antro-pólus

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FORMATIONS OF BELONGING IN MIGRATION, LABOR AND COMMUNITY MAKING | KÖTŐDÉSEK KIALAKULÁSA MIGRÁCIÓS HELYZETEKBEN, MUNKÁBAN ÉS KÖZÖSSÉGSZERVEZÉSBEN

REVIEWS SECTION | RECENZIÓK

Editorial Foreword:

Amidst the chaos of 2025, we have assembled a new edition of antro-pólus once again. This year's collaboration was carried out by a determined editorial team of five, supported by the generous labour of our voluntary reviewers, many of whom are PhD students from the Interdisciplinary Social Research Program. We consider this edition a dawn of a new area. We were much more organised than any time before and this marks only the beginning. This collaborative spirit runs through this issue, along with the shared sense of the imagined future together. The texts gathered here reflect not only shared editorial effort, but also the diverse ways in which anthropological thinking continues to respond to the conditions of the ever-changing present.

We received fifteen submissions for this edition, an unexpectedly rich collection that we eventually arranged into four themes. Each article, each research, and each author has a distinct way of looking at their field and the world; pushing the boundaries of what this journal and our community can collectively imagine and create.The first section, Traces and Reconfigurations of National Identity and Social Memory, follows the persistent ways in which national identities across post-socialist, post-colonial, and diasporic landscapes are unsettled. The second section, Challenging Norms and Power Dynamics through a Feminist Lens, brings together critical feminist perspectives, care, and resistance, revealing how power is lived, contested, and reconfigured. The third section, Formations of Belonging in Migration, Labor and Community Making, gathers ethnographic reflections on how belonging emerges through practice, negotiation, and relational effort under unequal conditions. The volume closes with a reflexive book review, which turns our attention to the visual and historical dimensions of anthropological inquiry.

This year, we also broadened our author pool, welcoming not only cultural anthropologists but also sociologists and students from international relations programs. The result is a volume that stretches across disciplines while remaining grounded in ethnographic curiosity and critical insight. Rather than asking how different disciplines might be reconciled, it may be worth reflecting on why they came to be divided, and what is lost when interconnected matters are approached in isolation.

Szerkesztői előszó

A 2025-ös év káoszának közepette ismét összeállítottuk az antro-pólus új számát. Az idei együttműködés egy eltökélt, ötfős szerkesztői csapat munkájának eredménye, amelyet önkéntes bírálóinak nagylelkű közreműködése támogatott, közülük sokan az Interdiszciplináris Társadalomkutatási Program PhD-hallgatói. Ezt a számot egy új korszak hajnalának tekintjük. Sokkal szervezettebbek voltunk, mint bármikor korábban, és ez még csak a kezdet. A kollaboratív szellem végigvonul ezen a lapszámon, akárcsak a közösen elképzelt jövő érzete. Az itt összegyűjtött szövegek nemcsak a szerkesztői munka kollektív jellegét tükrözik, hanem azt is, milyen sokféleképpen reagál az antropológiai gondolkodás a folyamatosan változó jelen feltételeire.

A lapszámra tizenöt tanulmány érkezett, egy váratlanul gazdag anyag, amelyet végül négy tematikus egységbe rendeztünk. Minden írás, minden kutatás és minden szerző sajátos nézőpontból tekint a szakterületére és a világra, kitágítva annak határait, amit e folyóirat és közösségünk közösen elképzelhet és létrehozhat. Az első tematikus egység, a Nemzeti identitás és a társadalmi emlékezet nyomai és újrarendeződései, azt vizsgálja, miként válnak bizonytalanná és újratárgyalttá a nemzeti identitások a posztszocialista, posztkoloniális és diaszpórikus kontextusokban. A második rész, Normák és hatalmi dinamikák kritikai vizsgálata feminista perspektívából, kritikai feminista perspektívákat, a gondoskodás és az ellenállás kérdéseit kapcsolja össze, feltárva, miként kerül megélésre, megvitatásra és alakul újra a hatalom. A harmadik fejezet, Kötődések kialakulása migrációs helyzetekben, munkában és közösségszervezésben, etnográfiai reflexiókat gyűjt össze arról, miként formálódik a hovatartozás gyakorlata, megegyezéseken és relációs erőfeszítéseken keresztül egyenlőtlen feltételek között. A kötetet egy reflexív recenzió zárja, amely az antropológiai kutatás vizuális és történeti dimenzióira irányítja figyelmünket.

Idén a szerzői kört is bővítettük: a kulturális antropológusok mellett szociológia és nemzetközi tanulmányok szakos hallgatókat is köszönthettünk. Az eredmény egy olyan kötet, amely több diszciplínán ível át, miközben megőrzi az etnográfiai kíváncsiságot és a kritikai éleslátást. Talán nem is az a kérdés, miként lehet különböző diszciplínákat összeegyeztetni, érdemesebb lehet elgondolkodni azon, miért váltak egyáltalán szét, és mi vész el akkor, amikor az egymással összefonódó kérdéseket elszigetelten közelítünk meg.

Traces and Reconfigurations of National Identity and Social Memory | Nemzeti identitás és társadalmi emlékezet lenyomatai és újrarendeződései

Kuvonchbek Kushboev

Centring the Nation: (Re)constructing Uzbek National Identity

Abstract: This article attempts to analyse how nationalism and national identity are (re)constructed through public spaces in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. By tracking the transformation of Amir Temur Square, located in the middle of Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, this article argues that while Uzbekistan tried to distinguish itself from the Soviet ideology and its policy from the very beginning of independence, the symbolic and ideological construction of the nation and its national identity in the country was influenced by the Soviet ideology itself. Drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of representation, this research has shown that the statue erected in the square is not only a commemoration of a historical figure but also a carefully chosen one to shape the post-Soviet Uzbek nationalism. While the statue reflects the values that the government seeks to promote, such as strength, cultural pride, and independence, it also illustrates erasing or (re)writing an alternative history.

Keywords: Amir Temur, ideology, nationalism, Uzbek, national identity.

Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, fifteen new independent countries emerged. Among those fifteen countries, there were new independent states in Central Asia, such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan. After spending over 70 years under the Soviet regime, these new Central Asian countries found themselves in the process of establishing their own national "imagined communities." To legitimize their

existing territory and their rights to their titular ethnicities, these countries created particular symbols, myths, and rituals that differentiated their nations from each other as well as legitimized the nation's right to exist in the territory.

By tracking the transformation of Amir Temur Square, located in the middle of Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, I will argue that while Uzbekistan tried to distinguish itself from the Soviet ideology and its policy, the symbolic and ideological construction of the nation and its national identity in the country was influenced by the Soviet ideology itself.

The structure of this article is as follows. First, I will outline the theoretical framework of this research, providing insight into the cultural studies approach that I use to analyse the topic. Second, I will examine the historical and political context of Amir Temur Square to demonstrate the broader picture of the site. Lastly, I will analyse the symbolic meaning of the square by applying the framework of representation theory before reaching a conclusion.

Theoretical Framework: Representation in the Analysis of Amir Temur Square and the Statue

Theoretically, I draw on Stuart Hall's theory of representation, with particular emphasis on the *constructivist* approach, to analyse how national identity is symbolically constructed through Amir Temur Square in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. Prior to engaging with the discussion, it is therefore important to clarify the theory of representation and its *constructivist* approach, particularly in relation to the national identity and the nation-building process examined in this research.

As outlined by Stuart Hall (1997), representation means that, at its simplest, it is using language and other systems of signs (e.g., images, symbols) to produce and exchange meaning within a society. To better understand how representation connects meaning to a culture or a specific society, Hall (1997) further analyses three different approaches to representation: *the reflective* (reflecting like a mirror)*, intentional* (main intent)*,* and *constructivist*. Regarding the *constructivist* approach to representation, which I will deploy in this research, Hall (1997) emphasises that meaning is not inherent in symbols or objects; instead, it is constructed through shared cultural codes within the society. In this sense, national identity and the nation-building process in Uzbekistan are processes of meaning-

making that are heavily shaped by political, social, and historical contexts, all of which are under the control of political elites.

There are two principal models of the *constructivist* approach—semiotic and discursive—according to Stuart Hall (1997). Amir Temur Square, with its prominent statue of a historical figure at the centre, exemplifies both models. In the semiotic model, as Hall (1997) explains, two key elements exist: *the form* (the actual image) and *the idea or concept* in people's minds with which the form is associated. Thus, Amir Temur Square, with its statue of a historically significant male figure and his symbolic accoutrements, does not merely represent historical reality; rather, it constructs a specific interpretation of Uzbek identity.

With regard to the model of the *discursive* to *constructivist* approach, Stuart Hall (1997), drawing on Foucault, argues that for Foucault, *discourse* is the production of knowledge, which constructs the topic and governs the way the topic can be meaningfully talked and reasoned about, as well as limiting or even restricting the other ways of talking and constructing knowledge about it. In the context of Amir Temur Square, the square has become a site where *discourse* operates to produce and stabilise a particular vision of the nation in Uzbekistan through its visual symbolism and educational narratives spread by the government among the society.

Historical and Political Context of Amir Temur Square

Building on insights from Bennett and Brubaker, Bell (1996) conceptualizes nationhood as a space of competing narratives, where different stories about national identity struggle for dominance within a society. In the case of Uzbekistan, during the Soviet period, it was the elites that served as the principal progenitors of the national identity of Uzbeks, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, it is still the elites who control the process by which the Uzbek nation reinvents itself (Bell, 1996). Those elites used intellectuals for the construction of national identity, as discussed by Diana (2016), and it is obvious that intellectuals are key actors in any nation-building project in any country, yet what is special in post-Soviet countries like Uzbekistan is the autonomy that intellectuals had. During the Soviet period, as noted by Diana (2016), intellectuals were directly tied to political elites, and as a result, they rarely had intellectual autonomy against the ruling elite.

This phenomenon continued even after gaining independence in Uzbekistan. Those intellectuals who worked closely with Soviet political elites, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, did not change their political loyalties; instead, they stayed connected to the same elites who had power during the Soviet Union. Consequently, the people who shaped national identity in the post-Soviet era, as outlined by Diana (2016), were often the same people who had done so during the Soviet period. For example, the political elites during the Soviet era introduced the use of selected historical figures to spread their socialist ideas within a society by erecting their monuments in public spaces (Dadabaev, 2010). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, this 'Soviet' political use of selected historical figures as a form of 'license', as Dadabaev (2010) discussed, continued to be used by the 'new' elites in post-Soviet Uzbekistan to symbolise certain ethnic groups and their historical legacies in the territory.

Amir Temur Square (Figure 1[1]) in Tashkent – the capital of Uzbekistan, is a perfect example of how Uzbekistan's political elites have used this public space to construct national identity as the Soviet elite did before. The original name of this square was "Konstantin Square" as the name was dedicated to the first Governor–General of Turkestan, whose name was Konstantin Petrovich von Kaufman. The construction of the square began under the rule of Chernyaev, who was the Russian Governor General of Turkistan during 1882–1884,

Figure 1 Amir Temur Square

and this "was supposed to be a square built in the Russian and European tradition, surrounded by buildings of the Russian governorship and other related building" (Dadabaev, 2010). In 1913, the monument of Konstantin Petrovich von Kaufman was erected in the

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[1] This is excerpted from Qalampir.uz (2020).

middle of the square, symbolising Russian dominance as well as in memory of the establishment of Russian Governorship in the region, and its name was renamed "Kaufman Square" (Figure 2[2]) (Kun.uz, 2017). This "was the beginning of a long tradition of using the space for the monuments of officially 'licensed' political and historical leaders" (Dadabaev, 2010, p. 32).

In 1918, the monument to Kaufman in the square was destroyed, and a red flag was erected on the stone pediment of the monument as a symbol of the revolution of 1917 in Russia, alongside the square being renamed 'Revolution Square' (Zarkar, 2015). However, priot to this change, for a little period the square was named after Maria Spiridonova, who was a female revolutionary leader during the early 1920s (Kun.uz, 2017). In 1919, to further emphasize the revolution, a new monument featuring the hammer and sickle was erected (Figure 3). However, after eight years, as noted by Dadabaev (2010), this monument was replaced by another one featuring a sign reading 'October-Tide-Mark of World Revolution' in two languages, Russian and Uzbek with Arabic script (Figure 4). After the death of Lenin in 1924, the bust of him was erected in the square under the famous propagandic slogan 'Five-year plan in four years' (Figure 5), followed by the statue of Stalin in 1947 (Figure 6) and Karl Marx in 1968 (Figure 7) (Dadabaev, 2010; Zarkar, 2015; Kun.uz, 2017). After gaining independence, the new independent Uzbek government dismantled the bust of Karl Marx and renamed the. Amir Temur Square, and in the center of the square, a large statue of Amir Temur—a historical conqueror who lived during the Middle Ages—was erected and remains to date.

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[2] Note that figures 2–7 are excerpted from Kun.uz (2017) and Zarkar (2015).

Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 2.
Kaufman Statue in the square
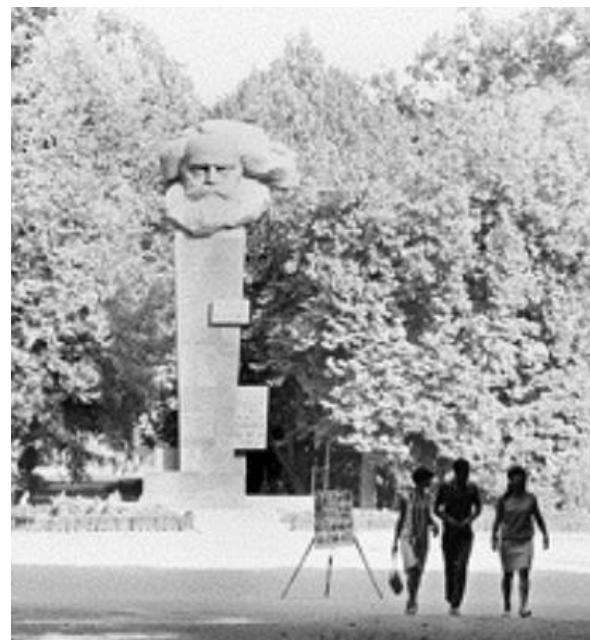
Symbolic Analysis of the Square and the Statue: Representation and Ideology

The Amir Temur Square is not a simple public landscape; it is a symbolic one that holds political and cultural meaning. As Bell (1996) suggests, public landscapes function as symbolic 'texts' that can be critically read by both scholars and community members. These spaces are not neutral, as they are shaped by power, ideology, and historical narratives. In the case of Amir Temur Square, the transformation of its central monuments, ranging from Kaufman and Lenin to Stalin and Karl Marx during the Soviet period, and the replacement of Karl Marx with Amir Temur during the independence show a deliberate (re)writing of national identity.

James Bell (1996) emphasizes that renaming the Square and replacing the monuments are acts of ideological inscription. When the Uzbek government replaced the bust of Karl Marx with the giant statue of Amir Temur after gaining independence, it was not a commemorative decision; instead, it was a symbolic act of nation-building. Through this transformation, the new Uzbek government clearly differentiated between the Soviet ideology, specifically its internationalism, and a sovereign Uzbek nationalism, which is rooted in pre-Soviet imperial glory. One of the residents who lived through multiple political regimes noted that "for the last 120 years there were 6 different monuments on the same

place, replacing each other. It means that every 20 years history gets rewritten and changed; it is the process of historical reformation" (Diana 2016, p. 231). This statement demonstrates how public monuments are not static and are used as a tool of historical revision and ideological projection.

State–approved monuments in public spaces, as Bell argues (1996), help turn complex histories into fixed and simplified stories that support unity and identity. By embedding historical narratives into physical spaces, the state symbolically activates both time and place, which promotes a shared sense of heritage within a society. In the case of Amir Temur Square, this place becomes a site of representation where political elites symbolically construct the Uzbek nation and its future vision.

The *constructivist* approach to representation outlined by Stuart Hall (1996) provides a useful framework for analysing this process. According to Hall, meaning is not inherent in symbols or objects; instead, it is constructed through shared cultural codes within the society. In this sense, the statue of Amir Temur in the square does not simply reflect the historical reality; rather, it constructs a particular vision of Uzbek identity, whose identity is deeply rooted in the strength, independence, and imperial legacy of the territory.

Angela Hobbs (2021) adds another layer to this analysis by arguing that putting up a public statue is not only to honour and express gratitude for the achievements and qualities of people but also to create a sense of identity and pride, making a clear "statement about the particular values and ideals that those commemorated exemplify or are at least thought to exemplify." As Hobbs (2021) further discusses, the society that erects or maintains the statue is literally saying, "We share these values and ideals; this is who we are or who we aspire to be" (p. 432). By erecting the statue of Amir Temur in the symbolic centre of the capital, the new government set the values and ideals for its society, all of which centred on strength, independence, unity, and cultural pride.

Amir Temur (1336–1405), who was the founder of the Timurid Empire, which stretched from modern Turkey to India at the beginning of the 15th century, is celebrated as one of the greatest military leaders and tacticians not only in Uzbekistan but also in world history, as well as for his great efforts in architecture and science. For instance, Amir Temur's enormous architectural monuments in the modern Uzbek cities of Samarqand and Shahr-i Sabz are known worldwide as masterpieces of Islamic architecture (Paskaleva, 2015). As

Paskaleva (2015) further notes, by using these architectural monuments of Timurid heritage, the Uzbek government "create a sense of emotional satisfaction and pride among the Uzbek population" (p. 419). Therefore, the giant statue of Amir Temur in the square is not a single symbol but a part of a broader strategy, including museums, commemorations, and education purposes in Uzbekistan that shape the national identity of Uzbek people.

The statue of Amir Temur (Figure 8[3]) in the square is approximately 10 metres high in total, including both bronze figure and its granite pedestal. Amir Temur's pose is depicted seated firmly on a rearing horse, with his right arm raising high to the sky and an open palm facing forward. His attire is depicted wearing Central Asian warrior's attire, including a long, flowing cloak, a detailed armour-like garment beneath the cloak, and a crown with a pointed top. His facial features are stern and resolute, and his body features are depicted muscular. The horse he rides is depicted in a rearing stance, balanced on its hind legs, with its front legs raised high.

The creation of the Amir Temur statue reveals the political initiatives. During the meeting at the Cabinet of Ministers in 1992, two years after independence, several design options for Amir Temur monument were presented but none of them met the expectations of the President. Islam Karimov, the first President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, highly criticized all proposals, emphasizing that they failed to convey Amir Temur's essence: "Where is the vigour, the boldness, and at the same time the grandeur that is characteristic

of Temur? After all, the statue should convey not only Amir Temur's outward appearance but also his inner world…" (Isajonov 2024).

One of those proposals, which depicted Amir Temur with a bowed head and a spear, was particularly rejected by the President due to its appearance, which looked like defeat. Another one was also strongly criticized by Karimov, insisting that the king of the great

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[3] Excerpted from Amir Timur Square. The crossroad of ancient trade ways of the Great Silk Road.

empire never holds a flag in his hand, as Murod Muhammad Do'st (2024, January), who was working closely with the president at the time, recalls. The last version as it stands now, with Amir Temur on horseback, his left hand holding the rein, and his right hand raised toward the sky, was approved after fixing the criticisms and considering suggestions by Karimov. This pose, later explained by Ilhom Jabborov, who created the statue, symbolizes a message to the people: "I have returned. I wish you peace and safety. Do not lose your independence" (Isajonov, 2024). This process of creating the public monuments shows how they are carefully constructed to align with the ideology and narratives of the states.

Regarding the horse's stance in the statue, it appears to align with the popular myth that leg positions signify the rider's fate. According to this myth (Gruchalak, 2023), two raised hooves would signify the rider's death in battle, and one raised hoof would signify the rider was wounded in battle. In the case of the Amir Temur statue, the horse's left foreleg is raised, while historical accounts indicate that Temur's right leg was injured (Nilufar, 2019). In addition, the sculptor Jabborov, in his interview (Isajonov, 2024), did not mention the significance of this pose, further suggesting that its meaning lies in broader ideological symbolism. This indicates that the pose of the horse operates more as an aesthetic and symbolic gesture of motion, authority, and heroic leadership within Uzbekistan's nation-building narrative.

From the model of *semiotic* perspective, the overall form of the statue, such as its posture, gesture, and its associated idea—national pride, strength, independence—work together to produce meaning. His pose stands for authority and command, and his gesture is interpreted as a sign of leadership, blessing, and power. Regarding his attire and expression, they emphasize his role as a military leader and reinforce the image of a strong and visionary ruler. A crown on his head symbolizes sovereignty.

At the opening ceremony of the statue, the President Islam Karimov attached a symbolic meaning to the statue by clearly stating that: "This statue reminds us to protect our independence, flourish our country, and the necessity of unity, courage and knowledge to lead our nation to the bright future" (*"Toshkent oqshomi" gazetasining 1993-yil 2-sentabr sonidan*, as cited in Isajonov, 2024).

These all meanings are absorbed by community members, often unconsciously, through their everyday interactions with the space and the statue, such as walking, attending

public events, or seeing it in media. These everyday encounters normalize and reinforce a particular vision of Uzbek nationhood and their national identity.

The model of the *discursive* approach to representation further explains how meaning is produced by not only symbols but also institutional practices. The Uzbek government, for example, reinforced the symbolic power of Amir Temur via the official policies. For example, the Supreme Assembly of the Republic of Uzbekistan (1994) imposed a law that included celebrating the 660th anniversary of Amir Temur's birth in October 1996, arranging international conferences, funding institutions and scholarships to learn and spread the knowledge regarding Amir Temur and his great Timurid Empire, as well as building the Amir Temur Museum and erecting his statues in other places. By doing these actions, the government institutionalized a specific historical narrative, making it part of people's everyday lives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, during the Soviet and Independence periods, the transformation of Amir Temur Square in Tashkent, more specifically the change of its name and statues, are great examples of how public spaces are used by the government to construct and communicate national identity. Drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of representation, this research has shown that the statue erected in the square is not only a commemoration of a historical figure but also carefully chosen to shape the post-Soviet Uzbek nationalism. While the statue reflects the value that the government seeks to promote, such as strength, cultural pride, and independence, it also illustrates erasing or (re)writing an alternative history. In addition, while it demonstrates how monuments function as ideological tools, which shape collective memory and support elite visions of the nation, it reminds us that even the most permanent-looking monuments may be deeply contingent and contested.

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Sumit Kumar

Hysteresis of the Native's *habitus* and the Structural Corruption of the Colonial Bureaucratic Field in India | A post-colonial critique of the bureaucratic structures and a call for decolonization.

Abstract

According to Bourdieu the genesis of state in Europe was a long process of the concentration of statist capital (*capital d'état*) in the hands of the dominant agents in the meta-field of power. The nature of this statist capital is that it is composed of various forms of symbolic capitals (economic, cultural and social capital), one of them being bureaucratic capital. Outside of Europe, specifically in India before colonization the structure of the society was not the same as that of Europe and the structuring structures that structured the native Indian's *habitus* were structured in social fields which were very different from the social fields in Europe.

Here is good news! Under the new plan the general improvement over here has risen from 11.5% to 16.75% . . . !

Colonization resulted in the extension of an alien field into the new Indian colony through the extension of the Empire. This results in two different fields getting superimposed one upon another, the native fields of social production and the colonial fields of social production. Bhabha calls this *liminality* and claims that the native thus loses his agency, becoming a *hybrid* capable only of existence in the boundaries of history that is

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produced in the colonial social fields. This kind of *liminal* existence results in the structuring of *plural dispositions* of the native's *habitus.*

This paper is a theoretical attempt at explaining from a post-colonial perspective, how these *plural dispositions* are structured by the extension of the colonial bureaucratic field into India and in turn how the *mimicry* of 'Practice' by the native in the colonized field introduces structural corruption in the field by altering the nature of bureaucratic capital in India. The main result of this research is establishing of post-colonial ideas like *mimicry* and *liminality* as mainstream sociological phenomenon and the paper does so by identifying these phenomenological structures within Bourdieu's mainstream post-structural framework.

Keywords: Bureaucracy, Coloniality, Bourdieu, Mimicry, Liminality

The problems of bureaucracy in general have already been discussed in detail, however, most of this criticism exists in the field of organizational theory or in public administration. In colonial democracies like India this critique of the Indian bureaucracy also takes the form of *mimicry* and most of the work is limited to either organizational theory or business/public administration. The colonial character of the Indian bureaucracy further complicates these problems and the purpose of this research is to understand these complications from a post-colonial perspective. I do not intend to rediscover new problems of bureaucracy, they have already been listed out in detail by scholars who deal with organizational sociology, management theory, democratic theory, political science and public administration among other fields of research. Dewey (1973) for example, talks about the problems of education and training of bureaucrats. Pandey & Moynihan (2006) discuss the problems of red tape and its political support and Aftergood (2008) talks about government secrecy and its implications. We see that these studies which are mostly focussed on the bureaucracies in either western Europe or America or at the very least conducted by scholars in the west, have all been *mimicked* and replicated in India. Similar studies have been conducted in India by Sneha *et al* (2021), Maheshwari (1979), Gupta (2012), Dwivedi (1967) and Das (2000). However, all these Indian scholars have only looked at these problems of bureaucracy from the points of view of either organizational theory or from a political science lens. In either case the colonial character of the Indian bureaucracy is even though listed out, its impact on

the *mimetic* nature of the bureaucratic field never analysed. We see that with the growth of neo-liberal and the new right philosophies in the west the solution to these problems of bureaucracy was thought to be the limitation of the state and disinvestment into private sector (Segalman & Marsland, 1989). Du Gay (2005) on the other hand provides a defence of bureaucracy highlighting the need for public value creation as opposed to profit which is the main focus of private enterprise. In the early 1990s with the serious foreign exchange crisis that India faced, it was forced to borrow from International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank and they imposed what is called the conditions of good governance on India. This led to a policy of what is called LPG (liberalization, privatisation and globalization) of the Indian economy (Bhandari, 2013; Chandra, 2004). The solutions for bureaucratic problems that were discovered in the west, were applied to the colonial Indian bureaucracy as well and to a certain extent the results were similar to what they had been in the west. However, whenever and wherever the solutions that had worked in the west did not resolve the bureaucratic problems in India, the blame was always laid upon the pre-modern characteristics of the Indian society which has failed to modernise even after 80 odd years of the end of British rule.

My purpose here is to show it through critical analysis of the literature that is available on bureaucracy, that these problems are not merely those of bureaucracy (political or organizational) but also of coloniality. The reason these problems can only be resolved partially within organizational theory is because these solutions are *mimetic* and they completely fail to take into account the colonial corruptions of the bureaucratic field. In order to do that, as explained in the previous two chapters, I will analyse the colonial character of the bureaucratic field and how it was extended to India through the extension of the empire into India, how this extension resulted in its structural corruption and explain how this corruption of the field resulted in the *mimicry* of 'practice' in this colonized field. In order to do that I will use the literature from political science and organizational theories, to refer to the problems of Indian bureaucracy that have already been identified and then critically problematise the same problems within a post-colonial framework.

The colonial bureaucratic field

The development of bureaucracy was not a natural process in India like it was in Britain or the rest of western Europe. The Indian society was very different from the British society at the time colonization of India starts. It has to be pointed out that India was one of the very last regions to be colonized. The Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French and even the British East India Companies arrived in India with the sole purpose of trading with India. The fact that the French Revolution in Europe and the American War of Independence also coincided with the decline of the Mughal Empire in India gave the British an opportunity to colonize India. The conquest of Bengal in 1757 by Robert Clive was more opportune than purposeful. He simply bribed the cousin and commander – in – chief (Mir Jafar) of the then ruler of the 'subah' (may be translated as province) of Bengal 'Siraj ud Daula', who had already committed most of his armies to the Mughal emperor defending against an Afghan invasion from the north west (Bandyopādhyāẏa, 2004). Clive simply walked in the palace gate, later renamed 'namak haram deorhi' or the 'traitor's gate' and took control of Bengal by installing Mir Jafar as the East India Company's puppet. For the Mughal emperor 'Shah Alam II', this opened up battles on three sides, in the South the Marathas were already revolting, in the north-west the Afghans under 'Ahmad shah Durrani' were invading and in the east now the British had opened up another front. In 1764, he marched east and met the British East India Company in a decisive battle at Buxar on the borders of the then 'subah' of Bengal. The Mughal Army outnumbered the British more than two to one and yet because of better tactics and technology, the British were able to finally defeat the Mughals in 1765 gaining the 'Diwani' of Bengal or the right to collect revenue in Bengal on behalf of the Mughal Emperor (Bandyopādhyāẏa, 2004). This would mark the beginning of the colonization of India according to nationalist Indian historians (Chandra *et al*, 1987), even though the British Crown was not directly involved in India at this time. Despite their victory in Buxar, the British were still subservient to the Mughal Emperor sitting in Delhi at the time and were only ruling over the 'subah' of Bengal.

It would be important to explain a little at this stage what this concept of 'subah' was in the context of the Mughal empire in India. During the reign of 'Akbar' (1556-1605) his brother-in-law and advisor 'Raja Man Singh' came up with the idea of what is known as the

'Mansabdari system' (the name Mansabdar itself fashioned on his own name Man Singh). According to this system he devised a mechanism of calculating the land area according to which the empire was divided into 'subahs' (or provinces), each to be governed by a Subahdar or Diwan. These rulers would then have the right to collect revenue in these areas and based on the size of the 'subah' they will be ranked as 'Mansabdars' or the size of their cavalry. A part of the revenue collected would be sent to the Mughal emperor, a part of the revenue would be spent on the maintenance of the cavalry and the rest would be for the expenses of the 'subah' and 'subahdar'. The revenue was collected as a part of the overall produce in kind and was then converted into coins to be sent to the Mughal emperors. European historians like Coulborn (1968) or Stein (1985) believe that this was a form of feudal structure similar to what existed in pre-modern Europe at the time. Post-colonial historians like Guha (2016) disagree and challenge the existence of pre-modern elements in the pre-colonial Indian society. Mukhia (1981; 233) claims that; *"unlike the structured dependence of the entire peasantry upon the lords in medieval Europe, pre-colonial Indian society was characterised by self-dependent or free peasant production"*. This claim of the post-colonial historians, among other things, rests on the fact that land was not owned in pre-colonial India and therefore there were no land-lords in medieval India like in medieval Europe. Furthermore, even if we accept the European historians' arguments that this was some form of feudalism, no one makes the claim that it was the same as the medieval European feudalism.

In Bourdieusian terms then, the character of the Indian King was not the same as that of the French King, or the British King, or any other European King. This is also evident from the fact that one of the reasons for the decline of the Mughal empire that gave the British the opportunity to colonize India was a minor civil war that started at the time of the death/old age of every Mughal emperor (Faruqui, 2012). *Ergo*; the '*maison du roi*' does not exist in India, and even if it exists its character is not the same as Bourdieu (2004) discusses in the context of France. It must also be pointed out that India does not exist in pre-colonial times and even though the Mughal empire was the largest empire in existence at the time in the Indian subcontinent, it had no control over large parts of south, west and north east of what we now call India. In the South there were the Hindu Kingdoms in the Tamil speaking and Malayalam and Kannada speaking regions which now form large parts of the states of Tamil

Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka in India and in the Telugu speaking regions the kingdom of Nizam of Hyderabad was also largely outside of the sphere of influence of the Mughals. In the west, the Maratha confederacy and already established its superiority over the Mughals and in the north east, the 'Ahoms' and other smaller tribes had always been outside of the control of the Mughals. It was only in the Northern India from Afghanistan in the west to Bengal in the east that the Mughals reigned supreme. This also meant that the administrative structures across what we call India today was not uniform. For example, the Marathas were a confederacy[4] of five dominant families who shared political power through a council more akin to a senate. This also meant that the 'Mansabdari system' did not exist in this part of India. This also becomes clear from the fact that even when the British started colonizing India and introduced what Guha (1982) claims to be *'pre-capitalist'* elements into the Indian society through permanent settlement; they did it in three different ways in different parts of India. In Bengal they introduced the 'Zamindari system' in the South they introduced the 'Ryotwari system' and in the West they introduced the 'Mahalwari system'. One of these the 'Mahalwari system' recognized the fact that land was owned communally by the villagers (Husain & Sarwar, 2012). This again leads *mimetic* historians to misconstruction of the fact that land in India could be owned; like it was in Europe at that time. In legal terms (common law legal terms) this was only possession or rights to cultivate and settle upon.

There were kings and kingdoms in all parts of what we know as India today, which even at the time of colonization was almost as big as Europe and vastly and diversely more populated than Europe at that time. Every part of India at that time had a different system of administration and the different kingdoms established their own mechanisms of governance[5]. Unlike Europe though, the kings of India did not have any divine right to rule and their bloodlines were neither protected nor constructed any dynasties in the same way that European empires did. However, there are some institutions across the Indian subcontinent that have been found to be exceedingly similar despite, linguistic, cultural,

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[4] Confederacy is a term used by European and mimetic historians of Indian origin. The Marathi (language of the Marathas) or the Hindi term would be 'साम्राज्य' [Samrajya], which may or may not be translated as a confederacy. Even if it is translated as a confederacy, it will not have the same characters of the term that is used in the European context.

[5] As pointed out in the previous chapter, this is the same as making a claim that Punjabis and Tamils are all Indians, just the same way that Hungarians and French are Europeans.

economic and social differences. One such institution is that of the village councils or "*Panchayats".*

Panchayats have been a part of Indian village society for more than three thousand years now, the earliest mention of these village councils can be found in the most ancient of Indian religious texts the *Rig Veda* about 1500 BCE. During the period between 500 CE and 1000 CE, when most of the Hindu religious scriptures, with the exception of the Vedas, were compiled and the religious practices were ritualised, *Panchayats* played a very important role in ensuring that these religious practices were not only justified but also embedded in our society to such an extent that even today it is exceedingly difficult to get rid of these practices (Heimsath, 2015; Kumar, 2022).

Even in the modern times today, in the remote villages of India, the decisions of the *Panchayats* hold more sway than a judgement passed by a court of law established by the constitution of India (Yadav, 2009; Kumar, 2022). Caste system found its justification in the *Panchayats* and even within the overall *Panchayats* in the villages, there formed sub-groups called caste *Panchayats*, which took care of the local needs of the various castes within the village (Chowdhry, 2004; Kumar, 2022). At some point during its evolution, the caste *Panchayats* of the more powerful castes started discriminating against the weaker lower castes and subsequently this led to villages being formed based on castes. It divided the society, and there were upper caste villages and there were lower caste villages with little contact between the two, giving rise to the concept of untouchability (Jodhka, 2002; Kumar, 2022). However, no matter what the social status of the caste *Panchayats*, they continued to exist at every level of society and continued to form a link between the village administration and the King.

Like in the west, historians in India are mostly fascinated by the march of empires and kingdoms, and there is no historical record of the evolutions of *Panchayats* in the villages of India, but it is an example of *the living memory of a society* (Nora, 1989; Kumar, 2022) which has continued to follow its democratic traditions for thousands of years and continues to do so. In modern times, when Indians have borrowed most of the modern ideas of enlightenment and experimented with concepts like socialism, welfare state, representative democracy, equality, rule of law and personal liberty, the sole reason that democracy has not just survived but thrived in such a diverse nation; with more recognised languages than

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those spoken in all of Europe, multitudes of religions, and diverse cultures, is the existence of a conscious memory of a democratic institution which has been socially and culturally embedded in the Indian society over centuries (Nora, 1989; Confino, 1997; Kumar, 2022).

When it comes to Bureaucracy, for both Weber and Bourdieu, it is a consequence of the progressive rationalization of the society evidenced by the differentiation of social structures (Bourdieu, 2004; Weber, 1978). Bourdieu (2004) for example describes the differentiation of the French house of monarch and the development of the bureaucratic field. This process was quite possibly similar in Britain at the time and this rationalisation would have led to the development of a bureaucratic field in Britain as well. There is a possibility that the Indian institution of *Panchayats* may have rationalised in the same way and it might have differentiated into a further rationalised field in Bourdieusian terms. However, colonization introduces a situation of social crisis, changes the character of the society substantially and results in the destitution of the indigenous institutions like *Panchayat* (Mignolo, 2011). This destitution is a result of certain essential characteristics of colonialism. In chapter two, I have already explained how Mignolo (2009a) claims that coloniality and modernity are two sides of the same coin and it is the process of modernisation that leads to the destitution of indigenous institutions. However, this claim axiomatically also means that the pasts of the indigenous societies (in this case India) are automatically consigned to the pre-modern. It is not possible for any society to modernise unless it is pre-modern, which means that within the Eurocentric epistemology the pre-colonial and pre-modern in India are the same.

On the one hand this gives the colonizer the civilizing mission and the justification for modernisation/colonization but on the other hand it also results in the characterisation of Indian religion, family, rituals and practices as pre-modern or uncivilized. This characterisation as primitive and uncivilized leads to the destitution of *Panchayats* at an epistemic level. This destitution does not just stop at the epistemic level, these 'primitive institutions' cannot fulfil the colonizer's civilizing mission; therefore, they need to be replaced/substituted with something modern (Mignolo, 2011). In 1793, the then governor general of British India, Lord Cornwallis, enacted, what became known as the **Cornwallis**

code[6] and among other things it established the covenanted and the uncovenanted civil services in India (Compton, 1968). The covenanted being for the European elites, while the uncovenanted for the native Indians (in clerical positions) to be appointed at the pleasure of the East India Company's discretion. In 1857, the East India company faced a major rebellion across all of north India, which the British historians called the *'sepoy mutiny'* while the nationalist Indian historians called *'the first war of Indian independence'*. In 1858, the British crown took over the governance of British India from the hands of the East India company and the covenanted civil service was renamed the 'Imperial Civil Services' and instead of the civil servants being nominated by the East India company, now the appointments were made on the basis of an open competition organised in London (Chandra *et al*, 1987; Compton, 1968).

