (Cohen and Middleton 1970: 28–29; cited in Lentz 1995)

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Part II
Comparison at work

6 Principles or pragmatics?

Debt advice as a comparative encounter

Deborah James

This chapter explores some paradoxes that arise when 'people compare'. It draws on my study of what, to paraphrase Norman Long, I call the advice 'encounter' (Long 2001; see also Koch & James 2020) to illustrate the divergent kinds of work that comparison does for the generalist and the particularist, respectively. Studying debt advice in two different national settings, the UK and South Africa, I show how, because advisors start from generalities and recipient/advisees start from individualized practices, comparison pushes them in different directions. In the everyday life of such encounters, just as in anthropology itself, there are always forces that propel people towards abstraction and generalization in their comparisons, just as there are other forces that propel people towards particularism or even incline them to refuse all generalizing forms of comparison. The chapter, as an ethnographic account of these opposing forces in two distinct settings, reveals the relations of inequality and exploitation that are in play. It also gives an account of attempts, during the 'advice encounter', to mitigate or ameliorate those relations.

The research for the chapter draws from study in the UK and South Africa.[1] In the former, advisers are motivated by the imperative to help their clients secure access to what remains of the post-war welfare state. In the latter, where welfare was previously skewed along racial lines, the country's new democracy has seen its mass expansion, but it is delivered through cash transfers rather than essential services. For those unable to get by on these transfers, high-interest loans, providing momentary relief, are whittling away what their recipients have to live on. In both cases, debt advice is at a premium because of a complex mix of expanding financialization and increased borrowing with (actual, in the UK case, or imminent, in the South African one) government austerity, and the retreat of the kind of state regulation that formerly acted to curb borrowing and restrict the fees and interest rates creditors were able to charge.

In both cases, as has been noted elsewhere in the world, combining cuts to welfare benefits with the expanding availability of credit means that welfare dependents have been reconfigured as 'debt repayers' (Adkins 2017), thus transforming a social into an individual burden. Nor is this a matter that

concerns only the unemployed. Because of 'an increase in jobs and a decrease or stagnation in incomes … at the bottom and the middle', both 'the government benefit cheque' and 'the living wage' are now supplemented by reliance on credit, turning the welfare state into the 'debtfare state' (Soederberg 2014: 3). Those at the bottom of the pile – be they the poor or unemployed, low-paid workers, or formerly middle-class people migrating to work abroad and now on 'zero hours' contracts – have been brought into the ambit of, or 'enfolded within', formal financialized arrangements (Kar 2018; Meagher 2018; Soederberg 2014). In the terms used by Gustav Peebles (2010), they are not so much beneficiaries of the good side of such arrangements ('credit'), as victims of their most rapacious aspects ('debt'). Such accounts point to the fact that the shrinking of the welfare state in northern settings, or its new instantiation via the provision of cash transfers in southern ones, seem to lead inexorably – albeit in different ways as documented below – to an increase in borrowing: to 'debtfare' (Soederberg 2014).

Drawing out similarities and differences between the South African and the UK case speaks to the theme of comparison in several ways. First, at the level of immediate experience, the advice encounter, in and of itself, involves a comparative exercise. In seeking advice, people with what seem unique and irreplicable problems find their situations ranked alongside other similar experiences. In the process, and in an attempt to acquaint advisees with a bigger picture, advisers lay out their problems side-by-side with those of others. When debtors realize they are not alone, they may be comforted by the results; but when they grasp the uniformly degrading circumstances (alongside their own) of those in a similar situation, they may equally be appalled by the scale of the phenomenon. The different actors involved are variously involved in weighing up individual situations vis-à-vis those of others.

Second, this chapter must perforce involve an exercise in analytical comparison between two very different settings, the UK and South Africa. The two might be presumed – quite rightly – to presuppose very different levels of development, capitalism, industry, financialization and the like. And this contrast in turn will structure how I go about interpreting the comparisons made by people in each context, which also, in their own way, involve ranking or differentiation depending on the extent of capitalist expansion, notions of economic value and the like. But there is a caveat: such rankings collapse under scrutiny and cannot simply be read off from the contrast between a Euro-American setting and one in the global South: indeed, the very existence of such a contrast has been said to arise *in the course of* the intimate interactions, over the course of several centuries, between the two (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). Thus, the comparative exercise itself is a product of these articulations.

The chapter offers a comparison of the work of comparison: one where each level (the generalities and abstractions made by advisers who align their clients' situations with those of others in a similar quandary; the

comparisons debtors gradually begin to draw between their own individual situations and those of others; and finally the meta-comparisons made by the anthropologist) helpfully illuminates the other. Overall, what it addresses is the interaction between local processes of differentiation, contrast and comparison, occurring at different scales but brought into juxtaposition through the advice and the ethnographic encounters.

Cases and comparisons

The encounters described below elaborate on the theme whereby 'principled' adviser, able to view matters in comparative perspective, interacts with 'pragmatic' client who is aware only of her own circumstances. The first, drawn from research in the UK, is one in which the modes assumed by that comparative work vary according to the perspective of the protagonist (adviser or client) and – linked to this – the level of abstraction at which the encounter is experienced. Seen from advisers' point of view, what is required is an ability to generalise, consistent with an analytical point of view accustomed to seeing the 'big picture' of indebtedness and involving the aggregation of multiple sources of data in order to make sense of that picture. Seen according to debtors' views and experiences, in contrast, things are more individuated, particularistic and personalized. The second case, drawn from South Africa, shows how even debtors' experience can vary widely; debtors here have more pragmatic modes of dealing with debt than is evident in the individualized sense of guilty self-blame experienced by some in the UK. Irrespective of these contrasting effects, both cases still seem to manifest a division between those (the advisers) who are engaged in explicit comparative thinking and those (the advisee/debtors) who, at least initially, fail to discern the parallels (or differences) that link their own specific situations to those of others who are subject to similar forces; they are compelled simply to cope with the consequences of their experience, whether this be internalized moral opprobrium or practical matter-of-fact budgeting. The third case blurs the adviser/advisee division. It demonstrates how activist/advisors in South Africa, in interplay with and informed by the plight of those they advise, have contested that country's corporate-capitalist biometric financial systems which extract repayments through automated algorithms. The fourth shows how debtors in village settings, following the reforms that were introduced as a result of these contestations, have themselves developed comparative insights at a local level. Inextricably embedded in a dependence on 'debtfare', they have swiftly adjusted to the changes. They retain those formal technologies that enable them to continue borrowing using welfare payments as collateral while also making use of higher-interest loans from local moneylenders. Their financial pragmatism, albeit seemingly out of touch with the bigger picture of indebtedness and its injustices, is governed by a systematic, pragmatic and temporal logic concerning the monthly rhythms of welfare payment and by the complex

negotiations over control of the all-important bank card through which those payments are accessed.

Case 1: 'disrupting attachments' in the UK

The first case sketches an encounter between a low-paid domestic cleaner and a debt adviser in a London office. It illustrates, as noted above, a broad division between advisers' insight into wider principles and debtors' more pragmatic preoccupation with their own circumstances, with the former attempting to make these insights plain to the latter. But it also demonstrates processual changes as a result of the encounter, with those advised developing their own sense of the extent of their problems and how to address these, while those advising may become swamped by tedious bureaucratic procedures, losing sight of the bigger picture.

'That is what makes me angry – they are in charge of your life' says Elaine. She is sitting in a London advice centre, asking for help from Aaminah, one of the advisers. People on low incomes who rely on 'debtfare' (Soederberg 2014) often feel this way. The more they depend for help on the state and commercial creditors, the more they seem to be at the receiving end of complex systems of bureaucracy, and the less they are able to control things.

Working as a domestic cleaner, Elaine takes pride in earning her own living independently. 'I want to free my mind', she explains, 'I need to pay my bills'. But in order to do this, she also relies on state support to supplement her income. She gets Child Tax Credits and Working Tax Credits and is still waiting to hear the outcome of her application for Housing Benefit to help pay her rent.[2] Part of why she feels so powerless (and has done so for months) is that, with this complicated set of payments and entitlements, she doesn't really understand how much she is due. What are her 'rights' and what is her true income? But what precipitated this visit, and the main reason she was driven to come here for advice, is that she has realized the extent of her debt to commercial creditors. She has just received a letter from a credit card company: they have taken out a court judgement requiring her to pay £50 monthly to settle her debt with them. She also owes money to other private creditors: £48 to her internet provider; and other debts to Provident and Shop Direct (the latter was sold on to a debt-collection company). Despairing, she announces 'I always pay on time, it's just this time …' her voice tails off as she fights back the tears. 'I can't believe I'm in so much debt'.

Shuffling through the batch of letters Elaine has brought with her, Aaminah works out that she also has rent arrears of £850 (the amount – of course – goes up every week): she is supposed to pay £116 every Monday but she has fallen behind. She also owes Council Tax of £70. The council sent her a letter saying that she must pay this tax in 2 working days. She went in to ask if they would put it on hold. In addition, she has a backlog with the gas

company and has been paying money in order to clear it. 'Yesterday I paid £12. I don't ever turn it on – instead I just wrap up. If I use it, it finishes, and if I don't use it, it still finishes!'

Only after Aaminah questions her, looks through these numerous letters and notes down the details of income, benefits and budgets, does she get an accurate sense of what Elaine owes. The most significant work of comparison she does is to reassure Elaine that, seen vis-à-vis other clients, her situation is not as bad as she thought: 'in total the debt is less than £2,000'. She also separates what seems like one large lump sum into separate, smaller obligations and suggests a way to tackle each of these. First, to Elaine's immediate relief, she phones the gas company and establishes that the debt to them has long been repaid. 'Thank God – I am happy!' says Elaine. 'I can't believe I'm laughing – I am happy that that one is clear'. Aaminah then requests a credit check from a credit bureau so they can see whether any other debts are repayable. She fills in a form requesting that the court order for the credit card debt be lessened or 'varied', and another one: 'This is the letter I will send to the court so that you don't have to pay fees – they will write to you with the decision'. She then sends an email to the council to ask them to avoid taking action and, once news of the Housing Benefit arrives, to set in motion a payment in order to clear the arrears. 'As for your other debts – I will write to them. I will say that you cannot pay at the moment. They should put a hold of 6 months, which will give you some time'. She explains that 'the other option, long-term, is a "debt relief order". They write off the debt'. However, if Elaine wants to remain in the flat, she will need to pay her rent arrears. She asks whether Elaine wants to consider the debt write-off option, or rather to 'set up repayments' to each of the creditors.

ELAINE: I know God will answer my prayer today – and I refuse to cry today. I want to go through with this. I don't want any money to borrow. I just want to be free from stress. I want a life. From the day I was born until now, I have been suffering.
AAMINAH: We all deserve happiness...

Aaminah was offering practical and material possibilities for relief. Perhaps more importantly, she was giving Elaine a sense of greater control, by helping her to overcome that feeling that 'they are in charge of your life'. In sum, she was doing the work of comparison which derived from her considerable experience in debt advice. Part of what this entailed was the building up of practical experience. Drawing on previous encounters, she was well-acquainted with what to do. By separating Elaine's debts into discrete strands of payment and comparing their importance and urgency, she was making it easier to manage and comprehend them. She was also enabling them to be queried or even written off, persuading creditors to postpone their demands or accept reduced payments, and even outlining

the more definitive option of debt relief. Elaine, in response, was expressing a sensed contrast between her suffering past – 'what is' – and an envisaged future of 'what might be', free from loans. The feelings of relief and future orientation signal the value of the broader perspective provided by advisers, alongside the practical, do-able steps they provide for a client to follow.

Writings on the experience of indebtedness in the UK show that the reasons why people like Elaine get into debt are not purely material. There are also 'market attachments' involved, as Joe Deville has pointed out (2015). A person may desire a certain object – such as a better life – as well as simply needing the money that would make it possible. In the process, the harm done to that person somehow becomes an intrinsic part of why the person remains 'attached' to the debt (2015: 47–8). This leads to a life lived 'in default' (2015: 51–3). The strength of these attachments and ties is intensified via poorly understood banking algorithms which govern everyday existence, making it possible for 'monies of all sorts to routinely live in and through our lives', and – despite the fact that their actual workings are obscured – enabling relationships between creditors and debtors to 'become deeper, more profound, more granular, more personal' (Tiessen 2015). Given how difficult it is for clients to let go of these attachments, one explicit task of debt advisors is to 'disrupt' them (Kirwan 2018). People like Elaine who are faced with the prospect of having to make do with less (and with having to borrow as a result) tend to experience their hardship as separate beings, divided from each other despite being subjected to very similar pressures. They face 'social division and isolation' (Diamond 2017: 34–5; Elgenius 2017: 45). The problems they experience are shared with so many others, yet it is only when speaking to the adviser that they realize this. Advisers use a set of bureaucratic tools to help clients distinguish those debts which – in their own best interests – ought to be given priority, from those which can be dodged or even cancelled, for example through bankruptcy procedures. In this way, they help to counter the strong emotions involved, as this case demonstrates. In the process, those advised may develop their own sense of the extent of the problem and the readiness by which it may be fixed.

However, there is ultimately little that advisers like Aaminah can do to remedy the simple fact that incomes and expenditures in this newly financialized world simply do not match, leaving people like Elaine unable, in the longer term, to pay their rent and other expenses. Although her visit to Aaminah gives her a sense of relief, and even of control, it seems likely that this will be short-lived. The choices she faces are quite restricted. Besides the option of making regular and affordable 'repayments' to her creditors, another possibility is to opt for one of the variety of insolvency or debt-relief options.[3] Aaminah explains to me that the first of these is dependent on income: 'Someone who comes here with £15,000 worth of debt and only gets £56 a week, we can't help them set up repayments, because it wouldn't be feasible'. Even for those, like Elaine, who owe much

less, small payments 'are only worth it if there's a chance of a change'. Setting up deductions to return money owed could condemn debtors to a lifetime of repayment. In such cases, they are advised 'to go through insolvency'.

This solution, seemingly more robust than that of setting up separate repayments with individual creditors, has however been seen as leading to problems in turn. In the money advisers' magazine *Quarterly Account*, a debate about the increasing prevalence of agreements between debtors and their creditors that help the former repay what they can afford to the latter (individual voluntary agreements [IVAs]) revealed that these were beginning to be churned out in 'factory'-like fashion, with 'all the work … done by unqualified staff, and with "many firms ask[ing] for large upfront fees, meaning that it doesn't matter to them if the IVA is refused by creditors, they can take the money and run"'.[4] In 2009, John Fairhurst of Payplan spoke of how, as more people become over-indebted and need help, 'aggressive advertising campaigns funded by increasing the charges made to consumers' would likely emerge, with demand met by 'fee charging providers' of advice.[5] Thus, each successive wave of credit demand has seen the birth of a new crop of companies taking advantage of fresh opportunities, and countering or regulating these in turn requires ever more expert advice and ever more vigilant surveillance by those in the sector. Even committed advisers like Aaminah, under pressure by regulators to meet targets of audit and by funders to refer specific proportions of her clientele upward to higher-level advisers, find themselves faced with limited choices and often find themselves operating almost 'by rote'. The adviser's ability to perceive broader trends and bigger 'principles' may be difficult to maintain.

Given that it is the task of advisers to inform and enlighten their clients about the collective experience of debt, the encounters between them, characterized in many cases I observed by encouraging and kind-hearted pedagogy aimed at introducing the bigger picture to the advisee, may indeed result in producing the desired experience in the latter, who may gradually come to view their predicament as something not of their own making (and hence not their own fault). Conversely, however, the amalgamation of clients' problems that is supposed to inform debt advisers' generalized overview of how best to help such clients can often be obscured by the routinized and 'tick-box' bureaucratic approach they are forced to take, especially when resources (and time) are in short supply, sometimes reducing their role to little more than a pragmatic set of procedures. If, then, comparison is thought to be an exercise through which protagonists can gain a critical perspective on the specificities of their own situation, and one that provides an overview enabling them to make sense of it and discern the principles at play, it might be said that – at least in some cases – clients become more and more able to take the generalized, comparative view while their advisers become less and less so. Blunted by the exigencies of the audit culture they are forced to operationalize, and realizing that few if any structural changes

are likely, these advisers can find themselves operating more 'by rote' than recognizing the 'bigger picture'.

Case 2: psychic self-blame vs relational pragmatism

For our second case, we move to South Africa. Albeit set in the global South, it is a site where capitalist relations and forms of proletarianized labour have predominated to an unusual extent for more than a century. In this setting, perhaps even more than in the case outlined above, debt has an ambivalent character. It was access to credit – coinciding with the moment of democratization – that allowed people to live a life of aspiration from which, owing to the strictures of apartheid, they had previously been excluded. But, since these things have been given to them on tick, theirs is a 'loaned life' (Han 2012). The debt is necessary to actualize dreams of a better world in which harmonious relations with family members might be possible. But being unable to repay while creditors knock at the door is disabling and may even destroy those relationships. Here, the debt conundrum juxtaposes apparently unlike sets of values. Cherished and non-commodified family relations, on the one hand, both induce and are subject to the inexorable force of commodified payment-plus-interest on the other (see James 2019a, 2020b).

   In the South African case, debtors are often more aware (even without formal debt advice, which is sorely lacking) of the need to juggle and prioritize debts. They may be shrewdly pragmatic rather than 'attached' to their debts or submerged in machinic relationships as 'deep … profound' and 'personal' as those described in the previous case (Tiessen 2015). A woman named Akhona, like Elaine a domestic cleaner, was reported as being similarly reliant on a mixture of commercial loans and state welfare. 'Sometimes I only get paid R1,800 a month', she said. 'And it's not enough because transport is expensive and I have to buy household things, and support other family members'. Supplementing her wage as a part-time worker are a monthly child-support grant from SASSA (the state welfare agency) of R640 and a regular monthly loan of R200 from a company called Moneyline. This is a subsidiary of Net1/Cash Paymaster Services, the finance company to which the state had outsourced the delivery of these welfare or 'social' grants in the early 2000s. Akhona needed this loan in order to pay her weekly transport bill to get to work. She had factored in borrowing as an essential element in the household budget rather than an accidental aberration, much like the Buenos Aires shack-dwellers documented by Ariel Wilkis, one of whom told him 'we don't have savings but we do have debt' (2017). Such canny matter-of-factness, shows anthropologist Fiona Ross, involves managing a series of conflicting debts and often necessitates taking short-term decisions, themselves subject to social scrutiny and pressure from relatives and neighbours (Ross 2010: 131).

One thing that differentiates these two cases is the presence or absence of psychic experiences of guilty self-blame. British borrowers like Elaine were viewing their indebtedness through a kind of individualized particularism, whereas South African ones experienced it in a more relational manner and handled it in more pragmatic, matter-of-fact ways. This contrast appears, at first sight, to map onto one of the binary metanarratives of 'West vs the Rest', in which modern neoliberal individualization is differentiated from traditional embedded personhood. Ideas of internalized self-discipline, so prevalent in many Euro-American settings, have been shown to be of limited usefulness in many southern ones. As historian Fred Cooper shows, 'power in colonial societies was more arterial than capillary – concentrated spatially and socially, not very nourishing beyond such domains, and in need of a pump to push it from moment to moment and place to place' (1994). Emphasizing the point, John Comaroff has argued that to apply Foucauldian ideas about governmentality to these southern/postcolonial settings is to misrecognize the limits to 'capillary' power. Power, far from being intangible, is here accompanied by coercive and brutal forms of domination (1998). If the case of South Africans like Akhona presents a contrast to Western-style individualization, then, it is less because their approach is embedded in traditional forms of personhood than because they are being subjected to outright compulsion. It is to a particular form of this duress (Stoler 2016) – and to attempts to counter it – that I turn in the next section, before returning, in Case 4, to a further consideration of the kind of pragmatic self-help (which in itself comprises a sort of 'folk' comparative effort) that is suggested by the story of Akhona.

Case 3: 'plunder' and 'claw back' of funds in South Africa

With the UK as a reference point, this section explores the South African lending landscape further. In the latter case, repayments for loans taken by welfare beneficiaries were being extracted through automated algorithms, with very little recourse to the kind of individual advice available in the former (Case 1). However, advisor/activists gleaning insight into the workings of the system from the experiences of – and in interplay with – client/debtors have acted to contest these arrangements. Focusing on pragmatic ways to counter the 'plunder' of cash transfers by 'clawing them back', one vision of a better life for debtors is based on an implicit comparison with an ideal society governed by principles of humanitarianism and rights, while a second invokes a vision of a properly functioning market. In both, through different approaches, 'looting' would be curtailed.

In contrast to the story of Akhona outlined above, many social grant recipients in South Africa have become less and less able to parse and weigh up their debts or conceptualize them as distinct (cf. Wilkis 2017), because they are so interwoven as to make them difficult to disentangle. Financialization has been accompanied by technologies of biometric registration through

which the 17 million South Africans who are social grant recipients have been brought within the ambit of the banking system (for a comparable case in India, see Kar 2020), with repayments orchestrated via electronic file transfers. Until it was relieved of its state contract in October 2018, the provider company, Net1, was using systems and algorithms that seemed virtually immune to human intervention. While South Africa, like the UK, uses automated electronic file transfers to deliver welfare (James, Neves & Torkelson 2020; Datta 2012; 32–6, 66), it has a more cavalier approach to banking and client privacy. Net1, at the same time as furnishing regular payments to pensioners, parents (mostly mothers) of children and disabled people, has also been offering them loans and selling them products – via its web of subsidiaries such as Moneyline – for which it has been deducting payments from the grant at the end of the month (Torkelson 2020). For many of those caught in the grip of this 'cowboy capitalist'-style approach to lending, such financialized logics are threatening to overwhelm styles of budgetary household balancing such as those practised by Akhona (in Case 2). Although the impetus for commercial companies to tempt customers into taking out loans and making purchases differs little between the UK and South Africa, debtors in the latter face particular problems because of the way repayments are secured. Not many borrowers are able to articulate a budgetary strategy as deliberate as that adopted by Akhona; many are engaged in far more complex (and incomprehensible) processes of repayment through deduction, as will be briefly outlined below.

Following a public outcry against Net1 for its deduction arrangements, the outcome of a Constitutional Court case saw the contract for awarding social grants withdrawn from the company and awarded to the post office in 2018 (Breckenridge 2019). Before that date, grant recipients wishing to borrow money were widely encouraged to 'swop' their state-provided SASSA (South African Social Security Agency) benefits ATM card (colloquially known as 'gold') for a Net1-administered alternative (known as Easypay but colloquially called 'green') and to use this to enable them to borrow from Net1's subsidiary, as outlined in the story of Akhona. This facilitated a smooth borrowing process, with repayments made by automatic deductions, facilitated by fingerprint-activated biometric technology (ibid., Torkelson 2020; Vally 2016). Because of this technology and the lack of a paper trail, there was little or no volition left to the debtor. Even where bank statements were able to be procured, they were often incomprehensible; debts were difficult to disentangle. People, feeling disempowered by deductions on their SASSA grant and with no apparent recourse, were coming in 'with tears in their eyes', said Mareesa Kreuser, a team member at Summit Financial Partners. Advisers like her expressed dismay on their clients' behalf that, despite all these transactions and loans taking place in a highly formalized payment space, errors were frequent, often amounting to fraud (practised both by 'street level' agents and at the level of high-tech deductions). When debtors attempted to seek recourse, company representatives were reluctant

to speak to anyone but the 'actual beneficiary'. 'Actual beneficiaries', however, rarely had enough mobile phone airtime to be able to stay on the telephone for the amount of time that it might take to get through the 'security questions' and challenge the details of the account: and in any case they often felt intimidated or embarrassed as well as unconfident when speaking English. These technical complexities compounded the stark facts of the situation: Net1 was, in effect, using welfare beneficiaries' grants as loan collateral, and taking advantage of their confusion to turn a profit (see Lavinas 2018 for a similar case in Brazil).

Advisers in South Africa's charity and business sectors attempting to 'claw back' such funds often use the metaphor of piracy to describe the ransacking of beneficiaries' monies. Unlike their UK equivalents, their primary concern is not to help clients put the brake on repayments or challenge 'overpayments' demands (see James & Kirwan 2019). Instead, since financial automation means that the repayment has already occurred, the advisor must set out, instead, to reclaim what has been 'stolen'. 'The bank account is almost, a place for looting. ... for pushing through as many different [loans] as possible', said an officer from the Black Sash, South Africa's foremost human rights organization. She celebrated the fact that, after much effort, she and her colleagues had helped a client 'to get some of the money back, a cash refund'. Likewise, 'pillage' was the term used by the CEO of Summit Financial Partners, Clark Gardner, to describe the situation. Lenders of all sorts, he said, follow

> an unwritten rule to chase market share .... [I]f I don't take your wallet, your full wallet, someone else is going to take it. If you can afford R100 a month on debt instalments, I want to take that full 100. Because if I take 80, someone else is going to take the other 20. That is putting my loan at risk. And no one is policing that. So I can do whatever I want. ... [T]he lack of enforcement has ... created a reckless lending environment. If you don't play that game you're going to lose.

This CEO took it upon himself, in the absence of regulatory activity by the state, to pursue moneylenders through civil court cases. The company's business model is based, in part, on scrutinizing the wage records of two major mining companies that are concerned about the welfare of their employees: Summit's job is to help ensure that these employees do not get subjected to illegal deductions by creditors.

These South African officers, paralegals and corporate employers/ employees, like those who advise on debt in the UK (Case 1), are motivated by a sense of the need to get the bureaucracy right, which they accomplish by unpicking the interwoven strands of debt in order to highlight cases of fraud and to distinguish legitimate loans from those which contravene the law. The efforts of would-be reformers in the South African example are focused on retrieving or 'clawing back' illicitly looted funds so as to restore

a client's bank balance to what it should be. Insisting that the money be reimbursed, they aim to redress what they evocatively describe as 'plunder'. Human rights charity The Black Sash has a principled opposition to the behaviour of companies like Net1 that is underpinned by a longstanding tradition of rights activism. For Summit, in contrast, the impetus derives more from a wish to reform capitalism and put it on a better-regulated and 'fairer' footing. Both kinds of adviser/activists, in countering the automated extractivism facilitated by biometric banking systems, have built on their interaction with debtors to yield comparative insights into their views of how the problem should be tackled. These, in the sectors from which each hails, draw on implicit comparisons with and accepted assumptions about how things ought to be done.

Case 4: temporal tactics in South Africa

But the comparative insights that motivate these advisers and activists differ substantially from how welfare beneficiaries, often in remote villages and townships with little or no access to help or counsel, understand the situation from a local vantage point. The former, inspired by ideas of a more just and properly regulated system, derive from the 'big picture' of problems of debt experienced across the country, and are fuelled by the knowledge of how those debts accumulate to form nation-wide trends (Vally 2016; Torkelson 2020). The latter, in contrast, must undergo, and negotiate, everyday predicaments of balancing incomes and outgoings according to the logics and rhythms of welfare payments and household provisioning.

To understand this case, we must briefly explore some of the developments following the withdrawal of the contract from the infamous and much-decried financial company, CPS/Net1.[6] A research project in which I was involved investigated whether and how the eventual withdrawal of that contract from the notorious company had affected (and allegedly improved) grant recipients' practices of borrowing and lending. It found, unsurprisingly, that aspects of the lending environment originally established by this company 'remain in place': just as before, grant recipients were continuing to seek credit 'because of enduring patterns of poverty and inequality'. An unintended consequence when responsibility for making welfare payments was transferred from the private to the public sector was that over 8,000 welfare paypoints across the country were decommissioned, with effects particularly intensely felt by remote rural populations living far from post office branches or ATMS. Many opted to keep their EPE ('green') card rather than transitioning to the new post office account (with its 'gold' one) (ibid.). The research report stated that

> as of March 2019, 9.5% of all grant recipients still use their Easypay accounts, which allow for automatic debit orders. Around 19.5% of grant recipients have other bank accounts with commercial banks (like

Capitec or FNB accounts), some of which do allow for automatic debit orders. Many microlenders and payday lenders force grant recipients to open accounts with Easypay … in order to continue borrowing money as usual.

(James, Neves & Torkelson 2020)

Somewhat ironically in the light of the opprobrium originally faced by Net1/CPS, it emerges that those who continue to receive their grant payment using the EPE 'green' card, and to continue using it to borrow from Moneyline, were now facing fewer problems than those who, alternatively or additionally, were taking loans from *mashonisas* (loan sharks).[7] These informal lenders, long a feature of life in black townships, had become much more prevalent with the gradually increasing liberalization of the economy during the 1980s and 1990s (James 2015: 92–7), and even more so since the new biometrically facilitated banking platforms enabled them to secure their loans by using borrowers' ATM cards as collateral. In short, the big corporate player that had previously been cast as the villain of the piece by the activist community was starting to be seen as less predatory and unscrupulous than these loan sharks. The operations of the two were, however, inextricably interwoven.

The impetus to explore how levels of debt and lending practices were shaping up following the withdrawal of the contract from Net1/CPS led those engaged in the project (including myself) to recognize some counterintuitive aspects. Our report repudiates any simple 'before and after' contrast that valorizes public over private or formal lenders over informal ones.

Advocates of 'banking the unbanked' often cite the formalisation of lending and borrowing as protection against the worst abuses of informal moneylenders or 'loan sharks' … [that] are said to abuse clients with stand-over tactics and high interest rates, or by controlling and retaining bank cards and PIN numbers. … People celebrate this as 'financial inclusion': a transition from exploitative … to formal, allegedly less exploitative, lending practices. In such a binary, it is easy to view lenders like Easypay as better alternatives to abusive practices, and many of our interlocutors did prefer Easypay under certain conditions—viewing it as the least-bad option. But to say that formal lenders like Easypay are better or worse than informal ones, is to miss the fact that their preferential access to this vast market had been handed to them 'on a plate' when Net1 was given the initial contract.

(James, Neves & Torkelson 2020)[8]

Such a binary view also obscures the fact that the two other main types of lending – by 'cash lenders' and *mashonisas* – depend on the highly technologized and biometrically facilitated banking platform that was originally enabled by Net1/CPS (ibid.).

It proved extraordinarily difficult to pick apart the contrasting effects of reliance on formal lenders like Easypay/Moneyline and on *mashonisas,* as can be seen below from interviews with two women in the rural settlement of Gamamadi (known by its original Afrikaans farm name of Taaiboschgroet). Borrowers were making their own comparative judgements on the relative advantages and drawbacks of each. Taaiboschgroet embodies in microcosm some of the effects of South Africa's economic slowdown – and the accompanying reliance on increasingly precarious employment – since the 1970s. The government had originally introduced a system of cash transfers or social grants for 'impoverished children under 18, adults over 60 and people with disabilities' in order to stave off the worst effects of that slowdown. With the effective unemployment rate having reached 38%, this was 'almost twice as many people as access wages from waged work (10 million). … many working-age adults survive on the social grants of others (and the loans they access using those grants as collateral)'. Even more than previously, households were dependent upon grant recipients now serving as 'breadwinners', particularly in rural areas like this one (James, Neves & Torkelson 2020).

In one case, a borrower, 37-year-old Mpho, was receiving three child support grants totalling R1,260 monthly, in addition to her R3,500 earnings from an NGO that provided home-based-care for HIV/AIDs sufferers. Since her 59-year-old partner has never had paid employment, these sources provide the family's only income. To supplement it, she has for three years been taking out loans using her 'green' Easypay card. She regularly borrows R1,000 in December to buy new school clothes for the children and has R220 deducted monthly for the following six months. In July, she takes out a further loan of R1,000, incurring identical repayments, to buy winter clothes and other necessities for them. Her total repayments for each loan, as laid out in a 'pre-agreement statement', are R1,680. As with many similar low-income loans, much of the interest paid was disguised as 'initiation' or 'service' fees (Gregory 2012), but seen overall, with these sleights of hand removed, the effective rate was 38% over the 6-month repayment period.

Grant recipients like Mpho, not unlike Akhona in Case 2, calculated their Easypay borrowing in a planned bi-annual sequence: once in December, for Christmas clothes, and a second time in July, for winter clothes. This temporal regularity is more structured, and seems to be informed by greater insights into the advantages and disadvantages of various lenders, than was the case for a number of other borrowers interviewed for the study. However, to me and the other researchers, and to the Black Sash that commissioned the project, it still sounded egregious. Our overview, gleaned through an awareness of broader trends (including international ones) and informed by a knowledge of the relevant legal frameworks, showed that these practices were illegal. They amounted to a direct sequencing of loans with no 'cooling-off period', and the effective interest rate was higher than what the law allowed, and seemed doubly iniquitous given that Easypay faced no risk whatever in

recouping its repayments biometrically. They were guaranteed by reliable collateral: the state's steady stream of welfare payments.

Mpho was fully aware of the fact that the Easypay loan compared advantageously with the other – 'informal' – options available locally. But it was not a case of 'either/or'; she was availing herself of both. Alongside Easypay, she had also borrowed from two *mashonisas*. From the first she borrowed R1,500 and was facing monthly deductions of R660 in repayment (slightly less than the normal rate among such lenders of 50% per month). To secure these repayments, the *mashonisa* keeps her Easypay card. The system of repayment, albeit wholly 'informal' since it is not only transacted in cash but also because the interest rate is excessive, nonetheless relies on the foundational arrangements enabled by the 'formal' arrangements that depend on electronic file transfer of social grants for its viability. On the day the grants are paid, the *mashonisa* uses the card to withdraw his full monthly repayment of R660 in cash, recording these in a book and leaving her with the remainder of R600. She sometimes goes to the *mashonisa* to check her balance, and they agree on the outstanding amount. I did not manage to find out how the second *mashonisa* secured repayment. The risks of unsecured lending would, however, have become evident in this case. A borrower like Mpho has only one account and only one card, hence only one *mashonisa* is in a position physically to keep that card by way of collateral.

During the interview, I glean evidence of Mpho's readiness to calculate and reckon her budget and to compare different lenders.[9] The logic of borrowing from informal lenders alongside Moneyline is imposed by the clash between the latter's six-monthly repayment cycle, monthly rhythms of welfare payment and daily/weekly consumption needs (including unforeseen ones). Of particular urgency are unforeseen and sporadic expenses such as those incurred when taking a child to the doctor (R500, plus R70 return for transport to get to the nearest town). But they also include the demands of social investment in local funeral and savings clubs. Paying money to such clubs enables the putting aside of money for future use and makes it possible to ring-fence savings for groceries or to cover the costs of good neighbourliness, but getting into debt in order to make this possible can create a cross-cutting jumble of incompatible obligations (James, Neves & Torkelson 2022). Not all these borrowings, then, can be readily computed.

What enables these loans – and negotiates the relationship between them – is the Easypay 'green' card. As noted earlier, these cards were made available by Net1, the company that held the original contract to deliver social grants, which had been able to retain its remit – and many of its 'customers' – in some sites. In addition, in Taaiboschgroet where Mpho lives, Easypay pays grants at the beginning of rather than the middle of the month. Again demonstrating the importance of temporal rhythms to issues of payment, savings and debt in this low-wage environment, it was this early payment date that predisposed Mpho to keep the 'green' card rather than

switching to the post office's 'gold' one. She (like many others) keeps it not just so she can receive her grant earlier in the monthly cycle, but also so that she can continue borrowing from Easypay. Hi-tech biometric data and electronic banking systems, seemingly a world away from the crudeness of cash-based transactions, here converge, but in doing so they enable a proliferation of contradictory scales.

Although Mpho is nominally the holder of the bank account to which the green card is linked, she is the owner and keeper of the card itself in name only. It is in fact kept – as in numerous other cases – by the *mashonisa* who gave her the first loan. This withholding of cards can make it difficult for a grant recipient/borrower to calculate what she owes to whom. She is unable to get a mini-statement from the ATM, and the only time she becomes aware whether her formal loans have been paid off is when she gets what is left over from her grant after the *mashonisa* has taken repayment at month end. To enable her to fetch the grant from the van that distributes them, the *mashonisa* 'lends' her the card, then collects the cash he is due and reclaims the card. One of Mpho's friends tried changing from the 'green' to the new 'gold' post office-issued card in an attempt to escape the *mashonisa* from whom she had borrowed, only to be accosted by him in the queue when she came to collect her grant and he took the card from her 'by force'. The household's financial dealings may thus involve physical intimidation and struggles over the card itself.

Mpho nonetheless attempts to keep a comparative handle on the distinctions between, and cyclical demands and opportunities offered by, these various lenders. Asked whether one type is better or worse than the other, she points out that the Easypay loan is possible only every half year, but '*mashonisa* will lend you money any time'. Because these *mashonisas* 'are helping us in the middle of the month, when we have no money', they have their value. Even having the lender keep her card does not seem to her unreasonable, given that 'we are looking for money'; her income, she insists, is 'not enough'. But her budgetary savviness has limits – she also exhibits the classic denial of the debtor, being unable to compute how much she owes to the two *mashonisas* in total: 'if you could remember that amount of money, you would get a heart attack'.

Temporally oriented practices of the kind Mpho used resemble those adopted elsewhere in the world where poor borrowers faced with the extractivism of 'financial inclusion' (Guyer 2004; Guérin & Venkatasubramanian 2020; Kar 2018; Shuster 2019) attempt to strategize, playing off their obligations to various lenders against each other where this is possible (Guérin 2014). Mpho's story speaks against the common misconception that low-wage or welfare-dependent people lack the ability to compare options or the insights that may be provided by 'financial literacy'. They surely have a capacity to think more widely about the available options. There is a certain seasonal logic and a corresponding rationale to her package of loans; with the predictability of the 'formal' six-monthly money for clothes balanced against the mid-month *mashonisa* borrowings that are

pinned to a less foreseeable – but equally pressing – temporal rhythm. But the mixture of technologies used across the lending spectrum can serve to create a jumbled hybrid of owings and obligations, often constraining such calculative insights: the inability to get a comprehensive and comparative overview of debts is linked to the confusing array of repayment systems at play.

As before, it would be too simplistic to contrast advisors' readiness to see the big picture with the notorious 'denial' of the debtor, often attributed to a reluctance to view matters in perspective. Instead, there are factors that propel people in different situations towards more abstract or more particularistic kinds of comparisons, respectively.

Conclusion

This chapter has involved comparison at a range of levels. I end by drawing some links between advisors and those (myself included) who practice the craft of anthropology, whose work can be seen as paralleling the generalizing/particularizing tension outlined here. The disproportionate power of early anthropologists, especially those theorizing from 'the armchair', allowed them to some extent to 'see the wood' instead of 'the trees', and make generalizations about modes of production, modernity and the like. Yet as fieldwork brought them into intimate proximity with their informants, anthropologists were gradually compelled to recognize particulars and complexities, and to 'scale down'. They resemble advisors in some respects. Advisors are, relatively speaking, better-off than clients and have access, via those clients, to a wealth of comparative data and to the training that allows them to make big comparisons (between different debts, etc.) which can then inform their activism. Working from their more generalized knowledge, they attempt to enable their debtor clients mentally to formulate balance-sheet-style budgets that counterbalance 'income' and 'expenses' in a rational way and help debtors form an overarching comparative picture of their plight. Case 1 showed how such a possibility was enabled for Elaine, allowing her to transcend the particularizing and internalized feelings that debtors classically display: of 'attachment' (Deville 2015) combined with the moral self-blame characteristic of 'responsibilized citizens' (Brown 2015: 84). Yet to see this as a simple transfer from adviser to client of the ability to 'see the bigger picture' in a manner informed by a comparativizing enlightenment – or, conversely, to see the systemic exploitation of the poor as completely impeding their capacity to make these 'big picture' comparisons – would be to misrepresent the matter. For the social grant recipients in cases 2 to 4, the experience of dealing with and calculating money and repayment involved an interplay of an individually experienced bewilderment in the face of machinic biometrics, on the one hand, and a canny pragmatism and the ability to understand and calculate a complex set of machinations in time, all experienced and negotiated through the physical processes of owning, storing, guarding and negotiating over a bank card, on the other. The advice

encounter makes clear how these different comparative scales can some-times shed light upon one another, while at others they speak in completely different logics.

This chapter represents not just a comparison of comparisons, but a comparison of comparisons structured in and around unequal exchanges of the kind that result from (and that in turn intensify) status and wealth differentials such as those of creditor vs debtor. It has given an ethnographic account of sets of opposing forces that come into play through the various kinds of comparison involved in the advice encounter. Because advisors start from the generalized grid and recipients start from specific practices that appear as unique, comparison pushes them in different directions. There are forces that, in some circumstances, propel people towards abstraction and generalization in their comparisons, just as there those, in others, that are conducive of particularism – or even drive people to refuse all gener-alizing forms of comparison. On the other hand, each of these tendencies represents a pole in an unrealized binary: fully general, abstract comparisons are always undermined, in the end, by the compelling nature of particulars, of difference and incommensurability; just as particularism is impossible to maintain in the face of the forces that drive towards abstraction. In the process, stark relations of inequality and exploitation are revealed.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 Some of the case study material is drawn from James (2019b, 2020a).
2 Since the time of fieldwork in 2016-7, most of these benefits had been replaced by a single benefit payment called 'Universal Credit'.
3 A debt relief order (DRO) is only available if the debtor owes less than £20,000 and lives in England, Wales or Northern Ireland. The debtor doesn't pay anything

towards her debts for 12 months, after which they will be written off. But she may only have a 'basic bank account' and may not take out further loans. An IVA is suitable for people with higher levels of debt and more assets and gives debtors more control of their assets than other forms of bankruptcy. It involves making regular payments to an insolvency practitioner or debt management company, who will divide this money between creditors.

4 Nick Pearson, Advice UK, and Alexa Walker, *Quarterly Account 5*: 16 (2007).

5 *Quarterly Account* 15: 21 (2009).

6 Pharie Sefali, "Money Lender Targets Social Grant Beneficiaries," *GroundUp*, 21 July 2015. www.groundup.org.za/article/money-lender-targets-socialgrant-ben eficiaries_3140/ Accessed 14 January 2020. See Torkelson (2020) for more detail.

7 Often translated as 'loan sharks', this Zulu word refers to local lenders resident in the village, but may be translated as 'one who impoverishes' or who 'takes and continues to take indefinitely' (Krige 2011: 144; James 2015: 242). Those now beginning to take such loans included the 71% of grant recipients that switched to the post office's 'special disbursement accounts' (James, Neves & Torkelson 2020).

8 Breckenridge (2019: 93) illustrates in detail how this inescapable technical 'lockin' developed over the course of two decades.

9 In August 2019 I interviewed Mpho (a pseudonym) jointly with Black Sash partners who work at the Mamadi Advice Office.

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7 Long, hard labours of comparison among Japanese salarymen

Mitchell W. Sedgwick

Introduction

Male Japanese salarymen are employed within private corporations and as government bureaucrats, a career that remains enormously respected in Japan today. I focus on how they distinguish themselves within their severely hierarchical organizations. This is particularly relevant because, ideally, they will spend their entire working lives identifying and being identified with their one organization. This configuration carries on after retirement, generating generalized respectability and, commonly, leadership in local, home communities until their death.[1]

Salarymen enjoy a middle-class lifestyle that is considered quintessentially typical in Japan. It unfolds in the workplace, during 'after hours' and at home, engaging all family members. Based in historical precedent, becoming a salaryman is the target of Japan's rigorous education system. The most sought-after career, it leads to the best marriages and offers the basis for a healthy retirement. It personifies stability. Whether or not they are *de facto* participants, for the vast majority of Japanese, the salaryman, with his full panoply of associations, represents the ideal structural formation for adulthood. Thus, even as the prospects for salaryman lifestyles have declined across over three decades of recession in Japan, the salaryman nexus continues to be central in reproducing modern industrial Japan.

To substantiate these claims, I will consider the foundations of Japanese sociality, paying particular attention to *cultural naturalizations of homogeneity* that inform the strongly hierarchical nature of Japanese social life generally and are embodied, with particular potency, within Japanese salarymen's formal organizations. To elucidate this point, I look at two highly respected, well-known Japanese corporations, one producing automobiles, the other, consumer electronics, that will remain anonymous.

From the outside, large organizations in Japan are impenetrable monoliths, the salarymen attached to them seemingly identical. Indeed, each organization cultivates and, so, encourages homogenization of particular visions of its employees. Unsurprisingly, these reinforce the organization's brand accompanied, as a matter of bodily practice, by displays of sober

authority, especially so among public servants. The homogeneity of training, experience and performance that socially construct the organization would seem to make individual salarymen incidental and interchangeable, easily caricatured as robots. By the standards of Japanese society as a whole, however, every individual salaryman at an organization like this is a stand-out winner. The competition to become members of such organizations – at the *de facto* pinnacle of Japanese society – is ferocious, and their competitive inclinations are hardly set aside once they make it inside. As these organizations are hierarchically structured pyramids, across time, fewer and fewer salarymen enjoy higher posts, so, to advance their career, each salaryman must seek to distinguish himself. That is, once employed, their competitive inclinations are repackaged to serve intra-organizational dynamics, fuelling an ethos of hard labour with comparative career success effectively pitting individual salarymen against one another. Famed for long hours, salarymen work relentlessly, day in and day out, year after year. Reticent to even take the (legally required) vacation days available to them, and seldom doing so, they are utterly committed to their organization's goals, spending their most productive years of their lives encompassing the salaryman lifeworld of, e.g., appropriately fulfilling their combined organizational, work and societal expectations.[2] Following from this, the relevant empirical questions for the purposes of this chapter are: How are the necessary comparisons between salarymen made? Within the organization itself, who is marginalized, who rises, relatively speaking, and why?

Constituted by an ethos of homogeneity, in seemingly airtight Japanese organizations, space for individual distinction is rare and risky: it must arise subtly. Our ethnographic cases will elucidate contexts where particular salarymen distinguish themselves compared to their colleagues. I will show that this occurs at the margins of their literally overwhelming organizational frames if, of course, in direct relation to it.

In order to locate spaces where differences and, so, distinctiveness might present itself, let us outline standard organizational principles guiding the Japanese salaryman's navigation of his organizational lifeworld. As a salaryman generates connections – *vertically* – above and below in his hierarchical organization, the breadth of his personal network expands. Sophisticated vertical networking includes a salaryman's prowess in cultivating relations with individual superiors who, he deems, are rising in the organization, and whose patronage may, therefore, advance his own prospects. Indeed, doing his job properly – responding fully and appropriately to what is demanded of him by those above him – might productively be considered performances to impress superiors. In the process, individual salarymen can differentiate themselves from erstwhile equals *horizontally*, thus exceeding them. While these standard trajectories unfold simultaneously, they become relevant in different time frames: they do different, if complementary, work. (For instance, a valuable piece of information offered by a superior draws the subordinate further into his sphere, leading to a

call for and, of course, commitment to particular tasks later on.) In this chapter, I will elaborate ethnographically upon such work in context: the *de facto* segmentations which, consciously and unconsciously, sustain a range of meaningful affiliations that constitute groups in various physical and social contexts and in different time scales, and that thereby reproduce the Japanese corporation (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1940).

Our case studies of the competitive lifeworlds of Japanese salarymen unfold through their experiences in overseas subsidiaries, specifically in Thailand and France. Notably, in Japan's over 130 years of industrialization, production abroad by Japanese corporations began only at the end of the 1980s: a relatively recent, and suggestively raw, phenomenon. I elucidate how Japanese salarymen, vastly outnumbered by non-Japanese 'others' in their subsidiaries, if holding dominant organizational authority, live and work in these foreign contexts. The conditions here are sociologically radical, exposing the tensions already present in sustaining cultural naturalizations of homogeneity common to Japanese organizational life. And they offer up unusual and consequential opportunities for self-differentiation by individual salarymen in their externally opaque but rich, complex and densely patterned intra-organizational world.

Seen overall, the long-term career trajectories of individual Japanese salarymen are constructed through a multiplicity of comparisons. While this will be made visible through the ethnography, my argument may be outlined as follows. The emphasis on homogeneity, within a highly competitive interpersonal environment, intensifies comparison between individuals, with small distinctions becoming especially consequential. This is because, first, distinctions feed directly into generalized rankings while, second, if inappropriate, they threaten the homogenized space of the organization. The situation in overseas settings provides excellent examples of these points because the salarymen are literally the products of this competitive homogenous environment while, working at the margins of the salaryman complex, e.g., overseas, they are at the same time positioned to actively mobilize distinguishing features.