In the name of modernisation what colonisation of India had done was transplanted a British administrative system into the Indian society. According to Guha (1982) the pre-colonial Indian society is not a pre-modern society. Therefore, this transplantation of a modern institution creates ruptures in the Indian society that are unforeseeable and unexpected. The pre-colonial may have been rationalizing, but it would not have been modernising because the pre-colonial was not pre-modern. However, when it was modernised by violence, the purpose of this modernisation was not enlightened benevolence, rather it was colonial exploitation. During the entire period of colonization of India from 1757 to 1947, Britain itself was going through a process of modernisation and even if we assume that the institution that was transplanted was a modern one, it has retained certain pre-modern characteristics. Along with this bureaucratic institution, colonization also transplanted pre-modern tendencies into the Indian society. Hence the claim by Guha (1982) and other post-colonial scholars like Chakrabarty (2009) that it was not the pre-colonial which was pre-modern, rather it was colonization that introduced pre-modernity to India, setting it on a path to modernisation.

Even though the pretext of the bureaucratisation was the civilizing mission, this Eurocentric idea of civilization was dehumanizing. The natives needed to be civilized in

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[6] This code introduced modern systems of taxation, currency, land ownership, common law courts, police and bureaucracy to British India. Permanent settlements of land which was the cause of feudalization of colonial Indian society was a part of this code.

order to be humanized or in this case Europeanised (Fanon, 2007). This justified the inhuman treatment of the natives; racism and bigotry became synonymous with colonization and cultural artefacts became displays in museums. This exploitative character expressed itself in the forms of laws, rules and regulations that defined the colonial Indian bureaucracy. It did not matter if the floods destroyed the crops and if the native was starving, the bureaucrat (tax collector) will collect his tax. In 1917, when Gandhi starts his first satyagraha (non-violent movement) in India, it is against the British land owners in the then Champaran district, where the starving farmers were forced to grow the commercial crop of indigo to be used in the mills of Manchester and Liverpool, rather than food grains. It did not matter to the British tax collector if the farmer and his family was dying, the land revenue had to be paid or the rights to the farm were forfeited and their only source of subsistence denied (Prasad, 2023).

In case of the Indian native this system was absolutely alien; in pre-colonial times, if there was a tax to be collected, it was a share of the produce, so if there was a draught or a flood and there was no produce, there was no tax to be paid and even if there arose a dispute between that taxman and the farmer, a *Panchayat* would be called upon to conciliate on the matter (Habib, 2011). In colonial times, first the East India company and then the British crown appointed a bureaucrat to collect taxes and the tax was now not based on a share of the produce, but on the basis of the tenancy of the land; a system that was transplanted from the British society and that had the effect of feudalising the Indian society, creating new classes like the landlords (Zamindars) and peasants (Ryots). This also meant that the British Bureaucrats could provide favours to these new Indian land lords by settling newly surveyed lands to them in return for bribes (Husain & Sarwar, 2012). As early as 1767, just 10 years after the annexation of Bengal the East India Company had established the office of surveyor general for this purpose.

The rules established by the colonial bureaucracy were created with the purpose on maximising the profit of the East India company and the exploitation of the resources (both human and natural) of India. For Weber (1978) Bureaucracy is an ideal type of social/political order which draws its legitimacy through established law. The technical rules and regulations on which the bureaucracy is based is depersonalised to ensure its rationality, to eliminate subjectivity and ensure objective and equal treatment of everyone. In case of

India, when the British established the bureaucracy, that was not the purpose. Weber (1978) describes bureaucracy as an ideal type construct, it's the legal rational type of social order, that is the consequence of the progressive rationalization of society from a traditional type of social order to a charismatic type and then finally to a bureaucratic type. According to him, this is the most rational type of social order there possibly can be. However, as he makes it very clear, it is an ideal type construct and not real, furthermore, this rationality that he is talking about is also an ideal type construct; the society progresses from a less rational type to a more rational type as it progresses historically from the pre-modern to the modern, but the rationality that he is describing is not something that can be objectively measured, it is just a means to understand the subjective meanings behind social actions, social relations and therefore social orders.

The British were not in India to administer it to the benefit of the people of India, they were there to exploit its people and resources, so they deliberately created rules which were not depersonalized, laws that were not clearly defined, leaving room for discretion and personalised decision making. Without suggesting that, depersonalisation of Bureaucracy does not create problems of its own (Du Gay, 2000), in the Indian context it contributed mainly to the irrationality and the exploitative nature of the colonial Bureaucracy. An unnecessary number of British and European civil servants were employed on the promise of exorbitant wages and opportunities of additional income through exploitative means (Tharoor, 2018). The field offices of this colonial bureaucracy became personal fiefdoms of these British officials and they started acting like feudal lords.

To an outside observer, the problems of India's bureaucracy do not look much different from what the usual problems of Bureaucracy have already been identified in Western Europe or North America. These problems may appear to be the same or similar on their faces, however, the cause behind these problems is not the same. European societies, were and continue to be markedly different from Indian society, and the way Indian society interacts with a colonial bureaucracy is also markedly different from the way that any European society interacts with a European bureaucracy. Research that has been conducted in Europe and has been *mimetically* applied to Indian society specially in the areas of public administration, bureaucratic theory, and organisational sociology, may be able to identify the problems of India's colonized bureaucracy, but it cannot understand the reasons behind

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these problems. This argument is similar to Said's (1989) criticism of Bourdieu, when he claims that an outsider may be able to observe the Berbers and their practices in Algeria but it would not be possible for them to understand the reasons for those practices, in other words Bourdieu also essentialised the Berbers without ever intending to do so. To his credit however, Bourdieu (1977) does recognise the limits of his observations and that is why he comes up with the idea of *habitus* and its *hysteresis* because not everything could be explained by 'Practice'.

As explained previously, I do not intend to rediscover new problems of the colonial bureaucratic field in India, but instead in the next parts of the thesis I will try, with the help of a post-structural framework to analyse how the problems of bureaucracy that have already been identified in organizational sociology, acquire a post-colonial character when similar *mimetic* research is conducted in India. The theories of organizational sociology are able to identify the same problems in India as well, but they are not able to explain why the same solutions to these problems that seem to work in England, do not seem to work in India in the same way.

The structural problems of Indian bureaucracy

This section will deal with some of the main structural problems of the Indian bureaucracy, and locate them within the framework of organizational sociology. Thereafter it will critically analyse the same problem within a post-colonial framework and explain why the solutions can only partially resolve the problems of the colonial bureaucracy which got extended into India during the colonial times.

Hierarchy in an organization is in itself not unusual, in fact without hierarchy, there is no organization itself, however, it does create a few problems. Scholars like Denning (2019) or Carnevale & Stivers (2019) have already presented a criticism of this type of bureaucratic hierarchy in organisational sociology and similar *mimetic* works have also been produced by Indian scholars. A pyramidal structure is bottom heavy and narrow at the top, but it is so bulky that the bottom of the organization is never in contact with the top. The movement of information between layers of this type of organization is so sluggish, that it creates automatic avenues of corruption and favouritism in order to expedite the process. The organizational structure is replicated in exact form in every department and the only

thing connecting these departments, is the top echelon of the pyramid. So, if communication has to be established on an inter-departmental basis it becomes twice as bulky as it would be on an intra-departmental level. Furthermore, in Indian Bureaucracy the organization is divided into Headquarter and Field Operations (Dhaliwal & Hanna, 2017). For a Country as large as India, if movement of information is restricted by strict hierarchical considerations, then it creates an even bigger problem than the two listed above. The vertical lines connecting the hierarchy also define the *division of work* within the organization, as a whole and by separate pyramidal organizational setups divided into secretarial, directorial and field operation within any department, ministry or other government bodies (Hodgson, 2004). More specifically, in case of India and considering that the bureaucracy is colonial in origin, it is centralized and power heavy at the top, carefully designed to keep absolute control[7] over how it operates in every sphere of governance, with all authority flowing down the hierarchical lines along the pyramid from top to bottom creating ample opportunities for delays, corruption, nepotism and favouritism at each level of the hierarchy (Rauch & Evans, 2000). New managerial approaches in organisational sociology, suggest that this type of organizational structure is unproductive and public bureaucracies need to adopt organizational structures that have been more productive in private organisations, like *Matrix* structures or *Projectized* structures (Bocean, 2011). In these kinds of organizations, the movement of information is not only vertical along a strict hierarchic line, it can also be horizontal and sideways and there's no rule that restricts communications between different hierarchies. If a decision has to be made at the top, the file does not need to travel through each level of the pyramidal hierarchy with recommendation being noted at each level. In a *Matrix* organization the issue is sent straight to the top where meetings are held in order to determine its suitability. If approved it is then sent to one of the smaller interdepartmental *Projectized* organizations for the project to be planned and then implemented (Fearon *et al*, 2010). This does not however mean that this kind of organization is completely devoid of hierarchy, for that would have a negative impact on workers motivation to perform in the absence of any career progression. According to Goold & Campbell (2003) *Matrix*

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[7] As explained earlier, the top of the colonial bureaucracy was occupied by the British and European officers (the covenanted civil services), whereas the bottom was serviced by the non-covenanted native clerks. It was designed in such a way that control always remained absolutely in the hands of the British officials.

organizations should also have 4-6 layers over which the employees can progress. In the context of India as well, similar research has also been reproduced criticising the structure of India's colonial bureaucracy and its consequences (Umapathy, 1982; Mishra, 2006). However, in most cases it fails to take into account the colonial structure of the Indian bureaucracy and how it interacts with the existing social structures.

In organisational theory, the purpose of *division of work* is to divide it into specialized functional units which when combined together result in the achievement of the desired goal, whether creation of a product or offering of a service (Meyer, 1968; Bendix, 1947). The colonial Indian bureaucracy is huge, and is broadly divided into Secretariat, Directorate and Field Operations (Sharma, 2023), but instead of creating separate specialized structures to conduct such functions at various levels, it remains a part of the same pyramid. There is little wonder that millions of rupees exchange hands in the form of bribes every time transfers, postings and appointments of government officials are made in India. Indian Bureaucrats are more than willing to pay in millions to get plum appointments and postings where there are more opportunities to make earnings through corrupt and illegitimate means (Iyer & Mani, 2012). As discussed before, this was the purpose of the establishment of the covenanted civil services in India, that British and European officers did not just draw exorbitant wages but also had ample opportunities of extra income through corrupt practices. The colonial origin of India's bureaucracy also means that, that it is divided into departments that do not make any rational sense, it creates illogical departments only propagate corruption in public life. Every time a new department is created it creates a new hierarchy, multiplying the same problems over and over again. For example; in order to curb corruption in public life the office of CVC (Chief Vigilance Commissioner) was created; and over time it failed[8], next in order to do the same work, 'Lokpal' and 'Lokayukta'[9] was created, and in the same fashion they are failing as well. All these offices were fashioned similar to that of the Ombudsman in England and critically fail to recognise the colonial character of corruption in India.

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[8] In 2011 the then Chief Vigilance Commissioner of India was forced to resign by the Supreme Court, because he himself was facing corruption charges. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12631887 accessed on 11.08.2025

[9] In 2016 the LOKAYUKTA of the state of Karnataka in South India was charged with corruption while in office. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Former-Karnataka-Lokayukta-chargesheeted-in-corruption-case/articleshow/53544191.cms accessed on 11.08.2025

Current research in organisational sociology points towards projectization of specialised functions. One of the most important aspects of Projectized Organizations is the level of control over time, cost and resources that it ensures making it the most effective, efficient and economical organizational type to perform any clearly defined work (Thiry & Deguire, 2007). As pointed out earlier, in organisational studies, these problems are not seen as problems of colonization but as I will discuss later on, there is a colonial character to these problems as well and the reason the solutions prescribed in organisational theory fail to succeed in India although they succeed to a certain extent in Europe is this lack of research on the colonial character of these problems in India. The lack of specialized division of work in the colonial Indian bureaucracy points us towards the next problem of hiring and appointments of the civil servants in India.

In pre-modern Europe the basis of appointment of any government official in Europe was loyalty to the crown. It did not matter if they were fit for the job, if they had the requisite skills to perform the job, or even if they cared to perform the job; only thing that mattered was the pleasure of the crown. The practice continued in colonial India and the bureaucrats were appointed first on the basis of their loyalty to the British East India Company, during the first 100 years of colonization (referred to as the company raj) and then subsequently when the crown took over in 1858 (British raj), the basis of appointments became the loyalty to the British crown. After Independence, the new government of India; for administrative continuity, chose to carry forward with the same civil services that the British had established in India during colonization. This system of bureaucratic appointments and career progressions is not based on skills, efficiency or the performance of the bureaucrat, but their ability to follow instructions, memorializing and executing large amounts of data, tasks and functions. Once appointed the bureaucrats are there for life as job security is considered a cornerstone of a technocratic bureaucracy. This makes the system rigid and inefficient as the bureaucrats do not feel the need to perform in order to keep their jobs (Hager, 1973). In organizational theory this creates a paradox between democratic responsibility and bureaucratic accountability. The citizens cannot directly make the bureaucrats responsible; they can only vote the political executive out every five years. The idea being that the political executive sits at the top of the technocratic bureaucracy and controls it indirectly to make it accountable to the *demos.* Researchers in political and

organizational theories argue that *elections ~ responsibility* whereas *appointments ~ skill,* but in fact neither of these is strictly true. Elections relate to responsibility only as much as constituents are aware of their rights and the elected officials are in close proximity of the electors (in other words approachable) (Dahl, 1994; Phillips, 1998). Appointments relate to skill and quality only if the process of selection is scientific and is based on sound managerial logic. Also, in this context skill means relevant skills, not unrelated ones, there's no logic in appointing an engineer a health officer.[10] The top line of the executive is elected and is in charge of policy making, whereas the bureaucracy which is appointed takes care of the policy implementation part. It is commonly accepted, albeit erroneously, that primarily our problems lie in implementation rather than formulation (Sheikh & Porter, 2010). The reason elected executives sit on top of the bureaucracy is to ensure responsibility to the citizens, but in reality, it is far from truth. Bureaucratic aid and advice become critical in policy formulation and instead of the elected executive making bureaucracy responsible it is the bureaucracy that teaches the council of ministers how to become irresponsible. It is clear that elections do not ensure responsibility towards the citizens and neither do appointments ensure skilled quality of workforce.

This problem of responsibility is not unique to the colonial Indian bureaucracy and researchers in bureaucratic theory have analysed this problem of responsibility in detail in both European and American bureaucracies. Initially the focus of the research was on depersonalization of the bureaucracy; in order to eliminate human bias in decision-making. In other words, structuring/programming the decision-making process in organizations (Simon, 2013). However, this led to the dehumanization of the bureaucracies and the problem of accountability became even more complex. Approaches in New Public Administration, acknowledged the political nature of state bureaucracies and recognised the fact that disinterested bureaucratic implementation of policy made the bureaucracy even less accountable (Frederickson, 1980). Further research led to the development of ideas like *new managerialism* and *post bureaucratic* organizational structures (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994; Du Gay, 2015). To some extent these have resolved some of the problems inherent in

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[10] http://m.timesofindia.com/city/patna/Engineers-double-up-as-docs-in-Gaya/amp_articleshow/3762186.cms accessed on 11.08.2025

bureaucratic organizations especially those in the liberal democracies of western Europe and north America.

India however, is a different case; there is no dearth of *mimetic* research dealing with similar problems of bureaucratic accountability in the Indian academia either (Kaul, 1997; Chakrabarti *et al*, 2021), but as pointed out earlier, these problems of the bureaucracy in India are not merely problems of organizational structure but also of coloniality. The way these power structures of bureaucracy interacts with the citizens in India is substantially different from the way in which it interacts in Europe. Since the days of the British Raj, bureaucrats have been selected on the basis of a single competitive exam. If a candidate is successful in passing that competitive exam, they're considered fit to become a bureaucrat and during the entire course of their career, there is no further need to assess whether or not they're actually capable of performing the work that is expected of a government executive. This competitive exam is generalist in character and designed to test only the memory of the candidate, the British designed it to appoint clerks who could help follow the instructions of their colonial masters (Dewey, 1973; Tummala, 2017). In fact, the assessments made in Europe and America for the appointments of bureaucrats have not been much different for a very long time (Bertrand *et al*, 2015; Hanna & Wang, 2017). The process in India is merely *mimetic* as pointed out previously. Furthermore, this process of selection of bureaucrats in India is in absolute control of the bureaucracy itself; the only logical explanation for it is that the colonial bureaucracy is desperately trying to preserve its ambiguous and discretionary character in order to remain a power instrument. Since bureaucracy is hierarchic and pyramidal in character, no matter in what category an appointment is made, promotions are always time bound and never on the basis of performance. The result of this archaic system is that for workers in the bureaucracy no matter in what category they are, there is never any incentive to perform (Burgess & Ratto, 2003). For *new managerialism* the solution to this problem is; avoiding time-bound promotions and fresh specialised appointments made for each position within the bureaucratic hierarchy. It is important that bureaucrats accumulate experience over time, but this should never be the sole criteria for career progression, although it should be one of the essential eligibility criteria to make applications for a position in the higher levels of the hierarchy (Ketelaar *et al,* 2007; Matheson *et al,* 2007). Eligibility criteria should be based on

both specialized education and experience of the applicants and for each and every position in the matrix/projectized organization, job responsibilities rather than power and authority must be clearly defined leaving no scope for ambiguity. Since *new managerialism* recommends projectized structures, this also means that bureaucratic appointments are made for a fixed term with bureaucrats are clearly indicated their specific targets (time, cost and resources) for the duration of their employment and these should be the basis of their performance appraisals (Ketelaar *et al,* 2007; Matheson *et al,* 2007; Burgess & Ratto, 2003). Some scholars also make the suggestion that citizens should have a *right to recall*, if they feel that the bureaucrat is not performing in accordance with the plan submitted before appointment or if they find them otherwise incapable of performing their assigned responsibilities (Serdült & Welp, 2017).

Without prejudice to organisational sociologists, both in Europe and in the former colonies, and without going into the problems that *new managerialism* itself creates in organisational theories, the problems in India are further complicated because of the colonial (feudal) character of the bureaucracy. The British did not care about the skill or experience in bureaucratic appointments in India, the process that they had created was to appoint on the one hand masters (covenanted) and on the other hand servants (non-covenanted). More than anything else, the purpose of this bureaucracy was exploiting the people and resources of India, and therefore, the appointments that were made were not for responsible administration, but with the intention of constructing a hierarchy of power relations. For the purpose of revenue collection the British had divided India into districts and even in independent India each district is headed by a District Magistrate; who is the tax collector, the magistrate, takes care of all planned development work, oversees all local government work, in charge of education, health, law and order, land records, registrations of births, deaths, marriages, and all other documents, the nodal officer for all e-governance projects, the link between international development efforts and the government; they are literally in charge of any and all work that the government undertakes at the local level (Bandyopadhyay, 2006).

When Bourdieu (2004) describes the genesis of the bureaucratic field in France, it is a result of the *largesse* of the dynastic capital to those outside of the king's household. In Britain it was quite similar to what happened in France, but what happened in India was

completely the opposite of what Bourdieu describes in case of France. In France the consequence of the *largesse* of dynastic capital outside of the king's household is the disintegration of the feudal structures leading to the French Revolution and the assassinations of the nobility. In India on the other hand the *largesse* of the dynastic capital created a previously non-existent feudal structure. In case of Britain for example the *largesse* of dynastic capital outside of the King's house meant that the land owners became powerful enough that it led to the English civil war and the subsequent supremacy of the British Parliament. The disloyalty of the land owners and their empowerment over a very long period of time leads to the differentiation of the dynastic field and the genesis of the bureaucratic field.

In case of India though the land owners were for the first time created through Permanent settlement, which in fact was a *largesse* of the dynastic capital by the British crown who was a shareholder in the British East India Company that colonized India. This created a special form of loyalty among the Indian land owners towards the crown that did not exist in England. Whether it was France, England or India, the very first bureaucrats belonged to this feudal land-owning class, but whereas in France and England there was growing a discontent and disloyalty towards the crown, in India this same class because it was created through the *largesse* of the crown, it developed a special kind of loyalty to the crown[11].

In European nation states the process of the differentiation of dynastic field that results in the genesis of modern state or the bureaucratic, juridical and political field was a process of decentralization of power. Power that was concentrated in the crown was decentralized into bureaucratic, juridical and political institutions of modern state. In India on the other hand, this process of differentiation of the dynastic field does not happen, instead through colonization the British bureaucratic field gets extended into India. This means that the pre-colonial Indian social field which was in whatever stage of its differentiation becomes irrelevant and because of the creation of the new land-owning class of nobility which develops a special bond of loyalty towards the crown, the extended

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[11] As in case of England, this initial feeling of loyalty did not last long and it was this same land-owning class of feudal lords who later on became the most influential members of the freedom movement. However, this will be discussed in chapter six.

bureaucratic, juridical and political fields diffuse to construct a structurally corrupt version of the British dynastic field in India (Guha, 1982; Bourdieu, 2004; Bourdieu, 1977).

Nation states had already started to establish themselves in Europe during the period of colonization of India and a colonial bureaucracy was created for the Indian colony as well in the form of the covenanted civil services. However, there was a big problem with this new bureaucratic field, the 'practice' in this field was determined by the rules of this newly created field, the *habitus* though never got the chance to develop as the field never differentiated in the Indian social field, it was a field that was abruptly created out of thin air. The 'practice' in this field is determined by the feudal practices of the British society, while the *plural habitus* of the native that introduces structural corruption in this field is determined by the caste and community-based rituals of Indian society and the new colonial 'practice' (Bourdieu, 1977; Hadas, 2021). It created new forms of feudal loyalties distorted into caste and communal loyalties which hold sway to this day. It also resulted in loss of agency for the backward castes and new forms of exclusion from the social field.

These new forms of exclusion were not totally novel, they always existed in the Indian society, colonization and introduction to modernity just brought them to the surface and kick started a debate around the topics of such exclusions[12]. At the time of colonization in the later part of 18th century, continental Europe and North America were still substantially feudal[13] societies and the modern Bureaucracy had just started to differentiate in a newly developing modern environment. When bureaucracy was transplanted into India, it was not just a shock for the native society, but also quite a shock for the Eurocentric bureaucracy itself resulting in its structural corruption (Bourdieu, 2004). On the one hand it led to the feudalization of Indian society, the caste-based differentiations got fused into two major categories the land-owning upper castes and the peasant backward castes. On the other

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[12] Introduction of modern ideas to Indian social field was not in itself a bad thing, even in the absence of colonization ideas of modernity would have travelled to India through its transcontinental trade and commercial contacts. It was the way it was introduced through colonization which destituted the indigenous institutions that it created more problems than solutions to existing social issues in India.

[13] When Guha (1982) talks about the introduction of pre-capitalist elements into the Indian society through colonization, he's not doing a field analysis and therefore he uses the term feudal rather than dynastic, whereas when Bourdieu (2004) is explaining the genesis of the Bureaucratic field he explains it in terms of the differentiation of the dynastic field. For the purpose of this research, both these terms will be used interchangeably and, in some cases, together, to denote the dynastic/feudal tendencies in the society and also the struggles for feudal/dynastic capital in the colonized fields.

hand, the introduction of this new bureaucracy meant that every aspect of the native society was documented and it had the impact of further solidifying the caste identities[14]. The *plural habitus* of the natives in the colonial bureaucratic field never developed even during the colonial times as this field was not characterised by struggles but by loss of agencies.

Caste and community-based dispositions still exist and are still one of the biggest deciding factors in elections and public appointments (Prasad, 1997). The representation of backward castes in India in the higher echelons of bureaucracy is minimal; the land-owning upper castes dominate the upper echelons of the Indian Bureaucracy and the peasant backward castes are relegated to perform the menial jobs at the bottom of the hierarchy (Doner, 2022). This means that even today Indian bureaucracy is primarily feudal in character. Subsequent to independence in 1947, it was decided that the Civil Services as established by the British shall continue in order to maintain effective administration (Austin, 2003).

At the time of the independence of India, the way the British crown divided India into two separate nations and hundreds of other princely states that were free to go either way or stay independent, the hurried manner in which the crown mapped the borders of India with its neighbours, sometimes running through people's homes and above all the basis of the partition of India being religion, created chaos and resulted in largescale migration and massacre of human population on either side of the border (Talbot & Singh, 2009). The newly appointed government of India had no machinery set in place to manage such large-scale malicious mismanagement of a simple transfer of power. They were arm-twisted into accepting and continuing with the common law system, Cabinet and Bureaucracy. The past 75 years of independence has not changed much. It's still the same bureaucracy, same policies and the same problems. There can be only two reasons for this; either the people, who can effect change (the agents on the dominating poles of the bureaucratic field), have no interest in bringing such change (preserving their position of dominance), or, those people do not have the required agency to effect such change (eventually resulting in the loss

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[14] If a person is issued with a certificate that certifies their caste background, social mobility gets further restricted. Eventually, in independent India this becomes a means of manipulation of the bureaucratic and political fields as caste becomes the basis of affirmative action and various communities start civil movements to be categorized into the backward castes to receive benefits of affirmative action.

of the position of domination). Alternatively, it could be the effect of colonization, epistemic violence that the natives are even to this day incapable of critically thinking outside the Eurocentric epistemologies.

The feudal structure tends to promote initially, nepotism and favouritism and subsequently corruption (Doner, 2022). The pre-colonial social structures have introduced structural corruption into the colonized bureaucratic field and even though the structure of the bureaucratic capital has affected the *plural habitus* of individual agents and their struggles in the field, but at the same time their *plural habitus* is also affecting the struggles for symbolic capitals within the colonized fields (Bourdieu, 1977; Hadas, 2021). The relationship between power and responsibility within every government organization is also skewed because of the feudal characteristic of the colonial bureaucracy. The sole purpose of this feudalistic bureaucracy is to usurp maximum power without taking on any responsibilities (Deutscher, 1969). The bureaucrats enjoy overbearing power within their jurisdiction, just like the feudal lords of the Middle Ages; they live in palatial bungalows, have numerous servants & vehicles, travel with bodyguards and are absolutely unapproachable (Booker, 1997).

During the British rule, since it was designed as an exploitative system, the colonizers never bothered to define the responsibilities of the bureaucrats; they only defined their powers. After independence of India, as Gandhi (1921) had warned, the colonial masters were replaced by Indian masters (dominating agents in the colonial bureaucratic field) *mimicking* the colonizers because the character of the colonized bureaucratic field remained the same as during colonization that of a feudalised bureaucracy that was transplanted and could not differentiate fully into a modern bureaucratic field (Bourdieu, 2004; Gregory, 1998). As democracy evolved in western Europe, the power transferred from the king on to the people and subsequently through them onto their chosen representatives. The focus though has always remained on power; limiting it rather than expanding responsibility. However, in India even the differentiation of the field was incomplete, because as Guha (1982) pointed out, colonization let to the feudalization of the Indian society rather than its modernization and therefore, the Indian bureaucracy has preserved its character as a power instrument (Etzioni-Halevy, 2010).

Critically thinking on the borders of this colonized bureaucratic field; at a discursive level if the character of the field changes in such a way that; agents on the dominant end of the field instead of being involved in a struggle to acquire political power, instead are involved in the delegation of political responsibility or a distribution of political capital, the field could turn purely democratic[15] as well. This can only happen if the structuring structures of the Indian native's *plural habitus* can introduce the kind of structural corruption into the field that its boundaries change to restitute the *Panchayats* (colonially destituted indigenous institution) within the colonized field and the struggles instead of being determined by representation of power, gets determined by delegation of responsibility (Bourdieu, 1977; Mignolo, 2011).

We can apply the findings of research conducted on bureaucracies in Europe, and this is what most mainstream (*mimetic*) scholars in India do, in an attempt to resolve these issues and their solutions are attempting to copy the solutions that work in Europe. The problem with this approach is that it misses out on critically analysing the colonized character of Indian Bureaucracy itself and when they apply European solutions to this colonized bureaucracy the results are not the same, because the manipulations in the field are not for production and reproduction of bureaucratic capital, it is instead for conversion and usurpation of the bureaucratic capital (Wacquant, 2004). This does not mean that the research conducted in Europe is useless as far as India is concerned. As pointed out in previous chapters 'border thinking' is not about finding a new epistemology altogether, but applying the same epistemology without ignoring the cultural factors that introduce structural corruptions in the colonized fields. For instance, the matrix structure discussed above, is theoretically very similar to what would be a bureaucratic field which has transformed its character in such a way that the field is no longer determined by representative power rather a uniform distribution of bureaucratic capital or that the field is no longer a field of struggle but it has transformed into merely a field of forces based on individual agency instead of representative agency. The projectized structure of the organization takes it back to the transient field of *Panchayats* that existed in the pre-colonial

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[15] Not modern democracy based on representation but a decolonized democracy based on individual agency of uniformly distributed political capital

times. The *Panchayats* were not a field of struggle and therefore the projectized organizations are also similar in character to the matrix organization. If decision-making was decentralized through *Panchayats* the people will be directly involved in the decision-making process. There is always a possibility of disagreements or disputes within and between *Panchayats* however, since they are transient (or at least they were until they became representative) their character remains conciliatory and they remain institutions which resist conflicts (Kumar, 2022). *Panchayats* are not institutions that adjudicate or pronounce judgements, they propose compromises and options to people that could potentially resolve the dispute or disagreement. Only the option acceptable to all is generally recommended by the *Panchayat* for execution.

According to Gandhi (1921) a democratic state only needs to take care of limited business that cannot be taken care of otherwise and leave the rest to private citizens. Only matters that cannot be dealt up directly by individuals can become the purview of the larger co-equal circle of governance, which is the transient *Panchayats*. If it still cannot be managed by these transient organizations (*Panchayats & Gram Sabha*), can it become the purview of a transient representative democratic state (a very limited state). Almost all research (conducted in the west) on direct democracies whether from a new right perspective or a neo liberal perspective, agree on at least this one thing, the limitation of state (Patnaik, 2007; O'Sullivan, 1993). The findings of these researches conducted in Europe and other societies like USA, Canada or Australia are applied to Indian democratic institutions by *mimetic* Indian scholars without taking into account the Indian native's *plurality* of *habitus*. The consequence of this kind of blind application is that instead of the *Panchayats* remaining transient and conciliatory as Gandhi (1921) suggests, they become permanent (elected for 5 years) and more like a small cabinet at the local level (Basu *et al*, 2015). Kumar (2022) makes a comparison between two case studies of two different types of *Panchayats* that are organised for the division of a common pool resource (water) in two different states of India; in the first case the *Panchayats* develop organically and are organized by the people themselves in the same way that pre-colonial *Panchayats* were organized and they are very successful, in the other case *Panchayats* are established through the bureaucratic machinery of the state and are elected and permanent, and they fail miserably. If the *Panchayat* is organized by the state, it is not really a *Panchayat* even if it is called so, it is the extension of the colonized

bureaucratic field effectively extending its structural corruptions. Even the application of the findings of the studies conducted on Bureaucracy in Europe fail and cannot be *mimetically* applied to the colonial bureaucratic field in India because the field itself is structurally corrupted because of colonization.

The bureaucratic field also has from within itself resisted all efforts towards further differentiation. Further differentiation in the field is a natural process of transformation that may already have started in the modern bureaucratic fields in Western Europe and North America (Wacquant, 2004). In the corrupted colonial Indian field whether this process of differentiation can start or even if started what character it will take is difficult to decipher. What is very clear though, is that since bureaucratic capital was not produced or reproduced in the transplanted and structurally corrupted colonial field, it was only converted from other forms of material and symbolic capitals that existed in the pre-colonial fields. The character of the colonial bureaucratic capital in the corrupted colonial field is not the same as that of the bureaucratic capital in the modern bureaucratic fields of western Europe or north America. This also means that the character of symbolic power in both these variants of bureaucratic field is different. In the modern bureaucratic field symbolic power is represented (with a possibility of usurpation) whereas, in the colonial bureaucratic field symbolic power is usurped (with a possibility of representation) making the chances of further differentiation in the post-colonial field less likely.

Bureaucratic Behaviour

In Bourdieusian Field Theory, the *habitus* of individual agents in the field is structured by the field and the field is structured by the *habitus*. These structuring structures are not fixed and are influenced constantly by the environment in which the Field develops. Since the colonial Indian bureaucratic field never develops in the Indian society and is transplanted from abroad, there exists a mis-match in these structuring structures of the *plural habitus* of individual agents and the structure of the field (Hadas, 2021). This introduces what Bourdieu (2004) would call 'structural corruption' in the field. Normally, this kind of structural corruption is the cause of the differentiation of the social fields (the gradual process of modernization), however, in the Indian case as we have seen before, it leads to a diffusion in the colonial fields and results in its feudalization. This is different from the homology of the

fields, where the dominant agents in one field occupy dominating positions in other fields as well (Hilgers & Mangez, 2014). This homology cannot be the cause for the feudalization of Indian society that Guha (1982) claims; it is the introduction of pre-capitalist elements into the Indian society like ownership of land, that results in its feudalization. As explained earlier as well, at the time of colonization the dynastic field in England was still differentiating, the fields that were extended into India from Britain through colonization had retained dynastic structures and these structures firstly, determined the 'practice' in these colonial fields but also secondly, structured the *habitus* of the individual agents in these fields resulting in the feudalization of Indian society. In this section I will attempt to explain how the colonial bureaucracy sustained its exploitative nature by keeping secrets, introducing discretionary powers and avoiding accountability at an individual level. Firstly, I will attempt to introduce how these problems are dealt in theories on organisational behaviour and its *new managerial* critique which has been *mimetically reproduced* in India as well without much success and subsequently I will problematise it within a post-colonial framework explaining why this kind of *mimetic reproduction* of Eurocentric research is not capable of solving the problems of a colonial bureaucracy.

In modern democratic nations, at least in theory the people are the source of all power (Fishkin, 2011). As explained in the preceding sections, ideally bureaucracy must be responsible to the people, however, the way it is structured, it creates a paradoxical condition between democratic accountability and bureaucratic responsibility. Even though it may seem patently undemocratic, but the fact remains that the bureaucracy is neither loyal nor responsible to the people that it is supposed to serve (Weber, 2015). In India, the behaviour of bureaucrats is primarily influenced by its feudal character and therefore feudal loyalties. During colonial times bureaucracy used to draw its powers from the crown and used to dispense justice under the authority of the crown, but even in independent India, even though democracy has been established, bureaucracy still seem to draw power from a fictitious source (a figurative Crown or the President) and discharge that power in exactly the same way that they used to during the era of the crown, preserving in essence the feudal character of the bureaucracy (Bakshi & Kashyap, 1982). They belong to a privileged class of persons, who are seen to be living in privilege and envied by the common man, who are difficult to approach, and even when the common man manages to approach them they

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expect to be treated likes feudal lords and begged before for justice, which if in their sweet discretion they choose to dispense, is to be seen as an act of grace by the public at large (Singh, 1986).

Although in theory the constitution of India establishes *rule of law,* but in reality, the feudal character of the executive, which primarily consists of the bureaucracy, makes it impossible for *rule of law* to be established in India. As discussed above the British created the bureaucracy as an exploitative system and therefore ensured that they enjoyed enormous amounts of discretion in making decisions (Colombatto, 2003). This resulted in their decision-making powers being unlimited and unchecked, which meant that they really did not need to follow any rules of decision making at all. Every decision was made on an *ad hoc* basis and *rule of law* was replaced by *rule of thumb.* This discretionary power in decision making has more or less stayed exactly the same for the last 80 odd years of India's Independence. It's a well-known fact that there is resistance to change in any organization, but in bureaucratic organization this resistance to change takes an unprecedented level. This discretion in decision making empowers them; and the bureaucrats are unable to let go of their powers in order to effect change (Trader-Leigh, 2002).

It is further compounded by the fact that in modern parliamentary democracy the legislative functions are not solely and exclusively dispensed by the legislature. The legislature delegates these functions upon the bureaucracy as it lacks, time, skill and most importantly the willingness to perform these functions (Pünder, 2009). These delegated legislations that the colonial bureaucracy enacts mostly form the rules, regulations, bylaws and orders that the bureaucracy uses in order to dispense the executive authority of the government. This power to make rules to govern their own conduct ensures that bureaucracy remains a power instrument (McC Heyman, 2004); which keeps enhancing its own authority and power and in turn makes sure that its exploitative nature remains intact. Bureaucracy creates the rules of procedure in such a way that there always remains a scope for exercise of discretionary power (Gailmard, 2002). In case of India, because of the exploitative character of the colonial bureaucracy, these rules of procedure are not simple rules; these rules are so complicated that even experts take effort to understand them. There are multitudes of these rules that may be contradictory in nature, and over time these rules

of procedure have become so innumerable that even the vastly experienced bureaucrats, themselves do not know which rules to follow and which not to (Evans & Harris, 2004).

Typically, these are problems with all bureaucracies and even in Europe these continue to be problematic, but in case of the colonies because bureaucracies did not develop there naturally, it creates bigger problems. Since the bureaucracy in India was established by the British as an exploitative system, they really did not mind that the bureaucrats practiced corrupt means to exploit the resources of India; in fact, the Europeans who were employed by the East India Company and later by the British crown were promised exorbitant wages and opportunities of extra income through exploitative practices. It ensured that the colonial bureaucracy assumed more and more power in order to become more and more exploitative in character (Dwivedi, 1967). After independence, the elected representatives of India became increasingly dependent on the bureaucracy for advice as at that time almost every Indian who was educated and skilled was in some way or the other a part of the colonial government. In 1951 only 18% of the population was literate and a smaller percentage of that was skilled enough to understand the workings of a bureaucratic government (Dewey, 1973). Today even though more than 75% of the population of India is literate (Swargiary, 2024), still a vast majority is easily fooled by the quagmire that is called bureaucracy. This lack of understanding of the vast multitudes of bureaucratic intricacies in India is what creates an *environment of ignorance.* The colonial bureaucracy purposefully creates this environment of ignorance to use against hapless citizens of India and extend its exploitative character.