The analysis foregrounding the cases exposes various, mutually reinforcing aspects of *general* Japanese sociality and provides a backdrop for the intra-organizational dynamics I describe ethnographically. First, based on co-recognized similarity and identification bounded by specific historical tropes of nationalism, economic growth, etc., the Japanese *internalize* a forceful sense of ethnic and cultural homogeneity. Second, the Japanese compare themselves with other nations and their peoples *externally*, a process elaborated further by differentiating between sets of 'others': in this case Thais and French. These internally and externalizing frames of comparison reinforce each other and, dependent as they are on tensions of similarity and difference from 'others' – both outside of Japan and 'non-Japanese' attributes in the behaviour of 'others' *in Japan* – serve to bound and sustain uniformity among the Japanese themselves. As outlined above, at the internal firm level,

where the case studies unfold, in the context of intense hierarchical, i.e., vertical, pressures, salarymen bosses make comparisons that differentiate, as a horizontal matter, salaryman subordinates from one another. In this chapter, that takes place in overseas settings, where differences from 'others' are radically present and especially highly attuned. But this sort of internal comparative discernment is characteristic of all Japanese organizations, informing career progression of their salaryman generally. I will return to these discussion points in the conclusion, after we visit the case studies.

Staging the field

Already with several years of experience in Japan and fluency in the language, while doing other Japan-related work, I began planting seeds among Japanese contacts to research foreign subsidiaries of Japanese corporations. Eight months in Tokyo, painstakingly bringing those contacts to fruition, was followed by two years of fieldwork in Bangkok. Mimicking the life of a Japanese salaryman, as was my intent, I enjoyed little free time: some extra sleep on Sundays, maybe. During the week, I endured lengthy daily commutes to and from downtown Bangkok to 10–12 hour workdays at factories in suburban industrial zones, ate and drank several weeknights with Japanese and, occasionally, Thai colleagues. On weekends, I often went golfing, always followed by drinking and eating. As *de facto* 'control' sites, I researched several firms for three to six weeks each, but my ethnographic work in Thailand was focused on long-term studies at two subsidiary factories, a well-known Japanese consumer electronics firm and a major automobile producer. Both headquartered in Japan, these huge corporations have subsidiary factories all over the world. And, as a result of these early, hard-earned experiences in Japan and Thailand, I was later able to carry out other extensive fieldwork projects at the consumer electronics firm's subsidiaries and surrounding communities in several locations, including one in rural France.[3]

At factories in both Thailand and France, I was given a rectangular desk in a typical large, open-plan, Japanese-style office, from which I could observe 40–50 people. Without barriers in between, my desk literally touched five others, so I could easily follow the minute-by-minute work, phone calls and conversations of my colleagues. In overseas offices, these were Thai or French employees, as the eight to ten Japanese working there held high-level posts that positioned them slightly apart. Their individual desks were at the top of our conjoined blocks of desks. Each day I moved freely to observe meetings, usually conducted in the language native to its primary participants (Japanese, Thai or French). Joint meetings, if peppered with native language use, were formally conducted in English, in which no one, except me, was fluent. I spent time on the factory floor, observing and never interrupting production but, for instance, having an occasional chat with a foreman. I went for a coffee or to lunch with a colleague or, more often, as

this was how they socialized informally, with an exclusive group of Japanese, Thai or French. (I also conducted one-on-one interviews – of several hours each – with core informants, always at the close of a long period of field-work.) As above, nearly every night I left the factory and went out with a few Japanese colleagues, before returning home, while, over the weekends, I undertook leisure activities, generally with my Japanese informants. As was their normal habit, they were usually doing sport together – especially playing golf – and/or socializing with some, or all, of the other Japanese members of the subsidiary, often including their families.

Intimacies of exotic work

I found the compass and intensity – the intimacy – of the eight to ten Japanese salarymen at particular factories, which extended to all of their family members, remarkable. Due to the overseas setting, they were especially tightly bound, though that condition rather reinforces my analysis of the gen-eral Japanese salaryman nexus. In any case, the tone of their social relations stands in radical contrast to common, (early) Western representations of 'the organization man' (Whyte 1956) and compartmentalizations of modern life. The implications in that literature regarding personal *anomie, malaise* and/or alienation (Durkheim 1893; Mills 1951; Fromm 1955) are associated with urban/suburban lives and, specifically, the type of office and factory work of which my Japanese informants, including their wives at home looking after children, are exemplars. Moreover, these salarymen are liter-ally drivers of mass production, a quintessentially modern configuration. However, rather than the disjointed modern configuration characteristic of the earlier academic, read Western-oriented, literature, the inextricably linked sociality of Japanese salarymen is in some ways 'immediate', resem-bling, in the anthropological literature, 'band societies'. One is reminded of Bird-David's evocation of the 'group conversations' of the South Indian, forest-dwelling Nayaka '… wherein all sit facing the same direction, sharing a perspective on the view, talking about what they all see (1994, 596)'. The environment that my Japanese informants in overseas subsidiaries observe is foreign and, so, more disturbing than is the apparently 'friendly' forest experience of the Nakaya. Nonetheless, it is intimately shared and meaning-fully rich, assisted by their naturalizations of homogeneity that assure they are all 'facing the same direction'.

I will return to the sociology of the Nakaya in thinking through indi-vidual salarymen's long-term 'views' of foreign contexts. Meanwhile, all Japanese salarymen labouring in the same firm and 'facing the same direc-tion' in overseas subsidiaries reproduce common 'us versus them' binaries. Indeed, day-to-day, the Japanese were often largely confounded by the Thai or French, and *vice versa*. However, I will show that cultural knowledge of Thailand and France can also serve particular salarymen in elaborating upon the stereotypical frames emanating from Japanese society generally. While

entirely framed through their deep associations with their corporation, these individuals' expressions of foreign knowledge, at the margins of their corporate frames, allow them to differentiate and distinguish themselves from other Japanese salaryman colleagues. As we shall see ethnographically, distinctive positionalities are developed by particularly skilled salarymen: in one case through the deployment of exotic foreign knowledge valuable to Japanese elites; and in the other, integration into the lives, and substantive knowledge, of foreigners, in a configuration not unlike that sought by the anthropological fieldworker, if with considerably different outcomes.

The cultivation of these positionalities will be examined in relation to the social dynamics that characterize Japanese expatriate work spaces. But, in addition to the competitions between salarymen common to all, e.g., domestic, Japanese organizations, the intense day-to-day cross-cultural, cross-linguistic interactions driving the sociology of such overseas contexts reveal the stresses of cultural naturalizations of homogeneity common to Japanese society generally. Already pronounced by occupants of, and aspirants to, the salaryman lifestyle across Japan, then, they are, in short, radically and consequentially extended abroad.

Intertwined bases of comparison in Japan: ethnic homogeneity, historical uniqueness and the sociological underpinnings of hierarchy

The cultural naturalization of homogeneity and bounded Japanese ethnicity

Where relations between the Japanese and 'others' is concerned, a distinctive and salient point needs to be emphasized. Over 98% of the population of Japan is identified by the Japanese as carrying the physiogeny 'Japanese'. While the social construction of national identity is everywhere a highly charged ethnic-cultural problematic, the on-going centrality of common ethnicity to the idea of 'the Japanese' and the 'nation of Japan', as a statistical matter and cultural phenomenon, stands in stark contrast to the 'ethnic make-up' of other advanced industrial societies, e.g., in Europe and North America, especially at the end of the 20th and start of the 21st centuries. By any comparative measure, Japan has one of the most homogeneous national populations in the world.

What is the relevance of that fact? While impossible to define specifically, as a *culturally naturalized* state-of-affairs among the Japanese, ethnic homogeneity in Japan has a profound effect on the sociology of Japanese society. Cultural naturalization is sustained 'intimately' (Herzfeld 1997) through day-to-day experience, dignifying the efficacy of individuals and forcefully emphasizing their social activities, e.g., outside of mass media and top-down political interventions. Herzfeld's notion of cultural engagement (1997, 3) reminds us that persons in a particular society share frameworks

that do not determine their individual actions. Rather, they instil a sense of 'us' *in* individual action. Such sharing is subjectively experienced in continuous acts of comparison through recognition of similarity with others in the constitution of group affiliation. Hastrup suggests that such processes prove socially and individually 'efficient' in that they allow an illusion of wholeness, an association of individual behaviour with a group or societal whole (Hastrup 2007, 27).

In our analysis of the Japanese, that associated whole intertwines ethnic homogeneity with the nation, personified in Japanese self-identity, e.g., how 'we', Japanese, think about and do things. Cultural naturalizations are substantively sustained – that is, bounded – by how the Japanese understand that others do not do such things. Those differences are encouraged by the fact that across their lifetimes, most Japanese people rarely see, nor have substantive interactions with anyone who is not ethnically Japanese. This enhances their awareness of differences – locally often understood as 'phylogenetic differences' – between themselves and others. Ethnic homogeneity, then, is an undercurrent that elicits the imagined community (Anderson 1983) of the Japanese, especially in its broadly accepted middle class manifestation, which is dominated, overwhelmingly, by the salaryman nexus.

Cultural naturalization of Japan's longue durée *historical trajectory and ownership of Japan's late 20ᵗʰ century 'economic miracle'*

Throughout its over-2000 year recorded history, the Japanese have been as deeply psychologically bounded to a particular place as they have to the mythological heavens above. Resonating with Britain's historical evocation of Shakespeare's 'scepter'd isle', Japan is a series of islands – four of them quite large – surrounded by heavy sea currents and, often, very powerful winds: it has had few invaders. The political compartmentalizations of feudalism across most of this history, meanwhile, were exaggerated in Japan by its domestic geography: 85% mountain coverage characterized by a steep, isolated valley landscape subject to seemingly continuous natural disasters: landslides, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis. In a well-rehearsed history – linked directly through to the present via Japan's nationwide education system – in 1600 the nation was for the first time consolidated or, better stated, subdued under a single authority. Here, the Tokugawa Shogunate took the explicit decision that Japan should have no intercourse whatsoever with the outside world. Enhancing its structural insularity, it would only be a slight exaggeration to say that Japan was effectively frozen in time for over two and a half centuries, from 1600 until 1868, when its barriers to exchanges of any kind, already creaking, were pried open by the threats of American warships in the port of Yokohama, just outside the capital in Tokyo.

From 1868, Japan's new Meiji government flipped this policy on its head, radically internationalizing through the structural emulation of contemporary Western systems of capitalist industrialization and expansive

militarism, e.g., colonialism. If spectacularly successful in copying from the West, this re-articulation aligned with Japan's cultural naturalizations. That includes the key historical takeaway for our purposes: although the Japanese military occupied and some nationals immigrated to its colonies abroad in, e.g., Korea and a splintered China, the Japanese people have experienced an entirely different pre-colonial and post-colonial/modern industrial *socio-logical* trajectory from that of the Western capitalist industrial nations with which Japan otherwise compares itself. Japan has never had an *immigrant* population that, among other things, might serve to challenge the imagined community of domestic 'Japanese' homogeneity. (Indeed, the only immigrants of significant number – e.g., [originally] forced labour from Japan's Korean colony – have, rather, served across time to sociologically reinforce Japan's ethnic *cum* cultural homogeneity.) I will return to this point, especially with regard to postwar Japan.

By the 1930s, the inexorable requirement that the machine of Japanese industrialization literally remain oiled coincided with further projections of power. Its politics ossifying tragically into fascism, Japan glorified the obsolete, if highly resonant, absolutist martial tradition of its feudal past. As a consequence, with its foolhardy attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, it drew the United States into the Second World War. By early 1943, Japan was strategically defeated but, for a further two and a half years, a brutal 'war without mercy' (Dower 1986), characterized by extreme cruelty on both sides, drove the exhausted Japanese people into destitution.

Finally surrendering in August 1945, Japan rose remarkably quickly from the 'ashes of war'. With a strong wartime base of know-how, it rebuilt its heavy industries and shipbuilding, harnessing a technology-oriented education system to a well-disciplined workforce labouring in highly centralized institutions through fresh government-led re-industrialization projects. Whatever the particulars of mid-20th century international relations, '[t]he will of the Japanese at the close of the war and over the decades to follow in facing up economically and organizationally to the radical domestic wartime and immediate postwar situation should never be underestimated (Sedgwick 2007, 167)'. And, critically, Japan's postwar 'economic miracle' is understood by the Japanese people, at its core, and through to the present, as a *home-grown* achievement. Based geographically on Japan's original four islands, it was manned exclusively by Japanese persons, with postwar Japanese corporations and bureaucracies tightly aligned in reproducing this particular historical and cultural-economic contextualization.

Remarkably, by 1967, 22 years after the war ended, Japan had become the world's second largest economy, ahead of every European nation, and behind only the United States with its enormous scale, seemingly unlimited resources and huge population. By then, Japan's corporations, including those where I have conducted ethnographic research, had broken the dominance of high profit Western consumer electronics firms, and the pattern was repeated quickly and overwhelmingly in motor vehicles in the 1970s. Thus, for the second time in less than a century, Japan caught up with,

and now exceeded (its model), Western powers. This was a matter of great pride to Japan's industrialists, its government mandarins – who provided unremitting economic and political support to the industrial sector – and the Japanese-at-large, who held severe wartime deprivations within recent memory.[4]

The Japanese people increasingly enjoyed the fruits of consumer society, cradle to grave health care, a STEM-oriented education system that generated near 100% literacy, a taxation system that discouraged intergenerational concentrations of wealth, wage structures that were remarkably tight between the least paid and most highly paid members of its institutions, etc. This reproduced a highly diligent, compliant and safe society where 85% of the Japanese considered themselves middle class.

I conclude this section on the cultural naturalization in Japan of geographical integrity and ethnic homogeneity by reiterating its core historical takeaway. Japan's unusual contemporary ethnic configuration, accompanied by an extremely low immigrant population, is part and parcel of the imagined community of its postwar 'economic miracle' based, implicitly and explicitly, in a homogeneity reproducing the nexus of the salaryman, who embodies every aspect of that very success story.

Foundations of comparison: hierarchy in the social construction of the Japanese self

In alignment with an ethnic and historico-nationalist trajectory that celebrates homogeneity across Japan's societal geography, what of the necessary, countervailing premise to the substance of comparison – identifying and articulating difference – among the Japanese?

The core principle of social relations among the Japanese is hierarchy. The Japanese understand themselves not as stand-alone entities, but as positioned relative to other persons. In stark contrast to the American idiom, the Japanese are unburdened by a projection of sociality where people, supposedly 'created equal' (by God), should be *treated equally* in the social relations that engage their lives. Indeed, at the other extreme perhaps from the American model – where a fully hypothetical and thoroughly unrealistic independent adulthood is the sought-after ideal – alone, a Japanese person would be presumed to be lonely, and/or selfish: not co-existing with others in a normal fashion. Among the Japanese, normality infers commitment to the widely recognized goals of one's age-set. Day-to-day this is nearly always expressed through hierarchically organized groups where, in practice, the *de facto* suppression of individual desire is considered a source of individual strength. Rather than negation, a productive way of considering the role of the individual Japanese is to understand their contribution to group work as a vehicle of individual aspiration.

Further articulating the priority of hierarchically structured social relations, it is worth examining, as counterexample, the few contexts in the

lifecourse of a Japanese person where individual members of a group are considered equal. School classmates generate a frame that models equality, but which can only be temporarily recreated in rare instances of co-equality later in life. An example of the latter phenomenon are elite salarymen from top Japanese universities entering the same Japanese company at the same time, in the same 'class', on the same day in April every year. Formally, co-equals from the start of their tenure – which, ideally, should extend across their working lives – they understand their positioning as elites relative to other members of the firm and as the group from which the firm's future top managers are expected to emerge. As suggested in the Introduction, for decades they will (privately) scrutinize the relative status of peers – as do, no doubt, Human Resources departments – comparing their positioning, e.g., as they rise, or do not especially rise.[5] These processes reinforce competition, and, therefore, a hierarchically nuanced understanding of their erstwhile 'equal' relations within their age-set. In a Japanese corporation or government office, one cannot overestimate the density and relevance of (hierarchically-oriented) comparative social knowledge and its corresponding intensity of competition. A Japanese salaryman recounted to me the specific pleasure of a recent professional success – a promotion – that served to show up the short shrift shown him 15 years earlier by a colleague, a competitor. His adversary may have won the initial battle, but this more important and recent one was his.

Meanwhile, the 'co-equal' classmate frame is itself riddled with (comparative) competition that generates internal hierarchies over time. Working backwards through the realities of growing up in Japan, because gaining employment in high status institutions in Japan – e.g., to become an elite salaryman – is more strongly associated with one's university than to academic achievement itself, competition to get into the best possible university is overwhelming, with university entrance examinations Japan's most rigorous, and consequential, rite of passage. Thus, Japanese high schools are widely known as sites of 'exam hell',[6] with the desire to enter top high schools often making the last year of junior high school, when children are 12 years old, agonizing. The tensions inherent to Japan's education system work their way into all Japanese families. This might seem especially so for stay-at-home mothers who, in practice, are the vast majority of mothers in Japan, while working mothers carry the additional emotional burden of perhaps insufficiently supporting their children's educational endeavours. In any case, mothers' progress through adulthood is intimately aligned, e.g., intergenerationally, with the success of their children. Seen overall, the processes co-producing Japanese children, families, the education system, young adulthood and broader Japanese society has been cogently described as 'socialization for achievement' (De Vos 1973).[7]

To conclude this section, seated in *longue durée* history and demonstrating Japanese preoccupations with hierarchical relations, I have outlined cultural naturalizations of homogeneity relating to Japanese ethnicity and

a sense of uniqueness tied to relative (nationalist) positioning. These cultural naturalizations preconfigure the highly competitive environments characteristic of interpersonal work among salaryman peers. Homogeneity, as a pan-Japanese societal phenomenon, is hyper-exaggerated in salaryman organizations. It generates intensive attunement to variations that, if appropriately mobilized, may positively impact a career trajectory relative to peers. Below, I discuss ethnographically how Japanese salarymen articulate these processes in relation to 'others' while *outside* of Japan at the *de facto* margins of their totalizing corporate systems.

The formal organization of Japanese corporations abroad: French and Thai disjunctures

Having discussed a Japanese society rooted in its (ethno)history, described the basic tenets of Japanese sociality, and highlighted the tenacity of the salaryman formation in modelling the adult Japanese lifecourse, let us bring these topics together. How does the imagined community of Japanese historical discourse, assisting the reproduction of a culturally naturalized, internally homogenizing and externally bounded comparative sociality, reproduce Japanese institutions day-to-day? How do the aspirations and lifestyles embodied by elite Japanese salarymen, and their families, at the Japanese corporations that I have studied in Thailand and in France, play out in their thoughts and activities as lived processes?

Notably, Japanese corporations maintaining significant operations abroad is a recent part of Japanese economic history. In order to facilitate its exports, in the 1960s, major Japanese corporations set up administrative offices in major foreign markets, so that local trade conditions could be studied and sales and distribution networks consolidated. However, it was only from the mid-1980s that the Japanese began the far more complicated physical plant and organizationally resource-intensive processes of manufacturing goods outside Japan. How are these subsidiary factories, each formally a corporation in its own right, structured?

Let's start at the top of their organizational charts. The president of every Japanese factory subsidiary in Southeast Asia, including Thailand, is Japanese. In Europe, all the presidents are European nationals of the host society.[8] I am not (yet) commenting on the supposed correlation of decision-making authority with designated position on an organizational chart. I am saying that, as a matter of corporate policy, at virtually every large Japanese corporation, top executives at headquarters in Japan – those ultimately responsible for these foreign operations – make particular decisions about how best to organize their transnational corporation, including the public face of their subsidiaries abroad. In Europe, that is with a European – a national of the location of the subsidiary – while, in Asia, it is with a Japanese. Meanwhile, obviously the centre, back in Japan, has had to make an enormous initial investment in order to set up an overseas subsidiary.

However, once functioning, although the structure of local presidents' expense relations vis-à-vis central authorities in the corporation is the same, the proportion of monies[9] controlled by Japanese presidents, e.g., in Thailand, exceeds that of French presidents, in France.

In all formal organizations, positions matter, of course. At a minimum, the head of a corporation takes responsibility for public and governmental queries into its activities. Arguably, however, as the information made available to the public, beyond the legal 'corporate veil', is easily manipulated, it may be superficial, telling us little about the content of and power over, say, internal decision-making and the resources involved in running a corporation. That said, among the Japanese, form – *tatemae*: literally, 'standing in front', or 'face' – matters to content and is taken extremely seriously. *Tatemae* is conceptually paired with *ura*, literally, 'back', or the circumstances that underlie or structure a situation. In translation, this dichotomy is often, predictably, misconstrued in Western conception as 'truth' versus 'presentation', with the latter, 'face' understood, effectively, as superficial and, so, suggestively, false. The better way to understand the *erstwhile* dichotomy of *tatemae-ura* is that they are necessarily collapsed together as, e.g., the total reality of a situation: 'face', or presentation in Japanese society is part and parcel of content. By way of example, it may well be that a person at the top of a formal Japanese group is a figurehead. One might be inclined, as a Westerner, to consider them irrelevant. But recalling our discussion of hierarchical premises in Japan, Japanese group activities cannot unfold productively without that person being physically present and, so, 'in place'. This is perhaps why the Japanese opt for putting a Frenchman in place as the 'face' of their corporation in France: it aligns with their, Japanese, conception of how to do things properly in a French context. That is so, even while, practically speaking, the *ura*, or back-story, is that the subsidiary is owned by the Japanese transnational corporation, it is ultimately dependent on Japanese resources and it is part of a global network under the control of Japanese managers back in Japan.

My interpretation of differences in the comparative practices structuring the relations of the Japanese with the French and the Thai, respectively, starts with the suggestion that where other Asian nations (and peoples) are concerned, there is a projected familiarity, or laxness. This is not simply a matter of geographic proximity but an understanding that in Asia the Japanese are 'first among equals'.[10] This hierarchical move obviously relegates 'other' Asians and Asian nations to a subordinate position and, thus, generates familiarity or informality in their treatment. Meanwhile, at significant moments in its modern history, Japan specifically reshaped its institutional systems based on Western models. As a process, in order to 'learn from the West', as a matter of proper relations between, effectively, teacher and student, Japan subordinated itself. This included taking on board superficial mores, such as Western fashion. That said, common to nationality, and nationalist sentiment, citizens of all nations understand

themselves, and their own nation, as better than other nations and peoples. The Japanese people do not consider Westerners as superior to them. Rather, an astute, elite driven political-ideological formation, mobilizing Japanese hierarchical predispositions, led the Japanese to understand the successes of the West as a target for their naturally competitive, and, so, foundationally comparative, inclinations. In contrast to local, 'other' Asians, the fact that the West is distant may assist its mythologization but, in any case, in the modern era, the Japanese have held a profound interest in and respect for the nations and societies of The West. Thus, as a matter of proper form, Westerners are distanced, held at arm's length, relations of the Japanese to them more formal. Corresponding to the 'face' (*tatemae*) of the situation, then, the Japanese would risk offending Euro-Americans, and undermine themselves, by not allowing a Westerner to (officially) lead a subsidiary corporation in a Western country.

How do these considerations play out interpersonally within the frame of salarymen working, respectively, in Thailand and France? Most of my core Japanese informants were skilled engineers, deeply familiar with their corporation's production machinery and its administrative processes. They were in positions of authority in 'their' overseas subsidiaries. And, in terms of direct, technical knowledge, they were a core resource of know-how for the work of their counterparts, who were local cadres: highly educated (French or Thai) engineers who formally occupy key positions in those overseas factories.[11] In practice, based around a particular skill set, each Japanese engineer would be closely affiliated with and effectively oversee the work of two or three local engineers. Working intensively with them, day in and day out, they would come to know well their local colleagues' technical knowledge and their capacity to work under the highly pressurized conditions of mass production. Below this formal hierarchical level, a Japanese engineer might be familiar with a local foreman who oversees a specific production line, e.g., where the Japanese engineer is a technical specialist. However, between the Japanese and the French, whatever feelings might be generated naturally through working together day-to-day were less often expressed, were more constrained, were more formal and polite than that between Japanese and Thai. These inclinations influence the types of knowledge developed by and the actions taken by Japanese salarymen in these two different contexts.

Distinctions in/of French '*cultural*' capital

Japanese members of the Japanese factory in France that I researched for a year and a half were typically posted there for three to five years. Seven or eight Japanese were based at this factory at any one time. But, as experienced colleagues finish their overseas cycle and return to Japan, they are replaced by newcomers. Across my period of research in France, then, I overlapped with 10 Japanese managers and their families. None were

competent users of French language. But, by virtue of living in France, they all had the opportunity to cultivate an understanding of 'French Culture', which occupies a highly desirable, elite space in the Japanese imagination. Along with practical information about how to negotiate day-to-day life in rural France,[12] especially valuable to wives who were isolated there, they would impart their cultural knowledge of France with varying levels of sophistication to in-coming Japanese colleagues. Seen overall, then, in what might be construed as a doubly inverted Orientalism (Said 1978), the exoticism of 'France' encouraged its desirability as an outpost of (high) Western civilization with knowledge thereof a means of standing out, or establishing 'distinction' (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]) among the Japanese themselves.[13]

Cultivated knowledge of French Culture might also carry over, importantly, to very high-level visiting managers from the corporation in Japan, who seemed to be in near-constant circumnavigation of the globe, e.g., checking up on the operations of their huge transnational corporation. The visits of such *de facto* dignitaries, called 'biggies', were anticipated with a tremendous level of planning, led by the highest-level Japanese at any subsidiary – in the case of France, also an engineer – with every minute of a visit, typically of 24–48 hours, accounted for. An extension of the basic cultivation of care for guests within Japanese society generally, these visits were calibrated so that the inevitably lower-level Japanese salarymen in an overseas factory could make the best possible impression.

Mid-level engineers, of which there are thousands at a major Japanese industrial corporation like this, would rarely have the opportunity to interact personally with very high-level managers of their firm *in Japan*. Thus, while taking good care of an important guest was simply doing one's job properly, in practice, if unstated, all of the mid-level engineers, that is, every salaryman in France, was aware that it was a career opportunity. As a classic example of Japanese group/corporate hierarchical relations that I outlined in the Introduction, a good boss would not only make you work hard, but also look after you: that is, he and his subordinates coordinated their (formal and informal) labour to make their group function successfully. Over an extended time period, a good boss, then, is aware (at a very high-level of personal and professional/technical detail) of the situation of every one of his subordinates, while he would also be, commensurately, tracking those above him as, in practice, he is a subordinate in the more confined, hierarchical group within the corporation within which he is eager to rise.

Thus, a boss, A-san, in France, would be aware, for instance, that a visiting corporate 'biggy' controlled or might be influential in particular sections of the corporation where the skills of one of A-san's subordinates, Yamada-san, coming to the end of his posting in France, could be usefully employed. In this example, based on actual observations, A-san, as the highest-ranking Japanese among those stationed abroad, leads the conversation at a dinner table at a fine restaurant in rural France with a visiting 'biggy'. A-san indicates to him that Yamada-san is highly knowledgeable about French wine, and

that Yamada-san, sitting at the same table, and who receives a nod, chose the wines that the visiting dignitary is now drinking with pleasure, a spectacle enhanced by the distinction associated with the consumption of wine globally, and especially French wine, as an elite cultural product. This was just one of a multitude of subtle interactions taking place within the short period of that dignitary's visit. It would be impossible to know if it would have any influence over a new posting when decisions would be taken back in Japan. But, and this is the key point, it might. A simple statement back in Japan, in a private meeting, where this dignitary mentions that he 'met Yamada-san in France, and he seemed quite competent', could be decisive. The firm, after all, would be choosing from a pool of, say, a dozen internal candidates, virtually all of whom would be competent for the job: trained, experienced, highly skilled and capable members of their elite corporation, otherwise their name would not be in the list of candidates, and they would not be members of the corporation in the first place. A 'biggy's' comment could set one candidate apart from all the others in a pool of outstanding candidates.

Yamada-san not only, in comparison with his local Japanese colleagues, had expertise in French wines, but he had also visited and studied in detail the layout and cultural offerings of interest to the Japanese at The Louvre, in Paris. He was happy to share his meticulous notes with newcomer Japanese colleagues and visitors to France. Thus, Yamada-san surrounded himself in France with an aura of cultural knowledge that elevated his standing. Apart from the formal context of visiting 'biggies', this was particularly sought after on relaxed social Japanese-only occasions, where discussion of shared and potential experience in France would predominate. Meanwhile, interestingly, among engineers, not typically skilled in social chit chat, this was the sort of non-work-related knowledge that made conversation with the wives of Yamada-san's colleagues comfortable. These Japanese families were, after all, isolated in rural France, so, apart from wives being in day-to-day contact with one another, entire families often met together, e.g., on weekends for barbeques and other events. While there were no French, all the Japanese were invited, of course, including the two men who were not accompanied by a spouse, but Yamada-san and his wife – an employee of the corporation until the birth of their first child – were especially sought-after guests.

Half a year later, Yamada-san was informed that he would be returning to an unexpectedly high-level position in Japan. He was delighted. Widely congratulated by his colleagues in Japan and in France – especially his boss, A-san – it was considered fully deserved. I have no idea if Yamada-san's success had anything to do with his knowledge of French Culture, the event I recounted at the restaurant, nor do I know if the visiting 'biggy' played any role in the decision regarding Yamada-san's future. But, as a Japanese intra-group, corporate phenomenon, Yamada-san had distinguished himself *horizontally* in many aspects of his work, including generously, and

entirely spontaneously, sharing his familiarity with French Culture with his competitors and their wives, and, thus, enhancing their foreign experience. Furthermore, in properly taking care of a senior colleague and guest, he displayed his *vertical* prowess, distinguishing himself by bringing timely knowledge of France to the table.

Intimate movements of Thai '*social*' capital

By comparison, in depth knowledge of high-level Thai Culture by Japanese based in Bangkok carried no weight among visiting Japanese dignitaries, and little among those Japanese based in Thailand on postings of several years. Other kinds of knowledge were valued, and they overlap with Japanese mainstream perspectives on Thailand: a site of entertainment dominated by men, e.g., golf and nightlife.

   Thailand's nightlife is characterized by prolific drink and food including, in Bangkok, which at the time of my research was the home of 50,000 expatriate Japanese, good, reasonably priced Japanese food. The huge expat Japanese population, residing comfortably in the same urban neighbourhoods, enjoyed a *de facto* Japanese bubble. Geographically, meanwhile, Thailand is a mere two times zones west of Japan, meaning day-to-day life in both places was conducted in the same daily frame. The general demographic and Japan-related amenities available to the Japanese expat community in Bangkok stands in radical contrast to the completely isolated situation of my Japanese interlocutors in France, seven time zones and an 11-hour flight away. However, it was sociologically similar: with the occasional exception of bachelors, Japanese salarymen and their families in Bangkok interacted socially almost exclusively with Japanese affiliated with their own specific overseas subsidiary.

   The projected cultural gap and physical distance between France and Japan mimicked the private interpersonal space shared between the Japanese and the French: to my knowledge, none of my Japanese interlocutors – two of whom were single at the time of research – was ever involved intimately with any French people. This was not the case for the Japanese in Thailand. The general pattern among Japanese salarymen sent abroad is that they are married.[14] Ordinarily, a salaryman would be accompanied by his Japanese wife, unless children were coming up to high school or, more importantly, Japanese university entrance exams which, at the time, could not be realistically prepared for outside of Japan. However, the breadth and density of Japanese corporate activity in Thailand was so dynamic at the time of my long period of research there that firms ended up sending bachelors to Thailand. Among close informants, three Japanese married Thai women, who later returned with them to Japan. After a cycle in Japan of a few years, two of these salarymen requested, and received, approvals for return postings in Thailand, which eventually, insufficiently cycling back through postings in Japan, was detrimental to their careers.

Hardball: golf as Japanese corporate idiom

The conventional wisdom is that among Japanese salarymen dedication to the company is demonstrated by overwork and a virtually complete overlap of their work, leisure and private lives. I can confirm this. Part of my field-work mission was near total immersion in the life of Japanese salarymen. So, apart from spending around 14 hours with them every weekday, almost every weekend in Thailand I played a round of golf with colleagues and, if we hadn't been working at the factory on a Saturday, occasionally twice in a weekend. I suppose that not every Japanese salaryman in Thailand played golf, but at a minimum he would be obliged to play in semi-annual company golf tournaments that were always followed by raucous awards ceremonies, accompanied by copious amounts of food and drink.

Walking off the green of the 18th hole, my Japanese golfing partner tells me, 'you can tell the entire character of a person by playing a round of golf with them'. Just a bit of socializing and fun? As the Japanese understand it, the cultivation of unerring steadiness, even under crisis, via a cool, not cold, demeanour is central to business itself. That is very difficult to maintain across four hours of golf – especially in the searing heat of Thailand – and it aligns with the slow personal development and expense associated with gaining skill in this sport. It is no surprise that golf, with consummate dedi-cation required to develop prowess, its high-tech, ever advancing gear and elite leisure associations is at the centre of Japanese business culture itself. In short, golf pervades the consciousness of Japanese salarymen, and it was especially central to Japanese expatriate experience in Thailand.

As such, while mediocrity means it goes unnoticed, high skill in golf can play an important role in a salaryman's career. Kuroda-san, one of my core informants from the automobile company I researched at length in Thailand, was an outstanding golfer. 'Par' is the number of shots it takes to finish a hole with no mistakes, and 'par for the course', of 18 holes, is always 72. Making no mistakes 72 times you hit a ball, each time under different conditions, is near impossible. Kuroda-san had a 'handicap' of three, meaning he would, on average, 'shoot' a 75.[15]

Well into his 50s, Kuroda-san was one of the best golfers in his entire, huge automobile corporation. While occupying a relatively normal, upper management position as a Japanese engineer in the Thai factory, Kuroda-san was a known figure – *kao ga hiroi:* literally, '[his] face is wide' – sought out by the corporation's high-level managers when they visited Thailand. Thailand is only a few hours by plane from Japan, so plenty of visitors also came there for leisure, and Kuroda-san would informally be called upon. As the lowest ranking person among, say, a visiting group of 'biggies' from Japan, during such events usually nothing more than the golf itself, and the reputational value his golf skills inferred, was in play for Kuroda-san. But, in practice, he had an inside track to these high-level figures that provided opportunities for more communications, e.g., should they take an

interest in confidential information on situations as Kuroda-san saw them in Thailand, or if they should provide insights regarding high-level organizational machinations back in Japan.

As a structural organizational matter, then, Kuroda-san's opportunity to interact with superiors well above his rank would naturally generate tension with his local superior: the (Japanese) president of the Thai subsidiary. Nowhere near the top of the corporation, but higher than Kuroda-san, in the normal course of his successful career, the president would have cycled into this position at the Thai subsidiary, ordinarily knowing next to nothing *per se* about Thailand itself. During the first segment of my research, the president of the automobile subsidiary was a former engineer: a mild, 'nice guy', who was serious and highly oriented to spreadsheets. He was also sociologically astute or, in the present context, organizationally smart, and this, no doubt, helped account for his rise in the firm. He saw the Kuroda-san situation for what it was. Kuroda-san 'knew everything about Thailand', so it was practical, for the president's on-going success in Thailand, to have Kuroda-san's knowledge on-board. In relation to his own vertical relations with the company's top managers, the president may have also considered it wise to keep Kuroda-san on side, while potentially benefitting from what Kuroda-san might have heard on the golf course or in drinking sessions with 'biggies' to follow that, sometimes, he too would be invited to attend. In any case, Kuroda-san enjoyed a direct, immediate line to the president.

In the space of the Thai, at the margins of the Japanese

In the 1970s, and correctly anticipating the rise of automobile sales in an expanding Southeast Asian market, the company had begun assembling cars in Thailand. Building 'knock-down' cars, e.g., from a set of loose parts, is detailed work, and early in his career in Japan, Kuroda-san specialized technically in this area. Highly skilled, and easy-going with non-Japanese 'others',[16] he was increasingly asked to apply his knowledge on a short-term basis, moving around the globe, e.g., not only to Thailand, but also to the expanding number of company assembly plants abroad. Kuroda-san took seriously the intense communications and intimacies of assembly work, and his style – hands-on initial tutelage, but then observing from a distance, allowing 'local' colleagues to get on with it – was much appreciated, especially in Thailand, where he enjoyed particular success. At the time of research, in his second lengthy posting, he had so far spent over 12 years in Thailand.

Kuroda-san excelled in mainstream salaryman credentials – competent, hard-working engineer; solid drinker; outstanding golfer – and was well-liked. So, he was comparatively strongly positioned – horizontally – relative to his Japanese peers, and this, in principle, should benefit him vertically, e.g., in rising through the ranks. While maintaining relations associated with his salaryman lifestyle, he also increasingly enjoyed life with Thais both from the

workplace and on the many golf courses within an hour or two of Bangkok, where he became a known figure. While he couldn't read Thai, he spoke it well and was utterly unpretentious with others: both highly ranked golf pros and caddies exchanged banter with him in Thai. Kuroda-san's social confidence suggests he would not in any case be predisposed to objectify 'others' with stereotypes common to mainstream Japanese society. Rather, he was attentive to the vivid 'immediacy' of circumstances presented to him in fulfilling his obligations in the workplace and beyond: full 'sociality' was characteristic of Kuroda-san's interactions in a shared environment (Bird-David 1994). From our perspective, he was the ultimate anthropologist/fieldworker, and he was increasingly comfortably integrated in Thailand.

As suggested, Kuroda-san's success in operating as a *de facto* bridge between the Japanese and Thais was instrumental in making the subsidiary a success. And his knowledge of Thai culture and language, always appreciated by Thais, was respected, at an individual level, by other Japanese. Kuroda-san was aware that Thais work hard and are 'productive' vis-à-vis highly pressurized factory/assembly line work. But, unlike the phalanx of hierarchal group dynamics so efficiently deployed among the Japanese, Thais work differently, requiring an immediate sense of individual efficacy, even in tasks that they share with others. This was something few Japanese engineers could understand and fewer accepted: they fought against it. If perhaps enjoying other aspects of their lives in Thailand, such as golf, and if invariably extremely devoted, these engineers were frustrated by their work in Thailand but, only there for few years, or months, they were resigned to it. Kuroda-san humoured them along, but knew that, with a couple of exceptions, he and the Thais were not going to be able to change the minds of these Japanese engineers. Meanwhile, Japan's very particular and famous 'production techniques' – quality control circles, just-in-time management, etc. – that lay at the centre of Japan's prolific postwar economic success, had by the 1980s become enchanted globally, especially significantly in Western industrial circles. This acknowledgement meant, already resistant to change, Japanese engineers were less likely to make adjustments to accommodate the differing sociology of the foreigners, who increasingly worked at their many assembly line factories outside of Japan, all across the globe. As a result, when there were perceived difficulties in Thailand, corporate headquarters, in Japan, assigned more and more Japanese engineers – of which there was a surplus in Japan – to 'work with', i.e., teach, the Thais. While always polite on the surface, this heavy tutelage was experienced by Thais as a statement, represented by the Japanese engineer on their shoulder, that they were failing.

In any case, as mentioned above, Kuroda-san enjoyed a direct, immediate line to the president, who relied on his advice and know-how on any number of issues that arose specific to Thailand. One of those was Kuroda-san's involvement in assisting the corporation's high-level managers with the complex negotiations involved in the company making a very large-scale

financial investment in a huge, new automobile factory in Thailand. A few years later, as production got started, a new president was assigned to the new factory, while the previous president returned to Japan and began his retirement. Comparatively young for such a role, and evidently rising fast in the larger corporation, the new president was rather proud. And, as ever, though he knew a lot about the automobile business, he knew very little about Thailand. However, unlike the earlier president, he was not comfortable with Kuroda-san's insider knowledge of Thailand, his connections with higher level managers in the firm nor, as it happens, the day-to-day presence of an anthropologist at the new factory. Kuroda-san was increasingly assigned to technical positions, e.g., sidelined, including the new president dominating relations with visiting 'biggies' from Japan. Two years later, with a generous financial package on the table, Kuroda-san took retirement at the perfectly respectable, but comparatively young age of 56. He remained in Thailand, and set about getting formal qualification as a golf professional. With a well-known Thai golf pro he then started a golf training and leisure company.

Kuroda-san embodied completely the salaryman ethos, but he occupied liminal positionalities in his firm on three counts. His golf prowess allowed him unusual access but, well 'above his station', it was considered threatening to a rigid superior. Meanwhile, the diversity of Kuroda-san's knowledge *on the ground* in Thailand was very profound and tangibly benefitted the corporation's profit line. However, this cross-cultural knowledge was not 'of interest' to the larger corporation. Further, Kuroda-san's unorthodox skills kept him (happily) in Thailand, but that, in itself, was an embodiment of his marginalization from the centre of the corporation.

Conclusion

Let me return to the themes articulated in the Introduction and earlier sections in relation to my ethnographic findings. As dominant forces in their corporations, top managers in Japan structure the leadership of their subsidiaries abroad as projections of general Japanese hierarchical valuations, respectively, with regard to Westerners and 'other Asians'. This is constructed out of their understanding of their own, Japanese history in relation to 'The West' versus 'the rest of Asia'. Unconcerned about 'face' in Thailand, and across Southeast Asia, they make Japanese salarymen leaders of subsidiaries while, demonstrating their respect and, in turn, *de facto* social distancing, make local Westerners their leaders, in this case in France. These generalized hierarchical, and, so, comparative, criteria mean that nearly all Japanese on the ground in France engage in cultivating expertise in French Culture: something that does not interest them in Thailand. We saw that Yamada-san openly and very generously shared his prolific knowledge of French Culture, making him an attractive 'horizontal' companion among his several colleagues in France – who were generally

at the same hierarchical level in the firm – and their families. Yamada-san's performances of desirable knowledge also allowed him to distinguish himself with a visiting corporate dignitary to France who may have been influential in procuring for him an excellent promotion back in Japan. Meanwhile, Yamada-san's promotion demonstrated his boss, A-san's, competence in positioning his subordinate to care for their guest, among many other tasks that, no doubt, spoke to Yamada-san's competence. Yamada-san's presumed on-going success in the larger firm would continue over time to reflect positively on A-san as his former immediate boss, or patron. One can easily see the outlines, and intimacies, of Evans-Pritchard's age-sets, across time, in this work (1940).

I have discussed Japanese golf as an idiom for enacting salarymen, while noting the universal attractions of the game as pleasurable, if serious, 'play', both immediately, on the golf course, and across time, through the cultivation of one's personal skill in relation to the world of golfers. *Bona fide* expertise in golf, meanwhile, exhibits competence and, in the cultural context of the Japanese salaryman, leadership. In his case, this allowed Kuroda-san to transcend the usual hierarchical confines of his immediate workplace, and to interact above his (normal) station in the firm, a liminal and, effectively, risky activity. While golfing, his special access to top management meant he might gain highly valuable distant knowledge, while potentially exposing local information. The dissonance thus led, naturally, to structural tension with his immediate, local organization's bosses, the presidents of the Thai automobile subsidiary. For his own benefit and that of the subsidiary, the first president brought Kuroda-san under his wing, cultivating his unusual positionality. The second, however, saw in Kuroda-san a threat and, drawing on his hierarchical power, marginalized Kuroda-san's work and alienated his relations with high-level corporate executives. Not long thereafter, Kuroda-san quit the firm, further embraced golf and, with his generous retirement package, made a business of it. This was only possible because of Kuroda-san's connections across the Japanese and Thai communities and his deep familiarity with the local Thai scene.

Kuroda-san's long-term, in depth knowledge of Thailand, including Thai language, had helped his Japanese corporation: many cars were sold, much money made. But the Thai could not work 'as Japanese', both because of their different cultural background and because, as 'others', the Japanese would not accommodate the change required in sociologically engaging with them fully (Sedgwick 1999). Kuroda-san knew this. Nonetheless, in that, based on his profound engineering know-how and local knowledge, he was instrumental in the very success of the company, the rationality supposedly associated with running a business or, for that matter, the exigencies of capitalism, suggest that, as a vertical organizational phenomenon, across time Kuroda-san would have had a 'high flying' career. He did not.

His knowledge of Thailand identified him as liminal, while his postings in Thailand – continuous over his last decade at the company – also set him apart.

In light of the case studies, and analysis of general predispositions among the Japanese that preceded them, I return to the complex panoply of comparative acts, first noted in the Introduction, that take place in the organizational lifeworld of Japanese salarymen across their careers. Based on recognition of similar positionality in their relation to a specific history of nationalism, economic growth, etc., the Japanese people internalize a forceful sense of cultural and ethnic homogeneity. They also compare themselves with other nations, further encouraging their own homogeneity, in externalizing elaborations that are not only 'us versus them' reproductions, but also entail complex comparisons of other nations and peoples: in this case Thais and French. These internally and externally oriented trajectories of comparison are of course mutually reinforcing, serving to bound and sustain homogeneity over time. Against this already-always-present backdrop of Japanese sociality, the case studies detailed internal organizational dynamics where comparative judgements, by bosses, differentiate salarymen from each other. Within these highly competitive interpersonal organizational environments, vertical and horizontal hierarchical pressures play out across the emphasis by the Japanese on homogeneity and, so, intensify attention to detail regarding an individual's distinctive qualities. Small differences are consequential because, first, the outcomes of judging them feed directly into generalized rankings while, second, if inappropriately deployed, such differences threaten the homogenized organizational space. My analyses of situations in overseas settings provided clear examples of these points. The Japanese salarymen here are of course literally the products of their competitive homogenous environment while they are also positioned to actively mobilize resources (at the margins of the salaryman complex, e.g., overseas) to distinguish themselves. Their work under these conditions thus has the potential to raise their rank but, especially because they take place at the margins of the organization, can easily threaten the central homogenized salaryman nexus, which may have a negative impact on an individual salaryman's career.

To return, finally, to our example of the latter phenomenon, Kuroda-san's unorthodox positioning constituted, in practice, a challenge to the homogenizing salaryman nexus. There is very little cultural 'give' here, as suggested by its tenacity in the face of actual decline in the number of salaryman jobs in Japan. Japanese salarymen work hard at bounding their corporations as *de facto* total institutions. However, they, and the many Japanese aspiring to affiliate with them, cannot but reproduce the cultural naturalizations of homogeneity by which the salaryman nexus and its corporate form remains a vital social construction in Japan.

Notes

1   And in some cases after death. Very high-level members of Japanese corporations enjoy elaborate corporate funerals, attended by large numbers of current and former high-ranking officials and associates (Nakamaki 1999). For such events (cremated) remains are temporarily shared by the family. Thus, through two ceremonies at two different sites, high-level corporate leaders have double rites of passage, their spirit divided between their corporation and their family.

2   These organizations' totalizing inclinations are especially vivid as, unlike the 'total institutions' famed in academic discourse – prisons and mental asylums – they are entered into and constituted by men, ostensibly, of their free will.

3   As a further ethnographic and methodological preface for this chapter, allow me to note that, although my career has centred around Japan-related topics, there is evenhandedness in my knowledge of social relations of the Japanese, respectively, with their French and Thai interlocutors. Before I conducted my first field research in Japan while at university, during high school I spent a year in a French family, becoming fluent in French. Meanwhile, if much later, and admittedly at a lower level of eventual expertise, I put considerable effort into my training in anticipation of, and during research in Thailand, where I have by now conducted field research for over three years. While it would be ridiculous to suggest that I don't bring my own blinders to the table, I know these people: I am an enthusiast and a critic of each of these societies.

4   Thus, with hierarchy always dominating Japanese competitive perspectives, as an ideological phenomenon the radical swings of Japan's historical processes also meant there was no *bona fide* contemporaneous experience with but, rather, an on-going reinforcement of the 'othering' (cf. Fabian 1983) of the West.