In 2005, the parliament of India enacted the Right to Information Act. It is by far the most sweeping enactment to dispense information. It has to a very large extent made dissemination of information in India a reality; information that the bureaucracy consistently tries to conceal from the public, in their pursuit for power. Nevertheless, the mysteries of the bureaucracy are far from being unravelled. Obvious problems continue to plague this system. Firstly; in order to seek information, one has to be skilled enough to draft a water-tight RTI (Right to Information) application or else, spend money to get it drafted by a skilled lawyer (if by any chance a mistake is made in the drafting of the application the bureaucracy will find some excuse to deny information). The purpose of the enactment is to disseminate information, whereas the goal of the colonial bureaucracy is to increase secrecy

in order to preserve its exploitative and corrupt character. Secondly; the problem of accessibility (both spatial and pecuniary) plagues the system like any other bureaucratic system. After all this power of dispensing information, in spite of everything else, still lies in the hands of the bureaucracy. E.g.; If the application has any ambiguity, the bureaucracy will use that ambiguity to exercise its discretion to either deny information or relay irrelevant information. If the application has been made to the incorrect Public Information officer (PIO), the bureaucracy will sit on the application as long as it can before denying information, causing immense loss of time and money, before the whole process of seeking information can be restarted again. Even in most crystal-clear cases if the bureaucracy does not want to share information, it will delay the application and force you to take recourse of an appeals procedure which then makes it inaccessible to most citizens, both in financial terms (cost of appeal) and also in terms of physical reach of the appellate authority as these appellate bodies usually sit only in state capitals and are outside the reach of most citizens (Relly *et al*, 2020). Indeed, in most cases, people just give in and pay the bureaucracy the bribe that it demands in order to get their rights enforced.

This *environment of ignorance* is created because the legislatures in India do not want to enact laws properly and always leave loopholes for the bureaucracy to exploit. In fact, this is not unique to India a whole branch of study of administrative law and delegated legislations has developed because legislatures across the world pass on the job of enacting rules, regulations, bylaws onto the bureaucracy. The colonial Indian bureaucracy was created with the purpose of being loyal only to the British interests and even after independence it has remained largely the same institution, confusing the elected Parliament of India as the Crown. Not only that instead of the *responsibility* of legislatures filtering down into the bureaucracy, the trend has been exactly the opposite, that of the bureaucratic lust for power and the seduction of secrecy expanding its tentacles through the bureaucracy into the legislatures (Aftergood, 2008). In India the prime motivation for anyone to join the bureaucracy is rarely a sense of service, it is more often than not, the lust for power and scope for additional income through corrupt means. Even those few who start out with a sense of service to the nation are in almost no time seduced by this glamour of absolute power and it is further compounded by the fact that common man starts treating these bureaucrats as feudal lords as soon as they join the service (Pandey, 2000).

There are various ways of dealing with these problems in behavioural theories in organizational sociology, however, I will limit my analysis here to (i) process automation, and (ii) performance management, both of which had their origin in the 1950s and 60s with the growth of behavioural studies in organisational sociology and a move ahead from what was called the era of scientific management (Heady, 2001). These ideas may have had their origin in the 1950s scholars like Chester Bernard and Herbert Simon starting this movement in administrative behaviour, and they have found varying degrees of success in private enterprise and therefore the scholars of *new managerialism* in the 1990s and early 2000s suggested its application to public bureaucracies as well.

The basis of automation in bureaucratic organizations lies in the Weberian idea of the depersonalization of decision making in the legal-rational type of organizations (Weber, 1978), although, this depersonalisation creates problems of its own in the form of dehumanization[16] of decision-making process (Du Gay, 2015). Herbert Simon (1959) comes up with the idea of bounded rationality and suggests that rationality of the organisation is not absolute, because of lack of availability and processing capability of infinite amount of data, that may be required to arrive at a purely scientific decision. According to him organisation is a complex web of individual choices made with the purpose of achieving a particular goal. Every organizational decision therefore is a choice that an individual within an organisation makes from the available option. Since, these options are not infinite, these choices are what he calls 'satisficy' and therefore the rationality both of the individual within the organization and of the organizational structure overall is bounded. Within these confines of bounded rationality, he proposes the idea of programmed decision making and unprogrammed decision making to achieve automation within the organization and partially achieve depersonalization in the decision-making process (Simon, 1959; Simon, 1972).

In any organization, it is impossible to get rid of human influence over decision making in totality, there will occur events or arise issues or unforeseen risks, which will have no recorded history. Employees and managers will have no previous experience in dealing with such events, risks or issues, and in such cases, decisions will have to be made after

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[16] Not the same as dehumanisation of the native as described in Fanon's work in chapter two. This dehumanization in organizational sociology refers to the removal of empathy from the decision-making process.

considering all relevant facts and information available, and will depend on the intelligence, logic and the bounded rationality of the employee or manager on case. These decisions cannot be programmed and depend on the creativity of the human factor in the organization. Usually, such decisions are left to the top brass of the organization to make as they have the most experience, skills and knowledge to come up with the most rational decisions (Simon, 1972). On the other hand, there are some decisions that can be automated, examples of which may include, decisions made on everyday basis on issues that deal with the normal functioning of the office, decisions made routinely in order to achieve the desired results and goals of the organization or decisions made upon the occurrence or non-occurrence of a certain routine event, which form a clear and certain pattern. These are examples of programmed decision making; because there is a recorded history of a unique way in which such decisions have been made in past save exceptions, it is assumed that in future as well decisions in similar circumstances will be made on the same historic pattern. These are decisions that can be automated (Simon, 1959; Simon, 1972). Mostly these decisions involve the procedure and processes followed within the organization and decisions relating to day-to-day routine and repetitive work that is carried out by organizations in order to achieve their desired goal and results. For example; garbage collection is a routine function which can be automated and human influence on such decision making can be eliminated. Automation in this context does not mean mechanization or to be performed by machines only eliminating all human involvement altogether, it only means that employees will not have any influence over making decisions. In the above example, employees will not decide whether or not to collect garbage, it is pre-decided for them and they just have to follow the instructions.

Although these problems take a colonial turn in India, these are not unique to Indian bureaucracy and a lot of research has been conducted in the field of organisational behaviour and they have received varying degrees of success in different bureaucracies specially in Europe. In India though these reform strategies have been scarcely implemented and have had very little impact on the colonial bureaucratic maladies like *corruption, nepotism, favouritism, secretive nature and feudal mindsets of bureaucrats* (Rai & Singh, 1973; Sharma, 2025). However, before going into the details of the issues of colonization I would firstly

explain the quality assurance and performance management aspect of dealing with behavioural problems in the bureaucratic organizations in general.

Although this problem is not endemic to India, there is no defined process of managing performance or assuring quality of service within the Indian Bureaucracy. The only method by which some sort of notional control over the work of the bureaucracy is exercised is through the office of auditor. Furthermore, the auditor only concerns itself with the financial workings of the government and not the overall performance. In any case, since this office of the CAG (Comptroller and Auditor General of India), is also bureaucratic in nature, even this notional control has over time evolved into a mechanism of exercising control over the elected council of ministers rather than controlling the bureaucracy, thus restricting the powers of the elected executive and ever-increasing the powers of the bureaucracy (Sukhtankar, 2015). It is also important to understand that, for any organization to function properly every individual within the organization must be motivated enough work towards achieving the goal of the organization. In other words, the personal goals of every individual must be harmonized with the organizational goal in such a way that they achieve their personal goals in achieving the organizational goal. Only in this case will they perform to the best of their abilities and the organization will achieve its strategic goals. Chester Bernard called it the contribution-satisfaction ratio and Herbert Simon further developed it into contribution-satisfaction equilibrium (Barnard, 1968; Simon, 1959; Simon, 1972).

Whether it is performance management or quality assurance, both have the same purpose; achievement of the strategic goals of the organization. Whereas Quality Assurance is conducted from the perspective of the customers (in the case of a bureaucratic organizations it is the citizens); Performance Management takes into account the perspectives of employees and the organization as a whole (Kaplan & Norton, 1992). In case of the bureaucracy, Quality Assurance can only be conducted whenever there is a direct or indirect interaction between the citizens and any government executive. This interaction may take the form of a (direct) conversation, in person or through voice, video or electronic means, or it may take the form of (indirect) transmission of data or information in the form of a work package. The problem with a public bureaucracy is that for most part it is a monopoly, and the citizens do not have a choice. Sometimes they can choose to go to a

particular office or avoid a certain bureaucrat when dealing with their problems, but in most cases, there is no choice. In the private sector, if I am not satisfied with a certain airline, I can choose to fly with others, and in this case when I rate any private organization it not only reflects my satisfaction as a customer of their goods or service but also a comparison of the quality of goods and services provided by others. Although it is very difficult to introduce competition among government departments, except where it is involved in some kind of commercial activity, it may be possible to introduce some sort of competitiveness amongst individual workers within the organization.

A very popular method of managing performance in private organizations is Balanced Scorecard (BSC) which was developed by Kaplan and Norton in the 1990s. They further developed this technique to be used in public sector organizations as well. According to Kaplan & Norton (2000) firstly, the organization's long and short-term goals have to be identified and thereafter they need to be harmonized with the individual goals of the employees. Most modern performance management systems provide a Top-Down approach towards aligning individual goals with organizational strategic vision (Kaplan & Norton, 2000). A top-down approach works perfectly well in a privately owned organization, where the strategic goal is focused solely on shareholders' interest, but in government organizations where community interests are involved a bottom-up approach is more advisable (Fraser *et al*, 2006). There is some research that points towards varying degrees of success of this model in the public bureaucracies of the west (Moullin, 2017; Northcott & Ma'amora Taulapapa, 2012; Mendes *et al*, 2012). However, in India these *new managerial models* are failing to even get implemented properly (Sharma & Gadenne, 2011; Muralidharan & Singh, 2020). Muralidharan and Singh (2020) for example, found that in India, performance was mostly being managed on paper. Some of the respondents told them that a lot of their time was wasted on preparing and filing plans and reports rather than on actual work; furthermore, once the reports were filed there was no follow-up. It is not as if when BSC is implemented in European bureaucracies, it does not require documentation, planning and reporting, but in case of India as pointed out earlier, the problem is not merely bureaucratic, but also of colonialism.

Across most of Europe, the society developed in such a way that individual agents formed a bond of trust and loyalty towards their feudal lords and through them to the crown.

This is the reason for the development of the idea of nationhood in Europe and also the idea of loyalty and patriotism towards the nation. In case of India though, it did not develop socially as a nation, rather it was constructed as a nation through colonization and as pointed out in chapter two already the society in India had developed in such a way until that point that the bonds of loyalty existed not at the level of nationhood or towards the crown or larger institutions of the empire, but towards community (Gotr or गोत्र), caste (Varn or वर्ण) and family (Kutumb or कुटुम्ब). In Muralidharan & Singh's (2020) work, the reasons why public servants do not focus on their performance is only partially explained. It is not as if the public servants do not focus on performance at all, they do selectively and this selectivity is determined by caste, community, religion, language, gender and host of other factors which formed the basis of pre-colonial social dynamics in India.

The colonial bureaucracy was established in India by the British, and it was clearly a remnant of their own feudal past. Therein lies the origin of the problem; the Indian bureaucracy is not Indian in character and since its inception, the people of India were forced into treating these British bureaucrats as their feudal lords, even after independence since the character of the bureaucracy never changed, most people still treat them as their feudal lords. This must also be pointed out here that the British constructed India as a bureaucratic state. Pre-colonial India was not India; there were multiple kingdoms across the sub-continent and none of them identified the whole of south Asia as a single political unit. India was not constructed by Indians and neither was it constructed for Indians; furthermore, the British did not construct it as a democracy, which at the time was still evolving into its present state even in Britain. Of course, even at the time of the start of India's colonization Britain already had a Parliament, but the British did not create a Parliament for India, nor did Indians get any representation in the British Parliament. The sole purpose of creating India was administrative efficiency in revenue collection and resource exploitation. During the 200 odd years of British colonization bureaucracy penetrated each and every aspect of the government of India and continues to do so even in independent India. It controls the Legislature (through the Cabinet Secretariat, Lok Sabha Secretariat and the Rajya Sabha Secretariat), the Judiciary (through the office of the Registrar General) and it is patently in total control of the state. Bureaucracy controls government finances, revenue, banks and

insurance, public relations, public service commissions (appointments of bureaucrats and judges), transport, communications, defence, education, health and all of public sector enterprise either directly through monopoly or indirectly through regulations.

It is not as if the individual agents in the colonized bureaucratic field intend to be exploitative, however, as pointed out in the preceding sections and chapters, their agency in the field is *mimetic*, which means the practice in the colonized field is such that the struggles for bureaucratic capital result in exploitation. Since, the plural dispositions of the *habitus* of these agents did not only develop in the colonized field, its manipulations did not develop with the field either (Hadas, 2021). Every instance of production and reproduction of bureaucratic capital in this colonial field is in fact through conversion or usurpation, keeping the field in a perpetual state of structural corruption (Wacquant, 2004). Bourdieu (1979) recognizes that the character of symbolic power in these fields of power is such that it always leaves the possibility of usurpation and dispossession of symbolic capital open. However, this kind of structural corruption in the colonial bureaucratic field does not mean that it differentiates like the dynastic field differentiated in Europe. On the one hand since the colonization leads to feudalization of the Indian society, it also meant that the colonial bureaucratic field (and the juridical and political fields) structurally retained dynastic capital and dynastic power in the agent's 'practice' in the field. At the same time this also meant that the dispositions of the *plural habitus* of the agents in the field which was acquired from without the field (the pre-colonial structuring structures), introduced forms of structural corruption that could not lead to rationalization of the colonized field. The character of the colonized bureaucratic field in itself is *mimetic* which means that it only appears to be a bureaucratic field, however, the struggles within this colonized field do not resemble anything like the actual struggles for bureaucratic capital. Take for example tax laws and forgetting about India where still a large proportion of the population is uneducated (not the same as literate; already explained previously), even in Europe and north America, citizens require the services of lawyers and accountants because they cannot understand tax laws themselves. In India, in 1999 the government introduced a single page tax return form 'SARAL' for non-corporate tax payers, however, it was discontinued in 2009 and the complex forms were brought back which required the expertise of professional accountants to be

filed[17]. This obviously is in the interest of professional accountants and their lobbying for the change can be explained by what Bourdieu (1979) calls usurpation of political and bureaucratic capital to obtain a dominant position in the field. This can also be explained by the conversion of material capital into bureaucratic capital, however, there is no way of finding evidence of bureaucrats receiving bribes for such lobbying, but the mere fact that in India some of them have been convicted or at least charged with corrupt [18]practices should be evidence enough (Quah, 2008).

As Bourdieu (1979) describes the homologous field of power, it is the representation of symbolic power that characterises the struggles within the bureaucratic field. Since the bureaucratic field is a field of struggles the agents within the field are perpetually involved in a struggle to acquire more and more bureaucratic capital which will ensure them a dominant position in the field. The more access to bureaucratic capital an agent has in the field the more capacity they have of producing and reproducing this form of capital. Another way of producing bureaucratic capital in the field is conversion of material capital or other forms of symbolic capital into bureaucratic capital. The pre-colonial social field in India was not the same as that of pre-modern Europe. Therefore, it was not possible for the pre-colonial field to differentiate into a bureaucratic field. It has previously been discussed already that pre-colonial Indian society was not a pre-modern society and therefore it is impossible to ascertain with any level of clarity whether the character of the differentiated field would have been based on representative form of bureaucratic power. This also means that the 'practice' and *habitus* of natives in this undifferentiated pre-colonial field would have led to the development of 'practice' and *habitus* in the hypothetical differentiated field. Colonization of India however, puts a stop to this process of differentiation, on the one hand causing a fusion of the differentiating pre-colonial fields into a feudal/dynastic colonial field, and on the other hand supplanting a partially differentiated bureaucratic field into the colonial Indian society. The agents in this new field have no idea about the rules of the game, their Practice and *habitus* has not developed in this field. They are unable to understand the

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[17]   https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/wealth/personal-finance-news/look-how-saral-is-taxmans-heart/articleshow/1606894.cms?from=mdr accessed on 13.03.2025

[18] This is different from the 'structural corruption' a term that Bourdieu uses to describe the corruption in any field that results in its differentiation.

nature of struggles in this field and are completely unaware of the nature of the bureaucratic capital or how it is produced or reproduced. They do not understand the nature of bureaucratic power or how to manipulate the field in order to obtain this form of symbolic power.

However, very soon, some agents in the field who have access to certain other forms of symbolic capital or material capital realize that they can convert these forms of capitals into bureaucratic capital and obtain a position of dominance over other agents in the field (Bourdieu, 2004). In fact, they can not only obtain a dominant position in the power struggle that ensues in this structurally corrupted field, they can even exclude those devoid of bureaucratic capital, of all agency within the field. In doing so they further corrupt the structure of the bureaucratic field ensuring that their position of dominance is never under threat from the agents who are dominated, because these agents have lost their agency. In other words, bureaucratic power is no longer representative power, but usurped power. This structural corruption of the bureaucratic field that creates this lust for usurped power continues to determine the struggles within the colonial bureaucratic field even after the colonizer leaves. Since the character of the field is corrupted, on the one hand, those who are able to convert material capital or educational capital into bureaucratic capital to obtain a dominant position in the field are seduced by this lust for power and on the other hand those who have lost agency within this colonial field use other forms of symbolic violence and symbolic powers to regain their agency and subsequently manipulate the field into obtaining a dominant position.

The only logical solution is to introduce further corruption in the bureaucratic field so that its borders change and it is culturally restituted into the Indian society. This is the problem that Mignolo (2011) and Chakrabarty (2009) deal with; one calls for the provincialization of Europe, in Bourdieusian terms, limiting or differentiating the colonial bureaucratic field in such a way that the struggles for power in this field is not determined by usurpation and dispossession but through representation based on voluntary sharing of symbolic power. The other calls for critical thinking on the borders of the colonial bureaucratic field leading to the change in the character of the struggles in the field *inter alia* changing the character of the symbolic capital of the colonized field. In both their critiques though there is a limitation; if the 'native', the agents within the colonized bureaucratic field

only have *mimetic* agency, how is it possible for them to further rationalize the field. The fact remains that in reality the individual agent's *habitus* is incapable of such manipulations that could result in the change in the character of the bureaucratic capital and yet every such individual manipulation, introduces a little bit of structural corruption in the field. According to Bourdieu (2004) this structural corruption in the field eventually leads to its differentiation and further rationalization. At the level of discourse, the recognition of Mignolo's (2009a) and Chakrabarty's (2009) post-colonial critique of the colonized societies and cultures poses a challenge to such existing Eurocentric power relationships.

The native's *habitus* initially develops in the pre-colonial fields but it is manipulating the colonial bureaucratic field introducing structural corruption in this filed with each individual struggle but the structures of the colonial field also introduce a *hysteresis* in the native's *habitus* resulting in it acquiring *plural* dispositions (Hadas, 2021). The mere fact that since independence there has been a consistent demand for restitution of *Panchayats* in India and in 1993, they were formally recognized in the constitution of India as institutions of local governance means that the native's pre-colonial *habitus* keeps structurally corrupting the colonized fields. Discursively, only a restitution of the pre-colonial *Panchayats*; something that the native can identify with, something in which the people are directly involved and which draws its source of origin to the people is the only way in which dispossession and usurpation of symbolic power can be eliminated from the colonized field (Kumar, 2022). Restitution does not mean revival (Mignolo, 2009b); there is no possibility of going back to the pre-colonial times; those times are lost in the living memories and cultural artefacts of the people who lived in those times. Furthermore, reviving a pre-colonial institution would mean undoing more than two centuries of social transformation. Naturally or unnaturally, modernity has penetrated every aspect of Indian social life through colonization. Separating it would require similar forms of violence that colonization of India resulted in to be repeated. Any violent method of restitution could only result in another cycle of violence[19]. Restitution would mean that the transformation that has already happened cannot be undone, only the institutional structures can be reframed in such a way

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[19] The cathartic reactionary violence of the native towards his colonial master that Fanon alludes to is the consequence of colonial violence of various forms and does create the cycle of violence that Gandhi warns against.

that the structural corruption (like colonized bureaucratic capital inheriting traits of dynastic capital) that was introduced by colonization can be eliminated. In other words, the character of post-colonial bureaucratic capital itself needs to change, and furthermore, the practice of the field modified in such a way that it is no longer a field of struggle for representation of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1979; Bourdieu, 2004).

Mimetic agency of the native Bureaucrat

We have already discussed that the agency of the native is a *mimicry* of the colonizer, however, in case of India the colonizer left in 1947 when India gained independence. Yet, the Indian bureaucrat in the colonized bureaucratic field is incapable of acting in any other way other than the *mimicry* of the colonizer who existed before 1947. The character of the bureaucratic capital in European bureaucratic fields is changing because it is differentiating, however, the character of the *mimetic* bureaucratic capital in the colonized bureaucratic field remains intact. Take for example the government treasury; in any progressive organizational setup, a treasury or any other organization that deals with matters of money, will inevitably be manned by professionally trained accountants and accounts managers. In India, like any other country in the world, there is a system of training various kinds of accountants; professionals undergo rigorous trainings, exams and long apprenticeships under established accountants before succeeding in becoming chartered accountants themselves (Jain, 2011). All the rules, regulations, and procedures for such training and development of professional accountants have been laid down in detail by this same colonial bureaucracy, yet this colonial bureaucracy is the only organization in India, that does not employ chartered accountants in the treasury to manage its accounts. Untrained bureaucrats are deputed to take care of treasury business on a daily basis, result being siphoning off, of millions on fictitious heads of expenditure every year by corrupt government officials and frauds[20]. If ever, there arises a situation where specialized knowledge in some area is indispensable; the colonial bureaucracy resists it, in order to preserve discretion, ambiguity and scope for malpractices (Kumar, 2003). Since the bureaucrats are only capable of *mimicry,* they continue to create the environment of ignorance in order to preserve the exploitative character of the colonial

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[20] https://thewire.in/law/explained-fodder-scam-lalu-prasad-yadav accessed on 14.03.2025

bureaucracy. Another aspect of this *mimicry* is the *mimicry* of institutions; according to the bureaucracy the only solution to its own problems is further multiplication of the colonial bureaucracy. It is not as if the Indian bureaucrat wants to be corrupt, but the character of the colonized bureaucratic capital is such that the native does not know how to produce and reproduce it, so instead they convert or usurp it.

According to Bourdieu (1977) institutional structures are the structuring structures that structure the *habitus* of the individual agents in the field. This also means that these structures are not fixed and Bourdieu prefers to do a field analysis rather than an institutional analysis because by his own definition of field, they are structures predisposed to structuring. Therefore, it is not just the institutional structures that construct the *habitus* of the individual agents but also the other way around the structure of the *habitus* that constructs the field boundaries (Swartz, 2012). If we take a look at the European bureaucracies, the field analysis of Bourdieu (1977) will apply perfectly; the field structures will structure the *habitus* and the practice in the field and *inter alia* the *habitus* and the practice will determine the field boundaries. This is because neither of these develop in isolation of each other. When Bourdieu (1977) develops his 'Theory of Practice', he notices that it is not just the 'practice' that determines the structure of the field, there is something else and he calls it *'habitus'*. However, when he writes about bureaucracy, even though he uses his idea of *habitus* to explain the structural corruption in the dynastic field, he only talks about the French society and not the Algerian society (Bourdieu, 2004). He fails to consider the possibility that if the 'dynastic field' had differentiated in Algeria, the Algerian native's *habitus* could have introduced a different form of structural corruption into the dynastic field and it may not have differentiated in the same way as it differentiated in France. Bourdieu's attempt to understand the Algerian native's *habitus* also essentializes the Algerian as something different from the French colonizer (Said, 1989). The essentialization happens not in the act itself but in the epistemic consequence of the categorization. It is the discourse that constructs the native as the other (Said, 1978). In pre-colonial India, there is no dynastic field that can differentiate into the bureaucratic field. However, with colonization, the dynastic field that exists in Britain[21] gets extended to India. At this time, this dynastic field is

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[21] Not the same as the dynastic field in France

already in the process of differentiating into the bureaucratic, juridical and political fields in Britain and when the empire extends to India, all these fields in whatever state of their differentiation they were in at that stage, also get extended to India. If according to Bourdieu (1977) it is the structure of the field that predisposes the structuring structures of the agent's *habitus*, how can a field that does not exist in a society predispose the structuring of the *habitus* of the natives of that society? If Bourdieu's (1977) analysis is correct this cannot happen, but he cannot explain it either, and the reason for this is that Bourdieu never considers the transplantation of social fields into alien societies.

When the dynastic field gets extended to India, the king is still distributing the dynastic capital in the form of *largesse* and the reason for that is his own fear of his brothers. However, once the agents acquire this capital, they are able to produce/reproduce it and also convert it into other forms of capital, which eventually leads to the differentiation of the fields (Bourdieu, 2004). The problem in India, though is that the Indian native has no agency in any of these fields, in whatever state of differentiation they were at the time. They cannot acquire, produce or reproduce any of these forms of symbolic capitals and they are excluded from the fields. However, the British cannot keep excluding the natives from the bureaucratic field in perpetuity, else how will they dominate them; therefore, the moment the field get transplanted into India, the British colonizers allow some Indian natives to convert other forms of symbolic capital into bureaucratic capital to gain agency in the colonized bureaucratic field[22]. The production, reproduction, conversion, dispossession and usurpation of bureaucratic capital is determined by the structure of the bureaucratic field. The native's *habitus* may not have developed along with the bureaucratic field, but the mere acquisition of the bureaucratic capital means that the structures of the bureaucratic field now start to structure the *plural habitus* of the native as well. The Indian bureaucrat though, is totally unaware of the rules of the games that determine the struggles for dominance within this field. He therefore, starts to play the game by copying the colonizer and this is the source of *mimicry* according to Bhabha (2012). In the British bureaucratic field, the *habitus* of the agents develops with the field itself and therefore the structure of the field is

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[22] This is what results in the feudalization of the colonial Indian society and the development of a new land-owning class among the Indian natives.

structured by the *habitus* of the agents, but in the colonized bureaucratic field the Indian native's *habitus* does not determine the structure of the colonial field and therefore the native is incapable of manipulating the field by itself. It can only participate in the struggles within the field by *mimicking* the colonizer. The reason why the colonial bureaucracy is an exploitative bureaucracy is because it is a *mimetic* bureaucracy. The *mimetic* agency of the native bureaucrat structures the plural dispositions of the *habitus* of natives who participate in the struggles for dominance within the bureaucratic field. However, as pointed out earlier the *habitus* of the native also introduces structural corruption in the field making the colonial field a structurally corrupted version of the British field.

Fanon (2007), Bhabha (2012) and Spivak (2023) believe that no matter what, it is impossible for the native to gain agency of his own which means that their agency always remains *mimetic* and the colonial bureaucracy therefore can only be exploitative as the colonizer constructed it to be. Mignolo (2009b) and Chakrabarty (2009) take a different approach though, which can be explained through Bourdieu's (1977) explanation of *habitus* and Hadas's (2021) explanation of *plural habitus*. As pointed out previously, it is not just the field structures that determine the structure of *habitus* but also the other way around. The mere fact that the colonial bureaucratic field gets structurally corrupted because of the native's *habitus* means that the native is not without any agency. The structure of the field preserves the *mimetic* agency of the bureaucrat and therefore we do not see the postcolonial critical analysis of the colonial bureaucratic problems and blind application of European solutions to Indian problems. However, the existence of a postcolonial critical discourse also means that the native's *plural habitus* continues to introduce structural corruption in the colonized bureaucratic field and there remains a possibility of decolonization.

When Guha (1997b) critically analyses George Orwell's 'shooting an elephant', he rightly points out the racist overtones in the essay, but more importantly points out that Orwell shoots the elephant not because he wanted to, but because as the colonizer he cannot be seen as weak in the eyes of the natives. It's a relationship of dominance and a white policeman like Orwell in India has to keep up the pretence of the reason for colonization; in order to ensure obedience, the native can never be equal to the English gentleman. At the same time Guha (1997a) also makes it clear that this dominance cannot be sustained without the complicity of at least some of the natives. When the British introduce land ownerships

and feudalize the Indian society an already differentiated caste based social structure was fused into the land-owning class and a class of landless peasants. It is these land-owning upper castes who first gain *mimetic* agency in the transplanted bureaucratic field and manage to gain clerical positions within this colonized bureaucracy. However, even in those positions, the native bureaucrats cannot ensure obedience and dominance of the natives if they do not *mimic* the British colonizer.

In order to maintain this position of dominance the native bureaucrats start converting and usurping other forms of symbolic capitals into bureaucratic capital. This introduced a form of structural corruption into the field, the kind of corruption that reversed the nature of differentiation that was ongoing in the European fields of production at the time and feudalized the colonial bureaucratic field. The dynastic field in Europe differentiated because the bureaucrats acquired specialised knowledge and skill that was not available among the king's brothers and the fact that the king wanted to balance out the power of his brothers ensured that anyone with skill and knowledge could acquire and reproduce bureaucratic capital (Bourdieu, 2004). In India, the British crown had no fear of his brothers, and they needed the complicity of some of the Indian natives to rule over India, therefore instead of skill and knowledge becoming the criterion for the production and reproduction of bureaucratic capital in the colonized bureaucratic field, it was the conversion; of material capital or social capital in the form of caste based loyalties or cultural capital in the form of access to Indian texts, into bureaucratic capital that characterised the struggles within this field. If bureaucratic capital cannot be produced and reproduced within the field on its own, the entire character of the field changes, furthermore if other forms of capitals get converted into bureaucratic capital, then this process is the exact opposite of Bourdieu's (2004) description of the genesis of the bureaucratic field. In case of England the process of differentiation goes from conversion (*largesse*) to reproduction whereas in case of India it's the process of feudalization that goes from reproduction (the British bureaucrat) to conversion (the native bureaucrat) of symbolic capital.

Once the character of the field was feudalised, the dominance in the field cannot be ensured by representation of symbolic power; the only way it can be ensured is through dispossession as was the case in the dynastic field (Wacquant, 2004). This is the reason that the native bureaucrat can only have mimetic agency in the field. The native's plural habitus

develops with the colonized bureaucratic field and it introduces corruption in the field to feudalise it. In order to maintain his position of dominance the only thing that the native bureaucrat can do is copy the British bureaucrat, but even after independence since the native's plural habitus is what feudalizes the field, he cannot reverse the process to rationalize the field on his own. This is also the reason why post-colonial theory develops outside of the colonized societies. It is a mimicry of the colonizer's agency in the further rationalizing post-modern fields that cannot exist in colonized societies which are still on the path to modernization.

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Alina Park

The Descendants of "Unreliable People": Identity and Memory Narratives of the Koryo-saram diaspora in Bishkek
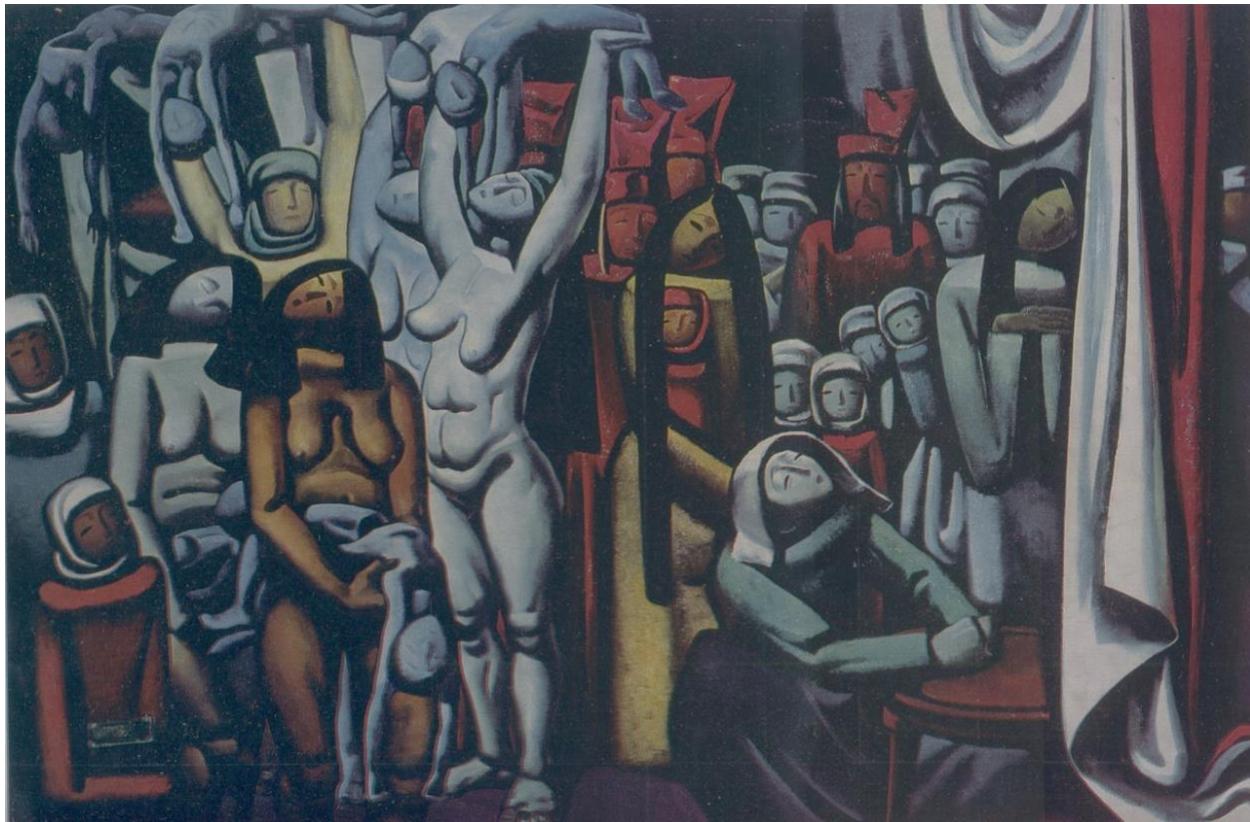
"Requiem" by Nikolai Shin

Abstract

This article presents the results of ongoing research on identity and memory narratives of the Koryo-saram diaspora in Bishkek. The results are based on the interviews with seven Koryo-saram representatives from Bishkek (one second-generation, three third-generation, and three fourth-generation), observations made while working with the official Association of Koreans in Kyrgyzstan, and information obtained from archival and publicly accessible sources. The findings revealed that across four generations, there is a rupture in the transmission of memory regarding the 1937 deportation, which might be explained by both

historical trauma and social dynamics. Members of the third generation are compelled to negotiate their identity between contemporary Kyrgyzstan and their Soviet past, with South Korea remaining a more distant concept for them than for younger generations. The fourth generation, however, is increasingly required to reconcile their identity between modern Kyrgyzstan and South Korea, navigating a more immediate sense of transnational belonging. This generational shift reflects the growing influence of globalized diaspora networks and youth initiatives such as SmartYouz, which provide spaces for exploring more hybrid identities. Nevertheless, it appears that the 1937 deportation and its impact are not a central concern for any of these generations.

Introduction

Koryo-saram are ethnic Koreans who were forcibly deported in 1937 from the Russian Far East to Central Asia as part of Stalinists repressions, primarily to the lands of the Uzbek SSR and Kazakh SSR. The deportation not only deprived them of the land they had inhabited for over 70 years and forced them to live in unfamiliar regions with climates and conditions entirely foreign to them, but also labeled them as "unreliable people".

Over decades, Koryo-saram adapted to these conditions and underwent a process of assimilation. Today, 88 years after the deportation, they constitute a distinct ethnic community in the post-Soviet republics. Nevertheless, the question of Koryo-saram identity and the ways in which the deportation affected (and still might affect) their lives – at both collectively and individually – remains unsolved.

When friends and acquaintances from my hometown hear that my research focuses on the Koryo-saram diaspora in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, they often condescendingly. Since one of my parents is Koryo-saram and I belong to this community, choosing this topic sometimes seems to others like cheating – as if I were trying to take the easiest path in doing my research. And in a way, I found myself agreeing with that. It felt somewhat inappropriate to study my own community, and the subject of deportation seemed already well-explored, leaving little new to say. So if there is nothing left to research, what could I do with that?

My perspective shifted during the second semester of my cultural anthropology studies, when I was introduced to the concept of collective memory. I then suddenly asked myself: what kind of knowledge do I actually have about Koryo-saram and their deportation in 1937, beyond the commonly depersonalized historical facts? It was never discussed in detail in my family. Our current situation and the history were taken for granted. The main narrative was concise and went roughly as follows: our ancestors once lived in the Russian Far East, and then they moved – or were forcibly relocated, depending on the family member recounting the story – to Central Asia where we now live.

Assuming that my family's experience might be exceptional in a negative way, I began asking my Koryo-saram relatives and friends about what they knew regarding the deportation and the history of their ancestors two to three generations ago. I was struck by how similar other people's knowledge was to my own. The deportation had never been taught in schools – education in Kyrgyzstan is still heavily influenced by Russia, where attitudes towards Stalin's repressions are ambiguous, so this was to be expected, as textbooks contained no information about it. What I did not expect was that it had also never been discussed within the families of other Koryo-saram. Among the Koryo-saram living in Bishkek, there is not a single family that was untouched by the 1937 deportation, and the collective silence around it was discouraging. It was a moment when I recognized for the first time that these similarities in narratives might reflect a pattern resulting from a significant gap in the collective memory of the Koryo-saram diaspora in Kyrgyzstan. This became the starting point for the research I began conducting in July 2025.

This research aims to investigate the narratives of the 1937 deportation among different generations of Koryo-saram in Bishkek, the process of transmitting these narratives across generations, and to examine key aspects of their identity. Therefore, several main questions shaped the direction of my field research: 1) How do different generations of Koryo-saram in Bishkek construct and express their memory of the 1937 deportation? 2) How do community members view their identity in relation to Kyrgyzstan and to South Korea today? 3) What role do official organizations – such as the Association of Koreans in Kyrgyzstan and the Embassy of South Korea in Kyrgyzstan – play in constructing and maintaining the identity and collective memory of Koryo-saram in Bishkek?