5   Those entering later, for whatever reason, or with a different or lesser background of educational attainment or skills, are *de facto* outsiders relative to the core group of 'original' entrants. With extremely rare exceptions, non-Japanese working in Japanese firms outside of Japan do not circulate to postings in Japan during their careers. They are always outsiders, peripheral to the Japanese corporate mainstream.

Of course, elite males in top Japanese institutions make up but a small proportion of all Japanese workers, the bulk of whom are not employed in that sort of institution, but their career and lifestyle situation is widely known and aspired to. That is, they are symbolic representatives of the pan-Japanese salaryman nexus central to my thesis.

6   This is represented, tragically, by the fact that, by international standards, suicide rates are extremely high in Japan, and especially so among youth.

7   While framed in the somewhat dusty language of the Cultural Psychology of the 1970s, there is no reason not to consider the insights from De Vos' work highly relevant to consideration of the lifecourse among the Japanese today, half a century later.

8   There are possibly exceptions in both Southeast Asia and in Europe to this phenomenon, but I am not aware of them.

9   I say 'proportion of monies' here because the costs of similar activities in France exceed those in Thailand. (So, in principle, should local expenses be capped equally at every overseas subsidiary – which they are not – this would in any case grant the Japanese president in Thailand leave to cover more expenses locally.)

What is happening here is that the Japanese president of a subsidiary in Thailand is given leeway over a higher proportion of his subsidiary's (internal) expenses because the centre of the Japanese corporation has more confidence in his capacity to make appropriate decisions.

10 This representation is, in part, literal: the Japanese Empire's colonial suppression of its Asian neighbours from the late 19th through the mid-20th centuries was named, during Japan's fascist expansion of the 1930s, 'The Asian Co-prosperity Sphere'.

11 On these corporations' organizational charts, most of these Japanese appeared tangentially, in terms of 'face', as 'Advisors': a complete misrepresentation of the dominance of their work.

12 The factory was located in a small industrial zone, within a pine forest just off a major motorway, at the geographic edge of small French village. It was 15 kilometres from a medium-sized market town, where all of the Japanese salarymen, and their families, lived and from which they commuted daily by car.

13 Baumann astutely points out that Said's Orientalism exceeds its suggestive 'us-them' binary. The Western 'intellectual and creative elites who established orientalist discourses' were 'estranged from their own cultural milieus'. Thus, their appreciation of and, e.g., desire for The East served as a means of communicating 'self-critique' (Baumann 2004, 20). Contrariwise, as we shall see, salaryman knowledge of elite Western culture(s), deployed in order to establish 'distinction' (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]), serves not as critique of, but a means of reinforcing their own positionality within and, so, a reification of the Japanese system.

14 I was never given a straightforward explanation of this policy. I think that Japanese companies expected and desired that the young men they are employing for a 'lifetime' marry Japanese women who would know in advance, and presumably be supportive of the demands put on their husbands, and, therefore, on themselves, by their husband's employment in the corporation. That is, Japanese companies fear 'losing' salarymen, in which they had made and expected to make investments across decades, to marriages with non-Japanese.

15 In the amateur game, handicapping is an ingenious means of levelling the playing field so that players of different skills can compete against each other and, so, socialize. This, of course, is essential if golf is to function as a relational proposition in the world of business. Meanwhile, in a round of golf, you compete both in real time with those in your foursome (and including consideration of your handicap), *and* with yourself over the long run to, e.g., lower your handicap and, so, through computer programmes, officially establish your handicap compared to all other golfers in the world. – Golf's complex time and space linkages, and its imaginary of competitive social relations, boost its attractiveness.

16 Unsurprisingly, then, Kuroda-san was enlisted as my first point of contact, in Tokyo, when I began research at his automobile company.

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8 Uncomfortable comparisons
Anthropology, development, and mixed feelings

Katy Gardner and Julia Qermezi Huang

Introduction

'Why is anthropology always so critical?' For those anthropologists charged with teaching courses in the anthropology of development, the refrain is all too familiar. Whilst our students may hope to learn how to 'do' development or already have professional experience in the field, much anthropological analysis of development is highly critical, to say the least, revealing to an increasingly deflated audience its colonial teleology, complicity with capitalist extraction, anti-politics stance, and all-round problematic nature. To date, most academic discussion explains the unease or, indeed, downright hostility that many anthropologists exhibit towards development in terms of the conflicting aims and ethics of the two fields (Ferguson 1997; Gardner & Lewis 1996, 2015). In this chapter, we take a different tack by foregrounding the affective registers of hope and cynicism that occur all too often in our classrooms. One reason for this, we suggest, can be found in the ways that the two fields use divergent techniques of comparison and, in turn, in the types of affect that these contrasting techniques produce. Rather than pursuing a romantic attachment to unchanging, stable, pre-modern societies or an ongoing commitment to cultural relativism, which rejects universalising teleologies of modernity, we argue that the reason why twenty-first-century anthropologists struggle with development is the latter's disavowal of ethnographic comparison, which disables the potential for cultural critique to challenge systems of inequality. Instead, development compares via exemplars and ideal types against which places or groups are juxtaposed; quantitative measures or 'baseline and output metrics' (in order to compare a place with itself over time) and 'indicators' (gauges for comparison). These development modes of comparison smooth out the rough contours of complexity and difference and clear the field for universalised techniques, models, and ideals to travel across space and time. This allows the possibility of hope, an emotion that anthropologists of development are all too quick to dash. Yet if development's dreams are an easy target for the wake-up call of anthropological critique, anthropology is open to charges of holier-than-thou smugness. The anthropologist appears as the clever know-it-all who

refuses to risk or *do* anything but is all too eager to point out to the do-ers just how colonial, naïve, or plain ignorant their approaches are. Judging by our experience of teaching the anthropology of development to students keen to learn how anthropology might contribute to an enterprise that for many inspires hope, the result is exasperation, pessimism, and even despair.

Our argument is as follows: whilst anthropologists have largely withdrawn from the attempt to use cross-cultural comparison to generate grand theory of the sort favoured by Levi-Strauss or Mauss, the discipline still places ethnographic comparison at the heart of its mission. Comparison not only helps build new concepts and fields of study but also forms the basis of what Charles Hale (2006) calls 'cultural critique', an enterprise in which detailed ethnography is used to critique political and economic structures, via comparison with similar cases. Yet, as Hale argues, unless combined with activist research or other forms of action, anthropological critique alone is politically toothless. The challenge is therefore to use anthropological knowledge to generate action, an endeavour which anthropologists working within development have attempted with varying success (Crewe & Axelby 2013; Gardner & Lewis 2015).

Meanwhile, even if informed by anthropological insights, development – as a discourse and field of action – compares via metrics and bureaucratic techniques such as indices or outputs. Here, rather than generating insights or theory, the intention is to measure projects, groups, social categories, or countries against a standard of progress or success. It is necessarily evaluative, referencing a clearly stated aim or problematic against which to recalibrate these groups, social categories, or countries (e.g. the aim of empowering women). These standards of progress and models of success appear to be self-evident, or at least possible to define, stripping out the very complexity and social reality (and the politics of who sets the goals) that anthropologists attempt to make visible.

In order to illustrate this argument, this chapter discusses two important development devices: the exemplar (in this case that of the female entrepreneur, demonstrated in the iAgent social enterprise project in Bangladesh at the scale of everyday project implementation) and training (in this case gender awareness training, developed in the early 1990s, at the scale of international policy building). In our first case of the iAgent project (a pseudonym to protect identities), we examine the role of the exemplar in motivating supposed beneficiaries of development to behave in certain ways. As we will describe, while development practitioners judge the 'beneficiaries' through the lens of the exemplar, anthropologists judge exemplars through the lens of beneficiaries' perspectives. This opposite directionality in the comparative act (of juxtaposing exemplars and beneficiaries), we argue, is the main reason why the two fields produce such markedly different states of affect.

In our second case, we explore how feminist anthropologists in the 1970s and 1980s generated rich ethnographic comparisons that revealed gender roles and relations in a variety of settings to be fluid and changeable. Such

an insight generated optimism among feminist anthropologists that gender inequalities could proactively be addressed. Yet once absorbed into the development apparatus, these insights were stripped of their complexity and rendered into one-size-fits-all gender awareness training models, thus converting anthropological hope into cynicism and critique.

Devices such as exemplars and training are aspects of what Li (2007) has termed development's 'assemblage', the means by which complex reality is reduced to a set of easily identifiable problems and techniques that the policy or project sets out to solve and apply, all the time stripping out the real issues. According to Li, the development assemblage involves three components: problematising, rendering technical, and containment. Rather than focusing on the much-discussed anti-politics aspect of these techniques (Ferguson 1990), in what follows we discuss how development techniques and the methods of comparison they use might also be understood in terms of particular states of affect and emotion. As Schwittay (2014) has argued, 'affect' matters to development because it mobilises support, creates relationships, and shapes outcomes. For the microfinance programme Kiva that Schwittay studied, for example, feelings of caring, compassion, and connection are vital in order to mobilise online lending to 'partners' in the Global South. As she writes: 'Affect shapes what matters to people, within a field of power that circumscribes its effects' (ibid.: 13). But as we shall see, affect can work both ways: the hope and enthusiasm generated by development's travelling techniques can end in cynicism and gloom when countered by anthropology's comparative critique.

Our argument thus rests upon a comparison of techniques of comparing, illustrated by comparative cases, which are drawn from our own ethnographic, participatory, and historical engagements of practising anthropology of/in development. What emerges from this feast of comparison is not only that anthropology and development have different aims but also that one reason the relationship between the two is so uncomfortable is because of the mixed emotions evoked.

The exemplar

Uncomfortable silence suffused the training room in an NGO office in rural Bangladesh. We had just finished watching a series of short videos featuring 'iAgent Mita', the young woman selected to be the face (and identity) of the iAgent social enterprise programme. Demonstrating topics ranging from 'Doorstep sales' and 'Self-promotion' to 'Preparing a correct weekly plan' and 'Daily accounting and savings', these videos had been recently produced in order to train village girls how to be proper female entrepreneurs – iAgents, or 'Information Agents' – ready to sell information- and communication-based services to impoverished villagers. Bangladesh's poverty, development practitioners reasoned, was due to people not possessing sufficient access to markets or to the information required to engage opportunistically with

them. Compounded by women's relative disempowerment and seclusion, the country's problems, defined in these ways, readily suggested their own solutions. Women, if empowered to become social entrepreneurs and active market-makers (Guérin 2017), could pull not only themselves, but also their rural communities and the nation more generally, out of poverty.

Two seasoned development practitioners from middle-class urban Bangladeshi families commented on how Mita's rags-to-riches success story inspired them in their work. Later they congratulated one another on the professionalism of the video production and how much of an impact they would have on these 'downtrodden' village girls, who now had a 'development-appropriate' role model to emulate. The anthropologist (Juli) felt troubled by the videos and the ways in which they narrated only a single version of acceptable 'success', marked by a *homo-economicus*-like rationality and stripped-away version of sociality. She had also watched as the iAgents displayed a mélange of reactions throughout the videos that ranged from admiration and hope to disbelief and suspicion.

Why did these videos generate such contrasting emotions? In this first case, we juxtapose development's and anthropology's acts of comparison and explore why these different approaches provoke such divergent states of affect. While development generates clean models (which are often represented by a combination of real-life and fictionalised exemplars) and seeks to bring the world in line with the models' image, anthropology focuses on the messy reality of the world as experienced by real people. It seeks to understand people's aspirations to achieve particular (and often multiple) models of ideal personhood and the socio-political projects that underlie each of these ideal types. While development begins with the model and critiques the individual for failing to conform to its indisputable logics, anthropology begins with people and critiques the model for failing to represent the complexity of reality. The opposite directionality in these acts of comparison (from generalised exemplars to particular real people, and vice versa) in this case is what generates opposite states of affect for the two professional groups in question.

The exemplar for development

In the decades since the explicit field of International Development arose after the Second World War, an ever-increasing and diversified set of institutions and policies have promoted a multiplicity of models for achieving economic growth, poverty alleviation, general well-being, and other stated objectives of the project of development. Development models are often expressed as process models, or frameworks for achieving desired end results. They operate deliberately on a free-floating, acontextual, abstract level so that they may readily be applied to any situation where development is perceived to be required. These blueprints for progress (e.g. community-based micro-credit; gender awareness training [see below]; import substitution) often

reference particular ideologies or theories (e.g. market-driven development or 'trade not aid'; women's empowerment; free-market economics). They are sometimes characterised more by the agent performing the developing than by the recipient of development (e.g. 'The West' vs. China in Africa [Fukuyama 2016]). These models are also sometimes expressed as end-state exemplars or best case practices. For instance, Botswana (Acemoglu, Johnson & Robinson 2003), Rwanda (Molt 2017), and Bangladesh (Chakravorty 2019) are often lauded as development success stories to which other countries might compare themselves in order subsequently to emulate.

Particular organisations also have their own sector-specific or location-targeted development models that, although emerging from a particular context, are often framed as tapping into International Development ideologies or as applicable to a wider setting. Muhammad Yunus developed his Grameen Bank model of microfinance (for which he and the bank won a Nobel Peace Prize in 2006) to meet a specific need he observed among poor women in Chittagong, Bangladesh, and this model has been scaled up and deemed suitable for poor women across the country and in nearly every country of the world. Another example is Acumen, an impact investment fund, which promotes a model of 'patient capital' that involves a blend of market-based and philanthropic principles for investing in social enterprises around the globe (Acumen 2018). From its many location-specific investees, Acumen has identified four universally applicable 'models of social enterprise' that best combine economic effectiveness with social impact. These models in turn become free-floating narratives that reinforce broader (market-driven) development ideologies and policies.

Although not as explicitly as the much-criticised 1960s' modernisation theory of W.W. Rostow (who postulated five stages of economic growth from 'Traditional Society' to 'Age of High Mass Consumption' through which all countries should aspire to ascend [1959]), most development models presuppose a linear teleology of change. This linearity is evident in terms and goals such as 'graduating from low-income status', referring both to countries and to ultra-poor individuals. Having established a model towards which subjects are expected to aspire and work, development-industry professionals applaud participants who manage to attain some resemblance to this externally imposed exemplar.

The leaders of the iAgent social enterprise programme maintained that their development model was unique and innovative, and yet that it also tapped into the global consensus of recent decades that market-driven development (i.e. 'helping the poor to help themselves' rather than directly offering material, social, and political support) is the most dignified and effective mode of achieving progress. The iAgent model, as itself an internationally touted exemplar, won numerous international awards. Its leaders partnered with well-known development institutions to scale up the model, which was to be applied in countries as far apart (and as socially and culturally distinct) as Haiti and Nepal.

At the level of local implementation, the iAgent model or exemplar, as introduced above, is a young woman called Mita who demonstrated the perfect embodiment of the rural Bangladeshi woman entrepreneur who helps others by empowering herself. The iAgent programme had another exemplar, a cartoon superhero iAgent, who was described as being the Wonder Woman of Bangladesh. This avatar was external-facing, augmented the magnitude of social impact assumed to be achieved by the iAgent model, and served to attract partners and funders. This is a good example of Schwittay's (2014) observation of how affect is employed to draw together external support (also Karim 2011). Mita, by contrast, was the internal exemplar, deployed primarily in the form of her video presence and for the purpose of training other young women to become iAgents. The iAgent programme architects designed Mita's life to represent what they believed village girls should aspire to achieve. At the same time, Mita appeared on film while describing the everyday process of becoming and being an iAgent. As such, she personified both the end goal and the process of the iAgent model, against which participants were invited to compare themselves.

The video series began by introducing Mita as a recently married woman in an impoverished area of Bangladesh. Mita described how, upon her marriage, she worried about whether or not she would be accepted by her husband's family, whom she had not previously known and with whom she would go to live. She did not know whether or not they would allow her to continue to make and sell handicrafts as she had done as an unmarried girl. Yet instead of restricting her work to domestic upkeep, the new family helped her to take on an even bigger and more impressive role, to become an iAgent. In the course of her daily work, as shown in the video, Mita accomplished the following: tutoring small children using educational cartoons displayed on her laptop computer; leading a session for farmers about the most effective planting and harvesting techniques and selling them seeds; teaching adolescent girls about puberty and selling them menstrual hygiene products; accompanying a woman abandoned by her husband to the local administrative office to help her receive a state stipend; producing passport photos for aspiring migrant labourers; and measuring the blood pressures of a group of pregnant women. The earnings from all of these activities (because of course, no good entrepreneur provides services for free) were materially evident; Mita and her in-laws wore nice clothing and lived in a *pucca* (cement walled and tin-roofed) multi-room house and kept livestock and poultry in their large courtyard.

The video series continued by systematising Mita's 'success' and breaking it down into concrete, practical steps. Thus, she was not only the aspirational figure but also the model for enacting 'the entrepreneurial conversion' (Dolan 2014: 8) among newly minted iAgents. These videos each highlighted and replayed specific segments of the introductory ones. Topics included Mita's daily routines, personal habits, and dispositions and the ways in which she cultivated relationships with potential customers and converted one-off

purchases into habitual clients. Additional topics covered the seven steps of running a streamlined beneficiary group meeting (including how to speak articulately and write down people's concerns), preparing a weekly and daily plan, and performing daily accounting and savings activities. In this way, processes of social and political change and upward mobility were rendered technical (Li 2007) and reduced to tick-box exercises that, supposedly, any young woman could follow to achieve the same success as did Mita.

For development practitioners, the codified iAgent social enterprise model and the exemplar of Mita performed several roles. They provided a sense of personal direction for these development workers, a template for inducing positive change, a framework for action, a set of forward-oriented goals, a rubric against which to measure their success, and a logic to justify their activities to potential partners and funders. The states of affect generated by the exemplar for practitioners included feelings of virtuousness, self-respect, daily motivation, and hope for the future. In Bangladesh, where 'helping one's own poor' (Gardner 1995) was a staple of ethical patronage and personhood, this work of coaching impoverished women and their beneficiaries to become empowered took on a nationalistically compelling valence as well.

The promotion of an exemplar also worked to preserve this hope, optimism, and confidence in the development model when things went wrong. When young women's fledgling businesses failed, the ready explanation was that those individuals incorrectly or to an insufficient degree adopted the patterns and routines necessary to be successful, in comparison to the exemplar. When an entire location of ten iAgents defaulted on their bank loans and abandoned their businesses, an iAgent team leader lectured them:

> It is only your responsibility for arriving at this situation today. Perhaps you are as talented as I assumed you were [when we selected you], but there was a great lack of effort to make it successful. You didn't show your talent in the field.

Her boss continued,

> Did not Mita practice her group sessions the night before? Did she not constantly promote herself to new clients? I have been to each of your houses. I did not see you packing your bag before bed, nor did I see you in the field during your free time.

Such a systematic failure did not shake these development managers' faith in the model. 'The model is sound', they explained. 'These women here were simply not ready to accept it'. Condescension towards the unruly subjects of development did not pose a threat to the compelling logic of the model.

This case illustrates the ways in which the development exemplar is conceptualised as central and primary, and real women's progress is subsequently compared against the prescribed model. Such an orientation enables

the preservation of the affective states of hope, righteousness, and faith in the model by practitioners, even despite disappointment with the performance of non-conforming individuals.

The exemplar for anthropology

If development places the exemplary figure on a pedestal and compares beneficiaries' progress against this singular version of success, anthropological methods of comparison flow in the reverse direction. Anthropologists begin with real people living real lives, inhabiting all the complexities of reality, and faced with a multiplicity of standards of behaviour. It is against these actually existing people and circumstances that standards, 'ideal types', exemplars, and models are compared as often unrealistic and misleading simplifications. Anthropologists pay attention to the ways in which people construct and desire to follow exemplars. Anthropologists also attend to the ways in which these models mask political projects of (at best) motivating certain types of behaviours and influencing people's aspirations, or (at worst) exploiting people by manipulating their desires in the service of fulfilling external agendas. In many cases, exemplars generate the 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011) of setting forth exemplary objects of desire or models of the good life, which either prove impossible to obtain or which themselves become obstacles to one's well-being. This mode of anthropological comparison – people first, then exemplars – stems from the commitment to ethnographic methods. Anthropologists are the ones who talked to people before the trainers arrived, and the ones still talking to people once the trainers have left the room and the trainees react, debate, attempt to comply with, admire, or reject the delivered content.

'Mita is a falsehood, a lie', declared one iAgent, disputing the exemplar's suitability for emulation. 'There is no way a mother-in-law of a first daughter-in-law would allow her to skip domestic work and shame the family by being out of the house all day'. The iAgents in the room angrily analysed each aspect of the videos they had watched, critiquing them based not only on the myriad political and social-hierarchical constraints to implementing Mita's 'correct daily plan', but also on practical matters such as the fact that farmers are only available when they are back from the fields after dark, an unsuitable time for young women to travel by themselves.

And yet, knowing that Mita was indeed a real person behind the screen, the iAgents were determined to learn the secret of her success (evidenced by her clothing, accessories, house, well-placed marriage, etc.). They were certain that she was helped by the iAgent NGO and that it was good patronage – rather than regimented personal plans and market-oriented behaviour – that was the key to her material well-being and the acceptance of her work by community members.

And they were correct. While the cinematographic version of Mita was significantly fictionalised for the production of the iAgent model, Mita was

indeed a real iAgent who performed well in her business, but not because she followed the steps she acted out on video. In real life, Mita was recruited as an iAgent under the programme's pilot-stage model, in which all equipment and training were provided for free and an iAgent manager accompanied the young women to smooth over their relations with family, local authorities and potential customers. Many of the services she provided were free to villagers and she received an honorarium provided by charitable funders. By contrast, all new iAgents in the scale-up model were required to take a loan from a national bank and go deep into debt, pay for all of their equipment and training from the NGO and, by themselves, convince community members that they must pay for each service. This was deemed by project staff to be the more respectful model, as it did not subject anyone to the indignities of handouts and charity, as well as the most scalable model, since it was primarily the women's resources, not the NGO's, that needed to be invested.

The exemplar of Mita thus provided a cruel and impossible optimism. Mita's exemplary (on-screen) conduct and success were unrealistic not only for all other iAgents, but for real-life-Mita herself, whose mother-in-law disapproved of her, whose husband controlled her bank account, and whose earnings dropped sharply after the NGO stopped undergirding her activities. The anthropological commitment to understanding the long-term trajectory of people revealed how, in this case, any initial motivation and aspiration elicited by the model gradually turned to cynicism, the feeling of being exploited by the bank and the NGO (to whom iAgents paid licence fees to enact this proprietary model), family tensions because of the large financial debt incurred, dismay and depression as it became clear these debts could not be repaid from iAgent earnings, and, ultimately, damaged reputations and fear of the future.

Thus, the anthropological mode of comparison in studying development models produces a very different state of affect to that evoked by the development one, despite analysing the very same cases. Instead of hope and faith, the emotions produced for anthropologists include disappointment and critique, cynicism and disillusionment. While the reader would be forgiven for objecting, 'but this is merely an instance of *bad*-case practice!', it must be pointed out that the iAgent case was a '*success*' case that continued to win international awards and investments. The argument here is that it is the exemplar that allows this sustaining of 'success', because, by definition, Mita (or at least her avatar) will always be successful. On-screen exemplary Mita enables failure to be located not in the development model itself but instead in the deficiencies of unruly individual participants. While development and anthropology employ similar acts of comparison among exemplars and beneficiaries, the opposite directionality of comparison (prioritising the exemplar or the beneficiary?) leads to wildly divergent interpretations and states of affect for the analysts involved. More importantly, the exemplar invites development beneficiaries such as the iAgents to compare themselves

to the fictionalised model individual. This act of comparison produces a cascade of mixed emotions. New possibilities are imagined and aspirations are ignited but then mistrust is kindled and frustration spirals into despair. Thus, the affective states of both development specialists (e.g. hope) and anthropologists (e.g. cynicism) are distilled and amplified within the experiences of beneficiaries, which leads us to wonder: who benefits?

Gender training

In our second example, we consider a more complex case rooted in the history of anthropology's entanglements with development. Here, the development technique – gender awareness training – evolved from ethnographic comparison via the work of feminist anthropologists in the 1970s and 1980s. As with anthropological theory, this comparison led to core theoretical concepts, though in this case the new field that arose from the work of comparison was the practitioner-driven 'gender and development' agenda rather than the academic discipline of anthropology. These core concepts were used to develop training materials in the early 1990s by feminist practitioners working within development.[1] The starting point was therefore anthropological cross-cultural comparison, but the end point within the context of development work was a set of 'tools' used for training which were designed to travel across space and up and down institutional and geopolitical hierarchies. Thus, we see how anthropological methods of comparison through engagement with complexity became translated and used in development practices that attempted to simplify and homogenise. Our story starts in the early days of gender training, a time of not only righteous feminist anger, but also hope.

Gender training arose from a call from feminist practitioners working in development organisations in the 1980s to early 1990s to 'mainstream gender' so that it was no longer a marginal concern within donor and 'developing country' bureaucracies (Ostergaard 1992). At that time, the agenda seemed radical, at least within the context of socially conservative government bureaucracies such as the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) where Katy was employed as a trainee social development advisor in the early 1990s; the account that follows is based partly on her recollections of that period and partly on secondary sources. This push for gender-aware development planning arose from a growing understanding, on the one hand, of the gender-blind and ethnocentric assumptions of planners and, on the other, of the adverse effects of colonialism and economic change on women in so-called developing countries. Whilst some of the earliest work had a tendency to create essentialisms and generalisations that today's reader is likely to find unfortunate (see, for example, Ester Boserup's discussion of 'African agriculture', 'African tribes', and her typologies of farming types into male and female systems of farming [1970]), these insights were largely generated by

the comparative work of feminist anthropologists of the 1970s and 1980s. Based on culturally and historically grounded descriptions of the complexities and fluidity of gender relations whilst theoretically underscored by an attempt to understand and critique women's subordination, feminist anthropology from these decades illustrates the potential of politically motivated cultural critique (Hale 2006).

The work of Ann Whitehead is emblematic. Drawing from her fieldwork in Ghana and the UK, her seminal paper 'I'm hungry Mum: the politics of domestic budgeting' (Whitehead 1981) introduces the concept of the 'conjugal contract', comparing the complexities of the gendered division of labour and resources in Kusai households in rural Ghana, where women and men produce different crops and have differing levels of rights over labour and produce, to the UK, where household goods are acquired with salaries from waged labour. In comparing her ethnographic cases, Whitehead argued that rather than being seen as co-operative mutually beneficial units, households should be understood as the sites of gendered inequality and domination, centred on differential rights over labour and its products and structurally generated conflicts of interest (see also Harris 1981; Moore 1988). Crucially, production, distribution, and consumption change over time and reflect broader socio-economic changes. Gender roles and relations, she argued, are thus infinitely fluid, a radical observation for its time.[2]

If this feminist work of comparison was associated with politically motivated indignation, its use in generating insights that could be carried over into action led to hope. In a seminal piece 'Some preliminary notes on the subordination of women' (1979), Whitehead set out the agenda. Rather than simply comparing case after case of the worsening situation of women, she argued, the goal was to theorise gender and gender relations, and in so doing, to develop tools for planning that could be passed on to those responsible for policy.[3] These tools were taken up by those working within development institutions, who by the late 1980s were increasingly active in pushing the gender and development agenda.

The 1980s to mid-1990s was a time of excitement in which social development advisors believed that progressive change could come from within, so long as they had the courage and strength of purpose required. Writing of her time at the ODA as a social development advisor intent on bringing feminist and anthropological perspectives to the bureaucracy, Rosalind Eyben (2007: 65) describes how she and others saw themselves 'more as guerrillas than missionaries' fighting battles with men in suits whose initial response to the feminist activists bordered on alarm.

> The men were clearly very uncomfortable with these women, who were so very different in behaviour from their own wives and secretaries. They wore long earrings and flowing, brightly coloured garments. They cut their hair very short like men, or, flagrantly feminine, wore it

loose down to the waist. Their bangles jangled discordantly when they
thumped the table to make a vociferous point.

(ibid.: 69)

Elsewhere in her article Eyben talks of the 'energy and enthusiasm' and
'aspiration' that she and her colleagues took into the bureaucratic battles
(ibid.).

ODA's agreement to support gender training was an important step
forward, one which Eyben had spearheaded within the institution and
which was based on the work of Caroline Moser, who later published the
course materials and underpinning concepts in her book Gender Planning
and Development (1993). Here, Moser states that: 'The goal of gender
planning is the emancipation of women from their subordination, and their
achievement of equality, equity and empowerment' (ibid.: 1). To enable
this, Moser argued that the first step was to train planners and other staff
to consider gender issues as they designed and implemented projects and
policies (see also Ostergaard 1992: 8). In the opening chapters of the book,
Moser argues that a rich body of comparative research 'provides the know-
ledge base for the new tradition of gender planning' and deduces that 'it is
the gendered divisions of labour that are identified, above all, as embodying
and perpetuating female subordination' (1993: 28). From this, she proposes
a set of underpinning principles to be taken forward into gender aware
planning. After all, 'planners require simplified tools which allow them
to feed the particular complexities of specific contexts into the planning
process' (ibid.: 5).

As promised, the tools were simple to grasp and easy to trans-
port: women's triple roles and the distinction between 'strategic' and 'prac-
tical' gender needs were the core concepts.[4] Comprising short lectures,
discussions, and group exercises based around these core concepts, gender
training was designed to be rolled out to a variety of institutional settings,
from the ODA or World Bank to 'developing country' NGOs. The first exer-
cise involved the analysis of case studies of women's and men's work in low-
income households in different regions of the world, tailored to the location
of the training session. The participants were to discuss and compare the
case studies, drawing up lists of the work done by women and men and in
so doing identifying women's triple roles. This was followed by a lecture on
the 'critical issues in the theory and methodology of gender planning', to
be put into practice by participants applying their newly acquired gender-
planning tools to three case studies of Development interventions (Puffed
Rice in Bangladesh; Gari Processing in Ghana; Food for Work Nursery Tree
Project in Sudan). The next exercise involved participants using their new
knowledge of women's triple roles and practical and strategic gender needs
to analyse their own organisation's policies and projects, marking up a chart
to indicate the impacts of the project at household and community levels
for men and women, and which gender needs were met. The final exercise

involved the trainees identifying how to operationalise gender awareness in their own work (Moser 1993: 229–46).

If the original end goal was political, the training was presented to participants in strictly technical terms. Trainers were reminded in their notes that the purpose of the workshop was 'to offer a practical framework',[5] providing a new way of seeing so that the ODA's gender perspective could be integrated into their work. Training notes that Katy was supplied with state the following:

> The trainer may make an analogy with putting on a pair of spectacles; one lens is the development intervention, the other is the technical planning process. Together they provide a new way of looking ie the gender perspective.
> Participants are being addressed as professionals requiring the means to implement ODA policies. We will provide a grid which will allow them to assess the effect of a development initiative on women as well as men …. It is important during the workshop to stick as closely as possible to facts rather than opinions or value judgements.[6]

Equipped with flip charts, definitions of core concepts, case study material and tables to be filled out during the exercises, the trainers aimed to give participants the analytic tools to 'integrate ODA's gender perspective into their work'.[7] What had started with concepts drawn from the comparison of detailed ethnographic cases had been turned into technocratic tools and exercises detailing the roles and needs of 'low-income women in the Third World', which aimed at enabling planners to understand the potential impact of their policies on gender relations. Like the entrepreneurial exemplar, the training was designed to travel, with a methodology and materials that could theoretically be operationalised in any institutional setting, from 'Southern partner NGOs' to the global or country donors at the top of the hierarchy. Moser advises that different case study material can be used according to the setting, including, for example, examples from households in 'advanced industrial countries' when trainers come from such places (1993: 217) and with workshops tailored for longer or shorter sessions. Despite these adjustments, the training presupposes that all that is needed for gender to be placed at the heart of planning is for policy makers – whatever their backgrounds, intersectional identities, or politics – to use the analytical tools provided. Implicit to the methodology is the premise that if they are from low-income households and situated in the 'Third World', women's lives, interests, and needs are essentially the same, a premise which has subsequentially attracted much criticism from post-colonial scholars (e.g. Mohanty 1988,3; Lewis 2001).

Within this framing, all women struggle under the burden of the triple role and all women require assistance in tackling gender inequality via policies aimed at their strategic gender needs. All complexity – including the

infinite variations of gender roles identified by the original anthropological studies – became smoothed out, coalescing to form the singular version of the needy Third World Woman. Katy recalls her bemusement and discomfort at these simplifications during her training as a potential trainer, despite her youthful wish to be involved with what seemed at the outset to be a progressive feminist project. Predictably for the ever cynical anthropologist of development, the effect of all this training was disappointing. At a personal level, Katy's reservations about the ODA led to outright disillusionment, and she left the organisation in 1991. What had started as a hopeful foray into a field which seemed to promise poverty reduction and the tackling of global inequality had, in only a year, been subjected to the anthropological habit of critique and found wanting: too simplistic, undeniably colonial, overly constrained by bureaucracy, and institutionally conservative.

Within the institution, whilst success could be measured in terms of how many workshops were held and in which countries (the 'outputs' of the intervention), subsequent feminist analyses of the overall effects of mainstreaming gender point to how strategies intended as radical became diluted as they were absorbed into development and government bureaucracies, a process that Hilary Standing refers to as 'policy evaporation' (2007: 101). Standing argues that the original feminist activists were naïve about how policy works, since bureaucracies are fundamentally conservative. Terms such as empowerment quickly lost their political bite once taken on by development institutions (see Batliwala 2007 on the fate of gender empowerment policies in India). Gender training is thus a case *par excellence* of development's anti-politics, transmogrifying feminist theory drawn from comparative ethnography into a set of technical procedures via checklists, guidelines, form filling, and planning tools.

This returns us to the question of comparison. In contrast with the conceptually generative cross-cultural comparisons of feminist anthropologists, development policies aimed at 'strategic gender needs' have to demonstrate their success (or lack thereof) via measuring pre-defined outputs, which are compared against the situation before the intervention started and/or other interventions across space, often within a project's 'logical framework', a technique designed to chart 'impact' in terms of quantifiable inputs and outputs that often have nothing to do with participants' experiences of them. Measuring the effects of gender empowerment is obviously tricky since changes to the amount of choice or control that a woman has are likely to be spread over time and differ widely according to context (Kabeer 1999). Since ultimately development is teleological in nature, it is change over time that is being compared in order to produce a measurement of relative success, the ultimate bureaucratic tool. The techniques that emerge to do this measurement are checklists, indicators, and outputs, all of which are devoid of cultural and historical context.

We have thus come full circle. From the cultural critique of early feminist Anthropology, hope was generated by converting anthropological knowledge borne of cross-cultural comparison into action. At the time,

gender training opened up the possibility of enacting change from within, mainstreaming what until then had felt radical and marginal. But disappointment soon crept in, and with it, comparative accounts of the ways in which policies became watered down and 'empowerment' turned into a technical fix (Standing, 2007). In a workshop held at Sussex in 2003, the rallying cry of 'Some preliminary notes on the subordination of women' (arising from a workshop held at Sussex nearly 25 years earlier) had turned into a sombre reflection on how 'what were once critical insights, the results of detailed research, have now become 'gender myths': essentialisms and generalisations, simplifying frameworks and simplistic slogans' (Cornwall, Harrison & Whitehead 2007: 1).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have argued that, rather than contrasting the ethics and aims of development and anthropology, as is done in much commentary on the relationship between the two fields, a focus on their different methods of comparison might yield interesting insights. This is not only because these methods of comparison are used for different epistemological aims (for development, the aim of teleological measurement; for anthropology, the aim of scholarly theory and cultural critique) but also because they evoke different emotions. For development, the technical fix of exemplars and training evokes hope for practitioners, since complexity with all its attendant difficulties is distilled into powerful models of positive change, which are then used as fixed points against which real-life situations can be measured. When disappointment arrives, it is with the subjects of development, not the models: those irritating Bangladeshi iAgents who failed to do as required, or resolutely patriarchal bureaucracies which proved impenetrable to the technical fix of gender training.

Such are the generalisations and frameworks that today's development practitioners celebrate and from which they derive hope while building models of women's empowerment such as the iAgent programme. As the political bite disappears and technocracy takes over, the states of affect reverse. Initially framed optimistically, anthropological complexity-driven techniques of comparison increasingly yield disappointing conclusions about development models. Meanwhile, development's initial scepticism and fear of anthropological contributions transform into confidence about the efficacy of its gendered models. The alarming table-thumping feminists were rendered bureaucratically manageable via the politically nullifying effects of 'training'; and the exemplar of the successful iAgent became a cause for celebration and self-congratulation amongst practitioners, donors, and their audiences.

And what of the underlying epistemology of this chapter? In making our claims, we have compared two cases which have enough in common to draw some tentative conclusions whilst being sufficiently different to make totalising generalisation problematic. We are thus clearly in the 'cultural

critique' camp of comparison makers. Though both our cases involve an aim of women's empowerment, in the first instance (the exemplar), the model was generated from a single case study of success (Mita), underscored by neoliberal theories which place the market and economic growth at the heart of a larger project of human development and freedom. In the second, located in an earlier era before market fundamentalism took centre stage, the training course was generated from feminist theory, based on ethnographic comparison and cultural critique. In accordance with the spirit of the times, the project of empowerment ('women's strategic gender needs') was political rather than economic: leading to a hoped-for change in gender relations. In both cases, the end results were to be measured, for such is the bureaucratic exigency of development practice. And rather than comparisons being made *between* cases, the comparisons made were *against* the desired outcome (whether behaviour adhered to the exemplar, or a measurement of gender awareness within bureaucratic planning processes).

   As our examples suggest, paying attention to the divergent states of affect generated from anthropological versus development modes of comparison allows us to understand further how structures of feeling enable the perpetuation or overhaul of development fads as they come and go. Training and the exemplar, as we have shown, are techniques that instil confidence in development practitioners about the sensitivity and soundness of their models. Whilst training takes the bite out of potential threats (scary feminists with jangling bracelets and long hair) exemplars such as Mita inspire hope in the possibilities of human agency and positive change. Crucially, whether naïve hope, cruel optimism, or the seeming neutrality of numbers, the emotions produced by development's comparative devices (such as exemplars, models, best practices, ideal types, and standardised techniques), we argue, may be as significant as political will and funding access in defining the direction of global development policy. Comparison in development provides as much a validating script justifying the perpetuation of development activities as comparison in anthropology generates trenchant critiques of these very same activities. In their efforts to re-politicise the development process, anthropologists in the last decades have brought complexity back into the frame of analysis and generated ethnographic comparisons of how development beneficiaries reject, re-appropriate, and are empowered or exploited by development programmes, insights which in turn often make their way back into development policy models. And thus the players in this symbiotic (but antagonistic) drama continue to pivot.

Notes

1 For an account of how the field of gender and development emerged from earlier incarnations of 'women and development', see Cornwall, Harrison, and Whitehead 2007; Eyben 2007; Rai 2011.

2 Meanwhile edited volumes such as Young, Wolkowitz, & McCullagh's *Of marriage and the market: Women's subordination in international perspective*

(1981), which compared a series of ethnographic examples, and Henrietta Moore's *Feminism and anthropology* (1988), which provided a comparative overview of much of the seminal work, helped to generate a framework for understanding gender inequality as well as a critique of the patriarchal tendencies of mainstream anthropology. The gendered division of labour, plus inequalities *within* rather than between households, was central.

3 This arose from a workshop at the Institute of Development Studies on 'The Subordination of Women'.

4 Women's 'Triple Role' involved their role in production, reproduction, and community management. These triple roles meant that 'low income women in the Third world' (Moser 1993: 37) worked harder and for longer hours per day than men. Indeed, it was this division of labour that was seen as the root cause of their subordination. Building on the work of Maxine Molyneux (1985) Moser argued that planners should distinguish between 'practical and strategic gender needs'. To quote her:

> 'Strategic gender needs are the needs women identify because of their subordinate position to men in their society …. Meeting strategic gender needs helps women to achieve greater equality. It also changes existing roles and therefore challenges women's subordinate position.

(1993: 39)

Meanwhile 'practical gender needs are the needs women identify in their socially accepted roles in society. Practical gender needs do not challenge the gender divisions of labour or women's subordinate position in society' (ibid.: 40). Finally, different types of policy approach to WID (Women in Development) were categorised as Welfare, Equity, Anti-poverty, Efficiency, and Empowerment–the purpose of which is to 'empower women through greater self-reliance' (ibid.: 231).

5 ODA training materials, undated.

6 ODA training materials, undated.

7 KG's Trainer's notes, undated.

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9 Implicit comparisons, or why it is inevitable to study China in comparative perspective

Hans Steinmüller and Stephan Feuchtwang

There are a number of obstacles to sustained comparisons in the study of China, including the methodological nationalism of the social sciences, the Sino-centrism of Chinese studies, and the specialization of particular social science disciplines. All of them have to do with the supposed uniqueness of China. Even such a supposed singularity has to rely either on an implicit comparison, or on a rejection of comparison. In this chapter, we deal with the modes, motivations, and results of comparisons involving 'China'. We focus on the different ways in which scholars and laypersons have made comparisons involving China: including our colleagues, students, research collaborators, and we ourselves.

In our research and teaching, we have often faced the reluctance of students and scholars to allow for comparison, as well as the tendency to self-parochialize by launching Chinese concepts. Weighing different possible comparisons against each other reveals core argumentative motivations: examples from our empirical work and our teaching demonstrate the scopes, scales, and terms of comparisons that are implied in concepts of Chinese society, Chinese empire, and Chinese civilization. Ultimately, we hold that a comparative perspective is inevitable, because implicit comparisons motivate both academic debates and everyday politics, in China and elsewhere. We demonstrate how implicit comparisons are accepted as shared fictions, and what happens when they are revealed as such: core arguments made about Chinese society and Chinese empire only function as long as the comparisons necessary to the argument are left implicit.

Our first section deals with the problem of Chinese uniqueness, which ultimately has to do with the identity and essence of 'China'. The second section presents the case study of our teaching in a Masters Programme called 'China in Comparative Perspective', and specifically the challenges of comparative perspectives in teaching. The third part then deals with the implicit comparisons and shared fictions in the study of 'China', specifically in relationship to notions of 'society' and 'empire'.

What is China?

The territory occupied by the People's Republic of China since 1949 is fundamentally the same as the territory of China's last dynasty, the Qing (1644–1911): China is a land empire turned into a nation, and this is the basis of the claim of Chinese nationalists that China is a civilization-nation (e.g. Zhang 2012). Nationalism reinforces the centrality and the unity of this civilization that is recuperated from the past as 'heritage' and offers coherence and reassurance for the nation on its path through history. How is the particularity of local heritage, and the great variety of ethnic groups, cultures, and societies encompassed by the unity of this empire-nation? Because each is in China doesn't mean that it represents or is typical of 'China'. You cannot even say of what a local study is a case until you establish some dimensions of variability, such as closeness to a centre of political control or to a centre of economic accumulation. And that is just a very basic start. The temptation of the obviousness of the great entity is great enough to say of each study, of a village, a neighbourhood, or a market that it is a study of China. But beyond the contemporary People's Republic and the empires of the past, what is 'China'?

For economists and demographers, the state provides statistics, which are used for comparison with other national populations and economies. Broken down into their base units, they can also serve as parameters of variables for case studies. But though it is apparent and obvious that China is a territory governed by a single state, which like every other state conducts the perennial process of never completable unification, including economic integration, what that state consists of, how government works and the nature and extent of its agencies and authorized actors, all this also varies greatly and local studies add to the substance of variation and differentiation of the state institutions themselves. So, every local study is and must be framed by a comparison with previous and other local studies.

The anthropological study of China has clustered around particular forms of action, styles of living, and modes of reproduction: such are reciprocal and instrumental networking or 'guanxi', the ideologies of ancestors, ego-centred relationships defined by asymmetrical roles of deference and care, and rules of mediation, reciprocity, and propriety, including, for instance, 'face' (*mianzi*). Put into wider frameworks of economic class, status hierarchy, political rule, and cosmology, these can be first steps towards more far-reaching comparison. Indeed, anthropologists of China have at various times brought concepts derived from the study of social action in China into far wider comparisons, such as Maurice Freedman comparing lineage segmentation in south-eastern China under a state and its status hierarchy with lineage segmentation in the West Africa of kingdoms, chiefs, and earth cults as studied by Meyer Fortes and his colleagues in anthropology (Freedman 1958; 1979: 335).

Such comparisons are valid and worthy. But they have been almost immediately compromised by being carried back into China studies and findings about 'China', while being ignored in Africa studies. The anthropology, political science, and sociology of China have become auxiliary disciplines of area studies, separated from general debates in the respective disciplines (Stockman 2018). This is an obstacle to comparison. And it goes further. The burgeoning of social science disciplines in China and Taiwan has been self-parochialized by the search for home-grown analytic concepts, so that face, guanxi, and the differential system of relationships – to give prominent examples – remain tied to their Chinese contexts, and their possible significance 'abroad' ignored. Local studies are thus frequently related to questions of generalization within China; and the resulting concepts are scaled up and substantialized into 'Chinese concepts'.

The social sciences of China do not have to reaffirm Chinese uniqueness, however. Comparison of ethnographies of 'China' can also lead to an interrogation of general concepts: case studies of local leaders in southern Fujian, for instance, can be used to revise and re-conceptualize Weber's outline of charisma (Feuchtwang and Wang 2001). To do so, it is necessary to question the category of 'China' itself, and anthropologists, who do fieldwork and pay attention to local moral worlds, are well equipped to do so. As numerous field studies have shown, each locality differentiates itself from its neighbours by particular stories of origin and migration, by particular ways of honouring ancestors and ritually communicating with them, by its references to a pantheon of gods and celestial heights, and by its inclusion and encompassment into wider communities, societies, and civilizations. Throughout history, the most important encompassing unit for local communities rarely was 'China', and even today, it often is not the political unit of the People's Republic, but rather particular visions of racialized identity, Chinese culture, or civilization.

At least since the first Chinese empire, and possibly earlier, outsiders have absorbed imperial cosmologies, or rejected them in favour of their own claims to civilizational superiority (Tapp and Lee 2010). This briefly is the way, by reference to minor differences and common criteria of scaling up, that the spatial expanse of the region can, using Marcel Mauss' definition of 'civilization' as a shared mode of self-differentiation of cultures, be described as a single civilization (Feuchtwang and Rowlands 2019). Claims to a single civilization, as well as the realities of nation state rule today, have to be taken seriously: but even if we treat the corresponding civilization or nation state as a unity, we still have to examine the centring and distancing acts that create this unity. It is also imperative to distinguish between 'Chinese civilization' and the People's Republic of China: even though the government of the latter explicitly claims to be the bearer of Chinese civilization today. The solidarity of nationalities (*minzu tuanjie*) here is premised on the division of the population into constituent nationalities that share the common essence of the 'Chinese nation' (*zhonghua minzu*). Local self-other differentiation

among those classified centrally as Han is just as much ignored as local differentiation among those centrally classified and administered as a 'minority nationality', and the subsequent differences between self-descriptions and identification by others have become a central theme in the anthropology of China.

Even so, we adamantly believe more generalizable comparison is possible. In the following, we describe how it can be done, on the basis of our experience teaching a Masters programme that puts China in comparative perspective. What is more, we believe that making comparisons is in fact inevitable, both for ordinary people and for China scholars: rather than a universal of human thought (which it might well be), we will argue that comparison is inextricably linked to our knowledge of entities such as empires and societies, including those related to 'China'. In the third part of this chapter, we thus describe how comparisons implicitly motivate our understanding of China, what kinds of comparison Chinese cases suggest, and what happens when implicit comparisons are made explicit.