This paper presents the findings gathered during the first phase of my fieldwork for the ongoing research in Bishkek. My current findings are based primarily on interviews with seven Koryo-saram representatives (one second-generation, three third-generation, and three fourth-generation), observations made while working with the official Association of Koreans in Kyrgyzstan, and information obtained from archival and publicly accessible sources. Firstly, this paper provides key theoretical concepts and a review of previously published research on this topic. It then moves to the methodological part. Since I am part of the community I study, this paper includes a section dedicated to my positionality, as well as the limitations and challenges I encountered during fieldwork. A historical context of the period before and after the 1937 deportation is included to provide a better understanding of the community's background. The paper then discusses memory narratives of past events, both from the perspective of the official Koryo-saram association and as recounted in the personal accounts of Koryo-saram individuals. Given the strong connection between past and present, this paper also explores the contemporary identity of Koryo-saram in Bishkek from the perspective of the research participants. Finally, the paper presents conclusions and suggestions for further fieldwork.

Background and Theoretical Framework

During the Soviet period, the topic of the Koryo-saram deportation and the community itself was scarcely studied. However, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, interest in the history and lives of Koryo-saram increased significantly. Both past and contemporary studies of the Koryo-saram have primarily focused on issues of language (Ten, 2015; Kim, 2016; Spur, 2021), history (Gelb, 1995; Lee, 1998; Woo, 2006; Kim, 2020), religion and customs (Kim, 1993; Lee, 1998; Artyukhov, 2018).

Existing studies approach the 1937 deportation of Koryo-saram primarily from a historical perspective, focusing on policy decisions and archival records (Woo, 2006; Kim S.J., 2022; Kim G. N., 2024). Most studies of Koryo-saram collective memory and identity focus on the diasporas in Russia, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan (Ten, 2013; Markova, 2020; Fan, 2022; Marver Kwon & Kangas, 2024). As a result, the Koryo-saram community in Kyrgyzstan remains relatively under-studied in the contemporary scholarly literature.

This study draws on two main theoretical frameworks: Maurice Halbwachs' collective memory theory (Halbwachs, 1980) and Victor Turner's theory of liminality (Turner, 1967). Based on the theory about memory as a social phenomenon dependent on social frameworks, this research examines how collective memory of the 1937 deportation is constructed, preserved, and forgotten within the Koryo-saram in Bishkek. Jan Assmann's concepts of communicative memory (family-based, shared verbally) and cultural memory (institutionalized, archival, and symbolic) are also relevant for this study, as the deportation itself, linguistic loss, and Soviet assimilation policies might create a significant rupture in communicative memory (Assmann, 1995). The trauma of the forced deportation may continue to shape identity and memory narratives among younger generations. At the same time, the concept of liminality helps to understand how individuals can negotiate their identity, navigating between Soviet heritage, local Kyrgyz culture, and Korean roots.

The research of German Kim, one of the foremost Kazakh scholars on the Koryo-saram community, has greatly contributed to this study. His book *History, Language, and Culture of Koryo-Saram* provides valuable insights into the historical processes that shaped the community and their lasting influence on Koryo-saram culture now (Kim, 1993).

A key contribution to the study of Koryo-saram in Bishkek is Matteo Fumagalli's work *Identity through difference: liminal diasporism and generational change* (2021). His study uses the concept of *liminality* to explore how Koryo-saram navigate their identity as neither fully "Korean" in the South/North Korea sense, nor simply Soviet or Kyrgyz. Fumagalli argues that younger generations of Koryo-saram have a hybrid identity, successfully combining Russian and Kyrgyz social influence with a distant Korean heritage. However, this study does not address the connection between identity and the intergenerational transmission of memory narratives.

Therefore, there is a gap in knowledge that limits our understanding of how collective memory is transmitted through generations, the differences in memory between generations, and the key aspects of Kyrgyz Koryo-saram identity. Collecting family stories and recollections of the deportation and the Soviet past appears to be an important approach for understanding how contemporary identities are shaped within the community.

Methodology & Positionality

Since memory and identity are complex social phenomena that cannot be fully measured and characterized using quantitative methods, this study employs a qualitative research approach. This research is designed as a case study focusing on the Koryo-saram community in Bishkek. For a more in-depth study of the community, I conducted the first part of my fieldwork in Bishkek over a period of two months, from July to August 2025. During this fieldwork, I conducted semi-structured interviews with members of different generations (both individually and in groups), one biographical interview with the member of the second generation, participant observation at the community event, and the analysis of archival materials and publicly available documents. To include the narratives of the first-generation Koryo-saram, who experienced the 1937 deportation, I relied on biographical interviews previously recorded by other researchers.

In total, I conducted seven interviews with my research participants: one from the second generation, three from the third generation and three from the fourth generation. The first generation includes those who directly experiences the deportation; the second generation consists of those who were born shortly after the deportation in the new settlements; the third generation comprises the grandchildren of those who experienced the deportation, and the fourth generation includes their great-grandchildren. I conducted biographical interview with the member of the second generation, semi-structural individual interviews with members of the third generation, and semi-structural group interview with members of the fourth generation.

It is important to note that, as a person who is affected by the consequences of the 1937 deportation, I cannot separate myself from the narrative of this research. Since this topic is directly connected to family histories, and my ancestors were the victims of the repressions, I decided to begin my research by conducting interviews with my family and friends. For instance, the research participants include my grandfather, mother, uncle, and one of my friends. Their names have been retained with the participants' consent. Additionally, anonymizing and coding their names seemed unfair giving the context of the deportation, during which the victims were stripped of their identities, and in light of the historical policy of silence surrounding these events.

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Since my positionality combines the roles of researcher and member of the community being studied, my perspective incorporates both emic and etic approaches (Eriksen, 2010). The emic perspective was included not only through the words of research participants but also through my own lens as a researcher – in the way I framed questions, in the aspects I choose to emphasize, in the specific vocabulary I used (for instance, be referring to Koryo-saram as victims of the 1937 deportation), and in the construction of the overall research narrative. As the researcher, I tried to navigate between my own experiences and the accounts of participants, aiming to fill the gap in personal knowledge and experience that I initially had. At the same time, my insider position granted me the level of access that might have been closed to outsiders. For instance, I was able to attend a private event of the Association of Koreans in Kyrgyzstan only through personal connections with other Koryo-saram members within the community. Additionally, the memory of a traumatic event like the deportation, as well as questions of identity, can be highly sensitive. My insider position allowed me to establish a greater level of rapport and trust with the research participants, as in this context there was no typical power dynamic between researcher and subject.

However, I recognize that my insider position is also a limitation that can potentially narrow my perspective in a negative way. In order to preserve subjectivity and ensure objectivity, I combined my own experiences with archival documents and interviews to mitigate possible bias and to provide a more detailed understanding of the issue.

Through this research, I do not aim to establish a single 'correct' or truly objective conclusion – my goal is rather to offer another perspective regarding what has happened and continues to happen with the community of the Koryo-saram in Bishkek.

Before and After the Deportation: The origins of Koryo-saram

In 1937, at the height of the "Great Terror," Soviet authorities made a decision to deport Koreans form the Primorye region in the Russian Far East to Central Asia, primarily to Kazakh SSR and Uzbek SSR. The main justification for forced deportation was the alleged possibility of collaboration between Koreans and Japanese forces – the Soviet Union de-facto shared a border with Japan through its colony, Korea. Therefore, authorities regarded Koreans as potential Japanese spies in the impending war (Woo, 2006).

By that time, Koreans were considered citizens of the Soviet Union; they established a well-organized community in Primorye and were there for almost 77 years. They actively participated in the life of the region: Koreans formed partisan units against Japanese forces and even supported the October revolution by joining the Red Army in 1917. By the time of deportation, there were at least two Korean districts in Primorye region, Korean schools, Korean theater, several newspapers published in the Korean language regularly (Kim, 2020). Unlike other ethnic groups in the Soviet Union, Koreans were generally not rebellious; they actively supported the authorities and demonstrated loyalty to the Communist Party. However, none of these facts prevented Stalin from declaring Koreans "unreliable people" in 1937 and issuing the deportation order.

The deportation was carried out in a short period of time with a preparatory stage that included the destruction of Korean cultural objects and the elimination of intelligentsia. Approximately 70% of intellectuals were erased (the exact number of killed people remains classified), staff and students of Korean Pedagogical Institute were arrested, the university itself was closed. Korean high-rank military officers, teachers, cultural activists were arrested and executed later this year. Deportation started in September, and within four months, by January, over 180,000 people were forcedly relocated to the lands of the Kazakh SSR and the Uzbek SSR. The transportation was conducted in cattle cars under severe conditions, hunger, and thirsts. The relocation of such a large number of people over a distance of more than 5,000 kilometers during autumn and winter was inevitably accompanied by a high number of deaths. Stops were allowed only to remove the bodies of those who had passed away on the road. Over 11,000 Koreans died during the deportation. In addition to those, around 23,000 passed away on the places of their new resettlement. Despite the instructions in the official order, deported Koreans were not provided with housing, and the confiscated property was not returned to them (Kim, 1993).

People had to live in dugouts, and hunger prevailed among the resettled. Koreans had to organize collective farms and cultivate new land – which was, in general, what the Soviet authorities had expected as a result of this deportation. During census registrations after resettlement, Koreans were given Russian first names, and their surnames were often altered. The resettled Koreans began calling themselves *Koryo-saram*, meaning "people of the country of Goryeo" (the historical name of Korea).

Even after the deportation, Koryo-saram were still considered unreliable, and they were prohibited from leaving the territories of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Moreover, they were prohibited from joining the Red Army during the Second World War, which, in the context of patriotic and militaristic Soviet propaganda, only emphasized their label as "unreliable" (Gelb, 1995).

However, it seems that the Soviet authorities did not entirely sever Koryo-saram from their culture. The authorities even encouraged the establishment of *Lenin Kichi* ("Lenin's banner") in Kazakh SSR – a newspaper written in *Koryo-Mar* (the native language of Koryo-Saram, a dialect of the North Korean variety of Korean) and promoted its distribution among Korean households. Many Koryo-saram themselves gradually began distancing from their language, attempting to switch to Russian instead – the language of education, employment, and state power.

The situation started to change in 1953 after Stalin's death. With the new policy of De-Stalinization, many repressed people were rehabilitated, including the Koryo-saram. The ban on movement was lifted, and Koryo-saram were reinstated in their rights – at least, at the official level, unofficial restrictions remained in effect until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Koryo-saram began relocation to other states of the USSR. Many of them moved to the Kyrgyz SSR – particularly to Frunze (now Bishkek) – in search of new opportunities for work and education. In Frunze, Koryo-saram established their own communities, one of the most notable was on Kommunarov street. These communities allowed Koryo-saram to maintain cultural traditions and, to some extent, resist assimilation, although by 1953 Russian language had become the first language for many of them (Lee, 1998).

The Koryo-saram diaspora in Bishkek

In 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Koryo-saram in Kyrgyzstan (as well as in other newly independent republics) organized the official Association of Koreans in Kyrgyzstan and established connections with the Republic of Korea. Cultural assets that had been lost after the resettlement began to be restored. The Association started publishing local newspaper *Ilchi* ("Unity") and organizing cultural and educational events, though now entirely in Russian language. Koryo-Mar remained in the past, as Koryo-saram increasingly learn contemporary South Korean version of language.

Currently, about 20,000 Koryo-saram live in Kyrgyztan, primarily in Bishkek. A special place in Bishkek is occupied by the so-called "Korean street", located along Yunusaliev Street. Many Korean families live along this street; it is also lined with numerous Korean restaurants, Korean businesses, and the embassy of the Republic of Korea. **This area can be seen as symbolically reflecting the current position of the Koryo-saram in Bishkek – in a state of liminality, between their belonging to the community of Koryo-saram, their newly acquired homeland in Kyrgyzstan, and their historical roots in Korea (paradoxically, it is South Korea, not North).** In this context, it is notable that there is not a single memorial or site dedicated to the events of the 1937 deportation in Bishkek.

Nevertheless, the presence of the Koryo-saram community and a growing interest in South Korean culture are clearly noticeable in Bishkek. The Korean Folk House operates in the city, offering free classes in the Korean language, Korean drumming, and traditional theater. In addition, Bishkek hosts a large number of private centers dedicated to teaching Korean language and culture. Many of their students are Koryo-saram themselves, preparing for potential relocation to South Korea for studies or for work.

Memory Perspectives from the Koryo-saram Association

When I started doing this research almost a year ago, the first thing that struck me was the complete absence of information about the 1937 deportation in *Ilchi,* the newspaper published by the official Koryo-saram association in Bishkek. To my surprise, there was just one article about the deportation. The article was published in September 2024, occupied half a newspaper spread, and reported in the anniversary of the issuance of the resettlement order. It presented dry facts about the deportation such as number of people resettled. It contained no information about those who had died or suffered, and did not include any images, interviews or parts of archives. The article seemed to me very impersonal and mundane – as if it were describing yet another local cultural event.

АЛМАТИНСКОМУ КОРЕЙСКОМУ НАЦИОНАЛЬНОМУ ЦЕНТРУ – 35 ЛЕТ!

Долгожданное событие состоялось! Алматинский корейский национальный центр (АКНЦ) отпраздновал свое 35-летие, а вместе с ним и День корейской культуры. Празднование прошло 16 августа в амфитеатре MEGA Center Almaty, где корейское сообщество города и гости собрались отметить этот знаменательный день.

«Сегодня мы отмечаем юбилей АКНЦ – 35-летие», – с гордостью отметил председатель центра Андрей Шин в своей приветственной речи. Он выразил особую благодарность Брониславу Сергеевичу Шину, председателю Совета старейшин, который возглавлял центр на протяжении 25 лет. В знак признания его выдающегося вклада Брониславу Сергеевичу [...]

новые красочные номера. В этот день можно было увидеть и традиционные корейские танцы, и популярные k-pop-выступления. Вокальные группы всех возрастов наполнили сцену особой энергией, которая передавалась зрителям и оставила незабываемые впечатления.

Во время концертной программы гости праздника могли насладиться блюдами корейской кухни, представленными магазином CU. Прохладительные напитки, кимпабы, корндоги и южнокорейские сладости стали идеальным дополнением к насыщенному дню.

День корейской культуры стал по-настоящему теплым и семейным праздником, который запомнится всем участникам до следующего года [...]

21 АВГУСТА 1937 ГОДА СОВНАРКОМ СССР И ЦК ВКП(Б) ПРИНЯЛ ПОСТАНОВЛЕНИЕ №1428-326СС ЗА ПОДПИСЯМИ СТАЛИНА И МОЛОТОВА «О ВЫСЕЛЕНИИ КОРЕЙСКОГО НАСЕЛЕНИЯ ПОГРАНИЧНЫХ РАЙОНОВ ДАЛЬНЕВОСТОЧНОГО КРАЯ»

Во второй половине 30-х годов XX века советское руководство пришло к решению, что корейцы на советском Дальнем Востоке – это питательная среда для японского шпионажа в регионе, и что их пора выселять.

Еще в начале 1936 года Политбюро ЦК ВКП(б) приняло постановление «О пограничных районах ДВК», согласно которому НКВД разрешалось высылать в административном порядке из приграничных районов Дальнего Востока бывших коммунистов, изгнанных из партии: среди перечисляемых категорий лиц – вслед за белогвардейцами и перед троцкистами и зиновьевцами – были корейцы.

В апреле 1937 года газета «Правда» выступила с разоблачениями японского шпионажа на Дальнем Востоке: агентами японцев, оказывается, были преимущественно корейцы.

В августе того же года краевой НКВД возглавил Генрих Люшков, (https://t.me/saramkor/1219) будущий перебежчик: он привез вышеназванное постановление СНК и ЦК ВКП (б) от 21 августа 1937 года «О выселении [...]

предусматривающее завершение всей операции к 1 января 1938 года. Любопытно, что один из пунктов постановления гласил: «не чинить препятствия переселенным корейцам к выезду при желании за границу».

В первую очередь были депортированы 11 807 человек, возможно, из числа стоящих под прямым подозрением в шпионаже. В целом же за сентябрь было отправлено 74 500 корейцев из Спасска, Посьета, Гродеково, Биробиджана и других мест.

В конце сентября 1937 года был расширен круг районов, подлежащих очистке от корейцев: в их число вошли Владивосток, Бурят-Монгольская АССР, Читинская область и Хабаровский край.

Уже к 25 октября 1937 года 124 эшелонами было выселено 171 781 человек (оставалось в крае – и то ненадолго – всего около 700 корейцев).

Депортация корейцев проходила в Центральную Азию, однако отдельные группы переселенцев попадали и в пределы европейской части России, например, в Сталинградскую область (Астраханский округ).

Picture 1 Spread of Ilchi newspaper from 5 September 2024. On the right, the article about the resettlement order

Then I began reading through the official statements of the Association and the events they organized – yet again, there was no mention of the deportation. On the other hand, the historical event mentioned several times was the 160th anniversary of the **willing** migration of Koreans to Russia's Far East. This migration began in the mid-18th century, when Koreans started relocating to the Russian Empire in order to escape poverty and the natural disasters occurring on the Korean Peninsula at that time.

A large concert was organized, featuring the Ambassador of South Korea, and a special game-style quiz was held for the younger members of the Association.

The absence of any discourse about the deportation and its impact on the contemporary life of the diaspora suggests that this narrative is, to some extent, ignored as unnecessary and outdated. This, however, raises the question of why the official Association devotes so much attention to the migration of Koreans to Russia (emphasizing that it was a voluntary migration) – despite the fact that this event predates the deportation by several decades. Nevertheless, the Association granted me access to the archival recordings of biographical interviews with those who survived deportation.
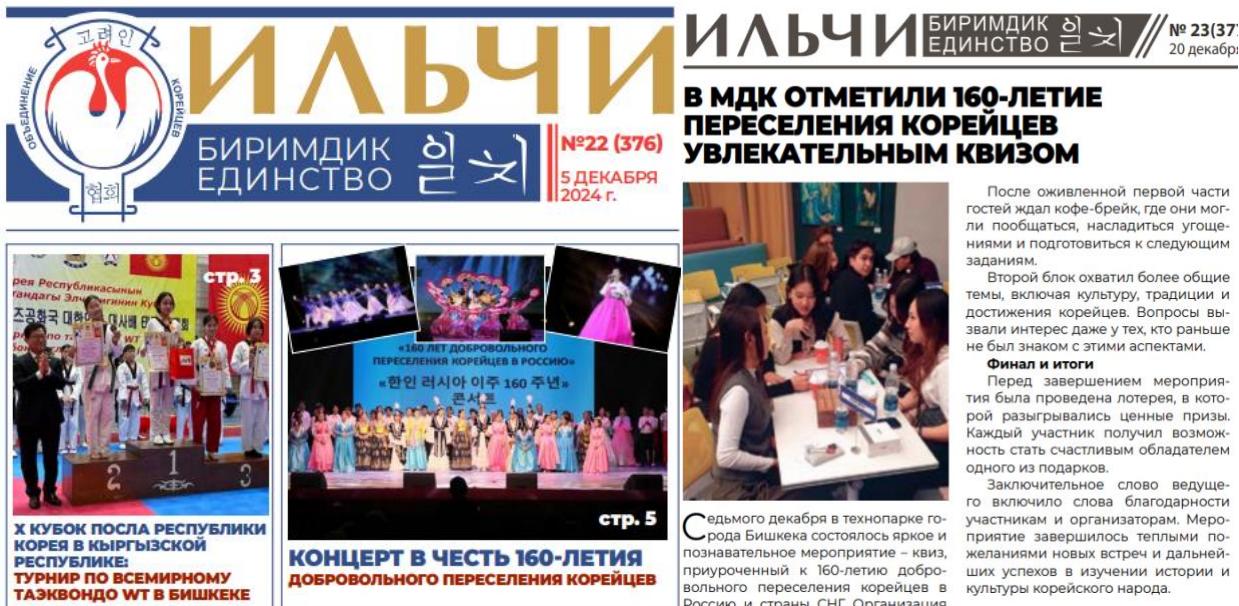
Picture 2&3 – December 2024 issues of Ilchi: on the left, the headline about the concert on the front page (title in Russian reads: 'A concert in honor of the 160th anniversary of the voluntary migration of Koreans to Russia'); on the right, an article about the

Unforgotten Compatriots of the Historical Homeland: Narratives from the Korean-Kyrgyz Ethno Forum

During my first conversation with the Acting Head of the Association in the summer of this year, she was genuinely surprised by the topic of my research: *"So much has already been written and said about the deportation"*. Nevertheless, she invited me to the Korean-Kyrgyz Ethno Forum, held on 2025 August 15. As I was later informed, the Koryo-saram associations of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan take turns organizing these forums, which are attended by guests from associations from these countries.

The forum opened with a reception, where guests were offered traditional Kyrgyz food, and attendees were greeted by people dressed in Kyrgyz national costumes. The unity of the two communities – the Koryo-saram and the Kyrgyz – was emphasized several times during the event. A special video was shown in which a Korean man marries a Kyrgyz woman, symbolically blending Korean and Kyrgyz traditions. The role of Kyrgyzstan as a newly acquired homeland was highlighted. However, not a single word was mentioned about the deportation. Also, no representatives of the government attended this event.

Pictures 4&5 – Photographs from the opening of the Korean-Kyrgyz Ethno Forum[23]

The start of the event was delayed by more than forty minutes as the guests were waiting for the arrival of the Ambassador of South Korea. In his welcoming speech, he noted that '*Korea never forgets its compatriots and is always proud of their achievements*'. He also urged the younger generation of Koryo-saram to learn '*their true mother tongue and do not forget their roots*'. The importance of this guest was hard to miss: a special place was revised for him and other embassy staff. The entire event was hurriedly concluded after it was announced that the Ambassador was about to leave.

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[23] *The first photo was taken by me, and the second was published on the official social media accounts of the association*
https://www.instagram.com/p/DNmzDPBNngu/?img_index=4&igsh=cTVrdW8wY2lwMGQ4

The date of 15 August was not chosen by chance. In her speech, the Acting Head of the Association noted that the Ethno Forum was also timed to coincide with the 80th anniversary of Korea's liberation from 'Japanese rule'. She emphasized that Koryo-saram made a significant contribution to the struggle against the Japanese occupiers and to the establishment of Korean independence, and that this contribution should not be forgotten. It is remarkable that she did not specify that Koryo-saram who fought against Japan had lived in Promorye before the 1937 deportation, while those who supposedly helped establish independence participated in the war on the side of the Soviet forces supporting North Korea after 1945. It was also not mentioned that many of the war heroes who fought against the Japanese forces in Primorye were repressed and ended their lives in foreign lands in Central Asia.

Such a selective approach to shaping memory narratives may be linked to a desire to establish closer ties between Koryo-saram and South Koreans, emphasizing shared history and roots in the past despite significant cultural differences in the present. South Korea established a special compatriot visa, under which a large number of Koryo-saram migrate there. Nevertheless, the status of a compatriot very often does not guarantee immediate integration into South Korean society. As migrants, Koryo-saram usually work in low-paying positions and remain a marginalized and vulnerable group (Song, 2019). It would be unfair to claim that the Association completely ignores the 1937 deportation, as they have several videos featuring interviews with second-generation Koryo-saram. A more accurate statement would be that this topic is not currently on their agenda. The question of funding is also unclear – possibly, by receiving donations from the South Korean embassy, the Association occupies a somewhat dependent position in its choice of narratives.

Memories about the deportation among generations

Another thing that truly puzzled me (and it continues to make me reflect on it) was the striking difference in how deportation is perceived by different generations of Koryo-saram: the first and the second on the one hand, and the third and fourth on the other. In the archival materials provided to me by the Association, members of the first generation trauma caused by this event is clearly palpable. The older Koryo-saram spoke and wrote about the tragic role that the deportation played in their lives. However, Koryo-saram of the third and fourth

generations know very little about the deportation and about what their ancestors went through. They often note that the deportation is something that was never discussed at home and that they learned about it from someone else.

The Deportation and Its Consequences Through the Eyes of the First and Second Generations

Olga Tskhai, born in 1933, said in her autobiographical interview (from archives) that the Russian Far East had been her homeland. Her father, Park Chi-Gyun, was the head of the family and maintained contact with his sister who continued to live in Korea despite the borders and the distance. She described the autumn of 1937 as a tragic time. Olga recalled a moment after they had already been evicted from their homes but before the trains for the deportation had arrived. She said: *"While waiting for the train, we lived in tents for two or three days, and the rain never stopped – it poured as it was from a bucket. I can still see my mother's tears as she did not know where to place my grandmother, who was ill."*

She remembered the period after their resettlement in Uzbekistan in the following way: *"The winter of 1937 was damp and freezing, and many elderly people could not survive it. Tragedy struck our own family as well – my grandmother died in December."* When spring came, new problems appeared: swarms of malarial mosquitoes arrived, and her little sister Ok Sun, fell ill with malaria. Koryo-saram began engaging in farming, but working on the marshy lands of Uzbekistan was extremely difficult. By 1939, the situation gradually began to improve – Koryo-saram were finally given monetary compensation for their labor.

However, after the USSR entered the Second World War, hunger and poverty struck them once again. She moved to Kyrgyz SSR with her husband in 1963. Olga considers the deportation of 1937 a tragic event that deprived the Koryo-saram of their culture, traditions and homeland.

One of the research participants, Vladimir Park, was born in 1941 in Uzbek SSR. In his biographical interview he mentioned that the only thing he remembers about his childhood is the feeling of hunger. In a conversation with me, he shared that the feeling of hunger stayed with him for almost all of his childhood, as food was scarce in their settlement due to the war. He said, *"Back then, everyone suffered from scurvy. My mother was constantly worried that I would die."* At home, his family spoke in Koryo-mar, and he was taught it too, but over

the years he forgot it – *"My grandmother was very kind; that is the only thing I remember clearly from my childhood. The language? My parents tried to teach me, made me read Korean newspapers – at one point I managed, but now it's all gone." It* seems that his father did not share much about the deportation and about its impact on his life, but after the lifting of travel restrictions in 1953, his father immediately returned to Posyet village in Primorye with his wife and his youngest son. *"My younger brother and I moved to Frunze (the former name of Bishkek) where he began his studies at the university there."*

After the interview, I asked him to write something about Koryo-saram – anything he considered important to pass on to next generations. Sometime after our conversation, he gave me a sheet of paper on which he had listed traditions and rituals that he deemed important for the Koryo-saram.

Aleksei Kim (approximate year of birth 1925) remembered in his biographical interview (from archives) that in the summer of 1937, rumors of a possible resettlement began to reach his family. They lived in the village of Lianchikhe, and by the spring of that year, all the Chinese residents of the hamlet had been evicted. Hecalled that after the deportation was announced, they were forbidden to take their belongings with them – almost all of their property was either taken by other people or handed over to the state. *"The day before the eviction, my father's senior colleague came to our place, along with three other people, to see what belongings would be left. My mother called them shameless,"* he said.

Aleksei remembered the deportation process itself as follows: there was barely any space in the cramped transport, and hungry people mostly survived by eating *sunyue* – charred grains stuck to the bottom of the cauldron, soaked in water. During the resettlement, his family was scattered – his grandparents, together with his uncle, were relocated to other places, and it took time to reestablish contact with them. Another remarkable detail he could remember is that upon arriving in Uzbekistan, he could not immediately enter the fifth grade at school because he did not know the Russian language. He had studied at a Korean school in Lianchikhe and spoke almost no Russian. Like many other Koryo-Saram, over time, he completely switched to Russian and began to forget Koryo-Mar.

He mentioned in his account that the Primorye region had indeed been a favorable place for the adaptation of scouts. His recollections differ from others in that they show an explicit approval of the actions of the Soviet authorities: *"At that time, Japan sent spies and*

pursued a hostile policy. Indeed, among the masses of narrow-eyed, flat-nosed Soviets, how could one distinguish someone who was also narrow-eyed and flat-nosed but actually Japanese? With the deportation, this question was resolved once and for all."

In his account, he recalls the deportation as a difficult period, yet his narrative does not follow the same tragic feeling that is present in Olga Tskhai's story. Additionally, he said: "*After so many years, it is impossible to say whether the government acted rightly or wrongly in relocating its people. For instance, France and England deported their undesirable citizens, but those were 'undesirable citizens,' not a whole population. After 70 years, no one can fully understand the military-political situation of that time.*"

However, several common elements can be found across all three accounts: regret over the loss of language, about losing their homeland and difficulties upon arriving in new lands.

Past and Present Narratives of Third- and Fourth-Generation Koryo-saram

It is interesting to note that the third generation holds entirely different narratives and memories. All members of this generation were born and raised during the Soviet Union, and their recollections often contain a strong sense of nostalgia for the Soviet past. For some of them their identity is strongly tied to the Soviet past rather than to contemporary Kyrgyzstan or South Korea.

Vyacheslav Park (born in 1971), speaks of the deportation as a "necessary measure." His viewpoint is largely similar to that of Aleksei Kim from the archives: "*The military situation was such that there was no other choice. Who in the Far East would have distinguished who was Korean and who was Japanese? That's why everyone was deported. In the Soviet times, this was not discussed; I only learned about it as an adult – by chance I saw something online and started reading and learning. At home, my parents never talked about it.*"

He also added that during the Soviet period, it was uncommon to hold traditional ethnic celebrations; mainly Soviet holidays were observed, such as Labor Day, the Day of the October Revolution, New Year, etc. Nevertheless, Koreans still observed important personal dates – for example, on April 5th, they would always go to the cemetery to hold memorials

for deceased relatives. He never spoke Korean and says he never felt any desire to learn the language.

When asked whether he considers his homeland to be Kyrgyzstan or South Korea, he did not give a clear answer: *"I don't know; it's hard to say now. It just turned out the way it did. I was born in the USSR."* He also noted that during the Soviet period, Koreans were given opportunities for professional development, although some informal restrictions still remained. *"Once, my father was almost sent to North Korea. He was an excellent electrician, and the administration was preparing the documents to send him there to set up some equipment, and to take our family with him. We waited a long time for an answer, but in the end, it was denied. Someone in the republic's leadership blocked the decision, thinking there was a high chance that we might either escape or become spies."*

Irina Park (born in 1969), said that the deportation was never discussed during her youth: *"It was not allowed to talk about such things. At school, it was never mentioned, and at home we didn't talk about it either. I think I only learned about it as an adult, when I was at university. My mother applied for reparations from Russia as a victim of political repression several years ago, and that's when I learned more about it."*

When I asked her whether she considers herself a victim of the deportation, she responded ambiguously: *"I personally did not experience it, so I cannot call myself a victim, but of course, as a community we suffered a lot. We do not know our language and live on foreign land."* When asked what "homeland" meant to her, she also found it difficult to answer: *"We don't have our own land, that's the truth."*

She said that she personally never experienced ethnic discrimination in her childhood or adulthood, but she recalls that during the Soviet period, even after the official restrictions on the Koryo-saram were lifted, there still existed an "invisible barrier" - as a rule, they were not given leadership positions in the republics or in the military.

She also recalled that during the Soviet period, there were many other Koryo-saram, and her family often gathered on Pravda Street (which intersects Yunusaliev Street, where the Korean street is located in Bishkek now), where their relatives lived, to cook together. *"In the Soviet times, there were no Korean restaurants or cafes; ethnic cuisines were not allowed. So we would gather on weekends and cook together. I still remember how we all made noodles and pounded rice dough together."* Her greatest regret is that the Koryo-saram are

losing their traditions: *"I think culture lives when people need to gather together and communicate. Now there are no longer gatherings like before, people do not need it anymore. Elements of our culture are disappearing. I no longer even know how to prepare much of our cuisine, and rituals and traditions differ from family to family – many things are gradually being lost."*

Speaking about the identity of contemporary Koryo-saram, she mentioned that she considers all questions of identity to be matters of ideology: *"During the Soviet era, we were told that we were all Soviet people; now they say that Koryo-saram are people of South Korea. In any case, it's all propaganda. We are Koreans, but we are different Koreans; for the Hanguk-in (local South Koreans) there, we are Koreans of another sort – we are worse for them."*

A similar experience related to the differences in identity between Koryo-saram and local Koreans in South Korea was recalled by Irina Kim (born in 1971). In her youth, she spent several years in South Korea, as her husband Leonid (a Koryo-saram representative too), was working there as a labor migrant. In her interview, she said: *"We lived there before other Koryo-saram from here started coming. Leonid was constantly at work, and I was stuck at home alone, and I felt so lonely. Koreans there are completely different – very emotional and loud. At the slightest thing, they would immediately shout, whether something good or bad happened. That surprised me a lot."*

Leonid passed away several years ago. According to Irina's recollections, before his death he was in the process of gathering documents for another visa application. She said: *"The last time, he was expelled from South Korea. He got into a fight in some bar with a local Korean, the police came and immediately took him away. No one even bothered to investigate – he was immediately put behind bars, and then after six months, deported back to Kyrgyzstan. Although at the embassy he was told several times that his visa would not be approved anymore, he did not lost hope. He enjoyed being there so much that he had adapted to the language to the point that he even spoke Russian with an accent. And the way he lied to his boss sometimes just to make a good impression! Can you imagine? Once he introduced my aunt as his own! I kept teasing him about it afterward."*

Some time ago, Irina was planning to travel to South Korea with her 18-year-old son, Sergei. However, Sergei changed his mind and refused to go: *"He's just not drawn there, that's all. He wants to continue focusing on things here."*

Speaking about the memory of the deportation in their family, she gave a standard answer: it was not particularly discussed at home. She also learned the details of the deportation only as an adult. *"Sergei doesn't ask about the deportation or our history. But at home, we maintain more traditional practices. Together with his grandmother, I teach him how to cook Korean food and follow Korean rituals - he calls his grandmother 'Amya' and his uncle 'Madabay' in a traditional Korean way.'"* She also noted that although she interacts with many Koreans in Bishkek, she has never attended official diaspora concerts or gatherings.

The situation is somewhat different among the younger, fourth generation of Koryo-saram. When it comes to the deportation, for many of them it is also a story they either have never heard about or know only partially. For better understanding contemporary perspectives within this generation, I conducted a group interview with three members of the youth movement *SmartYouz* (an activist initiative within the Association). Activists from *SmartYouz* organize cultural events (one of them was the Ethno Forum), workshops, and entertainment quizzes. They report directly to the Korean Association of Kyrgyzstan and are a subdivision of it.

Three participants agreed to take part in the interview: Daria Lee (born 2002), Kristina Tegai (born 2007), and Evgeniya Son (born 2005). Both Daria and Kristina are *tyagubya* – a term used for children from mixed marriages who are half Koryo-saram.

As with older generations, they have very little knowledge about the deportation or what happened before and after it. Daria said, *"You remember my dad, right? Once I asked him to tell me where Koreans came from in Central Asia, and he gave me a dry lecture with facts, without any extra details."* Kristina and Evgeniya also noted that in their households, nothing was said about the deportation or the history of Koreans before their relocation to Central Asia, even though they both grew up in homes with their grandparents. I found it interesting to ask whether they knew anything about the participation of Koreans in the Korean independence movement against Japanese occupation (a topic that had been mentioned a week earlier on a Kyrgyz-Korean ethno-forum). All three participants responded that they knew nothing about this historical event.

Notably, Daria mentioned that participating in *SmartYouz* gave her a sense of belonging and helped her feel less alone: *"At school, I knew at most two other Koreans; I*

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always felt like I was the only one. Then I accidentally saw an announcement about joining SmartYouz, decided to go, and I was shocked by how many Koreans were there."

For Kristina, being part of the youth organization is also an opportunity to make new friends among Koreans. Speaking about her identity, Daria said: *"I am half Korean and half Kyrgyz – that's something no one can take away from me. I don't want to choose between them. Of course, our Korean traditions are gradually disappearing, but I believe that can be fixed. I love Kyrgyzstan, but I also really like South Korea – their capitalist mindset there has some aspects I sometimes enjoy. I don't yet know if I want to live there, but I wouldn't rule it out. I think if you know their language and respect the local culture, you won't have problems. The only thing I can't live without is Korean food. I don't care whether it's Koryo-saram food or South Korean – it's all fine with me."*

Unlike Daria, Evgeniya has already decided that she will move to South Korea in the near future. Her boyfriend lives there, and they plan to work together. Evgeniya has been studying Korean for a long time at the Korean Folk House within the Association. She said: *"At home, we pay close attention to traditions – we celebrate all our holidays, and I address my family members using Korean honorifics. We mostly cook Korean food at home. When I have a wedding and a child, I plan to follow all Korean customs."* Kristina mentioned that she is not sure she will be able to follow all traditions in her future family after marriage, as many aspects she either simply does not know or does not wish to focus on.

When I asked the final question about what Koryo-saram identity consists of, Daria responded almost immediately: *"We are something third. We are not Kyrgyz, not Korean - we are somewhere in between, a third people."*

Conclusion

As this is an ongoing study and the current findings reflect only the first part of the fieldwork, it is important to outline plans for future research: 1) Expanding the participant pool: Invite a larger number of research participants to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how memory is transmitted across generations and to conduct a more in-depth study of Koryo-saram identity; 2) Study the role of food and cuisine: Since many participants highlighted the significance of food in their daily lives and in the construction of identity, further research should focus on Koryo-saram cuisine and its role in preserving cultural

memory and maintaining community identity; 3) Understanding "authenticity" from the perspective of Koryo-saram: As Koryo-Saram negotiate their identity between the cultural/physical spaces of Kyrgyzstan and South Korea, it is important to explore their perception of authenticity – what constitutes authentic Koryo-saram culture for them; 4) Exploring physical spaces: Examine spaces such as *Korean Street* in Bishkek to understand how such locations contribute to the preservation of traditions and the introduction of new community narratives; 5) Exploring deportation and identity narratives in contemporary contexts: Investigate how narratives about the 1937 deportation are being revisited and reinterpreted in the context of decolonial movements and cultural activism in Kyrgyzstan.