China in comparative perspective

The methodological nationalism of the social sciences, the Sino-centrism of Chinese studies, and the specialization of particular social science disciplines have made it increasingly difficult to engage in sustained comparative work. Even so, comparative social science of China is possible, and this has been the guiding principle of a Masters Degree on China in Comparative Perspective which the two of us have been running since 2008. We will describe our teaching of the core course of this degree as a short ethnographic example of comparison in action. The core course is designed to (and forces students to) read theoretical frameworks from various social science disciplines on the week's topic, as well as about both China as a case in that topic *and* another appropriate comparator. The topics include industrialization and urbanization, and a series of topics such as the demographic transition, changes in kinship, family relations, and gender, the formation of a modern secular state, and others, affected by industrialization and urbanization. They also include topics that start from what might be peculiarities of the Chinese state and its politics, such as Maoism, socialism with Chinese characteristics, and the current version of state-led capitalism. For each topic, we discuss relevant theoretical frameworks, such as Carl Schmitt's theory of the partisan or Eric Wolf's and Barrington Moore's comparisons of peasant revolution, and selected comparators, questioning whether any of the 'peculiarities' are in fact peculiar to China. It is an interdisciplinary social science course and degree, but we seek to include local studies as well as macro treatments of each topic.

More than half the students who take the course are Chinese, most from the mainland, but others from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and further overseas. They often say they are taking the course because they are interested in

seeing how we, as non-Chinese, view and treat China. In effect, this is a resistance to treating the studies of China that we ask them to read as cases for more generalized comparison.

The non-Chinese students have often spent periods of a year or more in China and are keen to learn more about the country, which is yet another narrowing down. Among both, there is a tendency to seek what is exceptional to China because the exceptionality of China is a matter of pride or it is an expectation or an exotic attraction. The strength of the course is that it challenges exceptionalism, including not just Chinese but also European or North American, or for that matter Indian. For instance, we can challenge any of our Chinese students to say whether there is anything that is uniquely Chinese.

At the same time, we side with Chinese, as we would with any non-metropolitan anthropologists, in challenging by means of China studies the unstated assumptions of Euro-American social science theories and analytic concepts. But we do so only where those studies show the concepts and theories to be inadequate. For instance, does neoliberalism adequately describe the management of the market economy and the fostering of individual opportunism in China (Kipnis 2007)?

We don't accept that the origin of a theory or of a discipline or of a descriptive assumption makes it centric, Eurocentric, or Sinocentric. Neither is it sufficient simply to show that it is ethnocentric. We care more to bring critical comparison to bear and thus to improve and expand the theory or the discipline. For instance, the theory of the Chinese differentiated self and its 'role ethics'[1], put forward by the Chinese comparative anthropologist Fei Xiaotong in the 1940s (Fei 1992), predates Marilyn Strathern's 'dividual' (1988) by about 40 years. Both Fei and Strathern attack the assumptions of methodological individualism and prompt historical explanations for their own cases, as well as further studies of the comparative differences between New Guinea, post-Enlightenment Europe, and modernizing China. It's the comparison, the differences, that are stimulating, not the critique of centrism. The comparison expands the discipline and its concepts. So, even though it is difficult to take a comparative perspective because of reasons such as China's supposed uniqueness as a civilization-nation, it is possible. These are our ideals. In practice, it has been difficult to bring a comparison beyond finding what is the difference of China from its comparator. It is difficult to bring the comparison to bear on the analytic framework and turn it into a conceptual reformulation. All too often one-to-one comparisons become contained dichotomies. But even that increases the student's view over a number of weeks of comparison, for instance extending comparison and critique of the concept of industrialization by comparing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century northern Europe with the Chinese political economy of that time, as well as with the industrialization of Meiji Japan's economy and then the much more recent industrialization of the Chinese economy. Reconceptualizations of industrial productivity, of 'market', of regulated

market, of autocracy, and eventually of political economy as such are implicated.

On another level, taking a comparative perspective is not just possible, it is inevitable, because of the strength of implicit comparisons – that is, comparisons that are ignored, un-reflected, and left unspoken, but at the same time, and because of their hidden nature, provide impetus and thrust, both to academic argument and everyday politics.

Implicit comparisons in the study of China

We have already mentioned above some of the difficulties that arise when asking explicitly 'what is China?' As we will try to show, both in the social sciences of China, as well as in ordinary people's everyday discourse, a number of comparisons of 'China' remain implicit. This has to do both with the nature of thought and communication anywhere (a problem we will not deal with in detail here, but which is addressed elsewhere in this book). Cognitive and psychological questions aside, we address the rhetorical and political issues at stake in comparison: accepting a particular comparative framework implies rejecting other possible frames. Generally, some part of the argumentative groundwork for such a comparative framework needs to remain implicit, lest the argument becomes arbitrary. In the following, we show this with examples of (implicit) comparisons of China as a society and as an empire. We will focus in particular on moments when these comparisons are made explicit and discussed in the open. The first question however has again to be, what is 'China'?

Society and individualism

The definition of 'Chinese society' was the starting point for a number of influential outlines of Chinese sociology and anthropology. Fei Xiaotong's concept of the 'differential mode of association' (*chaxu geju*) in his collection of essays 'China from the Soil' (Fei 1992) was perhaps the most famous attempt to suggest a systematic comparison between the essences of Chinese and Western sociality. It should be noted that the comparison between China and the West is entangled here with oppositions between tradition and modernity, and countryside and city, among both Chinese and non-Chinese scholars. Various anthropologists have pointed out that underlying this comparison is a series of symbolic equivalences characteristic of modernism: the peasant family in the village, the countryside as a social arena, and China as a nation, trapped in backwardness and tradition, each in turn opposed to another set of symbolic equivalences: anonymity and individualization in the city, urban life as a social arena, and Western nations, empowered by progress and modernity (Liu 2002; Wang 2007; Steinmüller 2011).

Already before Fei Xiaotong, a number of Chinese thinkers, from Kang Youwei to Liang Qichao to Liang Shuming, had used similar oppositions.

What is remarkable about the terms they used is that many of them emphasized the (supposed) organic unity of Western society in comparison to the incomplete and self-isolated individualism of Chinese society. Liang Shuming, for instance, in The Essence of Chinese Culture (1987, first published 1949) compared a society based on professions in the West with a society based on ethics and ritual in China. In this perspective, family-based ethics and the ritual affirmation of social roles cannot create the formal rules required by modern institutions and specialized professions, and therefore Chinese society lacks the cohesion of Western society. He concludes that China should introduce Western science and democracy, so as to be able to build the social cohesion that is necessary for national strength.

Studying Chinese society as outsiders, Western social scientists similarly struggled with comparisons between 'China' and a somewhat idealized 'West'. And just like their colleagues in China, Western anthropologists frequently collapsed the opposition between 'the West' and 'China' into the opposition of 'modernity', and 'tradition'. These were crucial questions in the sustained attempt of Maurice Freedman to apply anthropological and sociological concepts to the study of rural China. As with many other anthropologists of his generation, Freedman never questioned the implicit methodological nationalism of Durkheimian sociology. In his classical anthropological outlines of the lineage in Chinese society (1958, 1966), as well as his studies of popular religion, marriage, geomancy, and funerals (1974, 1979), Freedman paid a lot of attention to empirical variation, as well as to the influence of the imperial state on local society. He noted variation, differentiation, and status hierarchy but kept them within bounds by a fundamental reliance on the basic legacy of Durkheim's influence on British social anthropology, that is, the assumption of a social whole, in relationship to which the functions of various sub-systems are explained.[2] This assumption of an ethnically based social whole was later criticized, including in his posthumous Festschrift (Feuchtwang and Baker 1991): perhaps Freedman ignored such risks, but the idea of the social organism attached to a supposedly 'traditional' society offered a particularist essence for China within the framework of universal modernity. The core assumption of Durkheimian sociology – that societies are social totalities in equilibrium – therefore supported the classification of the world into nation state units.

While social scientists, more or less implicitly, contrasted Chinese society with Western society – either as lacking the organic solidarity and the supposed unity of Western society (Fei, Liang), or implying an abstract unity of traditional society (Freedman) – similar concepts also motivated Chinese politicians and thinkers to advocate change. Sun Yat-sen had famously claimed that the Chinese people were just like 'a pile of loose sand' (*yi pan san sha*): self-centred, bound by kinship and place, and held back by poverty and ignorance – and hence the challenge was to 'unite' the people so as to create a strong nation.

This brings us to Chinese social analysis and implicit comparisons in the context of revolutionary China. Even though Marxist historical philosophy centred on class struggle, Maoism as a political movement aimed similarly at uniting the people within the communist state under the guidance of the vanguard party. It should be emphasized that many Chinese peasants got accustomed to the word 'society' in the form 'society-ism', i.e. socialism (*shehui zhuyi*), and they learned about it in the campaigns and movements of the 50s, 60s, and 70s. The communist revolution achieved an unprecedented state presence in local society, with much higher numbers of officials per population than ever before in Chinese history and was thus a major unifier of society.

Much has changed since the policies of reform and opening took hold in the 1980s. A new pluralism of lifestyles and consumer choice has arrived in China. But the meanings and uses of the word 'society' still have something to do with this historical background. There is a broad contrast between 'society' (*shehui*) in official discourses, where it refers to a harmonious unity, and 'society' in popular discourse, where it basically refers to a jungle of strangers that can't be trusted (as when parents warn their children to prepare before 'entering society', '*zou shang shehui*'). In the same vein, it is immediately understandable to the Chinese public that the motive of murderers who committed spree killings in nursery schools was to 'take revenge against society' (Steinmüller and Wu 2011). Both imply comparison. The Chinese state promotes its style of governing the social as a model that no longer needs to be compared to the civil society of electoral democracies. The jungle of strangers accepts a version of individualism that is purported to be evident in a global jungle.

A similar, implicit, comparison, as the one that motivated Chinese social scientists in the first half of the twentieth century (such as Fei Xiaotong), is at the heart of such popular discourses about 'society' in China today: while 'society', at an abstract level, and supposedly in 'the West', is an organic social whole, contemporary Chinese 'society' is an a-moral arena in which individuals rely on their own personal connections. It is worth noting that Durkheim and other social scientists of his time shared similar preoccupations, in particular, the moral confusion and disintegration – the 'anomie' – of modern industrial society. A preoccupation similar to Durkheim's own is driving ordinary people, as well as social scientists, in their condemnations of 'amoral individualism' (Yan 2003, 2010): what we see is a set of implicit comparisons at work, between morality and amorality, and between society and individualism. Making the comparison explicit and pointing out that 'society' (whether as organic unity or anomic jungle) and 'individualism' (as in individual duties, or simply selfishness) are convenient fictions can be very disruptive, but also immensely productive for purposes of social analysis.

Other social scientists have suggested discarding the concept of 'society' altogether – or at least the Durkheimian version of it, as a social whole uniting and limiting individuals. The anthropologist Wang Mingming, for

instance, suggests studying 'China' as 'all under heaven' (*tianxia*), a 'super-society system', that is, as a civilization (Wang 2015). This is part of his outline of a new historical anthropology of China, calling for a renewed anthropological engagement with the historical transformations of core institutions (e.g. kinship, ritual, and exchange) and a turn away from the modernist preoccupation with contemporary development (e.g. urbaniza-tion, capitalism, and globalization) (Wang 2005).

Against the fundamental assumptions of modernist social science of a dialectic between individual and society (including its Cartesian dualism and methodological nationalism), Wang proposes a concept of civilization, which is fundamentally hierarchical and relational. The advantages of this proposal are palpable in the study of imperial cosmologies (Wang 2006) and the interaction of a civilizational centre with its peripheries and outsiders (Wang 2008). Such a Chinese concept of 'civilization' can also serve as a helpful reminder that empire and nation state, civilization and society, are not neatly separated by the arrival of modernity. It is also enlightening to look at the introduction of the concept of 'society' to China, and the entanglement of notions of 'society' and 'civilization'. And here we arrive at another fundamental point for comparative study, the proposition that denial of comparability is characteristic of civilization and empire – and perhaps also the study of civilization and empire. Inherent within any civ-ilization is its claim to be unique, or uniquely 'flourishing' (*hua*) as Chinese proponents write of the core territories of the empire.

Empire and the compulsion to find coherence

In Chinese history, a crucial question has been the unity and disunity of the Chinese empire – what held the empire together? A classical approach to this question was the study of social transmission between the 'great tradition' of the literati and the 'little tradition' of the commoners (first proposed by Robert Redfield 1956). Yet few scholars explicitly tackled the study of both. More commonly, they focused on either the 'great tradition' of scholars, or the 'little tradition' of commoners. This division of labour is partly due to the approaches of different disciplines, in particular history and anthropology. Anthropologists, based on their methodology of fieldwork, even in historical studies, often neglected the impact of the scholarly trad-ition on rural communities.

James Watson, for instance, in his introduction to a famous volume of historical and ethnographic studies of death rituals in Taiwan and mainland China (Watson and Rawski 1988) detected in them all a core sequence, a conformity which, he suggested, amounted to an assertion of Chinese iden-tity. Watson argued that it was primarily the following of correct practices ('orthopraxy'), rather than correct beliefs ('orthodoxy') that was essential to Chinese identity (Watson 1988). Even though traditional funerary practice in Han Chinese communities broadly corresponds to Watson's sequence,

there are also notable exceptions and regional differences (Sutton 2007). And even if local practices are uniform, the general question remains what such uniformity means. In a way, Watson's argument rests on a theoretical impossibility: practices that are executed without having meaning or value to their practitioners. The meanings of funerals, however, often speak of an aspiration to orthodoxy, and the social impact of written text. Rather than the defining feature of 'Chinese ritual', orthopraxy is actually what distinguishes commoners from intellectuals, as Angela Zito (1993) points out: ordinary people primarily act, and intellectuals primarily work with texts. Both are concerned with practice and meaning, and the ideological separation of orthopraxy and orthodoxy helps solidify the social distinction between commoners and intellectuals. Zito, therefore, lays bare the consequences of a comparison left implicit: only by not revealing this comparison is it possible to claim that 'orthopraxy' defines Chineseness.

On another level, Watson's argument is propelled by a second implicit comparison, which is that between different forms and meanings of ritual, and the question of how ritual creates coherence: obviously, orthopraxy is the opposite of orthodoxy, but does this opposition mean that in acting correctly (orthopraxy), beliefs are absent? That there are no ideas or concepts involved in ordinary ritual in China? Watson comes close to claiming so but escapes this non sequitur by downplaying the possible comparison between Chinese ritual and ritual elsewhere: for instance, rituals in which statements of faith are repeated as orthopraxy, or acts of liturgy that become part of orthodoxy. Hence, Chinese ritual as 'orthopraxy' retains a pristine uniqueness, and argumentative strength.

This China-confined comparison also raises other important questions for wider lateral comparison beyond China: if there are particularly Chinese forms of orthopraxy, of cultural transmission, and of the interactions between commoners and elites in general, how would they compare to the same features in other imperial traditions? On this basis, can we compare entire 'civilizations' or 'empires'? Such questions have been neglected or, rather, suppressed by generations of anthropologists and historians: this occurred, we argue, when scholars essentialized the practices of the 'little tradition' (as Watson did) or vice versa, when they adopted the perspective of mandarin rulers. The latter problem, in fact, seems intrinsic to the very premises of the great and little tradition as outlined by Redfield (1956), where 'peasant culture' is described as a 'part-culture' in relation to the whole of a respective 'great tradition'.

Implicit but suppressed comparisons are at the heart of the question of the unity and cohesion of 'China' throughout history. From the perspective of the centre, there is a new imperative of the civilizational nation state: note differences as an internal comparison, which can be the ground for showing internal coherence. But it is open to question where to stop the observation of variation between and differentiation of local cultures. The borders of the civilization-nation are not an acceptable stopping point, because similar

local cultures are found on the other side, in Mongolia, or Korea, or Vietnam, or Myanmar. Even though apparently the People's Republic of China today and the Qing dynasty before 1911 had almost the same boundaries, the nature of these boundaries and the relationships between periphery and imperial centre then are surely different from the boundaries and categories in the People's Republic today. Most answers to such comparative questions about the nature of the Chinese empire, however, are a precondition for developing concepts to describe it as a whole: and hence Wang Mingming's notion of a relational 'civilization' is an exception because it breaks down every hard distinction between peripheral cultures and classified nationalities, including the majority nationality of Han Chinese.

Similarly, few social anthropologists have made social transmission, both ways between the 'great' and 'little' traditions an explicit focus of their studies of China (but see Ward 1977). Engagement with the sociology of cultural transmission within civilizations, and the interaction of 'great' and 'little' tradition, has remained a side show of academic debate with a few notable exceptions, such as Steven Sangren's (1984) attempt at a synthesis. His outline led into a complexity that was rarely taken up by other anthropologists after him, except in one notable contribution again by Wang Mingming who took a comparative route to remark on the continuity of little traditions across Eurasia (Wang Mingming 2017). While Sangren suggests unifying the study of religion, markets, and society for an understanding of the dynamics between local society and imperial centre, other scholars have continued to focus on either of these aspects. Meanwhile in the study of popular religion in China, the question of unity and diversity within Chinese traditions remains central (Weller 1987; Feuchtwang 2001).

Feuchtwang (2001), for instance, argued that it was precisely the incongruity between the local and the imperial models that was at the core of both political conflict and unity: local deities were often more carnal and martial, as against the ideological harmony of Confucian propriety promoted by the empire. Precisely, such differences could be turned against each other and provide the background for protest, rebellion, and repression. But this too has been left in Sangren's side road and it was confined by the wish to generalize about China.

The Communist revolution of the twentieth century used much of the symbolism of earlier peasant rebellions, such as the colour red and the imagery of sworn brotherhood against the corruption of a dynasty in decline. When reading accounts of everyday violence and rebellion in central China throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties, such as William Rowe's magisterial study *Crimson Rain* (2006), the implicit comparison with Mao Zedong as a messianic peasant rebel – turned – emperor is apparent.

Ordinary people, explicitly or implicitly, make similar comparisons between today's rulers and the emperors of the past. One friend in Hubei, for instance, told Hans Steinmüller that his grandfather had lived 'under five emperors': Pu Yi, the last emperor of the Qing dynasty; Sun Yat-sen, the

father of the Republic; Yuan Shikai (who crowned himself emperor in 1915); Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Republic of China, and then Mao Zedong. Another neighbour said 'the last emperor, Zhu Rongji, changed the fortune of China's peasants'. Obviously, in public, the presidents and chairmen of China are not called emperors, as this would be an unmistakeable contradiction to the principle of popular sovereignty in the 'People's Republic'. Yet, it was challenging to the regime itself to strike a balance between having a supreme leader and limiting the cult of a person, under Mao Zedong (Leese 2011), and the same issue is evident under Xi Jinping today.

These implicit comparisons go deeper, however, than just calling communist party leaders 'emperors'. If the communist revolution itself relied on earlier imageries of peasant rebellion, similar registers of language and performance are widely used in contemporary China. These include, for instance, the persona and attitudes of the 'rivers and lakes' (*jianghu*), a Chinese genre of knights errant. Ordinary people, writers, businessmen,[3] and others often invoke these characters, or even style themselves according to the ethics of chivalric romance. These ethics are based on the personal allegiances, trust, and obedience between sworn brothers, which are said to be more sincere than the mendacity of life at the court, or official party discourse today (Osburg 2016).

What is perhaps implicit in such invocations is a comparison of actual behaviour with imperial propriety: the core claim of the *jianghu* is to uphold ethical authenticity against the mores of decay. The stories of *jianghu*, of personal devotion and bravery, obtain their vigour from implicit comparisons, that is, comparisons that are never spelt out, such as the comparisons between commoners and elite, and between cultural ideals and present reality. Indeed, the implicit comparison is put to practical use: to laud and to criticize a certain state of affairs.

Comparisons with imperial China are not only used to criticize the politics of the day. They are also used to emphasize the cultural continuity of Chinese civilization in the service of the civilization-nation. When describing the Chinese approach to international politics as a 'tianxia system', for instance, the political philosopher Zhao Tingyang (2005) might be simply defending Chinese hegemony.[4] Perhaps the most ambitious statement in this sense is the book by the historian and philosopher Gan Yang, Unifying the Three Traditions (2007), which argues that there is fundamental unity that connects Confucianism, Maoism, and Dengism – ultimately all based on the same essential civilizational core. These are the officially endorsable continuities of the centre, which attempt to but do not inclusively incorporate the continuity of little traditions, which not only share some of the same references, but also others not included such as those of fortune-telling and other condemned superstitions that have their own civilizational, cosmological centricity.

A characteristic of these civilizational and imperial metaphors is denial of comparison. Here we can begin to make explicit the comparison of empires

and civilizations, starting with a negative example and going onto a potentially productive example, one that could become a comparison. Empires don't like to be compared, as they aspire to universal validity. The problem is obvious in some hyper-nationalist outlines of China as a civilization. Moluo's book China Stands Up (2010) asks for an end to the critique of China's national character. He argues that throughout the twentieth century, many intellectuals unfavourably compared China to the West and, in fact, were bound by a common assumption that China was fundamentally inferior, what he calls the 'theory of [national] depravity' (*liegen lun*). Moluo's suggestion, then, is simply to forget and erase this history, for the sake of national pride and strength.

In the new historical anthropology of China, we see a similar tendency, even though it is infinitely subtler.[5] We already mentioned above Wang Mingming's suggestion to study China using Chinese notions of civilization, such as 'all under heaven' (*tianxia*), imperial ritual, and the tribute system. Wang and his students have produced a series of important analyses of the transformations of imperial ritual and cosmology (Wang 2012), the intermediary circles of social exchange at the Chinese periphery (Wang 2008), stranger-kings at the periphery of Chinese empires (Liang 2009), and of many other topics within a larger framework of a relational civilization. In Wang Mingming's own work, the focus is on particular Chinese understandings of myth – he has for instance suggested that legends about imperial exchanges can be analysed as a set of structural directions and transformations, or what he calls a 'directionology' (Wang 2014). This study is enlightening and refreshing, as it turns around the principal foci of attention of much of the study of China (most fundamentally, in Wang's historicization of particular Chinese views of 'the West', long before the emergence of a Eurocentric, i.e. 'Western-centric', world). Yet the persuasive power of Wang's argument relies to some extent on the absence of a systematic comparison with other imperial formations and their cosmologies of civilization. In fact, the concept of 'directionology', as one of the most specific theoretical outlines of this school of thought, characteristically stands by itself, even though arguably other imperial spaces and polities could be shown to share similar features – e.g. in the exchanges between imperial centre and periphery and how they structure space (Wheatley 1971), and in the cosmology of galactic polities (Tambiah 1977).

Implicit comparisons, shared fictions, and complicity

As we have seen, comparisons of societies and empires are not the preserve of social scientists, but are crucially important to everyday, practical politics. As long as comparisons remain implicit, they can be used as 'shared fictions', which allow for political struggle. Implicit comparisons are convenient lies, that is, lies that are not intended to deceive, but which simply conceal, or tacitly bypass, their comparative context. Robert Weller has recently emphasized the importance of such shared fictions in informal politics in

China (Weller 2017): political actors often share the convenient lie that they are acting within the law and within the boundaries of what is acceptable, when in fact it is obvious that their actions push the boundaries of law and convention, or squarely go against the requirements of either. The implicit comparison is with what is formally ruled and officially expected. Weller emphasizes the pervasiveness of such shared fictions and their flip-side, which is that they are tacitly acknowledged by the authorities. The social dynamics of shared fictions are very similar to what Steinmüller (2013) has discussed as the work of 'communities of complicity', that is, communities that are formed on the basis of a shared local knowledge that is condemned by public discourse: for instance, villagers who gamble for high stakes yet describe the same as entertainment and amusement to outsiders, or officials who take part in local worship and family celebrations, while deploring rural superstition and wasteful custom in public.

As we have tried to show here, implicit comparisons can be the stuff of which such complicity is made. Both in informal politics, and in scholarly discourse, revealing the terms of such comparisons can be a political move itself. Revealing those comparisons is tantamount to exposing a lie and explicating the scale and scope of such a comparison means to destroy the political strength and coherence of the argument that relies on this comparison. If, for instance, someone was to ask every time the word 'society' is used, 'what is the scope and scale of comparison on which your notion of "society" relies?', it would nullify the use of 'society' in a political struggle, which relies on the indisputability of the value of the term. The same is true even more categorically for 'empire', and concepts related to imperial governance, ritual, and civilization: using the words 'dynasty' (*wangchao*) or 'emperor' (*huangdi*) to speak about contemporary Chinese politics amounts to implicit criticism; and to open 'empire' and 'civilization' out to historical comparison makes the historical contingency of Chinese empire and civilization explicit, and an assessment, including in normative terms, possible. Similarly, when the focus turns to the comparison of different empires and civilizations, it will be difficult to maintain the belief in the uniqueness of the Chinese path.