The findings of this first part of my study reveal that collective memory and identity among the Koryo-saram in Bishkek are shaped by both historical trauma and social dynamics. Across four generations, there is a rupture in the transmission of memory regarding the 1937 deportation. This emerged as a result of Soviet policies toward the repressed, the trauma following the deportation, and the social stigma associated with it. Older generations retained fragmented knowledge, often filtered through Soviet narratives or silence within families, while younger generations have almost no awareness of this event. According to Halbawchs (1980), memory is socially framed, and when social frameworks fail to transmit knowledge, memory becomes fragmented.

The official Association, in collaboration with the South Korean embassy, also has a significant influence on memory and identity narratives. To some extent, the deportation is ignored or silenced, while historical events that can create a bridge between the Koryo-saram and South Koreans are foregrounded.

Identity is a complex issue for all generations of Koryo-saram. Members of the third generation are compelled to negotiate their identity between contemporary Kyrgyzstan and their Soviet past, with South Korea remaining a more distant concept for them than for younger generations. The fourth generation, however, is increasingly required to reconcile their identity between modern Kyrgyzstan and South Korea, navigating a more immediate sense of transnational belonging. This generational shift reflects the growing influence of globalized diaspora networks and youth initiatives such as *SmartYouz*, which provide spaces for exploring more hybrid identities. Nevertheless, it appears that the 1937 deportation and its impact are not a central concern for any of these generations. The event often seems

distant, which clearly goes against the growing decolonial movement of revision of local history in Kyrgyzstan –the Koryo-saram diaspora remains largely neutral on this issue.

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Rusudan Margiani

Towards Interdisciplinary Approaches in Street Art Research: Lessons From Russo-Ukrainian War-related Works

Jasień, Gdańsk. Mural by Maria Morawska. Photo taken on 22.07.25

Abstract

This review article analyzes three studies focusing on Russo-Ukrainian war-related street art. The first two studies explore murals painted at public spaces in Poland, highlighting their educational, inspirational, and resilience-building roles against Russian propaganda. Though the findings of both studies are limited by the lack of sufficient sociological data and consistent art historical formal analysis. The third paper explores unauthorized works by the renowned British street artist Banksy in Ukraine. This study addresses issues of site-specificity, preservation, and legal ownership, yet relies on a single artist's perspective, which limits its methodological robustness. Across all three studies, the review identifies significant gaps in research methodology, including lack of interviews with artists and viewers, unclear application of analytical frameworks, and an inconsistent formal-stylisting analysis. These shortcomings reflect broader challenges in street art research where art historical and social science methods remain insufficiently integrated. The review argues for

an interdisciplinary methodological toolkit to enable more rigorous and comprehensive studies of politically and socially engaged street art.

Keywords: Street art, Russo-Ukrainian war, interdisciplinary research methodology, formal-stylistic analysis

Introduction

Studies on street art have grown significantly since the early 2000s. Increasingly, scholars have researched street art as a medium for socio-political expression amidst wars and periods of civil unrest. Street art created in response to Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine is one such case, attracting attention from researchers across multiple disciplines. This paper provides a review of three recent studies that examine street art commenting on the war.

The aim of the review is to assess the methodological approaches the three studies employ, to evaluate their contributions to understanding the socio-cultural and political role of street art and to identify areas where research methodology could be strengthened. The review examines the studies through an interdisciplinary framework, drawing on both art historical and social scientific perspectives.

The Reviewed studies are:

1. "Socio-Educational Impact of Ukraine War Murals: Jasień Railway Station Gallery", authored by four scholars affiliated with Polish Universities[24] published in 2023 in journal *Arts* (MDPI).

2. "Building social resilience through visual instruments in Polish public space in the era of Russia's aggression against Ukraine" written by Katarzyna Dojwa- Turczyńska, professor at the Department of Social Sciences, Institute of Sociology, University of Wroclaw, Poland; Published in 2022 in *Defence Science Review*.

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3. "Problems of Expositions and Protection of Banksy's Murals in Ukraine" authored by seven scholars from Polish and Ukrainian institutions[25] published in 2023 in the *International Journal of Conservation Science*.

The first article ("Socio-Educational Impact of Ukraine War Murals: Jasień Railway Station Gallery") analyses and conceptualizes the content of the murals painted at the Jasień railway station in Gdansk, Poland. In doing so the authors propose that the murals raise awareness regarding the war and contribute to generating conversations on the topic. The second article ("Building social resilience through visual instruments in Polish public space in the era of Russia's aggression against Ukraine") offers a retrospective view on the origins and development of street murals and focuses on analysis of the Russo-Ukrainian war-related murals across different locations in Poland. The author suggests that these murals serve as tools for social resilience against Russian propaganda as well as contributors to building the historical memory. The third article ("Problems of Expositions and Protection of Banksy's Murals in Ukraine") focuses on legal and conservation issues surrounding stencils created by the British street artist Banksy.

While all three articles provide valuable insights and compelling new perspectives in the field of street art research, they exhibit some limitations in methodological consistency. In particular, the lack of comprehensive research data, such as interviews with artists, mural project managers and viewers, as well as the omission of detailed art historical formal analysis of the street art pieces, limits the strength and persuasiveness of their conclusions.

The subsequent sections assess the methodological aspects of each article, focusing on data sources, research methods, and analytical approaches.

Article I: "Socio-Educational Impact of Ukraine War Murals: Jasien Railway Station Gallery"

This paper is organized into following sections: 1.Introduction; 2.War in Ukraine; 3.The Social and Educational Importance of Murals; 4.Research Methodology; 5.Analysis of Murals

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as Visual Messages; 6. Interpretation of Symbolism in Murals; 7. Murals of Resistance and Hope; 8. Murals about Family and Courage; 9. Murals about Suffering and Death; 10. Murals about Torturers and the Oppressed; 11. Murals about Animals; 12.Idyllic Murals; 13. Conclusions; Appendix A; References.

In the beginning of the article the authors note that they apply interdisciplinary research combining critical theory and visual communication methods "to uncover the deeper messages conveyed by these thought-provoking murals" (Perzycka-Borowska E. et al, 2023, p. 1). However, the article does not clearly demonstrate how these theoretical and methodological tools are operationalized in the subsequent analysis. The link between the stated methods and interpretive process remains largely implicit rather than systematically articulated.

In the introduction the authors discuss the role of art in harsh political times, drawing on various scholars who view artistic expression as a means of speaking up against injustice, war, and oppression. They argue that street art is one such form of expression that 'vocalizes' the socio-political concerns, and therefore merits scholarly attention. The introduction continues with a brief overview of the political history of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. The following section discusses the social and educational importance of the murals created in Gdansk, Poland, in the framework of the project "Solidarity with Ukraine". The authors argue that the murals create an important narrative about the war and raise awareness of the conflict and its consequences. They also highlight the educational potential of the murals, maintaining that they can contribute to visual education. The next section outlines the research methodology. The authors note that their analysis draws on Paul Martin Lester's framework of visual communication perspectives: personal, historical, aesthetic, cultural, ethical, and critical. However, they do not elaborate on the specific mechanics of applying these perspectives to the conceptualization of the murals.

The following sections are dedicated to the symbolic and formal analysis of the murals. However, the statements and interpretations developed in these sections lack sufficient grounding due to an incomplete formal-stylistic analysis. This method, central to art historical research, requires a thorough and detailed description of the visual composition, after which interpretations can be considered legitimate. The study also omits interviews with the artists, who could have provided insight into the intended meanings of

their works, as well as interviews with the viewers. Such interviews would have offered a solid foundation for discussing the murals' societal impact. This latter is only speculated by the authors based on their own viewer experience.

Article II: "Building social resilience through visual instruments in Polish public space in the era of Russia's aggression against Ukraine"

The paper consists of the following sections: Introduction; 1.The importance of building the social resilience of Poles in the era of Russia's aggression against Ukraine; 2. Murals as artistic works in public space; 3. Mural as a medium for socially and politically relevant content; 4. Reaction to Russia's aggression against Ukraine in murals; 5. Selected murals of solidarity with Ukraine in Poland; Final Conclusions; References.

This article has a similar aim as the first one, it strives to find out the effects of the Russo-Ukrainian war-related murals on the viewers in the public places of Poland. Based on the visual content analysis the author argues that "the murals stigmatized the aggressor (Russia) and upheld the victim of the attack (Ukraine)" (p.85). This allows her to maintain that the murals are the instrument for building the social resilience of Polish people against Russian propaganda which got more active in Europe especially along the economical downfall due to the war. In the introductory part of the article the author introduces history of the ongoing war since February 2022. Here she points out that on the backdrop of activated anti-Ukrainian Russian propaganda there was a need for the initiatives that would combat the Kremlin's anti-Ukrainian messages and would "make people aware that the costs incurred as a result of the war are immeasurably lower than they would have been in the event of a Russian victory" (p.87). The author regards painting the murals in public places as one of such initiatives on the territory of Poland and abroad as they "broadcast solidarity with Ukraine" (p.87). In the following section the author defines the meaning of resilience and discusses the Polish resilience against the threats coming from Russia as it attacked the neighboring country. Here she discusses the Polish support for Ukraine and calls it a "Polish raison d'etre" (p.89) as she refers to the public opinion polls on willingness to help Ukrainian refugees. She believes that such support is fueled by the murals as well. This section is followed by the short introduction to the general history of public mural painting starting from the 1920-30-ies Mexican mural art followed by the development of graffiti in the USA

in 1960-ies. The third section of the article discusses the historical cases when murals communicated socially important messages such as Mexican murals, created after the Mexican Revolution 'talking' about class oppression and racial segregation. As well as the murals that appeared in Europe after world war II, in the period of reconstruction of countries. In the fourth and fifth sections the author turns to the main focus of her article: murals expressing support for Ukraine. Her analysis of these works is more convincing, compared to the first article, as she incorporates the comments of the artists themselves. However, similarly to the first article, this study also lacks a detailed art historical formal analysis and interviews with the viewers.

Article III: "Problems of Expositions and Protection of Banksy's Murals in Ukraine"

The article is divided into following parts: Introduction; Materials and Methods, Results and Discussions (subcategories: Street art as an art; Street art as site-specific art and its architectural and urban context; Evaluation of Banksy's murals as works of art; Legal Issues; Research on the technical condition and public perception of the murals); Conclusions; References.

The introduction part points to the change of the concept of "work of art" caused by globalization trends, social transformations and the development of digital technologies. The authors cite various aestheticians who maintain that it is impossible to formulate a definitive theory for defining an artwork, as the concept of art is "open-ended, chronologically variable and remarkably diverse" (p.100). Thus, the authors note that aesthetic evaluation of street art also remains open-ended as the evaluation criteria are not established.

In the following section on "Materials and Methods" the authors provide a somewhat unclear description of their research approach: "In line with the research objectives, the methods of art historical analysis, the analytical method, as well as conservation technologies were analyzed". From this it appears that some art historical methods were employed, though the specific approaches are not described. The meaning of "analytical method" is also not clarified, and the mention that "conservation technologies were analyzed" offers little insight into the methodology. In the same section the authors outline the aspects of the research they focus on: the artistic value of street art works, legal issues

related to ownership and conservation aspects of the preservation and display of street art works.

The next section is the main body of the article and contains five subcategories. In the first subcategory the authors discuss the phenomenon of street art, its characteristics and terminological differences between the different genres of street art. This is followed by the subsection on the site-specific nature of street art and the importance of the environment where the work of street artwork is located. Then comes the discussion on the seven works of Banksy created in Ukraine since the beginning of the war in 2022. The main discussion focuses on the site-specific nature of Banksy's works, which are painted on building ruins, with the surrounding environment playing an essential role in their composition. The site-specific nature of his works creates challenges for their preservation and future display, as the stencils must be relocated once the ruins are cleared. Another major issue the article addresses is the legal question of who holds the rights to Banksy's works, given that he creates them without authorization. The authors point out that his fame made his works extremely valuable for art market but still it is unclear whether how should his work be dealt, who has the right to remove and relocate them, whether the thieves should be punished, whether the building owners have the right to sell the parts of their walls painted by Banksy while those works are created for public reception. To address these questions, the authors present an interview with one street artist "Tigo", who recommends leaving street art pieces in situ. However, relying on a single artist provides limited data and including interviews with additional street artists would have strengthened the study's validity and provided a more comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Conclusions:

The reviewed three articles represent discussions on street art pieces reflecting Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022 and the ongoing war. The first two articles describe and analyze the content of the murals that were authorized in different Polish cities to show support for Ukraine. The third article discusses the unauthorized street art by renowned British artist Banksy in Ukrainian cities and raises the questions regarding their preservation.

The first two papers provide valuable insight into the legal street art scene of Poland, especially of the current wartime scene of street art. The second article proposes a socio-

politically intriguing theory that these murals function as tools of resistance against Russian propaganda. This is a novel perspective to the murals while the first article focuses on rather more widely discussed functions of murals, such as their inspirational and educational roles. Although these articles provide an important insight into the field, they lack sociological data such as interviews with artists and viewers, which would have made their arguments and interpretations more convincing. Additionally, both articles omit art historical formal analysis of the murals, which further contributes to a somewhat unconvincing impression.

The third article focuses on rather different aspects of street art such as the site-specific nature of it. As it focuses on unauthorized works of Banksy it raises questions related to legality, ownership and conservation. Here, the authors consider various possibilities for resolving these issues and, in support of this discussion, they interview one street artist. However, including additional artists' perspectives could have offered a more comprehensive view and strengthened the overall credibility of this valuable research. Similarly, providing a more detailed description of visual analysis research methods applied would have further strengthened the study.

In conclusion, reviewing these three articles provides important insight into the Russo-Ukrainian war–related street art scene while also highlighting significant methodological shortcomings in the field. This gap reflects a broader issue in the study of street art: as long as street art works do not fall within the official art world, exhibited in museums and galleries, there is a scarcity of research conducted using traditional art historical methods. Conversely, social scientists interested in mural art for its socio-cultural agency often do not possess the methodological tools required for rigorous visual analysis. This significantly limits their research: arguments are not well-supported, and conclusions are less convincing from an art historical perspective. These gaps suggest the need for an interdisciplinary toolkit that integrates art historical and social science approaches enabling researchers to conduct more comprehensive and methodologically robust studies of street art.

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Arsenii Stepanov

Shirli-Myrli and Brother as Two Frames of Memory of the 90s in Russia

Abstract

In this article, combining content and phenomenological analysis, we are trying to analyse how the history of Russia in the nineties was commemorated and how it created an idea of the conditions of the new social contract. Using films created in the 1990s and contemporary discourse about them, we show how the decade is portrayed as a time of a war of all against all and of national humiliation, and how this portrayal supports the idea of the necessity of a strong state and shapes the image of the Russian man. We will juxtapose the movies and the frames of their interpretation, and how the interpretation of movies about the 90s varies.

Keywords: memory and legitimation, negative integration, smuta, post-Soviet eschatology, survival masculinity

Introduction

In 2021, a documentary film titled *"Shirli-Myrli - an Underrated Masterpiece about the 90s"* was released on the YouTube channel of interviewer Yuri Dud. In this film, Dud interviewed actors and screenwriters involved in the creation of the movie. The goal of the documentary was not only to promote the film[26] but also to create a reason to talk about the 90s with people who experienced them firsthand. The result was very interesting, as the speakers conveyed a highly contradictory view of the period. Some said the film captured the spirit of freedom and carefreeness of that time, which contrasts with the growing authoritarianism of today. Others argued that Menshov perfectly depicted the madness and chaos of the 90s with the humiliations characteristic of the era. The "two-faced 90s" as a phenomenon (chaos and destruction/freedom and carefreeness) is a much broader issue that is not limited to this film alone. This phenomenon, in which the past is commemorated in sharply contrasting ways, recurs across many historical contexts (Wawrzyniak 2021; Epple 2020). Similarly, Nikolai Epple opens his book on the collective memory of the Soviet Union with an account of this very "duality of the past": at his father's funeral, his father's old friends articulate a vision of the socialist era that stands in direct opposition to his own, much like the contrast depicted in the documentary film about Shirli-Myrli (Epple 2020). What emerges is that such duality is not a mere coincidence but a patterned mechanism of "collective remembering," a way of interpreting the past that ultimately reveals more about the present.

Role of the nineties

But when we talk about the nineties in Russia, we are not just talking about a turbulent and problematic period of history, it has a special place in the eschatology of the Russian Federation. The nineties were the first decade of the new state that was trying to define its new principles, place in the world and reconcile with the collapse of the state-predecessor. For the Russian Federation, it is a time when new country was born. Moreover, it is a rare period when Russia witnessed rapid democratisation, liberalisation and revision of its authoritarian past. Memory of this period, in a limited sense, can play a role as a myth of

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[26] which, in one way or another, was already known to the general public, as it was made by a renowned Oscar-winning director and had previously been regularly aired in the 90s on federal TV

origin, a time when "a new social contract was conducted," new principles emerged regarding the absence of soviet ideology, and a new political and social order was constructed. Thus, this period of in-betweenness and meaningful emptiness (Clowes, 2011) plays a crucial role not only in collective memory but in national identity as well.

Fundamental economic and ideological changes also characterised this period. As many other countries of Eastern Europe, Russia went through the shift from planned to market-based economy and economic reformations called "Shock therapy", which led many people to poverty. In the same way Russia lost its status as a superpower and lost in the Cold War. Parallelly in the political area, controversies between different groups led to the war with the Chechen Republic and the shooting of the White House with tanks in Moscow in 1993. Reference to these turbulences is often used by representatives of contemporary government not only as proof that "Russia stood up from its knees" but also as a legitimisation of the status quo. This argument can be summarised in a popular phrasing, "Do you want to return to the 90s?".

Theoretical foundation

One of the main arguments of this article is that movies of the nineties, despite many things, contributed to a new principle of integration that Domonkos Sik, in his work, called the negative integration principle (Sik, 2020). This conceptualisation of the social contract theory in the context of sociology is also a very relevant tool in this work, because the 90s were symbolically the period when the principles on which the political subject exists were formulated. The positive principle of the Soviet Union (creation of the most just and equal society on the planet with prospects to communism) was lost and should be substituted. In his work, Sik creates the phenomenological framework of two different principles of integration – positive and negative – referring to Rousseau and Hobbes' contract theories correspondingly. What characterises motivation for positive integrative principles is "hope of overall increase in quality of life, of actualisation of common interest, moral recognition and rationality", while motivation for negative integration is characterised by different fears, such as fear of repressive collective consciousness, confrontation, irreversible risks or global structures. We assume that the difference in these different integrative principles, despite many factors, is also affected by the naturalised image of social order. And in the process of

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this naturalisation, cinematography and discourse around it can play a significant role. Like in Hobbes' formula that life without a social contract is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes, 1651). This interpretative grid grasps the natural state of man as the war of all against all, where man has a natural right to kill without a centralised government. This very idea aligns with the concept of "Smuta", a state of lawlessness that happened in Russian history in a period of interregnum, which is often used as an example of the scariest state of society possible. Thus, we will try to trace principles of negative and positive integration in "two faces of nineties" reproduced by movies as by actors reflecting on them.

Even though this interpretative frame is a central for our paper, analysed movies are also proliferated with many other important symbols and narratives, such as the role of America in self-definition (exemplified by American or Americanised woman in analysed movies). This aspect of the West as a significant other was successfully presented in the study of the negative identity of Lev Gudkov (Gudkov, 2022).

Art as a mediator of collective memory

Cinema, as a cultural medium, does not simply depict the past but actively participates in the contemporary negotiation of its meaning. In moments when collective memory turns to historical experience, it is the present that sets the interpretative horizon for what is remembered and how. In this article, cinema is examined as a mediator of collective memory that contributes to the reproduction and stabilization of shared cultural frameworks of interpretation (Assmann, 1999). This pertains both to the representation of historical events and periods and to the formation of identity structures and legitimising narratives that support existing social orders.

Thus, cinema about the 1990s, whether produced during that period or later, with its lasting popularity and canonical status in contemporary Russia, may reveal more about the present than about the time it depicts - especially when considering the popularity or interpretation of certain films in modern times

It is also important to take genre characteristics into account. While all the films analysed here claim to be a "snapshot of the era," the genres of hyperrealism and drama create a sense of "heightened reality" compared to "lower" genres, particularly comedy and farce. While the former employ a more direct means of representation, aiming to show "how

it really was" and exposing the "underside of the 1990s," films belonging to the latter genre do not have a direct reference to the "reality of events."

Methodology

In this paper, we are going to juxtapose two narratives about the 90s in Russia, exemplified by different movies and how one of them defined the "canonical" reading of this period. We will try to define the stylistic instrumentation that created a collective image of this historical period and analyse which society and what integrative principles are transmitted in two different frames of depiction of the 1990s, and later juxtapose them with two interpretative frames.

Brother

The iconic and classical movie Brother (Брат, 1997) is a central (or one of the central) and defining image of the 90s in the collective memory in Russian cinematography. Its role in the formation of modern Russian culture and identity cannot be overstated. However, the problem lies in the fact that, twenty-five years later, it is still widely discussed. The quotes of the actor of the main character, Sergey Bodrov - "In wartime, never speak ill of your own" - were used even in the context of the start of the conflict in Ukraine (it's important to note that Bodrov died in 2002). The reason for this is that the character of *Brother* (and the actor associated with this role) has become an archetype of the Russian man during the period of humiliation in the 90s, representing the "moral compass" and the example of a virtuous person. It is incredibly important to note that his character in the context of a plot is a bandit who often kills people and breaks the law, but is still remembered as a "lost hero". The reason why criminal can be so romanticised takes roots in the system of virtues created in late soviet society that romanticised heroism on the level of virtues without attachment to any "upper level" of morality. This interesting mechanism was described by Fishman in his book "The age of virtue" dedicated to the study of society of 90s in Russia(Fishman 2022). We can see from the very beginning that the identification referent is not characterised by a set of beliefs that character can hold, has no clear hopes for the change of the social context; he is a "good guy who lives in a bad time."

Without going into the plot details, Brother tells the story of a young man's survival (negative integration principle) in the context of the criminal world of St. Petersburg. Bagrov (the character's name), lost but unbroken, tries to find his place in the new world, navigating the new Russia, which he is suddenly immersed in, having been in the army at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union[27]. Bagrov realises that his brother is involved in criminal activity and sees how unfairly life has treated many around him. The constant conflicts with Caucasians and their "influx" into central cities (all of whom are portrayed as criminals who have taken over markets and terrorise the population) hint at the Chechen War as a humiliation, where Russians are subordinate to uneducated Caucasians (from this film comes the famous phrase "You are no brother to me, you black-ass scum"). All of this creates a general context of chaos and helplessness, where the calmness and restraint of a Russian guy and his love for the country and people stand in contrast to the surrounding world, creating an image of a national hero.

An important aspect is also the anti-Americanism conveyed through the protagonist's girlfriend, who listens to strange music, uses drugs, and asks him for "bucks" (not rubles), while the kind-hearted protagonist resists these foreign temptations, listens to modern Russian poets, and politely refuses her. In one scene, the protagonist, invited to a party by his American girlfriend, meets a Frenchman who doesn't speak Russian, and Bagrov says to him: "Your music is crap, and your America is going to collapse" before leaving the party, rejecting everything foreign to the Russian soul.

Another protagonist's love story revolves around a tram conductor woman who is regularly beaten by her alcoholic husband (a classic image of the defenceless Russian woman in distress). The stylistic contrast between the woman who betrayed Russia and the Russian woman happens not only at the level of their interests but also visually. After the protagonist first makes love to a Russian woman, they lie next to the carpet with a canonical painting of "The Three Bogatyrs" by Vasnetsov (picture 1) while the Americanized woman proposes that they have sex in a dirty drug den (picture 2).

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[27] Most likely he fought in Afghanistan for "a country that no longer exists" - a trope repeated in many films and series like Brigada, where the protagonist seems like a time traveller in a strange world.

Picture 1

Picture 2

This movie is also very one-character-oriented. Mostly we as viewers spent time either with Bogrov and the changing supporting characters or with Bogrov alone. This creates a feeling of deep loneliness in a hostile environment that will sharply contrast with Shirly-Mirly discussed below.

To sum up, the film Brother is a depiction of the 90s as a time of decline, external subjugation, humiliation, criminality, and grief through the eyes of a Russian man who is not

particularly smart or cunning but can tell right from wrong, has a big heart and is thrown into events involving crime, murder, and vices due to the horrible world around him. Stylistically, the film uses grey-yellow depressing colours. This film has a sequel, *Brother 2*, in which the main character travels to America to protect a Russian friend from American entrepreneurs who have cheated him out of large sums of money. The anti-American tropes are strengthened, but the protagonist now plays the role of a "Russian risen from his knees," who at the final scene from the position of power asks the question "What is power?"[28]

Brother not only depicts the 90s but also creates an image of a hero that millions of people could identify with. This film, both on a meaningful and stylistic level, set the narrative and, in some sense, the style of the 90s. Later, in both TV series and films, tropes and images from *Brother* were often used. More than 20 years later, *Bull* (Бык, 2019) came out, in which the protagonist repeats all the same tropes, and the environment is described according to the standards set in Brother. Thus, the "reading of the 90s" became firmly embedded (especially in cinematographical style and narrating mechanisms) and continues to be relevant even today, and the role of films in this image is colossal. The Chechens who have taken over the market, the Americanized woman who serves as a potential love interest[29], the quiet and kind hero (the *Bull* protagonist literally has a "sick heart" as a metaphor for his processing of all the horror around him) - all these images are borrowed from *Brother* or, at the very least, correspond to the canon set by that film with kind survivalist as a main character.

This type of cinema acts as a mediator of cultural memory, constructing an eschatology of the new Russia. *Brothe*, *Bull*, *Zhmyrki* (Жмурки, 2005), *"Brigada"* (Бригада, 1989-2000), and other similar films establish the cultural memory not only for those who didn't live through the 90s themselves but also serve as a "reminder of where we were," "where we came from." For the generation born in the 2000s, these films, which are in some sense classics of modern Russian cinema, are, if not the most important, then certainly one of the most significant sources of collective memory about the 90s. If for the older generation,

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[28] Another quote that leaked to daily language and used by the author of the discussed movie on Shirli-Myrli Yuri Dud at the end of each interview

[29] In *Bull*, the image of the prostitute and the Americanized woman who preferred an American diplomat to a Russian guy unites the archetypal women from both parts of *Brother*

characters like Bagrov, Sergey Bely, and others are figures they can identify with, saying "like them, we survived the 90s," for the generation born at the time of Putin's office, these films serve as a referent to the constructed image of a terrible and frightening past that should not be returned to. The current regime actively uses this image, building itself as a complete opposition to the political regime of the 90s on almost all levels. We can see how negative integration on a societal level can work when the period that is associated with a different political order is depicted as a time of survival. And it is in this context that the documentary film *Shirli-Myrli - The Forgotten Masterpiece of the 90s* was made.

Shirli-Myrli – All People Are Brothers

Shirli-Myrli, made in 1995 (two years before *Brat*), is a comedy farce in which three brothers, unaware of each other's existence, meet under different circumstances. Each of them has different prejudices, as each believes they belong to a different ethnicity. One brother considers himself Russian, is anti-Semitic, desires the restoration of the Russian Empire, and hates the Gypsies. The second brother identifies as a Jew, a composer who hates "Gypsy-like music" and style of life (Csiganshina) and considers Russians to be alcoholics and layabouts. The third brother believes he is a Gypsy who wants to protect his community (Tabor) through UNESCO, fight for the rights of the "dying Gypsy nation," and sees Russian chauvinism and imperialism everywhere. In the end, all three brothers unite and move past their stereotypes, and the final scene, showing many more twin brothers of the main character (played by the same actor) in China, America, Africa, and so on, hints at the central message of the film - all people are brothers. The context of the 90s is depicted as a time of poverty and ruin, but also a time of celebration, freedom, happiness and a period of unification.

The police, once always associated with the state apparatus, are shown as bumbling, and their plans to arrest one of the brothers always fail. The main police officer's desire to execute everyone, or his statement on TV, "according to the new presidential order, all guilty will be hanged," contrasts sharply with a phone call to the American ambassador or "Radio Free Europe," showing liberation from the totalitarian regime. There are essentially no antagonists in the film, apart from the criminals, who are also portrayed humorously, but in the end, even they reconcile. As in the *Brother*, the main character is also a criminal who

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steals the Diamond called "The Saviour of Russia," and in that sense, the criminal-hero aligns with the virtue system discussed above.

The film uses bright colours, and all the characters are kind and joyful people searching for their place in the new world. One of the brothers is marrying an American woman (breaking the stereotype of the Americanized woman). The wedding of a Russian man and an American woman becomes a place where all nations unite, and they all joyfully sing together, which completely contradicts the narrative of the "dark 90s." In the end, all the *Rossiyane* (in the movie widely used a new term widely used in the 90s for "Russians" - Rossiyane instead of Russkie - highlighting belonging to Russia as a state but not ethnicity) cheerfully fly to the Canary Islands, while the Turks will rebuild New Russia in exchange for a stolen diamond. The film is full of references to images and ideas from Russian society in the 90s, but the description of these ideas and the transitional period differs dramatically from the narrative set by *Brat.*

It is important that movie ends not only with a direct message of brotherhood of all people on earth (the final scene is a photo of Earth) but also with "rebuilding," creating new state where everybody reconciled and wait for future (in a final scene every character including antagonists are on a one plain altogether singing and flying to Canary Islands, waiting while Russia will be rebuild). This refers to a positive principle of a social contract where unification is based on hope and creation in comparison to security and fear (Sik 2020). This movie portrays Russia in the 90s as a country in a very turbulent and crazy state, but a state that tries to live anew and have a hope for a brighter future, as conveyed in a phrase of the President played by the director in this movie, saying: "We knew that only a miracle could save us, and it happened."

What is also remarkable is the fact that Shirly-Mirly is filled with superstars of Soviet Cinematography, theatre and was a high-budget production of its time, while Brother is an independent movie with relatively new actors. Despite its temporary popularity, Shirli-Myrli never became a part of the "classics," unlike the films of Balabanov (*Brat, Zhmyrki,* etc.), and Yuri Dud's documentary film directly addresses this difference. He not only invited the people involved in the film's production to discuss its creation but also to talk about their memories of the 90s.

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Perception of the past – a case of one documentary

In the documentary by Yuri Dud, the interviewees split into two distinct groups. The first group claimed that Shirli-Myrli was a portrayal of the madness of the 90s, for which the actors felt ashamed, admitting that they took part in it due to financial necessity. This group described the 90s as a time of external dominance by the U.S., a time of humiliation and hunger, with the film either being an embarrassment or a misunderstood critique of the 90s, rather than a celebration of freedom and friendship.

Although the main theme of the film is brotherhood, when discussing the film, representatives of this group either reinterpret it, like Igor Ugolnikov, who claims that the West is turning us away from the idea of brotherhood or that brotherhood is important within the country, or shift the central focus to the negative aspects of the 1990s.

For example, one of the actresses, who is also the director's daughter, says that her father, "observing the chaos of the 1990s and the trauma we all had to go through, became even more convinced of his pro-state ideology." Thus, the chaos of that period is contrasted with the modern order established by a strong state.

The second group described the film as reflecting the spirit and joy, and opportunities of the 90s, a time that now evokes nostalgia rather than fear - a sense of something lost. These actors do not deny the fact that these times were complicated and sometimes even dangerous, but still in the context of comparison with 2020 (the year the documentary was recorded) or from a value-based perspective, the actors either denied that the 1990s were terrible or emphasised that this period offered more freedom and opportunities.

Relatively the same data is shown in the research among the Russian population conducted by Levada Centre. This research showed that the majority (62%) say that in the 90s there were more bad than good things, with lawlessness/bandits/criminal (24%), poverty (20%), empty stores (14%) and anarchy/chaos (12%) in the first place. While those small portions that could remember/know good things about the 90s were: more opportunities to earn money, open a business, increase income (6%); youth (5%), free education, medicine, vouchers to a sanatorium, housing (4%), freedom (3%) and only 2% answered faith in future (Levada Centre, 2020).

Conclusion

Thus, it can be said that these two films not only reproduce contrasting frameworks for perceiving the 1990s and fixing their image in collective memory but also create principles by which the further political development of Russia can be legitimised. Brother and other similar films depict the 1990s as a state of war of all against all, where survival depends either on one's own strength (Brother) or on loyalty to a group, most often embodied in a criminal gang (Bull, Boomer, Brigade).

In line with Fisher's ideas on the "age of virtues," these films emphasise grassroots interpersonal loyalty, virtues, or the qualities of a "strong man" rather than universal values or positive social practices. The protagonists in these films survive rather than attempt to change the world or create something new, and the only hope for improving the situation lies in personal success (as in *Zhmurki*, where the successful gangsters ultimately become government officials). When interpreting this period, actors who support this view of the 1990s as accurate often appeal to the state as the force that put an end to this anarchic chaos. This framing is also reproduced at the state level, where the 1990s serve as a period of "Smuta," once again proving the necessity of strict social order as the only safe and viable option, thereby forming a new conditional social contract - not "for the sake of..." but to ensure that "never again...".

In contrast, an alternative reading of the 1990s, while not denying the chaos and unpredictability of the social order, creates a "colourful picture of dark times," as one of the actors from Shirley Myrli put it. Even if it does not offer well-developed integrative principles, it at least promotes the principles of equality, undistorted communication between different conflicting groups (as seen in the resolution of the ethnic conflict between brothers), and the actualisation of a common interest in reconstructing Russian society on shared foundations. More than 30 years later, we can now see which principles of integration dominate modern Russian society, where the canonical reading of the 1990s aligns with the image constructed by films like Brother.

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Challenging norms and power dynamics through a feminist lens | Normák és hatalmi dinamikák kritikai vizsgálata feminista perspektívából

Gemeda Odo Roba

Protective Aphorisms, Customary Laws and Domestic Violence against Women in Guji Society, Southern Ethiopia

Abstract

This article investigates the interplay between protective aphorisms, customary laws, and domestic violence against women in Guji society, southern Ethiopia. The study employs a qualitative approach, an explanatory research design, and data production techniques such as in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. The findings of the research reveal that protective aphorisms and customary laws intersect and function together in shaping societal norms that prevent domestic violence against women in

Fieldwork Photo with key one of the informants at Me'e Bokko Sacred Natural site, 2024

the society. Despite prevailing patriarchal dominance in Guji society, preventive aphorisms, along with customary law, have been used to deter violence against women in marital relationships. The aphorisms and customary laws about women's sacredness and clan as a haven of women's protection are characterized by honoring, respecting, protecting, empathizing with, and serving as profound means to address domestic abuses, specifically in marital relationships. Thus, the protective aphorisms and customary laws widely used to protect and honor women should be reinforced by stakeholders to prevent violence against women, blending it with mainstream state regulations on gender equality and women's empowerment. To prevent violence against women and advance their empowerment in society, it is vital to intensify advocacy initiatives that emphasize preventive aphorisms and customary laws in this direction.

Keywords: aphorism, customary law women, domestic violence, Guji society, Ethiopia

Introduction

Violence against women is one of the gender-based forms of violence that affects women's emotional, psychological, physical, and economic wellbeing across the world. According to a report by the World Health Organization (WHO), violence against women is a widespread and severe problem that affects women of all ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, and educational levels throughout the world (WHO 2021). This report shows that intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and harmful practices like female genital mutilation are all forms of violence against women that have devastating physical, emotional, and psychological consequences. Domestic violence against women is a form of violence perpetrated by intimate partners and other family members, and manifested through physical, psychological, sexual and economic abuses (Kapoor 2000; WHO 2021). Kapoor further stated that domestic violence is the most prevalent yet relatively hidden and ignored form of violence against women and girls. Similarly, a study by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) found that violence against women is often underreported and remains largely unaddressed by the concerned authorities (UNOD 2019). Domestic violence disproportionately affects women, with women being more likely to experience severe forms of violence and abuse compared to men (Kalokhe et al. 2017).

Globally, one in three ever-partnered women has experienced physical and sexual violence perpetrated by an intimate partner, as reported by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021). In Ethiopia, domestic violence against women in general and intimate partner violence in particular continues to be a major challenge and a threat to women's wellbeing, getting a bottleneck to their empowerment (UN Women Ethiopa 2022). According to the 2016 Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey, 1 out of 3 (34%) ever-married women aged 15–49 experienced spousal violence in the form of emotional, physical, and sexual violence by their intimate cohabiters or husbands in Ethiopia (CSA and ICF 2016).

The data indicates that domestic violence against women has been a critical problem in the country. Similarly, the research conducted on intimate partner violence among pregnant women in Guji Zone, showed that the prevalence of domestic violence against women has been intensifying due to biased gender narratives in Guji society (Worku, Lami, and Arero 2022). This study demonstrated that biased gender norms resulted in the

prevalence of domestic violence against women in society.   Likewise, other studies conducted in Guji society reported that patriarchal dominance restricted women to subtle rights, rituals, and ceremonial roles, with limited engagement in public affairs (Debsu 2009; Tadesse 2019; Wodajo 2021).   Even though studies have witnessed the prevailing subordination of women and evident cases of domestic violence in Ethiopia and Guji society in particular, there was no prior empirical evidence indicating how Guji society strives to prevent domestic violence against women through protective local aphorism, and the customary law of the Gada system. Aphorism is a concise, pithy statement that expresses a fundamental truth, principle, or insight in a given cultural context (Geary 2005), which has also been widely used in Guji society in the form of proverbs and sayings. By protective aphorism, I mean an aphorism that advocates protection for gender equality, human dignity, identity, and empowerment. Customary law refers to a set of laws that have developed over time within a particular community or society, based on longstanding traditions, practices, and norms (Diala 2017). Unlike statutory law, which is formally enacted by legislatures, customary law evolves locally and is often unwritten, passed down through generations.

The scholars uncovered mythical narratives and folktales that have bottlenecked women's public engagements in Guji society, witnessing how women have been portrayed as weak, inferior, and subordinate social groups in society (Debsu 2009; Tadesse 2019). However, these studies have missed an investigation into how cultural elements like protective aphorisms and customary law are used to prevent domestic violence against women in society, in spite of the prevailing patriarchal dominance that confines women's role merely to ritual and ceremonial activities. As a result, the conclusion of these studies narrowly emphasized patriarchal preeminence and its impacts on women's lives, overlooking the contributions of protective aphorisms in preventing violence against women, particularly domestic violence. Aphorisms, which are concise and memorable statements conveying wisdom and a moral lesson, have been used in Guji society to pass on indigenous knowledge and principles support human dignity to the next generation, educate and inspire people, and indoctrinate basic social information in culturally patterned ways. Customary law is usually made by senior elderly experts and promulgated publicly at the Me'e Bokko sacred natural site to the assembly of the Guji society every eight years (Gemeda 2025; Jemjem and Dhadacha 2011). The promulgation of this law addresses women's empowerment, respect

for human rights, protection of the environment and wildlife, among others. However, the contribution of protective aphorisms and customary laws to preventing domestic violence against women has not been investigated in society. Investigating how protective aphorisms and customary are used to transmit moral lessons and protective values to members of society to prevent domestic violence against women helps to understand and enhance community-based approaches to preventing domestic violence against women in society. Thus, this article analyzed succinct protective aphorisms along with customary laws, which are widely recounted among Guji society with the aim of preventing domestic violence against women in southern Ethiopia.

Methods

Description of the Society

This study was conducted in the Guji society of southern Ethiopia, where the Gada system has been actively practiced since time immemorial. The Guji society is one of the subgroups of the Oromo nation living in the southern Oromia region and speaks the Oromo language, the most widely spoken language in Ethiopia. The society also lives in some enclaves of the western parts of the Bale Zone and Wondo District of the West Arsi Zone in the Oromia regional state, and around Dilla, Gamo Gofa, Wondo Genet, and Lake Hawassa, out of two Guji zones. The Gada system is an indigenous institution that orders the entire socio-political, economic, cultural, religious, and ecological experiences of society (Asmarom 1973; Hinnant 1990). It is mostly described as an indigenous complex system of ranking, authority, and decision-making consisting of a successive generational structure that rotates every eight years among five culturally configured 'parties', locally known as *Baalli Shanan*, in Guji society context (Hinnant, 1990; Jemjem and Dhadacha, 2011). These five parties are known as *Muudana, Halchiisa, Dhallana, Harmuufa, and Roobale*. However, the rest of the parties tolerantly wait for the cyclical rotation of their tenure by performing all the prerequisite rituals and passing through rites, rituals, and anticipatory socialization processes. It is a globally recognized intangible cultural heritage, as endorsed by UNESCO in its 11th intangible world heritage meeting held in Addis Ababa in 2016.

Based on mythical narratives and genealogical classification, Guji society is categorized into three phratries: Uraagaa, Maatti, and Hookkuu. This classification traces back diachronically to Guji's origin myth in Girja Land and to Gujo, the ancestor of Guji society. Gujo, the first ancestor of Guji society, had three sons and one daughter named Uraago, Maatto, Hookku (Tulloo), and Adaadaa, respectively. Over time, the names of the three phratries—Uraagaa, Maattii, and Hookku—were derived from the names of Gujo's three sons. According to Guji elderly informants, subsequent subdivisions such as Haloo Mokkonna (Alaaba), Weessitu, Ottuu, and Sheelloo were developed over time from the former three phratries of Guji society, each with its own distinct and mythical background. The emergence of the latter sub-divisions out of the three phratries, as stated by elders, is related to the fission of the former phratries as a result of Guji's wide territoriality and the enclaves of settlement formed in different pocket lands. In general, all three phratries of the Guji have an independent *Abbaa Gadaa* (Gada leader) who oversees the overall affairs of society, but the Gada leader of the Uraagaa phratry is thought to be the premier of all Guji Gada leaders because of the *Uraago* myth of primogeniture. Despite the decline of the Gada system in many areas of the Oromia region, it still functions in Guji society.

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed a qualitative approach with an explanatory research design, employing in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs) as primary data collection techniques. A purposive sampling technique was used to select informants with extensive knowledge of cultural expressions in the Gadaa system, specifically aphorisms, customary laws, and gender-based norms. A total of fifty-eight (58) informants participated in the study, including fifteen Gadaa leaders (aged 50–80), twelve women (aged 40–65), and seven youth (aged 18–30). Additionally, two focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted—the first with nine participants and the second with ten—comprising community elders, Gadaa leaders, women, and youth. In-depth interviews were also carried out with four informants to gather detailed insights into cultural aphorisms, customary laws, and gender norms. Key informant interviews were held with Yuubaa members, who are esteemed senior figures with deep experiential knowledge of the

society. Secondary data from published documents were also reviewed to support the analysis.

Fieldwork spanned five months (June–October 2024), with data collection continuing until saturation was reached—where responses from the informants became mostly repetitive—rather than being limited by participant numbers. The decision to employ data saturation without predetermining the number of participants is guided by the qualitative approach adopted in this research, which aligns with the nature of the study problem. The researcher encountered no ethical, linguistic, or logistical challenges during data collection. The researcher conducted all interviews and FGDs in Oromo and subsequently translated them into English. Before the writing-up session, the collected data were regrouped under the themes. As soon as the data collection started, the sorting and grouping of ideas under similar themes were simultaneously conducted. Finally, the data were presented thematically by the manual coding process and qualitatively through the description.

Result and Discussion

Aphorism and Customary Law in Guji Society

Aphorism, as already explained, is a concise and pithy statement that expresses a fundamental truth, principle, or insight in a given cultural context. It is culture-specific and used contextually in various social settings to uncover reality and instill principles. For example, the English aphorism 'not all that glitters is gold' serves to remind that appearances can be deceiving - just because something may seem valuable on the surface doesn't mean it truly is. This succinctly makes the point that not everything that shines is precious. In a similar vein, the Guji society has a rich tradition of using aphorisms to exchange indigenous knowledge, belief systems, norms, values, and critical cultural information among its members and to pass these down to future generations. They are widely used in day-to-day conversation and interaction with the aim of advising, encouraging, teaching, criticizing, and teaching individuals about dos and don'ts in society. Aphorisms, brief statements that convey profound realities, have long been utilized as a means of wisdom communication by educating, inspiring, socializing, and guiding individuals in society. Specifically, protective aphorisms serve as a tool for conveying complex ideas and moral lessons in a concise and

memorable manner, reinforcing social norms, human dignity, equality, ethics, and cultural identity. This fosters a sense of solidarity and continuity among community members in Guji society. In this article, some protective aphorisms and customary laws are analyzed to understand how they intersect and channel to shape people's thoughts and actions in contributing to preventing and mitigating domestic violence against women in post-marriage.

On the other hand, customary law is another indigenous practice widely used in Guji society to protect women and girls against violence in public and domestic spheres. The nature of customary law in Guji society is complex, addressing a plethora of social, cultural, economic, political, environmental, and biodiversity concerns, aiming for social harmony, sustainable peace, sustainable livelihood, and environmental sustainability. This law is usually made by senior elderly experts in the Gada system who reached apex structural tower of the system, that is known as Yuuba stage. It is made and publicly promulgated among the Guji assembly that is gathered together once every eight years to attend the Gada power transition at Me'e Bokko sacred natural sites. The customary law in general is not only made but also amended with new promulgation based on the context and possibly observed gaps. Specifically, the law of women and girls (seera dubartii fi durraa) is one of the forms of law that is made, amended, and promulgated by Yuuba elders at Me'e Bokko sacred natural sites with the aim of disseminating laws to . According to this law, women and girls are sacred bodies that deserve protection and empowerment. The common customary promulgations about women and girls' protection announced at Me'e Bokko include, women and girls are sacred bodies to be respected, protected and empowered, abusive insults, harassment and abuses of women and girls are strictly forbidden, and sacredness of spouse bed (woyyummaa rifanoo) among others. The detailed data about the role of customary laws in protecting women and girls from domestic violence is presented under section 3.3.

Women as Sacred Bodies

In Guji society, a deeply ingrained belief system views women as sacred entities, providing them with protection and care amid the overarching dominance of patriarchy, which mostly limits them to domestic roles at homesteads. The practice of assigning sacred status to natural elements, animals, and persons is an ancient belief system intertwined with myths,

realities, and customary practices that govern relationships among people, the natural world, and the supernatural power known as Waaqaa in Guji society. Consequently, various living and non-living entities are considered sacred due to the deeply ingrained cultural norm of sanctifying objects and beings on earth and in the universe. This belief system, which regards women as sacred also known as "*dubartiin woyyuu*", is rooted in the cultural practice of sanctifying diverse entities based on socially constructed realities. The term *"woyyuu"* in the Oromo language signifies sacredness, while "*dubartii*" specifically refers to women. Within Guji society, terms like "woyyuu" and "*woyyummaa*" are commonly used to exhibit profound respect, admiration, and mythical powers associated with revered individuals or objects as inviolable principles. In this context, sacredness encompasses a revered or consecrated body set aside for cultural or religious purposes, symbolizing respect, holiness, and special significance that transcends the mundane world, embodying mysticism, extraordinariness, and eternal qualities (Elizabeth, 2006; Pickering, 2011 and Rose, 2010). Even though sacredness is commonly understood as representing holiness, veneration, eternality, and omnipresence within the spiritual domain, it also holds secular connotations, suggesting an entity that is revered, given special status, and viewed with awe due to its profound and esoteric nature. In this context, *woyyuu* serves as an example of such an entity, being regarded as set apart, respected, and revered for the exceptional esteem it holds among the Oromo people of Ethiopia overall, and particularly within the Guji society (Ashenafi and Sena, 2017; Marit, 2009; Talilee, 2018). In the society, both spiritual and secular connotations of sacredness are shared, elaborating on the culture of sacredness. This culture tends to be explained in an aphoristic and respectful manner, guiding the ways of thinking of the people. It should be noted, however, that not all cultures of sacredness are explained aphoristically. Some are articulated in witty statements with significant emphasis, such as the aphorism "*dubartiin woyyuu*." While this phrase may seem simple on the surface, it succinctly encompasses the principles of women's protection, respect, care, and consideration.

In Guji culture, the aphorism "*dubartiin woyyuu,"* which translates to "women are sacred bodies," holds significant importance for women wellbeing. This aphorism stresses the reverence, protection, consideration, and care that are extended towards women in the community, recognizing their essential roles as nurturers, caregivers, and fundamental

pillars of society. The cultural belief in viewing women as sacred beings is rooted in the perception of men as incomplete without women, attributing an esoteric quality to women that commands respect, protection, and care due to their roles in fertility, reproduction, and motherhood. Within Guji society, it is widely believed that a man's life is considered incomplete until he is married, particularly in his late adult years. Marriage symbolizes a transition from incompleteness to wholeness for men, legitimizing their social status and bestowing them with social respect and honor. According to elderly informants of the community, even a man who may be wealthy, educated, and successful in terms of social and economic standing is perceived as incomplete if he remains unmarried. Women are thus regarded as the primary source of men's social reputation, deference, and greatness within Guji society.

According to the prevailing belief system of the Guji culture, women hold a sacred status rooted in their roles as life-givers and nurturers. They are viewed as symbolic representations of the earth, from which valuable minerals are extracted and various natural features sprout. This sacredness attributed to women holds both mythical and symbolic significance, embodying qualities of fertility, wisdom, and strength. Their bodies are revered as sacred vessels that warrant honor and protection. The aphorisms "*dubartiin woyyuu*," encapsulates the reverence for women as life-givers and caretakers deserving recognition, awe, care, and support within society. As expressed by one elder informant, "*dubartii malee jireenni hin jiru. Sababa waaqi woyyummaa isaanii kenneefi dhiirtille isaan malee hin toltu, manni isaan hin jirrelle duwwaa fakkaata*," which translates to "There is no life without women. For God inherently bestowed sacredness upon them, men are clumsy without them, and the absence of women makes a home feel empty." This perspective underscores the vital importance of women as the bearers of creation, deserving of utmost respect for their capacity to bring new life and illuminate society. The role of women in Guji society is of utmost importance, as they are tasked with caring for their families and upholding the well-being of the community, which designates them a special status of sacredness. The culture of women's sacredness is deeply ingrained in Guji society, with a strong emphasis placed on the pivotal role of women in maintaining harmony and balance within the community. Their contributions are recognized as essential to the overall well-being of society. Over time, the sacredness of women has been enshrined in the customary laws of the Gada system, ensuring

its protection and upholding. This sacred power is believed to be inherently bestowed upon women by God, bestowing them with the nature of life-giving. In Guji society, there is a prevailing belief that sacredness is a mythical power and status granted by God to individuals, with the sacredness of women considered as a divine grace from God. This belief has been incorporated into the customary laws of the Gada system, becoming a dominant mode of thought in society. On the contrary, the Gada system's rituals and rites of passage are publicly performed, while those at the family level are done domestically. These ceremonies cannot proceed without the presence of women, who are considered sacred individuals, imperative hostesses, and bearers of good omens in every ritual. According to one informant, the statement "*Gujiin dubartii malee hin jilatu*" translates to "Guji never perform rituals and/or rites of passage in the absence of women." Despite their limited involvement in public affairs, political decision-making, and administration, Guji women hold a significant sacred status that places them in an indispensable role during ritual recitations and passage rites. The Guji elders emphasize that this belief system, coupled with the innate esoteric qualities of women related to reproduction and nurturing, contributes to the consideration of women as sacred beings.

Customary Laws and Women Protection

The informants noted that it is strictly forbidden by customary law to insult one's wife with abusive and harmful words like "nannaqa" among the specific words stringently banned with due attention. Nannaqa is a local term that is used to indicate someone who is hedonistic, sexually enthusiastic, and voluptuary. According to the customary law of Guji society, if a husband insults his wife with this abusive word, she has to report it directly to the Gada leaders, skipping steps of bringing cases to her husband's relatives. This happens because of the seriousness of the case and the hateful implication it indicates. The punishment imposed on perpetrators of these abusive insults would be very serious and take different forms. The elderly informants noted that apart from this word, any abusive words used against women and girls in Guji society are strictly forbidden and denounced, and when they happen, they are followed by punishments such as retribution, social ostracism, and corporal punishment in the form of beating depending on the nature of a case. It is also customarily declared that women and girls deserve protection from all members of society without any preconditions.

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The violations of these protections are usually followed by the punishments just to enforce the laws on women's protections. During the focus group discussion with community elders at Me'e Bokko, the discussants stated that "dubartii hin miidhanuu santi seera, dubartiin woyyuu santi seera" which translates to women/girls should not be harmed according to the customary law, and women/girls are sacred bodies that deserve due protective measures. On the other hand, the informants stated that dubartiin qaban qabaa qabdi, which translates to any abusive and harassing behavior against women/girls leads to punishments and social banishments.

The customary laws of protecting women/girls and the belief system about women/girls' sacredness are inextricably intersected and reinforce the protection of women together. The informants stated that the customary law of women's protection and the belief system about women's sacredness are the same coin with two faces in Guji culture. This comprehensive body of regulations encompasses various facets of socio-cultural, political, and economic life of society in general and concerning women and girls in particular. According to this legislation, women are entitled to societal care, protection, respect, and due consideration in both private and public domains. The recurring promulgation of women's sacredness at the Me'e Bokko Assembly every eight years has given rise to the adage "dubartiin woyyuu," which serves as a guiding principle for addressing women's issues within Guji society. Through continuous reinforcement over the years, this law, in conjunction with preexisting beliefs, explicitly condemns all forms of physical violence against women, such as slapping, beating, and other forms of abuse. Additionally, it denounces sexual abuse, including harassment and coercion, as well as psychological abuse in the form of intimidation and verbal aggression. Any transgression of these laws not only violates the sacredness of women but also contravenes the endeavors to safeguard women's rights and well-being.

In cases of violence against women and the violation of their sacredness, it is believed that the mystical power inherent in women's sacredness acts as a form of retribution, manifesting through accidents, bankruptcies, illnesses, disasters, the death of offspring, and detrimental effects on social life. This form of retribution, known as "*Kajjuu dubartii*," is believed to be inevitable for those who abuse women, invoking the wrath of God in various ways. Socially, individuals identified as bearing the curse of women due to their

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mistreatment of them are ostracized as cursed individuals. The fear of divine retribution and social banishment serves to safeguard women from domestic violence within this culture of sacredness. Concerning breaches of women's sacredness in the context of customary law, there exist established procedures for presenting cases to relevant bodies and modes for dealing with and addressing them. In instances where a woman is subjected to abusive mistreatment by her spouse, she typically presents the case to her husband's relatives, often turning to his brothers for resolution, as elaborated in the subsequent section.

Clan as Protective Refuge for Women

The aphorism, *'intalti ta worraa gosaati'*, which translates to 'women and girls belonging to family and clan', is widely and commonly narrated in Guji society. The Oromo language word '*intala*' used in this statement contextually refers to both women and girls in the stud society. It is evident that boys and men also belong to their families and clans due to the consanguinity bond of kinship. However, there is no aphorism used to communicate their belongingness to their relatives, as is the case for women. Despite the common experience of reckoning one's kinship line to parents and relatives, Guji society succinctly uses aphorisms to demonstrate the belongingness of women and girls to their family and clan, emphasizing their protection and care from potential harms in both domestic and public spaces. This aphorism typically operates within kin-based and affinity-based networks of relationships in society to prevent harassment and abuse of women and girls.

In Guji culture, there exists a custom known as "*araara durraa*," which is typically arranged after marriage as a symbol of marriage approval and social harmony between the bride's family and the groom's family. The concept of "*araara durraa*" involves harmonizing the new bond between the bride's family and clan and the groom's family and clans, signifying social approval of the marriage. On "*araara durraa*" day, the bride's family conveys the message that they are offering the bride not just to the groom but, more importantly, to his family and clan with due consideration of their keen support and care for the bride. The bride's families entrust the responsibility of protecting, respecting, and caring for the bride to the groom's family and clan in post-marriage times to keep the bride from any potential domestic violence perpetrated by her husband. Following this event, the bride's family maintains a respectful and distant connection with her since they have formally handed her

over to the groom's family as part of the marriage agreement and their responsibility to take care of her. In Guji culture, the relationship between in-laws is sacred, with both families showing mutual respect and awe towards each other. Once the marriage is finalized, and family harmony is achieved, the bride is considered to belong to the groom's family and clan. If she faces mistreatment, harm, or abuse from her husband, she has the right to report the case to her husband's father, his brothers, and clan members to get solutions in a step-by-step manner. And also, the husband's father, the groom's brothers, and their respective clans are socially responsible for offering instant assistance and support to the bride in her time of need.

However, when the abuse is severe and remains unresolved at the initial stage of the husband's brothers and father's dealings, the wife appeals to and seeks assistance from the clan members (*gosa/fira*) of her husband. These members carefully assess the situation and take the necessary correctional actions. During the deliberation process, the husband receives repeated and stern advice from his father, brothers, and clan members to treat his wife lovely, carefully, and respectfully. If he fails to acknowledge his mistakes, disregards the counsel, and continues to mistreat his wife, a final decision is made to discipline him through a practice known as Kutaa firaa, which involves the physical punishment of beating him on his back. This form of physical punishment involves using a switch or birch tree with leaves to beat the husband who has committed an offense against his wife in abusive ways. The husband is beaten on his back, specifically between the neck and buttocks with birch of small and tiny trees. His brothers, father, and other clan members gather at his home, lay him down on his belly, remove his clothes except for his trousers or shorts, and proceed to beat him. Once positioned half-naked on the ground outside, they begin beating him with a switch, asking him during the beating if he will refrain from repeating his wrongdoing. They also question him on why he has mistreated, harmed, or abused his wife and refused to heed the advice of his relatives.

Subsequently, they inquire if he intends to repeat such actions, to which he typically responds in the negative, promising to treat his wife with love and care. Upon receiving the assurance from him amidst punishment, the beating ceases, and they proceed to offer advice to prevent any reoccurrence of violent behavior against his wife. According to the Guji elderly informants, the decision to use physical punishment against a husband for

mistreating women is considered a last resort, reserved for those who persist in their harmful actions and violence towards their spouse. Furthermore, the informants emphasize that the decision to discipline the husband serves two primary objectives: firstly, to correct his behavior and action towards his wife, and secondly, to ward off potential negative consequences stemming from their discord that is believed to call for God's wrath upon them. This insight suggests that the sacredness of women is upheld through a belief system and customary laws that dictate corrective actions against husbands who abuse and mistreat their wives in society.

This hub of kin-based women protection network is an indigenous social structure in a society and family where girls are safeguarded and cared for by their relatives, kinship ties in family of orientation, and where women are protected and cared for by their family of procreation, including their father, brothers, and clan of her husband. This system often involves principles of collective responsibility and mutual support among family members to protect women from harm, violence, or discrimination. This can include providing emotional support, shelter, financial assistance, or intervention in cases of abuse or mistreatment in Guji society. The concept, "*intalti ta worraa gosaati*" underscores the importance of strong familial bonds and the role of extended family members in ensuring the well-being and safety of women in society. The act of reporting domestic abuse and mistreatments as a method of addressing violence with a sense of urgency is a common practice in Guji society. A common proverb in society encapsulates this idea, stating, "*Worra gowwaa dubbiin fira/gosa geetti, fira gowwaa dubbiin yaa'a geetti*," which translates to "the only foolish family matters that are presented to the clan, and the only foolish clan matters that are presented to the Gada council." This proverb serves as a reminder for all family members and clan members to resolve disputes at the family level or within the community with critical look and urgency. The informants reported that failing to protect women from mistreatment, abuse**,** and harassment at the family level before polarization of the case showcases the wiseness, maturity, level-headedness, wisdom, love, and composure among the family (extended family) members where the mistreatments and violences happen.

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Change and Continuity in Protective Aphorisms and Customary Laws

In Guji society, adherence to and respect for aphorisms that aim to prevent violence against women have undergone both changes and continuities across generations. As for the continuity in adherence to aphorisms, the elders and adults uphold the cultural values and strive to preserve them, emphasizing the significance of respecting women, showing empathy towards them, and abstaining from violence. The younger generations are also instilled with these values from an early age, which helps in preventing violence against women in society. The elder informants noted that the transmission and perpetuation of values and protective aphorisms that contribute to women's empowerment have been recounted in society with the purpose of educating the younger generation.

However, there have been changes in the way the younger generation views and adheres to these aphorisms when compared to adults and elders. When discussing the observed changes in the young generation of Guji society regarding their interest in learning from elders and living accordingly, one elderly informant stated, "*Mucaa kiyya amma barri badeera. Nami ammaa wa nurraa barataa hin jiru. Inninuu dura yokaan mana amantaati, yokaan mana barumsaati yokaan ammo sibiila baxxicha kana qofa haxaawaa oola.*" This can be translated as "my son, the time is getting worse. There is no one who aspires to learn from us. The young generation either goes to school or church, or sweeps the surface of flat steel all the time with their fingers." The informant is referring to the mobile phone when mentioning flat steel, indicating that people spend most of their time on it. This suggests that with the influence of modernization, global trends, and increased access to information through technology, some young individuals prioritize individualism and personal freedom over indigenous values, belief systems, and customary practices. This change could result in a decrease in adherence to protective aphorisms and customary laws that deter and mitigate violence against women. The informants noted that there were instances where the younger generation in society reinterpreted the protective aphorisms of women's sacredness and customary laws as outdated, and interpreted them in a manner that aligned with their own personal beliefs and perceptions out of existing social values. Depending on how these aphorisms and customary laws are understood, their interest to uphold these practices are limited, thus, this can weaken efforts to prevent violence against women in Guji society. The informants observed that although there have been shifts in how the younger generation

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adheres to and respects aphorisms and customary laws regarding women's sacredness, the family and clan's role in protecting women continues to contribute to the prevention of violence against women in society. This is achieved through the enduring emphasis on core values such as respect, reverence, honor, empathy, and non-violence toward women. Despite the degrading and changing indigenous ways of doing things, protective aphorisms and customary that inculcate women's sacredness appear to be persistent and consistent in society because of their deep embedment in the belief system and customary law of Guji society. However, following the expansion of the modern education system, modernization, urbanization, globalization, mainstream faiths, culture contacts and the proliferation of information communication technologies, the tendency to adhere to protective aphorisms and obey customary law and its punishment is being slightly degraded from time to time. It is essential for society and all stakeholders to adapt and find ways to ensure that these protective aphorisms and customary laws are upheld and understood by the younger generation to prevent violence against women since aphorisms and customary law in Guji society strongly denounce all forms of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse against women.

Conclusion

The research findings demonstrate that, despite patriarchal dominance and the portrayal of women as subordinate groups, Guji society has a well-established culture of utilizing protective aphorisms and customary law as means to deter domestic violence against women in the post-marriage period. These protective aphorisms and customary laws are intersected and deeply rooted in the local belief system and are not only practiced as normative cultural practices but also serve as guiding principles on how individuals should treat women in marital relationships. The implications of these findings suggest that the indigenous approach to addressing post-marriage abuses and harassment of women involves promoting protective aphorisms widely accepted in society as a way to prevent violence against women, while also advocating for their protection, awe, empathy, and respect. The aphorisms *'dubartiin woyyuu' and 'intalti ta worraa gosaati'* are not merely descriptive accounts, but rather represent profound and culturally significant modes of

thought that contribute to the protection of women from physical, psychological, emotional, and sexual abuses, harassment, and mistreatment.

The consideration of women as sacred bodies through the aphorism *'dubartiin woyyuu'* represents a profound and esoteric conceptual thought that guides efforts to understand women's nature and enhance their well-being in multidimensional ways. Therefore, this thought needs to be re-imagined and reconsidered as a comprehensive approach that honors, respects, and shows empathy towards women, ultimately aiming to prevent violence against them. The protective aphorisms, along with customary laws, offer an emic perspective that assists in alleviating the challenges faced by women in their daily lives within society, particularly in their domestic lives. Approaches that are emulated, targeting the prevention of violence against women but not aligned with community culture and ways of thinking, do not yield the expected results. Conversely, indigenous modes of thought, characterized by honoring, respecting, empathizing with, and awing women, serve as alternative, profound, and potent methods to address domestic challenges that women encounter if consolidated and capitalized on. These approaches should be strategically reinforced and supported by all stakeholders to effectively mitigate such challenges, blending them with mainstream state regulations on gender equality and women's empowerment.

Despite their resilient nature and persistent traits, protective aphorisms as a mode of thought in society are not pristine due to the rapid pace of globalization, urbanization, modern education, cultural contact, and increased access to information through technology. As a result, all stakeholders, including local community, Gada custodians, the government, scholars, policy makers and others, need to collaborate to strengthen and enhance these protective aphorisms and customary laws. They should be viewed not only as elements of culture but also as a means of combating domestic violence, and societal beliefs that contribute to the prevention of violence against women in Guji society. Thus, the government should prioritize policy attention toward reimagining and exploring the contributions of indigenous knowledge and local modes of thought, specifically protective aphorisms and customary laws that have not yet been tapped but can benefit humanity and promote societal transformation and prevent violence against women. In general, promoting protective aphorisms and customary laws that uphold respect and protection for women and support

gender equality in Guji society could serve as a successful strategy in preventing domestic violence and advancing gender equality in society. Finally, it is essential to conduct further research and advocacy efforts in this direction to prevent domestic violence against women and support their empowerment in Guji society, Ethiopia.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent, including consent to participate, was obtained from all informants involved in the study

Availability of data: The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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Ana Luiza Toaldo Nardi

Care as Relational Ethics and Resistance: Lessons from Creole Seeds

Abstract: This study examines how the Creole Seed Guardians use care as a political and cultural tool to navigate their reality in Anchieta, Santa Catarina, Brazil, using qualitative methods grounded in ethnographic and anthropological approaches informed by dialectical materialism. Findings show that their work with seeds is rooted in ethical, affective, and intergenerational ties that link them to land, biodiversity, food sovereignty, and family memory. Rather than profit-oriented, their practices emphasize care as a relational and political force that sustains ecological resistance and everyday life. The study also reveals gendered dimensions of care, highlighting women's roles in transforming traditional responsibilities into spaces of autonomy, knowledge production, and collective action. Overall, the Guardians cultivate values and identities that challenge dominant agricultural models and contribute to broader debates on agroecology and rural resistance.
Keywords: Creole Seed Guardians, care, gender, resistance, ethnography, Brazil, peasant movements.

Introduction

In recent decades, the expansion of agribusiness and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) has intensified debates around food sovereignty, biodiversity, and rural autonomy. Against this backdrop, alternative agricultural practices have emerged that resist capitalist logics and technocratic models of production. This article examines one such movement, the Guardians of Creole Seeds in Anchieta, Santa Catarina (Brazil), whose members cultivate, exchange, and protect Creole Seeds as an ethical, political, and ecological practice of care.

By focusing on the Guardians' daily practices and affective relations with seeds, this study explores how care operates as both a cultural and political tool through which smallholder farmers navigate structural pressures imposed by agribusiness and state policies. The movement's opposition to GMOs, while explicit, reveals deeper tensions surrounding the normalization of industrial agriculture, the commodification of life forms, and the erasure of traditional ecological knowledge.

Theoretically, the article draws on environmental anthropology and feminist theories of care to conceptualize seed guardianship as a multispecies practice grounded in affective and relational ethics. Following Deborah Bird Rose's notion of responsibility as a situated response to entangled lives, care here emerges as a relational ethic that grounds ecological knowledge in everyday practice rather than abstraction. This perspective situates the Guardians' activities within broader anthropological discussions of care, resistance, and multispecies coexistence, foregrounding how affect and labor intersect in the making of alternative agrarian futures.

Anchieta provides a particularly rich setting for this inquiry. Recognized by federal and state law as the National and State Capital of Creole Seeds, respectively, the municipality is a key site for understanding the persistence and transformation of traditional agricultural systems in southern Brazil. The Guardians' work preserves agrobiodiversity and strengthens rural identity through intergenerational knowledge transmission, in-situ conservation, and community exchange networks (Campos, 2007; Gofi, 2017; Swiderska et al., 2022).

Methodologically, the study adopts a Historical-Dialectical Materialist framework, viewing the Guardians' practices as products of historical contradictions and material conditions that articulate class struggle, power relations, and labor as core to cultural

transformation context (Netto, 2011). It also incorporates an ontological understanding of affectivity (Espinosa, 2010; Sawaia, 2000) to examine how emotional and relational dimensions underpin social resistance.

Ultimately, this article argues that the Guardians' seed practices constitute more than a form of agricultural resistance, they represent a living archive of care, heritage, and ecological ethics. Through the embodied labor of maintaining Creole Seeds, these farmers "stay with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016), crafting alternative futures rooted in sustainability, community well-being, and food sovereignty. By analyzing how care functions as a political and cultural tool in this context, the study contributes to broader discussions on socio-environmental transitions and the pursuit of sustainable rural development aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goal 2: Zero Hunger and Sustainable Agriculture.

Method

This study draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted among the Creole Seeds Guardians in Anchieta, Santa Catarina, southern Brazil. The research seeks to understand how seed guardians mobilize care as both a political and cultural tool to navigate the contradictions of industrial agriculture. Ethnography provides an embodied and interpretive approach to exploring how these relations are experienced, narrated, and sustained in everyday life.

Fieldwork was carried out over fifty days across multiple visits between guardian families, twenty of whom were identified as seed guardians. Immersed in their daily routines, (planting, harvesting, milking, cooking, and sharing meals), I sought to apprehend how seeds are integrated into the temporal and affective rhythms of life. Seeds appear as presences woven into domestic and ecological practices. Their meaning surfaced laterally, in the midst of gestures of care, hospitality, and routine labor, what Haraway (2008) describes as "becoming-with."

The methodological design combines participant observation, in-depth and semi-structured interviews, and walking conversations. Participant observation involved living with families for two to three days at a time, taking part in both domestic and agricultural tasks. Informal encounters, afternoon gatherings over *chimarrão*, visits among neighbors, and communal meals, proved essential for understanding how ecological knowledge circulates and how care is performed and shared.

Walking methodologies (Duedahl & Stilling Blichfeldt, 2020; Minkkinen, 2021) were employed to trace how the Guardians relate to their fields, gardens, and landscapes. Walking alongside participants, I asked them to guide me through their cultivated areas and narrate their histories of planting, seed exchange, and land care. These movements revealed how spatial practices are entwined with emotional geographies and sensory memory, each path mapping a form of belonging and ecological intimacy.

Interviews with guardians, local leaders, and members of the Women Peasant Movement complemented these observations. These conversations, held in homes, fields, and community spaces, centered on themes of land inheritance, gendered labor, intergenerational knowledge, and the politics of seed exchange. Together, they illuminated the moral and affective worlds in which the Guardians' practices are embedded.

Analytically, the research follows a historical-dialectical materialist framework (Netto, 2011), situating these practices within the broader contradictions of agrarian capitalism and class struggle. This perspective highlights how forms of care are entangled with material conditions and social reproduction. At the same time, drawing on an ontology of affectivity (Espinosa, 2010; Sawaia, 2000), the analysis attends to the emotional and relational dimensions that sustain collective resistance. Methodologically, this dual lens allows the study to move between structure and sensibility, tracing how economic conditions and affective attachments co-produce alternative agricultural worlds.

Access to the field was facilitated through existing networks, particularly the Women Peasant Movement, whose members introduced me to the Guardians and their families. As an outsider, my presence was initially marked by the boundaries typical of first encounters, which sometimes limited access to more intimate seed practices. Yet, it was through peripheral participation, helping in kitchens, walking between fields, or joining informal gatherings, that I came to perceive the subtle ways care materializes. These moments of lateral engagement made visible how ecological relations are sustained through ordinary gestures rather than formalized rituals.

All participants were informed of the study's purpose and consented to take part. To ensure confidentiality, personal identifiers have been omitted or altered. The analysis is informed by a relational ethics of care, one that mirrors the Guardians' own practice of responsibility toward human and nonhuman others. In total, I visited 22 farmers, of whom

20 were recognized as seed guardians. Additionally, I conducted interviews with 11 individuals whose work is connected to the movement in various ways. Rather than presenting these guardians through strictly categorical or analytical lenses, I describe them as they appeared to me: through the lens of our shared affective encounters, or more precisely, through how they affected me. It is through this relational and situated perspective that I now introduce them.

R. – A white woman peasant, wife, mother and grandmother. While she currently focuses more on domestic responsibilities and health care (she had cancer diagnosis), she continues to cultivate seeds in small plots for both self-consumption and the sale of surplus. Her husband supports her in this work, for years they also sold orchids. Though she speaks sparingly, her words are precise and deeply expressive, particularly in articulating the connection between seeds and health production.

Z. – A white woman, a peasant, mother and grandmother who managed her property independently for years and remains its primary decision-maker (her husband worked outside the farm). She is articulate, politically aware, and a powerful advocate for the seeds. Z. speaks confidently in public and engages skillfully in discourses around political struggle and gender equality, embodying leadership within the movement.

C. and her husband – C. is a 53-year-old white peasant woman, mother, wife, and recently a grandmother. She joined the Women's Peasant Movement (MMC) in 1998. Together with her son, she works with dairy cattle and actively cultivates creole varieties, though they also use hybrid seeds to meet the demands of milk production. Her husband, now retired from urban employment, became more involved in seed cultivation afterward, actively seeking knowledge beyond what he inherited generationally. C is a sharp and perceptive leader, she analyzes situations subtly, mediates without imposing, and articulates collective needs with precision. Practical and action-oriented, she speaks clearly and confidently, unaffected by unspoken tensions or social judgments. Her husband is charismatic and enjoys conversation, contributing to the warmth and openness of their household.

Literature review

Historical contextualization

The Creole Seed Guardians movement is rooted in specific historical contexts and mobilizes local knowledge in response to the pressures of agribusiness and agricultural transformations. The ethnographic focus is the municipality of Anchieta, located in the far west of Santa Catarina, Brazil, encompassing a territorial area of 232.348 km^2. The region is characterized by a predominantly rural landscape, with people living mostly in small villages, where agriculture constitutes the primary economic activity. (IBGE, 2022).

The daily practice of working with Creole Seeds in Anchieta, Santa Catarina State, Brazil, is embodied in organizations formed by rural workers, many of whom are now Creole Seed Guardians. Currently, there is no exact number of guardians or guardian families in Anchieta, Santa Catarina. In an interview, CooperAnchieta estimated that around 50 families are involved in the movement, while SINTRAF provided an estimate of between 20 and 30 families, with approximately two to three individuals per family. In percentage terms, based on the most recent census (IBGE, 2022), it is estimated that only about 2% of Anchieta's population identifies as Creole Seed Guardians. It is important to note that many farmers use Creole Seeds on their properties without necessarily identifying themselves as guardians or engaging in activities aimed at the formal recognition of this practice.

Rooted in trust, built on historical relationships, these individuals not only revitalized the Rural Workers' Union but also established a network of associations, institutions, and events, such as National and State Fairs. These initiatives have provided materiality to the practices they developed in rural areas, particularly in the effort to preserve and rescue seeds.

The Union of Workers in Family Farming (SINTRAF) faced an existential crisis in 1995/1996, grappling with financial difficulties and dwindling member participation. It was within this context of vulnerability and introspection that the rescue of Creole Seeds emerged as a central solution to the challenges faced by family farmers. The Green Revolution, with its emphasis on commercial seeds, chemical inputs, and integrated production models, had created a dependence that raised critical questions for the farmers. The specter of rural exodus hung in the air as farmers contemplated the potential loss of

productive capacity due to technological dependence and the imposition of corporate control over their production processes (Canci, 2002; Locatelli, 2019).

The recognition of the health and environmental risks associated with pesticides and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) further fueled the movement towards alternative agriculture, this growing awareness, combined with the union's crisis, propelled SINTRAF, in partnership with the Small Farmers' Movement, to intensify their efforts in rescuing Creole Seeds. In 1997, a grassroots meeting solidified this commitment, placing the defense of nature and the production of healthy food at the core of their strategy. (Canci, 2002; Locatelli, 2019).