There are a number of 'shared fictions' that are based on implicit comparisons and which have been central to the study of China. The first one we have discussed is the fiction that 'China' is a society lacking the organic unity of Western society. If not attached to 'the West', the ideal of society as an organic unity itself might be described as an 'implicit comparison'. And it is this shared fiction which has motivated numerous Chinese sociologists and ordinary people who are worried about social anomie and individualism.

Some Chinese historians and anthropologists have suggested debunking this shared fiction of society and replacing it with others, in particular civilization and empire. But here we have identified another series of comparisons that are never spelt out in detail: (1) the comparison of little tradition and great tradition, and their respective modes of transmission;

(2) the comparison of different civilizations and empires. But the contrary is even more evident: the strength of not comparing. The argument about 'orthopraxy', for instance, relies on the lack of comparison between little and great tradition; and the strength of many arguments made about Chinese cosmology relies on the lack of comparison with other imperial cosmologies.

Conclusion

The question of what 'China' is, and what 'the Chinese people' are like, motivates everyday distinctions drawn between locals and outsiders, as well as political and academic debates. We have tried to demonstrate that both informal politics and academic argument often rely on the persuasiveness of implicit comparisons. Such implicit comparisons are the shared fictions on which Sino-centrism and methodological nationalism rely. Making such implicit comparisons explicit has motivated a number of anthropological debates, such as those around the unity of Chinese popular religion. Revealing such implicit comparisons is an explicitly political move. If 'political' refers to the power games that pitch actors against each other into different camps, then pointing out the invisible fencelines that give coherence to the opponent's position is indeed the ultimate political move. Such revelations are central to everyday politics in villages, as well as to academic debates in seminar rooms. We have shown the effects of this play between concealing and revealing comparative frames in relationship to notions of 'society' and 'empire' in China. Core arguments made by ordinary people and scholars alike rely on leaving some elements of comparison untouched and unsaid.

   We have observed a series of cases showing how comparisons are rejected and suppressed. The tendency to resist comparison was exposed already in the 1920s by Marcel Mauss: 'Societies live by borrowing from each other, but they define themselves rather by the refusal of borrowing than by its acceptance' (Mauss 1920: 242–251). This is true within the spreads of variation between cultures that constitute a civilization. It is also true of the centring that characterizes every civilization, and in particular a nationalized civilization, as well as a regional culture and its claims to uniqueness. Its occurrence elsewhere should be of interest to anthropology. So too should be the necessary lies, or fictions of reference to the state and to the social as tokens of contention and rule. Their use as political tokens of descriptive truth can be a common ground for comparisons between empires, between nation states, and between non-state social formations.

Notes

1 Numerous anthropologists and sociologists have used Fei's concept; the philosopher Roger Ames has recommended developing Fei's relational ethics into a general understanding of Confucian role ethics (2011).

2 Freedman also wrote about China as a 'complex society' and a 'civilization', but very much in the colloquial sense of 'oriental civilization', that is, an aggregate of societies, which might require particular methods (and particular attention to written sources about history and variation), but emphatically not the dismissal of the core assumption of a social totality (which motivated anthropological holism and had been developed and tested in the studies of relatively small societies). Note for instance the following passage from his Malinowski lecture in 1963

> I am not sure that I myself know what a complex society is, or, more accurately, where along a continuum from most to least simple a complex society can be said to fall; but I think I know when I am in the presence of a civilization. In a civilization an ethnographer cannot do what ethnographers have done elsewhere; total society is beyond his individual grasp. And yet, if he is to be informative when he pronounces on his findings, he must have had access to material bearing on the total society and be able to bring his own work into relation with it. It is in this limited sense that anthropologists working on China must aim at the total society. Of course, the more competently they equip themselves in history and sociology, the larger the circuit they will be able to cover, although it is not necessary to assume that their activities as straightforward field ethnographers of the old type are of no use in the grand enterprise.
>
> (Freedman 1963: 10–11)

3 Under the leadership of CEO Ma Yun, employees of the hugely successful internet market Alibaba are encouraged to adopt nicknames, usually based on the martial art novels of Jin Yong, i.e. the *jianghu* genre (Lee 2018).
4 Zhao Tingyang's 'tianxia system' builds on the outlines of Fairbank (1968) and others of the imperial tribute system of 'tianxia', 'all under heaven'. For a criticism of the culturalist, sino-centric, and normative assumptions, see Zhang 2011.
5 For an overview of contemporary Chinese anthropology see Ji and Liang (2018) and Zhang (2018).

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10 Afterword

The social lives of comparison

Harry Walker

How, then – and to what ends – do people compare? The contributions gathered here certainly attest to the diversity of comparative practices in which people engage. In some cases, the aim seems relatively straightforward: one compares persons or groups to generate knowledge, whether about others or about oneself. As Pelkmans notes in the Introduction, '[w]e are driven to comparison because we need to know where we stand'. Knowledge of self and other would indeed be a central premise of the comparative projects in which social scientists have traditionally engaged. On the other hand, several of the chapters here also make clear that such projects – for all their pretensions to neutrality or objectivity – are shot through with political and ethical values, as well as emotion and affect, of one form or another. Often, the comparative move helps to establish a claim (for recognition, for instance) while furthering a particular set of interests; it may also offer a new way of seeing, and thus evaluating, mapping the world in a particular way. Beyond the confines of academic production, the aims and effects are broader still. Ultimately, as Benedict Anderson (2016) points out, comparison is probably best thought of, not as a method *per se*, or an academic technique, but simply a discursive strategy. Which is not to say that its effects are predictable or easy to achieve: as Candea (2019: 16) argues, comparison often resists the ends to which it is put. In the final analysis, all relations may in some sense be based on comparison (see Scott in this volume), and thus we might infer that comparison, too, is what people use to negotiate those relations as they unfold over time. Comparisons are often contested, and their effects may linger, with unforeseen results.

It may come as no surprise to find that many of the chapters here are in fact themselves comparative, in the sense that they rest on relatively conventional forms of comparative ethnography. Indeed, most of the contributors have themselves previously undertaken more or less explicit comparative projects on their own (anthropological) terms, revealing through their work an enduring interest in what comparison might achieve. Thus, South African debt advice services are compared with their British equivalents (James); Japanese expatriates in Thailand are compared with those working in France (Sedgwick); academic anthropology is compared to development

practice (Gardner and Huang); Chinese scholars of China are compared with Western scholars of China (Steinmuller and Feuchtwang) and so on. It was, after all, this shared interest in comparative approaches that prompted the discussions culminating in this volume, in which these scholars turn their gaze more explicitly – perhaps for the first time – to the comparative projects of those with whom they have carried out fieldwork. What we have, as a result, is thus something like a comparison of comparisons, or – better, perhaps – of comparative inclinations and competences. None of the chapters articulate a vision for a comparative anthropology, in anything like a normative sense, nor do they explicitly engage the question of what comparison ultimately 'is'. There are echoes here of the pragmatic turn in French sociology, exemplified by the attempts of Boltanski and Thévenot (e.g. 2006) to move away from the deployment of an analytical framework designed to critique social reality, towards an examination of how people employ their own critical capacities in their everyday lives.

In what follows, I propose to further this aim by posing three questions which I believe are especially pertinent for an anthropology of comparison, and which the contributions gathered here can help us to answer. Firstly, what are the different social and cultural factors that might push peoples' comparative inclinations in specific directions? Secondly, how and why do particular strategies of comparison correspond to recognisable emotions and affective dispositions? Finally, what does it mean to explicitly deny the possibility of comparison, by insisting on uniqueness or incomparability? I conclude with a suggestion that acts of 'reframing' may be an integral component of the social life of comparison, and key vehicle for the expression of agency.

Are there cultures of comparison?

Are there dominant modes or styles of comparison in a given cultural milieu – and if so, why? Can we expect that children are socialised to favour certain kinds of comparisons, with particular ends in mind? What about the professional training of adults? If indeed we do compare in order to know where we stand, as Pelkmans suggests in the introduction, are some people nevertheless simply more driven than others to try to figure this out? In other words, why might some people crave clarity around questions of prestige, rank or identity, while others seem comfortable with ambiguity? What forms of privilege might facilitate certain comparative capacities or desires, and what kinds of structural disadvantage might impede them?

Perhaps the strongest claim for identifying overarching comparative styles can be found in Scott's contribution to this volume. According to Scott, the Arosi people favour a recognisable style of comparison that he terms 'adumbration', epitomised by exchanges between discrete, autonomous, pre-given matrilineages that always slightly dominate or overshadow one another. He identifies four specific kinds of adumbration, all of which share

an overarching concern with the integrity of these matrilineal categories that effectively instantiate what Arosi consider to be wholly incommensurable classes of being – a totemic mode of organisation that Scott refers to as poly-ontology. The very interesting suggestion here, then, is that ontological differences of this sort shape how people compare in recognisable ways.

Scott's claim, in fact, is that ontology is itself largely a matter of pre-disposition to a certain kind of comparison. Needless to say, the conventional anthropological project of cultural comparison can be understood as predicated on ontological naturalism: many 'cultures', superimposed on an underlying and unified 'nature'. I am immediately tempted by this to ask what an animist or perspectival mode of comparison would look like. A partial answer might be found in Viveiros de Castro's (2004) concept of 'controlled equivocation'. Rather than mapping one social or cultural whole onto another – the familiar process of cultural translation – controlled equivocation depends instead on a kind of productive misunderstanding, one that he defines as a 'referential alterity between homonymic concepts'. Rather than comparing different ways of representing the same world, the Amerindian perspectivist – departing from an assumption of a representative unity – would use comparison to reveal and preserve the radical diversity of the real. The task of describing ethnographically how this plays out in everyday life, however, like that of developing a more extensive mapping of how ontology shapes comparison appears still to lie ahead.

As another significant determinant of comparative styles, what emerges perhaps most strongly from these chapters is the question of relative power and prestige. The issue is familiar to anthropologists: the traditional criticism of many comparative approaches, after all, has tended to be that they abstract from, and distort, local realities in ways that exemplify and perhaps reinforce the privileged position of the analyst (see Pelkmans, Introduction). For the people of Indonesia's Riau Islands discussed by Long in this volume, however, it is their perceived subordinate status that structures the kinds of comparisons they make. Long observes that they regularly compare themselves to their neighbours (on mainland Riau, in Singapore, in Malaysia, or further afield) and find themselves wanting: backward; neglected; under-achieving. Yet these are what Long terms 'bad comparisons', rigged from the outset. The structural features that generated vast inequalities of wealth and opportunity are naturalised and essentialised as racial characteristics, or the product of 'Malay' patterns of thought that must be overcome. Such racialised comparisons are in part the product – as well as naturalisation – of postcolonial power dynamics, shaped by peoples' experiences of marginality and cultural inferiority, or 'backwardness' as seen from the perspective of modernist ideologies of development.

By contrast, the Kyrgyz people who host and participate in the World Nomad Games (which come metonymically to represent the Kyrgyz nation) appear to have adopted a different strategy for dealing with a nevertheless similar situation of perceived marginality (see Pelkmans, this volume).

Rather than embark on comparisons within pre-given frameworks that would inevitably lead to negative self-evaluation couched in terms of backwardness, such as those offered by the ideology of development, they chose instead to deny the utility of these conventional comparative frames, by insisting on their own uniqueness and 'incomparability'. More outward-focused, in some ways, than their Riau Island counterparts, the Kyrgyz are profoundly concerned with recognition, especially on the part of the West, and less so, perhaps, with assessing their own weaknesses with a view to improvement. The reason for the difference may have much to do with their diverging national histories. As Pelkmans explains, recognition was a key issue for all the Soviet nations, relations between whom typically involved cultural displays aimed at promoting mutual knowledge. We might suggest, in short, that if Riau Islanders are concerned with backwardness, it is the threat of insignificance that preoccupies the Kyrgyz, and they adopt divergent comparative strategies accordingly.

Finally, training – including, especially, professional training – clearly shapes recognisable cultures of comparison, as the contributions to the second half of this book make clear. This too maps onto power dynamics in important ways. James, for instance, shows how the position occupied by professional advisors affords them a very different view to that of their impoverished clients, as their training enables them to fit their clients into a comparative framework that draws out structural similarities that were otherwise obscured. Meanwhile, Gardner and Huang compare prevalent styles of comparison within academic anthropology and development practice, concluding that development is not only more comfortable, generally speaking, with comparative approaches but also favours a particular form of comparison, between existing states of affairs and their own models or exemplars. This has certain recognisable consequences, including a tendency to 'smooth out the rough contours of complexity and difference'. It is quite different to the anthropologist's proclivity to criticise such models for failing to represent the complexity of reality, and to use ethnography for critiquing political and economic structures. Such is the approach taken by Steinmuller and Feuchtwang in their own teaching on China – theoretical models are presented as tools for developing a much-needed comparative perspective, but with a view to criticising and thereby improving the models themselves. They draw a parallel here, too, to a certain critical potential discernible in the comparisons made by 'ordinary' people in China when they compare current realities (and rulers) with China's imperial past, in what they describe as a subtle kind of everyday politics.

What does it feel like to compare?

Comparison does more than produce knowledge: it produces emotions. The embeddedness of comparative styles in structures of feeling is a key theme to emerge from these chapters. Certain emotions not only push people to

compare in the first place, as a motivating factor, but also are an important part of its effects. It is clear that comparisons oriented towards the discernment of difference between people who are otherwise alike can generate strong feelings, as in the case of the salarymen discussed by Sedgwick in this volume, who operate in an environment of intense competition. In the case of one worker he mentions, a promotion over a rival finally brought sweet revenge some fifteen years after a slight that had left him bitter. Gardner and Huang contrast the feeling of hope generated by development with the cynicism arising from so much anthropological analysis and note the confusion and inner conflict this can produce among students of the anthropology of development. They explore how the use of exemplars in development, such as the iAgent social enterprise project in Bangladesh, is intended to be motivating for participants and onlookers but can eventually end up producing different kinds of feelings altogether. Comparing themselves to the model – in this case, the quasi-mythical Mita – can initially motivate participants to strive for a better life, encouraging them to fashion themselves as entrepreneurs; for a time, at least, this generates 'feelings of virtuousness, self-respect, daily motivation, and hope for the future'. Until, inevitably, failure sets in, and a growing sense of cynicism or even bitterness.

Long, too, explores the connection between comparison and motivation, and the fine line between hope and despair. A teacher's comments comparing his Indonesian students' lacklustre linguistic accomplishments to those of the high-achieving foreign anthropologist are supposed to motivate them to try harder, to overcome their laziness. But they can only have this effect if the comparison narrows down to epistemologically unreasonable extremes and ignores the long-term effects of structural advantages, not least among which is the legacy of educational privilege. In fact, instead of hope, such comparisons risk generating feelings of shame and humiliation. There is a similarity here to the way many Riau Islanders compare themselves to their neighbours – on mainland Riau or across the border, in Singapore and Malaysia – which generates feelings of inferiority and resentment once they come to see themselves as 'backward'. Chinese, too, are readily perceived as more successful than ethnic Malays – although because of the way the comparison is constructed, structural factors are downplayed and the difference is attributed to 'mindset'. Comparing in ways they are sure to lose, the Riau Islanders occupy a position of anxiety, oscillating among hope, delusional fantasy and despondency.

There are other kinds of comparison, however, that appear to bring reassurance, because of the way they can help people to overcome feelings of guilt or isolation. James effectively compares the plight of debtors compelled to seek out advice in the UK and in South Africa, finding that whereas the latter are quite pragmatic in their dealings with debt, the former are often plagued by guilt and disconcerted by the scale of their problem. According to James, the experience of locating their predicament in relation to others can bring feelings of relief. It is tempting to suggest here that the problem to

begin with is not so much the lack of any comparative framework altogether, but again what Long calls 'bad' comparison, in which their predicament is construed as the outcome of their own personal failings, rather than the broader structures of disadvantage in which they find themselves.

The denial of comparability

Given the risks associated with comparing, perhaps it is no surprise that people so often seem to repudiate it altogether, to stake out a claim to uniqueness or incomparability, whether of themselves, their peers, group or some other entity with which they are associated. It would appear to be precisely because comparison is so fraught, so riddled with potentially negative emotions, that the Amazonian Urarina people, described by Walker in this volume, tend to view it as morally problematic, and mostly inappropriate in a public setting. As a discursive strategy, comparison is closely associated with 'bad talk', or gossip, which is not only common enough but also roundly condemned because of the trouble it can lead to.

At peoples' disposal, therefore, are a number of strategies for avoiding making comparisons explicit, especially where this could lead to ranking or hierarchy; the denial of comparability might be seen as a form of egalitarian politics. Far from explicitly proclaiming the incomparability of persons or things, however, Urarina tend to do the precise opposite, routinely declaring markedly different things to be 'alike' or (even better, insofar as it precludes comparison) 'the same'. This is not the only possibility for avoiding the ranking effects of comparison: the people of Arosi, discussed by Scott in this volume, may wilfully avoid identifying a particular group as *auhenua*, or autochthonous, in relation to other 'outsiders', even if this comes at the price of an enduring sense of disorder.

Explicit denials of comparability, where they appear in this volume, tend to support a different kind of politics; above all, they seem most closely associated with nationalism. As Benedict Anderson (2016) observed, 'One of the central myths of American nationalism has long been "exceptionalism" – the idea that US history, culture and political life are by definition incomparable. Needless to say, this is absurd'. A similar point is made here by Pelkmans: 'claims of uniqueness rest on comparative practices that potentially contradict and undermine its condition of possibility'. Yet this is nevertheless precisely what his Kyrgyz interlocutors press for, in relation to the World Nomad Games that serves as an important source of national pride. Steinmuller and Feuchtwang similarly point out that 'denial of comparability is characteristic of civilization and empire' – which might help to explain why many of their Chinese students resist their calls, in the classroom, to analyse China within a comparative framework, seeking out instead out what is exceptional and exotic. Even certain influential Chinese anthropologists can be read as denying comparability in their writings. Comparison facilitates critique, which is why empires 'don't like to be compared'.

It is Japanese exceptionalism, meanwhile, that forms the backdrop of the corporate culture examined by Sedgwick in this volume and that generates much of the internal homogeneity that intensifies awareness of minute individual differences. Japanese exceptionalism is inextricably linked to the economic success story that the salaryman epitomises; yet Sedgwick also acknowledges that it does not preclude comparison in practice, and there are indeed important differences in terms of how Japanese compare themselves to their French and to Thai counterparts. Even the Arosi indulge in claims to exceptionalism, of sorts: as Scott (2016) has elsewhere made quite clear, they assert the uniqueness of the island of Makira through the idea that it conceals an extraordinary power, a 'wonder'.

Humphrey's (2012) discussion of incommensurability might be helpful in thinking through some of these questions around the political significance of denials of comparability. According to Humphrey, incommensurability implies not only the presence of difference, but also the suspension or inapplicability of inequality, insofar as relevant common elements are denied. It works to different effects depending on whether the incompatibility – or incomparability – is affirmed from a dominant or from a subaltern point of view. A key issue is how social acknowledgement of difference is transformed into inequality. Totemic orders, for instance – which would include the Arosi poly-ontology discussed by Scott, comprising autonomous matrilineages – are typically subaltern creations that set up nonhierarchical intergroup relations, typically 'in the midst of imperial, colonial, and capitalist realities' (Humphrey 2012: 303). While Lévi-Strauss (1963) drew attention to the incipient hierarchy in totemic systems, and their mutual transformability with 'caste' systems, Humphrey points out that they can equally operate as pockets of parity and interdependence in the midst of enormous asymmetries. Far from representing some original or non-modern, 'pure' state, they may be adopted for historical reasons. As she puts it, 'Conceptualizing human groups or individuals as innately different from one another has to be the ultimate weapon against any ideology that would hierarchize all groups in relation to a quality they hold in common' (2012: 306). In other words, incommensurability can be a useful way of refusing or sidestepping hierarchy. From the point of view of a dominant party in a relationship, by contrast, incommensurability can also be a crucial element of exclusion – as happens when a radical opposition is produced between nationals and immigrants. As Stolcke (1995) has argued, the rhetoric of exclusion deployed by the political right is often predicated on ideas of the fundamental incommensurability of different 'cultures'. This is much closer too, of course, to nationalism and its myths of exceptionalism.

Shifting the frame

A final theme to emerge from the papers gathered here, which seems well deserving of further exploration, situates the social life of comparison within

a more temporal perspective. It concerns how people commonly seek to shift the framing of comparisons offered to them – for instance by recasting their terms in a different idiom – in order to generate an alternative perspective, with a different set of effects. Long shows how, for all their epistemological problems, the 'bad comparisons' made by Riau Islanders can allow them to reclaim a sense of dignity and value simply by being held in the same comparative frame as less 'backward' others. Consider again the advice encounter analysed by James, in which people with problem debts seek counsel from experienced professionals. A key dynamic here is the way in which these debtors are empowered to compare anew, firstly, the debts they have, assessing them for priority, and secondly their own predicament vis-à-vis others, such that they realise their case is not unusual, nor is it simply a product of their own incompetence. The Kyrgyz, by contrast, empower themselves by moving in the opposite direction, as it were: faced with a seemingly all-encompassing comparative framework effectively framed by the 'rules' of global geopolitics, they withdraw into their own 'uniqueness' and play up incommensurability. The frame shift here means refiguring the values used to rank and order in a comparative hierarchy: purity, bravery, 'wildness' and the like are reasserted and become predominant. As in the game of *kok boru*, in which the Kyrgyz excel, unnecessary and unwanted rules are stripped away so as better to bring to the fore the underlying raw skill and bravery of their participants. The new comparison, we might note, is just as rigged as the old one, but this time in their favour. Their agency is nevertheless curtailed by their dependency on foreign recognition: hence, the compulsion to adopt features of the Olympic games, such as national teams, deemed necessary for the Nomad Games to be perceived as genuinely 'international'. The potential of, as well as constraints on, peoples' agency as they seek to shift comparative frames emerges as a key question for future research.

Comparative anthropology and the anthropology of comparison

A slew of work in recent years has brought the question of comparison back to the forefront of anthropological research. There is a growing sense that the time is ripe to reverse an earlier retreat into ethnographic particularism, though at the same time, scholars are wary of advocating forms of comparison that would leave practitioners open to accusations of riding roughshod over specificity and nuance. Comparison is sometimes said to flatten uniqueness, to erode or abstract from particulars, to be a way of exercising power from above. Our answer has been to redirect attention for a moment towards a descriptive account of the kinds of comparisons our interlocutors make in their everyday lives. On an individual level, such comparisons have been the focus of some classic research in social psychology, under such banners as relative deprivation theory (e.g. Runciman 1966), which considers the kinds of interpersonal comparisons that lead people to feel they are deprived of something essential in their lives, or social

comparison theory (e.g. Festinger 1954), which considers how individuals compare 'upward' or 'downward' as a way of assessing their own abilities or traits. Here, however, the authors have taken a rather more open-ended approach, considering a broad range of comparative operations and their social, emotional and political effects. How, if at all, the kinds of comparisons people make are influenced by social and cultural dynamics; how they make people feel; why some people downplay or deny outright the possibility of comparison altogether; and how people seek to reframe comparisons as an expression of their social agency – these are among the many questions that an anthropology of comparison might well seek to answer.

Might we also ask how – if at all – a better understanding of other people's comparative practices could (or should) inform the anthropological project of comparison? Is all comparison inevitably about ranking, passing judgement, evaluation – always predatory and parasitic, as Scott suggestively claims? Or is there something like an alternative or 'minor' tradition of comparing from which we might learn? If the task of developing a compelling answer to this question still remains ahead of us, we can at least begin by noting that comparison would seem to be almost always a fraught endeavour, often resisted, though not without a string of tangible benefits. It has a social life that lingers on, and perhaps an afterlife, too, in which its various effects continue to be felt. No wonder it is such a site of struggle and contestation, as well as an opportunity for the exercise of ingenuity.

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