An intensive articulation driven by social organizations with the region's peasantry focused its actions on the genetic and cultural recovery of local varieties. In other words, an activity focused on the region's Creole Seeds, since most rural workers never completely stopped using and working with local and creole varieties. However, many had forgotten or abandoned practices and seeds passed down from previous generations, such as those introduced by their parents/grandparents (Gofi, 2017).

The movement's strength lay in its ability to harness this latent knowledge and integrate it into a cohesive strategy for agricultural autonomy. With the support of Technical Assistance and Rural Extension (ATER), MPA, and SINTRAF, and guided by individuals like agrarian technician Adriano Canci, groups of rural workers focused on Creole corn seeds, corn emerged as a spontaneous demand, reflecting the farmers' realities and its role in animal protein production, contributing to the project's sustainability. The number of Creole Seed Guardians saw significant growth, with eight varieties identified in 1998, expanding to 33 Creole corn cultivars planted by the 2001/2002 harvest. (Canci, 2002; Gofi, 2017).

A technical team provided guidance through seminars, meetings, and technical visits, focusing on identifying, rescuing, and managing local seeds, as well as facilitating the redistribution of seeds among rural workers, consciously emphasizing the cultural aspects and traditional knowledge associated with the seeds. The cultivation of Creole corn, in particular, proved strategic for family sustenance, offering benefits such as reduced operating costs, lower pesticide use, increased income through exchange and commercialization, and stronger collaborative networks. (Canci, 2002; Campos, 2007).

The Creole Seed Guardians movement in Anchieta is characterized by its intricate web of interrelationships with institutions and organizational agents, highlighting the symbolic and political dimensions embedded in its practices. Key entities playing a central role include SINTRAF, the Small Farmers Movement (MPA), the Peasant Women's Movement (MMC), and educational institutions such as the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC) and the Federal University of the Fronteira Sul (UFFS), seed fairs and festivals also serve as crucial spaces for exchange, resistance, and cultural strengthening.

Public policies have been instrumental in solidifying the seed rescue process, the Own Seed Production Program, launched in 1997 through a partnership between SINTRAF and the City Hall, along with the 1st State Festival of Creole Corn in 2000, significantly bolstered the movement. These initiatives enabled the recovery of various Creole Seeds (corn, vegetables, wheat, soybeans, tomatoes, beans) and even Creole animal breeds like pigs. (Canci, 2002; Campos, 2007; Locatelli, 2019). In a further step towards sustainability, SINTRAF established a seed bank in 2014/2015 to store varieties, offering an accessible resource for farmers who had lost their seeds or temporarily interrupted production.

The movement's success in identifying and rescuing Creole seeds and associated traditional knowledge has resonated beyond the local community, the project played a crucial role in strengthening and ensuring the reproduction of corn and other crop varieties, revitalizing traditional exchange practices that had become limited due to increasing dependence on commercial seeds. (Canci, 2002, Campos, 2007, Gofi, 2017, Locatelli, 2019).

By mobilizing local knowledge, fostering collaborative networks, and strategically engaging with public policies, the Guardians have not only preserved invaluable genetic diversity but also reinvigorated traditional practices and strengthened the social fabric of their communities. Their ongoing efforts offer a compelling model for resisting the dominant paradigms of agribusiness and for building more resilient and equitable food systems.

Seeds and Creole Seed Guardians

Unlike conventional farmers who often operate within the logic of industrial agriculture, focused on productivity, standardization, and dependence on commercial seed systems, Creole Seed Guardians engage in practices rooted in biodiversity and a sense of collective responsibility, aiming autonomy of their land, practice and believes. To understand what

makes someone a *Guardian* is to recognize that this role is not defined solely by the act of producing seeds, but by a broader ethic of care, transmission of generational knowledge, and commitment to sustaining agrobiodiversity as a cultural and political heritage.

Within the vast spectrum of agricultural practices, seeds hold a unique dual significance: they are both biological entities and cultural artifacts. Seeds are the foundation of agriculture, yet beyond their physical and genetic dimensions, seeds embody centuries of human interaction with nature, shaped by labor, memory, and care. In this sense, seeds represent not only the beginning of agricultural cycles, but also the preservation of historical, ecological, and symbolic legacies (Berlan, 1999, Sudhakar et al., 2020). This intergenerational continuity is vividly reflected in the narratives of Seed Guardians in Anchieta, who often recount how their Creole Seeds were handed down from their parents and grandparents.

Traditional farming systems, particularly those grounded in peasant and Indigenous knowledge, have long cultivated landraces, that is, dynamic, locally adapted plant varieties developed through conventional breeding practices rooted in cultural traditions and natural selection. These landraces, to this research, the subtype known as Creole Seeds, are the result of human-mediated evolutionary processes involving mutation, hybridization, migration, and selection (Jarvis & Hodgkin, 1999; Villa et al., 2005; Kaufmann, 2014). Through the repeated practices of sowing, harvesting, and selecting seeds, farmers have historically enriched the genetic diversity of crops, creating reservoirs of resilience and adaptation that modern breeding systems often overlook or attempt to control through biotechnological interventions.

Differently, genetically modified (GM) seeds or organisms (GMOs), are plants that have been genetically engineered to exhibit specific traits not naturally found within their species. According to Koul (2022) and Low et al. (2018), these seeds are developed through the insertion of foreign genes from unrelated species, enabling novel characteristics such as pest resistance, herbicide tolerance, improvising productivity. Key characteristics of GMO-based systems include an emphasis on quantity and homogeneity, a reliance on machinery, a systemic organization of distribution and broad production (consequently monopolized production), significant political power, and patent dominance by large corporations.

In traditional farming systems, the interplay between biological and anthropogenic factors significantly shapes evolutionary processes (Jarvis & Hodgkin, 1999). Creole Seeds, then, are living archives of place-based knowledge. Their evolution through peasant management systems resists the sterility imposed by hybrid and transgenic varieties produced by corporate breeding programs. The genetic diversity embedded in Creole landraces enhances resistance to climatic and biological stress, ensures food security, and sustains nutritional quality (Altieri, 1999; Frankel et al., 1998; Newton et al., 2011). Just as importantly, their cultivation reproduces cultural identity, familial bonds, and territorial attachment.

Importantly, to speak of the farmer here is to invoke more than an occupational category. It also raises questions of gender, territory, and relationality, dimensions that became visible during fieldwork. The term *Guardian* though not philosophically elaborated by the farmers themselves, emerges as a narrative device. Rather than an identity constructed through abstract reflection, it is formed through lived practices, daily interactions with soil, plants, animals, time, and memory. One key element in the consolidation of this movement is the recognition of the central role of women, whose forms of knowledge, memory, and labor are crucial to seed conservation and transmission, which is connect with the MMC and SINTRAF.

The term Creole Seed Guardian seems to have been applied primarily by social movements (MMC and SINTRAF) as a way to give narrative form and political meaning to the everyday practices and values of peasant life. Rather than emerging organically from the self-descriptions of the farmers themselves, the term functions as a symbolic construction that frames their relationship with seeds, land, and community within a broader discourse of resistance, care, and agroecological ethics. In this sense, it offers a language through which the lived experiences of peasants, often rooted in affective, intergenerational, and place-based relationships, can be recognized, legitimized, and politicized.

Therefore, for these farmers, seeds function not only as tools of agricultural production or symbols of autonomy, but also, perhaps more profoundly, as expressions of resistance and relationality. While their practices often begin with the defense of independence from corporate seed systems, at a deeper, often unspoken level, their commitment is grounded in an ethic of care, integration, and *becoming-with*.

However, Anchieta also reflects a painful reality: this guardianship is fading. The movement is slowly dying, as the current seed guardians grow old and few young people are stepping in to carry forward this care. This ongoing erasure, of knowledge, practices, and lifeways, raises urgent questions about the forces driving this decline and what it means for the future of seed sovereignty. And yet, despite this, the guardians continue. Their persistence amidst disappearance is not only an act of care but also of resistance.

Care

The relationship between human and nature passes through care, a collective responsibility essential to sustaining the environment. It is a collective responsibility that necessitates awareness, education, and active participation from individuals and communities. To fully understand this concept, it is crucial to explore the meaning of care, its implications for the world, and the power dynamics at play in the environmental sphere. Applying a care framework to the Creole Seed Guardians reveals the affective, ethical, and embodied dimensions of seed stewardship often overlooked in technocratic or market-driven surrounding agrobiodiversity. (Boff, 2013).

This approach foregrounds care as a situated, relational practice that actively resists extractive logics, emphasizing values such as maintenance, reciprocity, and the transmission of intergenerational knowledge. By centering care, we redirect the analytical focus from abstract models of conservation to the lived experiences and moral economies that shape how Creole Seed Guardian communities sustain seed diversity amid environmental and political pressures,

In this context, the concept of care serves as a critical lens for examining the interdependencies and relational dynamics that underpin the well-being of individuals, communities, and institutions. Care, encompassing both a practical application and an ethical orientation, challenges individualistic constructs of agency by highlighting vulnerability, reciprocity, and responsibility (Tronto, 1993; 2007). Such an understanding posits care as central to comprehending the politics of everyday life, especially in contexts of social inequality, crisis, and transformation. Consequently, care transcends being merely an affective practice, it evolves into a socio-material arrangement that influences who thrives and the conditions under which they do so (Guimarães & Hirata, 2020).

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By focusing on care, we gain a broader and more powerful perspective on how Creole Seed Guardians interact with land, plants, and their communities, which postulates these elements not merely as resources but recognizing them as kin, entangled in a web of reciprocal obligations. This anthropological engagement with care has evolved beyond solely interpersonal relationships to include multispecies, ecological, and epistemic forms of interdependence, all of which are central to Creole Seed practices (Rose, 2012; Haraway, 2016).

Studies on care often center around three main aspects: the position of care ethics in relation to justice, the breadth of its scope and applications, and the association of care with gender/women (Wells & Gradwell, 2001). Some research focuses on care within the private sphere, emphasizing family, personal, and health relationships. In contrast, other studies view care as a moral framework that extends to public and political relevance. In this context, I argue that care is a complex, multifaceted, and contextual concept, as articulated by Martin, Myers, and Viseu (2015). They suggest that various political commitments inspire distinct ethical frameworks and forms of intervention, which contributes to care's production. Therefore, there cannot be a singular definition of care or a definitive vision of what it might evolve into.

I would like to highlight the historical significance of Gilligan's (1982) work in refining conceptions of care that emerged from the subsequent justice-care debate. However, Tronto's work (1993, 2007) aligns more closely with an integrative and ecological perspective of care, which this literature review defends.

Feminist theories provide valuable insights for tackling various socio-ecological crises, they do this by positioning care as a normative guideline. Gottschlich and Bellina (2016) underscore that feminist perspectives have introduced care as a pivotal concept within sustainability discourse, emphasizing its significance for both individuals and society. Feminist approaches illuminate the unique characteristics of care work, which involves taking responsibility for others and committing consciously to their well-being. These perspectives advocate that care should be understood as a foundational element of social ethics. The ecological issues driven frequently by the focus of short-term economic gains and political interests, not only threaten the preservation of nature but also disrupt the livelihoods of populations (Gottschlich & Bellina, 2016).

Clement (1996) highlights that caring is evident in contextual decision-making, the maintenance of relationships, and the social construction of the self. Warren (1998) views care as a crucial moral value, essential not only for the stability of society but also for any comprehensive conception of ethics and ethical decision-making. Moreover, Warren (1998) further suggests that the capacity to care is fundamental to human interactions: both with ourselves and others, as well as with nonhuman entities, and is indispensable for any ethical reasoning. She argues that sensitivity to care is a requisite for any ethical framework.

The framework of care is especially relevant in late modernity, where neoliberal logics have increasingly privatized and devalued caregiving labor (Fraser, 2022). This theoretical orientation toward care enables a reconceptualization of value, labor, and affect outside dominant economic and political paradigms. When applied into an agriculture reality, care is a powerful tool to see the value and labor of these small farmers, here, the Creole Seed Guardians, as equivalent or 'more profitable' (in a sustainability scale) in a parallel narrative of dominant economic. The framework of care enables us to see Seed Guardians not simply as producers of biodiversity but as custodians of cultural memory and ecological integrity, whose practices are grounded in deep temporal, relational, and spiritual connections to place. (Shiva, 2016, Haraway, 2008)

With this in mind, care is defined based on the notion of caring for others. This appears as an attitude of concern (showing solidarity and concern for others), and the attention, concern and zeal for others, connected to the involvement and affection that one has with them (Boff, 2005); as a result of relationships, not determined by rules, principles or prescriptions (Kuhnen, 2010); and as the ability to identify what is good for oneself and for others, and to do so, acting towards the continuity of human life, revealing actions with reciprocity/future donation (Silva; Torres, 2019). Tronto (2007) details this definition by understanding care as an effort intrinsic to our species that involves maintaining, continuing and repairing our 'world' to facilitate ideal living conditions, this world involves our bodies, ourselves and our environment.

These concepts allow for a nuanced understanding of how care is not only experienced on an individual level but also embedded in larger social structures. By exploring these interfaces, Guimarães and Hirata (2020) open avenues for connecting consubstantiality, the inherent link between entities, and the mercantile and relational

configurations of care. In essence, their insights reveal that care is deeply intertwined with social dynamics and power relations, highlighting the need for a critical examination of how these factors shape caregiving practices and experiences. This comprehensive approach underscores the complexity of care as it relates to broader societal issues, ultimately advocating for a more equitable understanding and practice of care within various social contexts, in this case, environmental issue in the Brazilian agriculture realities.

Tronto's theory (1993) aligns with the discussions presented by Guimarães and Hirata (2020) by framing care as an *ethics of care.* This perspective emphasizes care as a social practice that is contextually situated rather than merely a collection of universal rules or principles. According to Tronto, "Care as a political concept requires that we recognize how care – especially the question who cares for whom? – marks relations of power and reveals the intersections of gender, race, and class in caregiving" (p. 169, 1993). This understanding positions care as a critical lens for examining societal structures and power dynamics.

Expanding beyond the social dimensions of care, Rose's ethics of multispecies responsibility and Haraway's concept of 'staying with the trouble' become crucial for articulating a practice of care that intricately binds humans, plants, soils, and ancestral knowledge in ongoing, co-constitutive relationships. Haraway (2016) emphasizes 'response-ability,' highlighting the capacity to respond and be accountable within entangled worlds. Similarly, Rose (2012) conceives of care as a vital practice of sustaining life in the face of death, extinction, and dispossession, thereby extending its scope beyond purely human concerns.

This theoretical framework finds practical instantiation in the practices of Creole Seed Guardians. Rose's articulation of 'shimmer', the felt vitality of life in its connective, ephemeral forms, helps illuminate how these Guardians experience and enact care as something beyond utility: as an aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual relation to the more-than-human world. Furthermore, Donna Haraway's notion of 'making kin' across species offers a generative way to understand how Seed Guardians construct care networks that include not only human descendants but also plant lineages, soils, and landscapes. In this comprehensive framework, care transcends a private emotion, manifesting instead as a world-making praxis that shapes ecological and social realities. (Rose, 2012; Haraway, 2016)

In contrast to extractive agricultural models rooted in colonial logics, the practices of Creole Seed Guardians embody what Rose (2012) might term an ethic of ecological coexistence. This approach signifies a refusal to sever life from land and a profound commitment to nourishing future worlds amidst legacies of displacement. Guided by Haraway's (2016) call to 'make oddkin' and Rose's emphasis on care as an intergenerational, multispecies obligation, Creole Seed Guardians actively uphold this principle through their attentive and reciprocal relationships with seeds. These seeds are not merely biological entities but are recognized as carriers of memory, lineage, and ecological futurity.

Ultimately, this expansive understanding of care, rooted in both social and ecological ethics, resonates with Boff's (2013) perspective, which posits care as intrinsically woven into the evolutionary process. This evolutionary process translates into a requirement of life, permeating the entire process of producing and reproducing human existence. Caring thus appears in personal, social, and loving relationships, which connect with care-concern and care-precaution. He articulates care as a fundamental aspect of being, advocating for a shift from a fragmented, individualistic society to one grounded in compassion and interconnectedness.

Using that discussion, and pursuing an understanding in the field of care action, caring can be understood in four phases, which always have moral dimensions, namely: '*caring for', caring about, offering care and receiving it*. '*Caring for'* something is in itself a moral attribute characterized by attention and recognition of needs, however, it is more than altruism, compassion or recognition, care incorporates the notion of responsibility, the satisfied execution of one's duties and the fulfillment of the needs that we strive to meet (Tronto, 2007). By using this approach, we recognize that the world is made up of individuals entangled in networks of interests and committed to meeting the needs of other people around them, that is, in the political structure intertwined in all human ties, whether in human-human relations or in human-nonhuman relations.

However, as noted by Nelson and Power (2018), discussions surrounding care within environmental debates remain relatively underdeveloped. Nevertheless, some ecological economics initiatives are actively working to bridge this gap, often through case studies that examine women's interactions with the environment.

Warren's work (1998) illuminates how big scale agricultural practices adversely impact the stability, diversity, and sustainability of indigenous and peasant cultures and ecosystems, specifically highlighting rainforests and deserts. The issues noted include water contamination from pesticides, unethical treatment of livestock and workers, as well as ecological degradation from soil erosion and habitat destruction. In contrast, Wells and Gradwell (2001) argue that Caring-Sensitive Agriculture (CSA) is a framework that prioritizes care as a fundamental value, advocating for a more conscientious and responsible approach to agricultural practices. This approach reveals how the concept of care can shape personal values and influence daily actions to promote sustainability.

In this way, Martin et al (2015) articulate that care encompasses "an affective state, a material vital doing, and an ethico-political obligation." In alignment with this perspective, Corrêa and Bassani emphasize that care involves both responsibility and action. They further expand on the concept of environmental care, contending that the relationship between individuals and their environment can be framed through a lens of responsibility, which is recognized as a dimension of human potential and a fundamental element of environmental education. This understanding captures the essence of a unique and irreplaceable endeavor, wherein pro-environmental values and behaviors are nurtured to enhance the well-being and quality of life for both present and future generations.

In order to do this, by associating discussions on care with a focus on the ecological issue and familiar agriculture, Corrêa and Bassani (2015) support the understanding of environmental care as linked to a need for meaning/significance that connects the individual and the collective, the present and the future, bringing values of conservation and extension of life on the planet. That is, as discussed by the theoretical basis of socio-historical psychology, meaning is capable of providing structure for the reproduction and permanence of actions within certain activities, as in this research, seed production, which connects with food production, and connects with health production, which is abstracted from caring for others and for the planet, as well as nourishing the essence of farmers for the continuation of their praxis (Sawaia, 2011, Espinosa, 2010). By understanding care in this way, we take care of what we like, and it results in 'feeling good', connecting not only the production of health, but also of life, beyond yourself, to others, collectively, in society.

In conclusion, the scholarly landscape reveals a multifaceted understanding of care, engage with the concept as both a practice and a manifestation of relationships, urging consideration of its broader context. Notable works by Warren, Tronto, Puig de la Bellacasa, Rose and Haraway emphasize the importance of care in relation to nonhuman entities, while Boff (2005, 2013) and Corrêa & Bassani (2015) encourage examination of environmental care through intricate lenses of meaning production, associating environmental education into the discussion. By incorporating perspectives from Sawaia (2011) and Espinosa (2010), these discussions emphasize the role of affectivity in constructing and understanding care, thereby enriching the discourse surrounding environmental care and responsibility.

Building on feminist and decolonial perspectives, the analysis shows how Creole Seed guardianship embodies a distinctly political and practical form of earthcare. It aligns with anthropological views of care as a multispecies practice, positioning guardians as more than agricultural workers. They enact an ethic of sustained, place-based attentiveness to more-than-human life. It ensures ecological continuity while preserving cultural traditions. Ultimately, seed guardianship functions as ecological stewardship and cultural resistance through everyday acts of selection, sharing, and storytelling.

Discussion

The concept of care is not only crucial for understanding gender complexities in rural areas but also serves as a central theme in analyzing the relationship between humans and nature, as well as among humans themselves. Care embodies the capacity to respond to structural violence within the Brazilian agrarian context, fostering the development of mechanisms for resistance and resilience through ecological action. This multifaceted relationship between individuals and the 'natural' world encompasses social, cultural, and structural dimensions, with the dynamics of these connections, profoundly shaping the identities of those involved. In this section, I explore how care operates as a political and cultural tool within the practices of the Creole Seed Guardians.

In this article, care is understood not merely as a moral or emotional disposition, but as a relational, practical, and political act. Within the practices of the Guardians of Creole Seeds, this concept of care emerges materially in their relationship with food, seeds, and the land. It is consciously associated with health and intimately linked to mental and emotional

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well-being. In this context, care becomes a way of reclaiming agency and restoring life amid structural violence and ecological degradation. This connection is articulated in R.'s reflection:

> R.: *"It's health. [...]. Like in 2003 I was diagnosed with breast cancer. And then, I had to change a lot of my diet, right? So, at that time you would go and look for organic food, something, it was very difficult, right? Because in those years, it was that era of poison and poison and poison, right? And I thought, 'no, but you know, I'm not well, but I'm going to have to find a little strength for myself and produce things for myself to eat, and they have to be healthy....'"*

In this sense, R. not only associates Creole Seeds with healthy food, but also utilizes the cultivation and consumption of these seeds as a symbolic tool of self-care, a form of care that is never solitary, but always extends to others. Her family became part of this productive and dietary focus, illustrating how individual healing becomes a shared and collective process. The understanding of native seeds as health begins with a biological necessity and expands into emotional, ecological, and relational dimensions. Through storytelling, tradition, and a renewed relationship with the land, R. cultivates what Haraway (2016) terms a *becoming with,* an ecological and integrated mode of existence that connects self, world, and kin through the sign of the seed.

In this way, when asked C., *"What is the meaning of seeds for you?"*, she replied simply: *"Healthy food. Food without poison."* This statement encapsulates a deeply held perception: Creole Seeds are recognized not only as food but as a superior and renowned food source compared to commercially available alternatives. They are perceived as producers of wholesome nourishment (healthy foods), serving as a counterpoint to "*poisonous"* options. The term *"poison"* carries a connotation of profound harm, illness, damage, and destruction. By delving into this meaning, native seeds are understood as the antithesis of *"poison"*, representing health and healing. They also function as a tangible strategy to navigate a world increasingly dominated by a homogenous supply of unhealthy foods, often associated with transgenic crops and pesticides use.

Consequently, Creole Seeds gain broader significance, encompassing the very lives and livelihoods of these Guardians. These seeds have historically been integral to the existence and identity of these individuals, permeating their meals, labor, and familial and

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social relationships. The intrinsic connection between farmers and Creole Seeds fosters an intersubjective relationship that evolves into a subjective one. This bond facilitates the ongoing construction of networks, underpinning the existence of these individuals and, consequently, the unique way of life of this community. This connection becomes evident in a quote from J., when asked: "What meaning do creole seeds have for you?" He responded: *"For me, it's... it's everything, right? I do everything to save them, because for me, it's... it's life. [...] And you go there and plant it and then you see it produce, it's very gratifying."*

Similarly, Z.'s response to the same question reveals a sense of mindfulness and care in the relationship:

"Life, life. Because when you prepare the soil, you just put the seed there in that prepared soil, and, and you water it today, and in a few days you go there, you see it germinate and you see it grow, you follow its entire growth, right, because you have to have someone accompanying it, you realize how much life it has and how much life it brings to other people too. [...] This is work that brings you life."

These reflections express what can be understood as the essence of affectivity, defined by Sawaia (2000, p. 2) as "the tone, the emotional color that permeates human existence," composed of the emotions and feelings that mediate the relationship between the individual and the world, and which precede conscious action. Focusing on these emotional tonalities, affective mediations shape internal subjective organizations that influence how individuals relate to place, people, and things. These experiences encompass physical, sociocultural, psychosocial, and symbolic dimensions (Sawaia, 2011).

In the symbolic field of seeds, J. and Z.'s accounts reveal the material and relational foundations of meaning in their lives. Their narratives embody a lived sense of purpose tied to seeds, not only as food or agricultural resource but as a source of vitality and existence itself. This concept is closely linked to the *senses*, which guide individuals and groups within their cultural and socio-historical contexts (Aguiar & Ozella, 2006).

Both affectivity and the sense of each group influence their actions and perceptions of the world. Life and its production, therefore, appear here as the positive power proposed by Espinosa (2010), which leads these individuals to respond and produce positive affects, which allow them movement and transformation that develops beyond them. That drive movement and transformation, extending beyond the individual. This dynamic reflects the

dialectical relationship between individual and society, manifesting as social action, that is, 'I am doing my part, for the future, for the food/health of future generations'.

Still in dialogue with this perspective, understanding seeds as life, and integrating them into the ongoing process of becoming, positions the relational field within an ethical framework. This involves care and responsibility in the production of life, the cultivation of seeds, and the temporal-spatial processes that this care inhabits. That is, it reflects an embodied ethics rooted in sharing, participation, and a situated presence in the world. In this context, care moves toward an ethics of multispecies responsibility and "response-ability", as articulated by Rose (2012) and Haraway (2016).

Care is also deeply expressed through the act of sharing, of knowledge, perspectives, and lived experience. This is evident in the words of R., who emphasizes the urgency of disseminating this understanding:

> R: *"I would like you to take this to people as you are researching it, and to show them that this is very important, you need to take care of the seed, because the seed is life, which is everything, and without food, we cannot survive, so the seed is life and you will produce [...]."*

The desire expressed by R. to share with others suggests a commitment to continuing the movement and work with seeds. For R, seeds appear not only as material entities but also as forms of information, or better yet, as messages to the future. From an analytical perspective, the consequence of this sharing is the formation of networks and webs that propagate an ethical and caring worldview, one grounded not only in the construction of health but also in the strengthening of social ties. In this framework, care functions as a connective force, a relational bond between individuals. Even when these connections are not rooted in deep personal relationships, there remains a clear intention to foster the possibility of harmonious coexistence in society, for everyone, with universal access to food, health, and well-being.

Another intersection with a sense of care is the production of mental health. Mental health can be understood according to the World Health Organization (2022) as an integral part of human health and well-being, characterized by the mental state of well-being that supports the ability to deal with stressful life issues, as well as the ability to be resilient to do so, also including collective skills regarding the response to the world in which we live.

Mental health extends beyond the absence of mental illness, existing on a continuum that encompasses the individual's actions and reactions within social, cultural, and clinical contexts (WHO, 2022).

The debate is fruitful and mainly requires an integration of the understanding of health, and fundamentally the production of this associated with well-being and quality of life. The guardians understand this feeling related to the work with seeds, by integrating them within a complex and broad ecosystem. For example, Participant R. compares the experience in rural and urban areas, based on her reality as a peasant, in which she understands the benefits implicit in contact with nature in comparison to the current alienation of work sunk in a valorization of the rational and disconnected from the whole, which causes an emotional incongruence with reality. R says:

> "[...] *There are many who are, who are coming back, because they see that it's not what they thought it was, right, that producing is much better than making words, living in an apartment, you don't have a space for anything, you don't have contact with nature."*

The statement *"that producing is much better than making words"* is highlighted to emphasize a critical perspective. Here, it can discuss how both urban rationality and the disconnection with 'natural life' (with nature and green areas) produce a delicate illness that can ultimately express itself in the forms of better-known pathologies such as depression, anxiety and suicide (Brazilian Federal Council of Psychology, 2013). However, they can be perceived in different ways and at different levels, and can initially be connected with feelings of discontent, numbness, or a nebulous path of physical illness (which includes a sedentary lifestyle and ultra-processed foods), and/or social isolation, individualizing a human life that is essentially social.

Integrating this statement with the responses to "What feelings arise from being a seed guardian or working with Creole Seeds?", reveals an awareness of how this work contributes to health, particularly mental health. Participant R. reflects:

> *"I've always been a farmer, so, we've always worked with the Earth and that brings a.., I don't know, it's a peace, right? Because when you go there to work with the earth, if you're sometimes stressed, or something, the stress goes away.* [...]*I say that the earth is life."*

All the Guardians interviewed shared a similar understanding and emotional response,an experience of well-being associated with being in contact with nature (living in rural areas) and cultivating or working with the land. The time dedicated to such practices allows a detachment from future concerns, anchoring individuals in the present through the sensory and embodied experience of cultivation. Touch, physical strength, bodily engagement, sight, hearing, and smell all contribute to an ecological encounter with the land. This complex engagement reflects a profound, affective relationship with the productive process, one literally grounded in having hands in the soil. Moreover, following this delicate and labor-intensive process of cultivation, mental well-being also arises from the sense of reward that follows production. C's husband expresses this in sharing and his social connection and having a hobby:

> C's husband: *"I tell to many friends, huh, when relatives come, friends come, I said "my pleasure is, early in the morning, to go to the farm and come home with a bucket of potatoes, mandioca, tomatoes, bring a melon, a watermelon, go to the fruit trees, bring a bunch of bananas", all of this, it is, for me it is a, almost a hobby, you know. It is a joy to go to from there in the early morning…"*

The use of seed activities and the direct connection with hobbies, feelings of well-being, whimsy or stress-relieving actions affirm the capacity that this work has in producing mental health and well-being. That is, meaningful activities generate motivation and mental health, even though it may be easier and more practical in the productive sphere to go to the market than to produce these seeds, thus elevating the activity with native varieties as an action beyond food production, producing health, mental health and life, fundamentally through care. In this way, Boff (2013) translates care as immersed in the evolutionary process that translates into a requirement of life, permeating the entire process of producing and reproducing human existence. Caring thus appears in personal, social and loving relationships, which are connected with care-concern and care-precaution.

By associating discussions of care with ecological concerns, Corrêa and Bassani (2015) support a conceptualization of environmental care that is fundamentally tied to meaning and significance. Such significance links the individual and the collective, past/present and future, embedding values of conservation and prolongation of life on Earth.

That is, meaning is capable of providing structure for the reproduction and permanence of actions within certain activities, as in this case, seed production, which connects with food production, and connects with health production, which is abstracted from caring for others and for the planet, as well as nourishing the essence of guardians for the continuation of their praxis (Sawaia, 2011, Espinosa, 2010).

> Z: *"So you end up not giving up on a difficult one because of it, because it's bad to give up on the others, you'll find your way and do the same, and keep doing it. Today I've even started saving some species of flowers [...] so you have to pass them on to those people who remember it, but can't find it anymore."*

In this statement, ecological care is linked not only to cultivating challenging or less resilient seeds, but also to preserving and rescuing seeds that are more than just sources of nutrition. For Z, ecological care is also connected with cultivate difficult seeds, and to also associate preservation and rescue seed that are more then food. This excerpt highlights two relevant issues. In the context of the conversation, Z. emphasizes that cultivation results in multiplicity, that is, from five or six seeds, one can obtain 500 grams or even one kilo after the process. As Z. states, "*then you start to realize how from so little, you can transform so much.*" After pointing out how the land, in her view, gives back more than it receives, she also notes that, upon understanding this dynamic, she feels a responsibility to cultivate difficult seeds, those that require more than they can return. In this way, she becomes an articulator within the ecological dynamics of that territory, mediating the diversity of plants, orchestrating the dialogue, and making space for both those that demand more and those that demand less.

The rescue of flowers adds aesthetic and social memory to the discussion. In her laughter and detail, Z describes the process of seed care not as labor alone, but as a generative, sensorial moment:

> Z: (laughing) *"I... I like... I feel good, when I'm going to harvest it, each one, each species/seed has its own way of choosing, its own way of... of even putting it, you have to have a place to put it, drying it, then you're going to clean each one of them, you have to take it out of its space, you have to clean it, that's it.... you're going to do that from there, there will be endless things going through your head."*

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Seed cultivation, rescue, and dedication thus emerge as acts of care and health production. These practices directly engage with both the aesthetic and political realms. Flowers, for instance, are often rescued through collective memory, of a mother, a grandmother garden, or a church garden. They are preserved not only for what they evoke emotionally, but also because someone once commented on them, expressed a desire for them, or responded with beauty to their memory. This work with seeds, whether involving those that are easy to grow, those that are more demanding, or those that are not edible but cherished for their aesthetic or mnemonic value, stems from a practice rooted in the present: the act of cultivating, sensing, and observing. All of this arises from the encounter in the present of cultivation, which involves feelings of presence and therapeutic moments. This is an ethical–aesthetic field of human–nonhuman relations.

Care becomes political, a *conatus* (Espinosa, 2010) that bridges the objective world and the subjective, enabling an affective flow that integrates actions, feelings, and relations among people. Corrêa & Bassani (2015) argue that self-awareness sustains authenticity, which in turn allows one to assume responsibility, caring for oneself and for others, including the environment. As one guardian, C., puts it, "*There's a whole care process to, so that you can produce it.*" Z. expresses more strongly: "*And then we produce it, we take care of it.*" Both affirm that one cannot separate the act of production from care, one takes care of what one likes, and results in 'feeling good', connecting not only the production of health, but also of life, adding the ethical dimension to the relationship with earth and seeds.

All the Guardians perceive their constitutive process as innate. There is a shared understanding that "it could not have been otherwise", they became who they are because they grew up in the countryside and learned to relate to the land in this way. In this sense, gender becomes a key aspect. It is impossible to separate the notion of care from gender in the patriarchal and capitalist society in which we live. A significant point within the Creole Seed Guardian movement is that the vast majority of guardians are women. By integrating gender and care, an analytical field is opened that allows us to understand how agricultural work and the act of caring intersect with the feminine, highlighting both the historical and sociocultural dimensions of women's relationship with biodiversity and food sovereignty.

To explore this connection more deeply, it was asked one of the participants about the apparent gendered dimension of seed guardianship: "Do you think this is related to us (women) being more communicative?" R.'s response offers an illustrative perspective:

"I think it's because of an instinct, right? Of guarding and taking care of, right? Because, It's always been that women, right, were more in charge [...] it was planting the small things, planting pumpkins, planting peanuts, potatoes, those things, right?[..]

Attempting to understand how they perceive this difference, R. emphasizes relevant aspects of the Brazilian rural woman. Always responsible for the family's daily nourishment and obligated to care for the "*miudezas*" (an interesting expression used in the region meaning the small or humble things), the female guardians bring variety to the table through seed diversity, this impacts every process in cooking. Access to nutritional diversity, as well as affection in the dishes, which being a physical and sometimes monotonous work, allows these women to introduce colors, flavors, and creativity into everyday life.

The feminine dimension of care is shaped by patriarchal expectations that, as Herrera (2016) notes, merge care with domestic labor. Framing care as a form of labor highlights its role within reproductive work. Souza, Loreto & Eufrásio (2023) emphasize that the public sphere, traditionally associated with freedom, depends materially and symbolically on domestic life. Accordingly, Puleo (2012) argues that sustainability, related virtues and obligations arise from this dynamic and contends that only by dismantling the divide between productive and reproductive labor can women's work, especially that tied to biodiversity conservation, be properly valued.

Returning to the term *miudezas*, which means 'small, minor, reduced, undervalued things,' it is culturally applied to creole seeds in the region, except for maize. *Miudezas* are considered the responsibility of women and are also understood within the domestic sphere, in the blurry line between domestic and agricultural labor in rural areas. The symbolism behind this term correlates with perceptions of the value of women's work: *miudezas* are usually planted on leftover land, not the good or fertile land, and it is women's duty to produce diversity for the table; to plant, tend, harvest, and prepare these "small things" for the family. It is something deemed unimportant, because it is part of women's invisible work; yet it is an expression of care that involves no immediate profit. Associating this with the

careguzzler problem pointed out by Fraser (2002), capitalism relies on social reproduction but devalues it, pushing it into the private/domestic sphere.

The Guardians perceive the care crisis we are experiencing, even without having read Fraser. Their conscious, ethical, and political choice to replace *miudezas* with seeds of life, health, and superior quality is an affirmation of value: of self, of their work, of their gender, and of the seeds themselves. In affirming their value, these farmers produce symbols that also carry value within capitalism, such as health and product quality. Using these symbols to embed value in seeds for a social field that ignores care as essential is a powerful strategy of resistance and navigation within the economic system in which they live.

Caring can be understood in four phases, each inherently moral: caring about, taking care of, caregiving, and care receiving (Tronto, 2007). This perspective allows one to conceptualize the world as comprising individuals embedded within networks of concern and committed to fulfilling the needs of others, that is, a political structure that permeates all forms of relationality, whether among humans or between humans and non-human entities. Within this framework, the Guardians highlight the ecological dimension of care.

The Peasant Women's Movement (MMC) plays a pivotal role in integrating care with seed work. Through pedagogical initiatives and socio-political advocacy, mainly led by the MMC, a holistic approach emerges, dialectically fostering empowerment, reinforcing social bonds, and promoting self-esteem and autonomy among rural women. A compelling example of the MMC's impact on guardians' lives is seen in Z.'s account of being invited to travel to Italy to share her experiences as a Seed Guardian. During the interview, she revealed that her path to independence as a rural worker emerged not from a deliberate choice, but out of necessity: with her husband working outside the home, she was left to manage the property alone. This autonomy "allowed" her to make decisions, take initiative, and act without a man as the final authority.

> Z.: *"Helping other people realize that there are other ways of living, they just need some strength and a little support. […] In some places, women don't have much freedom, so they're amazed that we can do it here. […] Since he worked away from home, I had to decide: what, when, how, everything. […] They'd say, 'My God, what courage you have.' Sometimes, I don't even know if it exists, or if you find it somewhere."*

This excerpt from the interview allows us to analyze that participant Z. not only became aware of how her actions express independence, creativity, autonomy and productivity, but also confronts the societal contradictions that often impede women's development globally. Siliprandi (2017) highlights agroecology's role in advancing gender equality. In family farming contexts, women are prominent in activities that facilitate the development of agroecological systems. These include managing vegetable gardens and orchards, raising small animals, and producing food products, demonstrating care for the quality of the food used by the family. Z.'s reflection "*I don't even know if it exists or if you end up finding it somewhere, that's how it is",* resonates with a quote from the researcher's field diary regarding participant C.:

> *"C. shared how, in the early years of the MMC in Anchieta, a group of women began organizing to overcome the challenges they faced, especially those affecting rural women. Without formal training or political influence, they worked together on a small scale to organize meetings, travel to larger cities, and connect with broader rights movements. They were humble people, without much knowledge of structures or power articulation, but they were people who knew how to work, who did not shy away from challenges and were willing to try. A desire for a better life and access for all drove these women, who, having grown up under constant burdens, did not give up or become weakened in the face of prevailing challenges and oppressive powers."*

The act of doing, of collective change, and of engaging in political practices rooted in daily life is often framed as a male role. Growing up as a woman in these contexts frequently means positioning oneself in parallel to the other, awaiting validation, usually from a male figure. The peasant and guardian women interviewed were socialized under these norms. However, the political implications of the MMC's work with Creole Seeds, and, by extension, with the Guardians, highlight the emergence of community, collectivity, and shared praxis. These practices challenge gender norms and allow care to extend beyond the private sphere.

Individual and cultural affects, as seen in the cases of Z. and C., have mobilized and continue to mobilize these women in carrying out ecological, autonomous, and creative actions of belonging and becoming-with. Their interrelations use care as an ethical and organizational tool, building a *conatus*, a generative force of response to the tangled, systemic barriers this group has faced and continues to confront.

Therefore, care emerges as a central axis in the work of Creole Seed Guardians. It links meanings related to the production of health and mental health, the generation of life, and the enactment of care, not only as an interpersonal practice but also as a feminine, social, and political act ("I am doing my part"). This analysis has demonstrated how these indicators converge to constitute a shared ethics of care within the symbolic and material practices of the guardians, rooted in their lived experience and expressed through their praxis.

Conclusion

The ethnographic engagement with the Guardians of Creole Seeds in Anchieta, southern Brazil, reveals care not as a secondary factor, but a driving force behind sustainable agricultural actions. Their everyday practices, cultivating, exchanging, and preserving Creole Seeds, constitute a political and ethical commitment to continuity. These actions emerge from deep histories of struggle and belonging, shaping a form of environmental care grounded in reciprocity rather than accumulation. Within their fields and homes, the Guardians cultivate an ecological ethic that refuses alienation and reclaims autonomy through interdependence.

Care, for these farmers, is both method and meaning. It animates an alternative mode of production sustained by affective attachments, family histories, and embodied knowledge. Rather than opposing modernity through isolation, the Guardians transform their relationship with the land into a living critique of capitalist agriculture. Their work demonstrates that resistance does not always take the form of confrontation, it can also be enacted through maintenance, through the slow and deliberate labor of preserving life. In their hands, seeds become vessels of care, repositories of memory, labor, and hope that root the future in lived relations with the past.

The Guardians' practices illuminate how affect can organize political life, enabling communities to imagine sustainability beyond the market. For these farmers, values such as tradition, community, and health hold greater importance than market profit. Their ecological ethics unsettle dualisms of nature and culture, labor and emotion, revealing how human and nonhuman lives co-constitute one another within shared landscapes. Through care, these farmers sustain multispecies continuities and enact a politics of attention, an insistence on living well with others despite structural constraints and ecological precarity.

Ultimately, the Creole Seeds Guardians offer an anthropology of care in action. By caring for their seeds, they care for the land, for community, and for the possibility of alternative worlds. Their work reminds us that environmental care is about preserving biodiversity, but also nurturing the fragile and enduring bonds that make life, in all its forms, possible. Its exemplifies how autonomy can be pursued not through rupture, but through continuity embodied in seeds, stories, and acts of care. That is, a material example in the pursuit of autonomy and care.

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Farah Ghoul

Whose Peace? Whose Liberation? A Critique of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda

Abstract: This paper critically examines the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda by interrogating its theoretical foundations, practical limitations, and uneven effects across global contexts. While WPS aims to promote women's participation, protection, and rights in conflict and post-conflict settings, its liberal feminist assumptions often universalize Western perspectives and embed gendered, colonial, and securitized logics into peace and security governance. Drawing on securitization theory and postcolonial critiques—including Orientalism—the paper demonstrates how WPS discourses frequently construct women of the Global South as vulnerable subjects in need of protection, legitimizing paternalistic

"Romantic Mentality" by Maias Ghoul (2025)

interventions while obscuring structural violence produced by militarism and occupation. Through constructivist and intersectional feminist frameworks, the analysis also highlights how women in the Global South strategically adapt WPS norms to advance local struggles, as seen in Liberia and Uganda. These cases illustrate the potential for WPS to facilitate transformative activism when reinterpreted from below rather than imposed from above. The paper concludes by questioning the future of WPS in a shifting international order and calls for centering non-Western women as agents shaping the next generation of feminist global politics.

Introduction

"Where are the women?" is a central feminist International Relations question that exposes the patriarchal structures excluding women from political and international affairs through gendered dichotomies of masculinity and femininity (Enloe, 2014). The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda emerged from United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 as an institutional attempt to address this exclusion by advancing women's inclusion in political and foreign affairs and positioning gender as central to international peace and security debates (UN Women, 2025). At its core, the agenda focuses on promoting women's participation, protection, and rights in conflict and post-conflict settings. Initially, the agenda was structured around four foundational pillars: conflict prevention, women's participation in peace processes, protection from gender-based violence, and gender-sensitive relief and recovery (UN Women, 2025; DPPA, 2023). Over time, the agenda expanded beyond its original pillars to incorporate economic empowerment, disarmament, and emerging climate–security linkages. In doing so, the agenda seeks to shift the perception of women in conflict from passive victims to active agents in sustainable peacebuilding, particularly through mechanisms such as National Action Plans (NAPs)[30] and their integration into peacekeeping and state-building initiatives (Newby & O'Malley, 2021).

Yet critical theory scholars have raised substantive critiques regarding the WPS agenda's theoretical foundations and practical implications. According to Newby and O'Malley (2021), the WPS agenda is grounded in liberal feminist theory, which prioritizes gender-equal inclusion through rights, participation, and institutional reform. However, they argue that this framework fails to interrogate the deeper structural and societal gender roles underpinning conflict dynamics; instead, it often reproduces essentialist assumptions that cast women as inherently peaceful actors. Building on this critique, Newby and O'Malley note that postcolonial feminists highlight how WPS frameworks frequently operate through an

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[30] National Action Plans (NAPs) are the key instruments through which states implement their WPS commitments, outlining specific national strategies, actions, and obligations under WPS resolutions (UN Women, 2021; UN Women, n.d.).

Orientalist binary that constructs Muslim or Arab women as passive victims in need of protection from their own men, thereby legitimizing foreign, often Western intervention. Newby and O'Malley (2021) further highlight the neoliberal logic underpinning WPS frameworks, which tend to prioritize economic empowerment while overlooking the complex realities women face in informal labour markets[31]. Therefore, although the WPS agenda appears to offer a positive and inclusive framework, it raises important questions about its claims to universality and its underlying logics of inclusion. WPS seeks to solve the question "Where are the women?" only to incorporate women into the very structures that have historically marginalized them. This raises deeper questions about its aims and effects, namely, whether its frameworks advance genuine liberation or simply reinscribe silences and exclusions of their own. This paper argues that the WPS agenda is limited in its effectiveness and built on theoretical assumptions that constrain its ability to capture women's diverse experiences. This critique is developed through securitization theory, postcolonial theory—specifically Orientalism, constructivism, and intersectional feminism, each of which frames a section of the analysis.

Securitization

The liberal feminist paradigm often prioritizes women's inclusion without challenging the structures of power themselves; meaning that the sole focus on participation ultimately reinforces institutions shaped by patriarchy, militarism, and colonial hierarchies. Such symbolic inclusion becomes a depoliticized marker of progress and legitimizes peace processes through what Newby and O'Malley (2021) describe as the *securitization of women*. Securitization theory argues that threats are not inherent but discursively constructed, where issues are framed as urgent threats to advance particular interests. Buzan et al. (1998) suggest that securitization occurs through a "speech act" that labels something a security issue, an audience that accepts this claim, and the authorization of exceptional measures over democratic deliberation. This dynamic is evident in the WPS agenda's framing of conflict-related sexual violence as an urgent global security threat. While it rightly points to

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[31] Informal economy could be defined as a set of economic activities, jobs, and employment under unregulated and unprotected conditions (World Economic Forum, 2024). This ranges from street vendors to handicraft workers to agricultural jobs, where 60% of all workers are involved in the informal labour market, with an overrepresentation of women in such fields (WIEGO, 2025).

a conflict setting threat, such framing often shifts attention toward protectionist logics that cast women as inherently vulnerable and in need of safeguarding; where protectionist logics refer to the assumption of the subject's, in the case women's, dependence and disciplines their conduct with the aim of reducing vulnerability to discrimination and violence (Caroline, 2023; Hafeez, 2025). Hafeez argues that such assumptions are almost never neutral since they apply sorting on who is to be saved or who is worth saving. They then apply strategies that overlook these subjects' agency and centralize their political identity through their injury or vulnerability. As Kirby and Shepherd (2016) argue, this approach sidelines feminist aspirations and obscures the broader politics of inequality and militarization. Transnational feminism scholars such as Mohanty (1988) have long pointed out that liberal feminisms' constructed category of the "Third World Woman," produces arbitrary and singular categories where western women are imagined as liberated saviors and women of the Global South as passive, homogenous victims. Protectionist logic, thus, further embodies and weaponizes these constructed categories. This embodies the colonial tradition that assumes that the colonizer knows better than the colonized and enacts this patronizing logic on the marginalized peoples (Caroline, 2023). Such beliefs and practices are then used as a justification for colonialism and dominance (Sheposh, 2023). These representations justify paternalistic "saving" missions and erase the diverse political, social, and historical contexts and agency of women in the Global South by universalizing Western feminist discourse.

The dynamics of securitization become evident in the case of Afghanistan, where WPS agenda's language was mobilized to reproduce social hierarchies and assert Western liberal norms through the framing of Afghan women as objects of protection (Akbari & True, 2024). In the post-9/11 context, U.S. and NATO rhetoric invoked feminist claims associated with the WPS agenda to legitimize military intervention, constructing Afghan women as "vulnerable" subjects in need of Western rescue (MacDonald, 2012). These narratives produced policies aimed at "saving" Afghan women while simultaneously harming their societies and excluding them from decision-making processes, thereby reaffirming colonial hierarchies between a supposedly civilized West and an uncivilized Afghan society (Farrell & McDermott, 2005). Neoliberal interpretations of empowerment ignored the material effects of occupation, militarization, and the war economy on women's lived conditions while Afghan women were instrumentalized for geopolitical aims as well as state-building and stabilization efforts,

reinforcing patriarchal logics of female objectification leaving structural inequalities intact (Akbari & True, 2024). This example demonstrates how the securitization of women within the WPS agenda can silence the voices of women in the Global South, positioning them as victims to be used for geopolitical interests and further entrenching patriarchal and colonial hierarchies.

Post-Colonialism (Orientalism)

Peace discourses such as those mobilized in the WPS agenda often reaffirm Orientalist understandings that instrumentalize women within narratives of "peace" and "intervention." For example, women are framed as quintessential peace agents regardless of context. However, this assumption articulates elitist and superficial conflict resolution which undermine root causes of conflict (PeaceRep, 2017). Drawing on Edward Said's analysis, Orientalism describes the Western production of the "Orient" as its civilizational opposite—irrational, backward, and in need of guidance or correction (Said, 1979). This framework legitimizes Western imperialism by positioning intervention as a civilizing mission. Within this logic, gendered binaries emerge in which the "Oriental man" is depicted as violent and oppressive, while the "Oriental woman" is cast as voiceless, exotic, and victimized. Such representations lay the groundwork for feminist protectionist discourses within WPS that depict women of the Global South as subjects to be saved from their own cultures.

Postcolonial feminist scholars emphasize that these narratives erase the social, political, and historical nuances of non-Western women's lives. Abu-Lughod (2013) notes that the rhetoric of "saving women" is embedded in a broader humanitarian claim through "universality"—one that presumes Western actors possess superior knowledge and authority over those they seek to rescue. These patterns extend beyond formal policy instruments: they permeate cultural production and global media, helping naturalize Orientalist gendered hierarchies. For instance, as Jack Shaheen (2006) illustrates in *Reel Bad Arabs*, Hollywood has long depicted Arabs—both men and women—through tropes of violence, hypersexuality, and helpless victimhood, reinforcing a monolithic and dehumanizing imaginary rather than reflecting lived realities. Such representations matter because they shape public sensibilities and normalize interventionist logics that resonate with WPS discourses.

These Orientalist constructions become especially visible in the implementation of the WPS agenda in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (oPt). As Maraqa (2025) argues, WPS has reproduced "gendered Orientalism" by framing Palestinian society as inherently patriarchal and violent, thereby applying a protectionist discourse that casts Palestinian men as primary oppressors and Palestinian women as victims in need of external rescue. This framing obscures the structural violence of Israeli occupation and erases Palestinian women's longstanding histories of political resistance and community leadership (Palestinian Feminist Collective, 2023; Decolonizing 'Peace', 2022). This tackles the assumption that co-existence is superior to struggle, where WPS agenda framings feminizing peace fail to support the peace established through resistance activism (PeaceRep, 2017). Leila Khaled, a member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), is a representation of the Palestinian militant who presents feminine agency through the refusal of occupation and displacement coupled with the refusal to accept patriarchal configurations of the home. She fights for steering national culture away from 'reactionary culture'[32] (Mohan, 1998). Hanan Ashrawi, a Palestinian politician from the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and activist also presents an example of Palestinian women agency aiming for reform through involvement in national struggle, where she articulates the importance of cultivating space for women within liberation struggles, taking them on equal footing (ILSA Journal of International & Comparative Law, 2001). These examples demonstrate political agency of women from different parts of the Palestinian political spectrum as a means of affirming resistance and an equal entitlement to oppose peace processes where they are lacking (PeaceRep,2017). These two examples demonstrate women's leadership beyond the WPS framework.

By universalizing Western feminist norms and sidelining local agency, the WPS agenda reinforces colonial binaries and legitimizes external intervention rather than addressing the root causes of Palestinian women's insecurity, as they so clearly articulate it. Such liberal forms of peacebuilding prioritize containment and control over liberation, which decontextualizes gender-based violence from the colonial condition of occupation. As

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[32] Fanon highlights how anti-colonial pursuits that draw upon oppositional nationalism often lead to sentimental reactions and nostalgic quietism that accept and fight for all cultural aspects, even those that marginalize members of the anti-colonial struggle such as women (Mohan, 1998).

a result, WPS frameworks become complicit in masking the structural and political violence of settler colonialism in Palestine. Consequently, Palestinian women's resistance is not only erased but actively replaced by narratives that position their suffering against the figure of the 'violent' Palestinian man rather than amplify their struggle for justice and self-determination (Maraqa, 2025). In this way, WPS frameworks reinforce Orientalist perceptions that perpetuate colonial and Western hegemony by silencing women's voices rather than amplifying them.

Constructivism and Intersectional Feminism

Although the liberal feminist foundations of the WPS agenda assume problematic universality of Western perspectives, it cannot be neglected that patriarchal structures operate across diverse societies. This recognition helps explain the political appeal of UN initiatives such as WPS, whose normative commitments can translate into social and institutional change through the shaping of global social norms. From a constructivist perspective, norms are socially and politically constructed, and their power lies in shaping how actors understand and respond to global issues (True, 2016). Constructivism can also be explained through the concept of reflexivity (True, 2016). In this context. reflexivity refers to the capacity of criticizing self biases that may influence constructions of knowledge and reality (Duffy et al., 2020). Therefore, feminist epistemological approaches engage with reflexivity by underscoring the extent of their processing and representation of those they study, thereby articulating that actors themselves can construct and influence social norms (Duffy et al., 2020). In this sense, the WPS agenda gains influence through its ability to redefine expectations around gender equality and women's participation in peace and security processes. Over time, these principles have developed into a widely recognized international normative framework, with WPS norms increasingly diffused and internalized across multiple levels of governance (True, 2016). The normative reach of WPS is further extended through transnational advocacy networks, which promote its principles globally and facilitate their adoption at the national level through mechanisms such as National Action Plans and the integration of gender perspectives into peacekeeping and conflict-resolution practices.

The potential normative impact of WPS can be observed in Liberia, where Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected to become Africa's first female head of state in 2005 (UN Women, 2025). Her leadership in a post-conflict setting demonstrated how women's participation in governance can challenge entrenched patriarchal norms and contribute to state reconstruction (EJS Center, 2023). Sirleaf's presidency also illustrates how WPS principles can be institutionalized through top-down mechanisms: under her administration, Liberia adopted National Action Plans that embedded WPS priorities into national policy and promoted women's participation in peace and security processes (African Union, 2025). These developments reflect how the diffusion of WPS norms can reshape political expectations and open space for women's leadership in post-conflict governance.

As Steans (1998) notes, despite differences among feminist perspectives, they share a concern with how socially constructed gender hierarchies shape power relations and political structures. From this standpoint, liberal feminist efforts to expand women's representation in international politics can play a meaningful role in reshaping global norms by bringing diverse experiences into institutional arenas. Increased participation enables women to contest existing power dynamics and influence the development of more inclusive policies at national and international levels.

Although Western dominance shapes much of the international legal and normative order, it is neither uncontested nor absolute. Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL) critique the Eurocentrism of international law and the marginalization of Global South actors within these structures, while also emphasizing that such frameworks can be strategically appropriated by marginalized groups to advance their own struggles for resistance and self-determination (Eslava, 2019). Feminist TWAIL scholars extend this critique by emphasizing the agency of Third World women in navigating and contesting global legal structures, thereby creating spaces in which their own understandings of rights and justice can emerge (Otto, 2006). Intersectional feminism similarly challenges universalizing narratives by showing that women's experiences of conflict and peace are shaped by intersecting factors such as race, class, and colonial histories (Crenshaw, 1991). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that while the WPS agenda is not universal in its assumptions, it offers a framework that local feminists can adapt strategically to assert agency and address layered forms of injustice.

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A clear example of such strategic adaptation can be seen in Uganda, where women's organizations reshaped the WPS agenda to fit local priorities. While the WPS framework is often implemented through top-down mechanisms, Ugandan women mobilized from the bottom-up by translating WPS principles into local languages and embedding them within community practices (Peace Women, 2013). These efforts strengthened grassroots capacity to hold government actors accountable, address wartime sexual violence, and advocate for increased funding for gender-based violence prevention and response. One outcome was the creation of the District Action Plan (DAP) in Dokolo District—a collaborative initiative involving local authorities, civil society organizations, and community members—that improved the implementation and monitoring of Uganda's NAP (Peace Women, 2013). The DAP also introduced practical mechanisms, such as a toll-free line for survivors and witnesses of gender-based violence. In this context, Ugandan women not only addressed immediate community needs but also influenced national policy and resource allocation from the bottom-up. Their engagement demonstrates how marginalized groups can reconstruct global agendas to address context-specific issues, transforming themselves from passive recipients of international norms into active agents of change through adaptation rather than adoption. This illustrates the potential of WPS to serve as a platform for context-driven, transformative activism (Olonisakin et al., 2011).

Conclusion

The WPS agenda has played a significant role in shaping global discourse on women's participation in peace and security, yet it remains embedded in Western liberal feminist and colonial epistemologies that constrain its universality. While women in the Global South have demonstrated remarkable agency by adapting and repurposing the framework to address their own contexts, this very process reveals the limitations of WPS as currently constituted. Its most successful applications emerge when marginalized groups themselves take ownership of its principles—raising critical questions about why women must adapt to an external framework rather than participate in reconstructing the broader international system that governs them. When WPS is implemented through Western-led intervention, its humanitarian veneer too often conceals geopolitical interests, producing securitizing

narratives that objectify women and render them tools of foreign policy rather than subjects of political struggle.

These dynamics demand that we rethink not only how WPS operates, but whose voices and experiences shape the future of global peace and security. As the liberal international order faces increasing uncertainty, so too does the normative architecture that underpins WPS. The urgent questions, then, are not simply "Where are the women?" but "Where are the non-Western women within this shifting order, and how are they reimagining peace, security, and resistance?" Their actions and interpretations—rather than Western institutional frameworks—should guide the next phase of feminist global politics. The task ahead lies in listening to what they are saying, observing what they are doing, and recognizing them not as objects of policy but as architects of their own political futures.

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Formations of Belonging in Migration, Labor and Community Making | Kötődések kialakulása migrációs helyzetekben, munkában és közösségszervezésben

Vu Hoang Linh

Manifestations of Hierarchy and Soft Power in the Making of Belonging inside a Vietnamese Diaspora Restaurant

Figure 1: Broad view of the fieldwork restaurant

Abstract:

This paper explores how hierarchy, belonging and soft power shape everyday relationships inside a Vietnamese restaurant in Budapest. The restaurant is treated as a small social world where cultural values from Vietnam continue to influence behavior. The study is based on three months of ethnographic fieldwork that involved participant observation, informal conversations and two semi-structured interviews. The analysis focuses on the use of Vietnamese address terms, rules of respect based on age and seniority, and daily food

practices. These elements show how staff members organize their relationships and how they negotiate their place within the group.

The paper uses Bourdieu's idea of moral habitus to explain how norms learned in early life guide actions in the diaspora. These norms appear in patterns of speech, expectations of politeness and small acts of care such as sharing food or advising younger workers. Alongside these formal rules, staff also rely on soft power. They use humor, small gifts and friendly gestures to create closeness and maintain harmony. Moments of tension reveal how workers adjust their behavior in order to protect relationships and to avoid loss of face.

The study offers insight into social dynamics within the Vietnamese diaspora by focusing on internal interactions rather than public identity. It also suggests that regional background and linguistic variation continue to shape relations abroad, offering possible directions for future research.

Introduction

From early childhood, Vietnamese speakers learn not only vocabulary but the moral logic embedded in forms of address. Each interaction demands a choice that indexes respect, intimacy, hierarchy, or social distance. Unlike English pronouns such as *"you"* and *"I,"* Vietnamese terms of address require speakers to position themselves relationally. Using the "wrong" term is not simply a linguistic mistake but a misrecognition of the social world shared by speaker and listener. For example, when addressing peers, close friends might use *"mày"* and *"tao"* to signal familiarity, while more casual acquaintances typically rely on *"tớ"* and *"cậu/bạn".* These choices communicate not only how people understand their relationship but how they wish to shape it (Chiến, 1993).

These forms of address do more than mark politeness; they reflect a moral order based on age, respect, and relational hierarchy. There are also specific terms to address someone older or younger, male or female, even if they are strangers. This way of speaking is deeply tied to Vietnamese social values and the moral structure that organizes everyday life. It helps people make sense of who they are and where they belong. What is striking is that this logic of hierarchy travels. Even outside Vietnam, in a foreign place where languages,

laws, and customs are different, Vietnamese people still carry this moral understanding with them. It becomes part of how they create social space and rebuild community.

Restaurants are an important setting for examining these dynamics because they bring together work, culture, and everyday social interactions. As Beriss and Sutton (2007) argue, restaurants are not only sites of consumption and production but also spaces where social and cultural life is performed and negotiated. Within a restaurant, questions about age, gender, hierarchy, and ethnicity often appear, creating opportunities to observe how moral and social orders are maintained in practice. While much research on diaspora restaurants focuses on food, authenticity, or relationships with customers, fewer studies investigate the ways staff members make sense of themselves and each other through everyday interactions, and how these practices sustain cultural identity and belonging while supporting the smooth running of the business.

This paper examines a Vietnamese restaurant in Budapest where all staff members are Vietnamese. It focuses on how hierarchy is expressed and maintained through language, age, and everyday acts such as giving and sharing food. These practices are not only practical but carry cultural and emotional meanings that shape the staff's sense of belonging. Following Bourdieu's (1984) concept of moral habitus, the paper argues that these behaviors reflect internalized moral structures that guide social interactions. At the same time, drawing on Yuval-Davis (2006), it considers belonging as both social and emotional, shaped by relationships and attachments that are constantly negotiated in everyday life.

Through three months of ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation and informal conversations, this study shows how moral hierarchy operates as a tool for understanding how belonging is constructed in a diaspora context. Belonging is not fixed or always harmonious. It often involves ambivalence, negotiation, and mixed emotions. The continuation and adaptation of hierarchical practices through age-based authority, address terms, and everyday acts such as serving meals, sharing food, and guiding younger or less experienced colleagues enable staff members to navigate social relationships and maintain a sense of connection to each other and to their cultural roots even far from Vietnam. By focusing on micro-social interactions within the restaurant, this paper uses hierarchy to reveal how emotional and moral structures sustain Vietnamese diaspora communities.

Literature review

This paper investigates the interplay of hierarchy, belonging, and soft power within a Vietnamese diaspora restaurant, analyzing the space as a self-contained micro-society. The study's objective is to move beyond conventional scholarship that often focuses on the external presentation of immigrant identity or economic metrics, instead focusing on the micro-social dynamics that govern relationships among co-ethnic staff. This review establishes the theoretical framework by examining the sociological significance of the diaspora workplace, the moral logic of Vietnamese relational culture, the performative construction of belonging, and the operation of informal power.

Diaspora, community, and the restaurant as a social site

The ethnic restaurant is a critical yet often undertheorized site for understanding migrant social life. Research commonly recognizes the restaurant's role in the ethnic economy, providing employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for co-ethnics (Ray, 2004). However, the scholarly framework needs to extend beyond economic function to address the deeper sociological role of these spaces. Beriss and Sutton (2007) argued that the restaurant functions as a cultural laboratory, a unique sphere where production, consumption, and symbolic activities converge, making it a valuable setting for ethnographic study of class, ethnicity, and moral conduct.

By focusing on a Vietnamese restaurant in Budapest, Hungary, this paper addresses a geographical gap in the literature. The Vietnamese diaspora in North America and Western Europe receives extensive attention (Zhou & Bankston, 1999; Blanc, 2005; Nguyen, 2009), especially in France, with well-documented waves of migration tied to colonial labor, refugee resettlement, and family reunification. However, the experiences of Central Europe's Vietnamese community remain comparatively understudied regarding their internal social organization (Szymańska-Matusiewicz, 2015; Schwenkel, 2015). The restaurant's linguistic and ethnic composition, relying exclusively on co-ethnic staff, makes it an ideal microcosm to analyze how traditional cultural structures are preserved and adapted, offering insights into internal social dynamics rather than external identity performance for a customer base.

The moral logic of hierarchy and respect

The internal social life of the Vietnamese restaurant is fundamentally shaped by a deep-seated relational hierarchy that migrants carry with them, which operates as a binding moral system. This structure dictates that respect and status are primarily derived from factors like age, seniority, and kinship, rather than job title alone. This cultural orientation is situated within the broader characteristics of high power distance and collectivism, as defined in cross-cultural models (Hofstede, 2001). In such cultures, individuals' identities are closely tied to their position within the collective social structure, making social position a moral imperative.

The clearest manifestation of this moral order is found in the meticulous use of Vietnamese address terms, which compel speakers to select pronouns and titles that continuously signal the relationship's hierarchy and degree of intimacy (Luong, 1990; Nguyen-Trung, 2015). Choosing the appropriate self-referential term or title is a moral act, reflecting an individual's awareness of their social position relative to the interlocutor and the ethical responsibility to uphold social norms (Nguyen-Trung, 2015). This system emphasizes kinship rank alongside age and familiarity, demonstrating that social position is not merely descriptive but a moral imperative within Vietnamese relational culture (Chau et al., 2017). Using an inappropriate term constitutes a moral transgression rather than a simple breach of politeness, highlighting how linguistic practice is deeply intertwined with the maintenance of *mặt* (face) and the preservation of social harmony (Luong, 1990; Chau et al., 2017).

This persistence of relational hierarchy in the diaspora workplace is best understood through Bourdieu's (1984) concept of the moral habitus. The *habitus* comprises the durable, internalized structures of perception and action learned through socialization. In this context, the Vietnamese *habitus* ensures that norms of age-based respect and deference are not forgotten at work; rather, the act of speaking (using address terms) becomes a performance of cultural morality that structures interaction. Consequently, the restaurant's structure exhibits a distinct cultural hierarchy that often supersedes or blends with the typical organizational hierarchy. Older staff members command deference not simply because of their job tasks, but because their seniority warrants cultural respect, thus linking authority to an inherited moral mandate.

Belonging, trust, and micro-social negotiation

While hierarchy defines the framework of interaction, belonging serves as the collective goal, representing the feeling of being situated and accepted within the micro-society. Yuval-Davis (2006) defined belonging as a combination of social location, emotional attachment, and ethical practice. For migrants, belonging is rarely assumed and must be continuously produced through reciprocal micro-actions and shared cultural meaning.

In the restaurant, this production of belonging is highly visible in routines surrounding commensality and foodways. The ritual of shared staff lunch transforms a simple meal into a foundational social event. Studies on food and society, drawing from the foundational work of Mennell (1994), demonstrate that commensality acts as a powerful social lubricant that establishes intimacy and reinforces group identity. Food, therefore, is not merely consumption; it acts as a social currency and a cultural mediator (Appadurai, 1988). The acts of preparing, distributing, and sharing culturally significant dishes communicate a specific type of patronage and care, reinforcing the age-based moral order while simultaneously creating emotional attachment and social trust. One example is the preparation of specific comfort foods for the team.

Furthermore, belonging is negotiated in moments of social tension and ambivalence. The reliance on personal networks for recruitment ensures a high level of social capital and implicit trust among staff members, built on shared background and cultural understanding. When conflicts inevitably arose, the choice by junior staff to accommodate or manage disagreement passively represents a critical ethical practice of belonging. This strategy of accommodated resistance (Scott, 1990) prioritizes the group's long-term social harmony over the individual's temporary desire to assert an opinion, demonstrating that the maintenance of the social fabric is essential for continued inclusion. This behavior is a subtle negotiation that secures the staff member's social location within the community.

Soft power and the negotiation of authority

The paper introduces the concept of soft power to analyze the subtle, non-coercive influence that complements the age-based hierarchy. While originating in political science (Nye, 2004), where it is defined as the ability to shape preferences through attraction and co-

optation, soft power in this sociological context refers to informal influence and cultural authority enacted through everyday gestures.

Soft power is expressed most clearly through gifts, reciprocity, and informal social investment (Mauss, 1990). When senior staff offered care, guidance, or material goods, these were acts of patronage that generated symbolic capital and obligation (Bourdieu, 1984). The junior staff member, by demonstrating respect, diligence, and polite acceptance, reciprocated this cultural gift, converting the symbolic capital into increased trust and social acceptance. This mechanism ensured that influence flowed both vertically and horizontally, maintaining the functional flexibility of the hierarchy. For example, senior staff often shared traditional Vietnamese snacks or special meals with younger colleagues.

Moreover, soft power governed the management of resistance and tension. The accommodated behavior noted in conflict (as will be discussed further in Section Analysis) can be understood as an avoidance of the brittle, coercive application of formal hierarchy. By choosing restraint, the junior staff member gains symbolic capital and avoids overt confrontation, while still implicitly recognizing the moral authority of the elder. Playful interactions, such as joking or teasing, also operated as a subtle form of soft power, testing social boundaries and ensuring that new or less integrated members adapted to the group's humor and relational style. By engaging with this teasing, junior members signaled their willingness to abide by group norms, securing their recognition and support. Soft power, in essence, is the cultural lubricant that prevents the inherited hierarchy from becoming rigid, allowing it to adapt to the fluid environment of the migrant workplace.

Research focus

The review demonstrates that while existing literature effectively covers the role of diaspora restaurants in cultural maintenance and economic life, few studies connect the moral order of relational hierarchy (rooted in the Vietnamese habitus) with the micro-negotiation of belonging and the operation of soft power in a non-Western diasporic context. This paper contributes by showing that in this restaurant micro-society, hierarchy is not a rigid structure of control but a moral framework actively and flexibly negotiated through everyday gestures of care, language use, and the sharing of food. By focusing on these micro-

social dynamics, we reveal how belonging is actively produced and sustained through the reciprocal expression of soft power and adherence to a shared cultural logic.

Methodology

For this research, I use a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore how hierarchy and belonging are shown and negotiated among Vietnamese staff in a diaspora restaurant in Budapest. Ethnography fits this context well because it lets the researcher observe social interactions as they happen naturally, capturing subtle details of language, age-based hierarchy, and daily practices such as care and food sharing (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). The restaurant is a fast-paced and demanding environment where interactions happen constantly and often at the same time. Because of this, long formal interviews were not practical, as staff rarely had time for long discussions during work. Therefore, flexible and immersive observation methods were more effective in showing the real experiences of staff and the dynamics of their relationships.

During three months of fieldwork, conducted from July to the end of September 2025, I took part in participant observation while working as a cashier and server, joining both kitchen and dining-room activities. During July and August, I worked about 30 hours per week, alternating between full-day shifts (around ten hours, from opening until closing) and half-day shifts (from opening until after lunch). In September, I reduced my participation to around 10 hours per week, focusing mainly on observation and note-taking while maintaining regular contact with staff. This hands-on approach allowed me to feel the rhythm of restaurant work directly, similar to Fine's (1996) description of kitchen work as a space where time is experienced physically. Staff handled several overlapping tasks, using short verbal cues and gestures, and depending on shared, often unspoken knowledge of routines. Being part of this flow helped me see how hierarchy appeared in daily actions, especially during busy hours, when assigning tasks, guiding others, or solving conflicts took place in real time. Acts of care, such as sharing food or helping others, showed how social bonds and a sense of belonging were built, maintained, and negotiated through practical and morally meaningful interactions.

Moments of shared lunch were especially meaningful during fieldwork. Staff usually ate together in a family-style setting, similar to an ordinary lunch in a Vietnamese household.

These occasions revealed subtle but important expressions of hierarchy and belonging. Who cooked the food, who set the table with bowls and chopsticks, who served rice from the shared bowl, and who cleaned up afterwards all reflected age, status, and relationships among staff. Observing these routines provided valuable insight into how respect, care, and moral responsibility were performed and understood in everyday life. These moments later informed the development of key themes in the analysis, particularly those related to cooperation, seniority, and care within the group.

Informal conversations supported the observations. These talks happened naturally during short breaks or meal times, giving participants a chance to share experiences without interrupting their work. Such moments often revealed thoughts and feelings that might not appear in formal interviews. Following Spradley and Mann (1975), these conversations highlighted how hierarchy was constantly performed and interpreted, showing how staff understood authority, address terms, and the moral meaning of care.

To gain a more reflective perspective, I also conducted two semi-structured interviews with two staff members. The interview mainly explored the participants' experiences of working in this specific restaurant, such as what they enjoyed, what they thought could be improved, and how they understood everyday practices such as address terms, age respect, and interactions with other staff members. These discussions helped reveal how participants interpreted hierarchy and belonging in their own terms, linking personal reflections to the observations made during fieldwork.

Fieldnotes were written during and right after each shift to keep detailed records of interactions, task division, address terms, and moments of cooperation or tension. Special attention was given to conflict, which shows the limits and flexibility of hierarchy, and to acts of care, which reflect moral and emotional engagement. These notes supported an ongoing process of coding and analysis, allowing new themes to develop as more data were collected. This approach ensured that the analysis was based on participants' real experiences rather than on pre-set theoretical ideas (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

By combining participant observation, informal conversations, and two semi-structured interviews, this research captures both the lived experiences of staff and the meanings they attach to their actions. The ethnographic design treats hierarchy not as something fixed, but as a way to understand belonging. Actions such as helping others,

guiding colleagues, and sharing food show how moral and emotional aspects of belonging were expressed and negotiated in everyday life.

My positionality as both a Vietnamese researcher and a part-time worker in a Vietnamese-owned restaurant shaped both my access to the field and the way I interpreted daily interactions. Being part of the staff allowed me to participate in daily routines and experience the restaurant from an insider perspective, while my observer role required me to step back, take notes, and reflect on interactions. This dual position made me both an insider through language and cultural familiarity and an outsider because staff were aware of my research role and my limited long-term involvement in the workplace. These intersecting positions influenced how staff related to me, what they felt comfortable sharing, and how I interpreted moments involving hierarchy, care, or conflict. This experience highlighted the complexity of social relationships in the restaurant and the importance of considering multiple perspectives in understanding everyday interactions.

Ethical considerations were central to this study. All participants gave informed consent, and their identities were protected through anonymization. Observations and interactions were carried out with respect for the busy work environment, ensuring that data collection did not disturb the staff or add to their workload. Participants could refuse or withdraw from the study at any time without any consequence. The semi-structured interviews were arranged at a time that suited the participants, respecting both their comfort and work schedule.

Analysis

The fieldwork in the Vietnamese restaurant revealed how relational hierarchy, belonging, and soft power were actively negotiated through daily practices. Staff interactions were shaped by age, experience, and shared cultural knowledge, creating a micro-society in which moral, social, and practical concerns were intertwined. The analysis focuses on three key areas: the role of Vietnamese address terms in expressing hierarchy, the significance of shared meals in constructing belonging, and the use of food and informal gestures as expressions of care and influence, which is where soft power manifests. These findings illustrate the ways in which belonging and authority were constructed in a diaspora context, linking interpersonal behaviors to broader cultural logics.

Context of the restaurant and staff composition

The restaurant where this study took place is a Vietnamese-owned eatery in Budapest, Hungary. It operates six days per week, opening from late morning until evening. Recruitment of staff relied heavily on personal networks, including family, friends, and acquaintances, as well as postings in Vietnamese community groups on social media. All job communications were conducted in Vietnamese, reflecting the linguistic and cultural specificity of the workplace. Only Vietnamese students were recruited as part-time cashiers and servers, while the kitchen staff consisted of core members with long-term connections to the owners.

The total number of staff present during fieldwork was six, including the researcher. Core kitchen members included the owners' cousin and two other individuals known to the owners, all were around thirty years old. The owners themselves occasionally visited the restaurant, typically to eat lunch with the staff, providing occasional oversight and symbolic reinforcement of hierarchical structures. The remaining staff, including two interviewees, were students and worked as part-time cashiers and servers. One of them was younger than the kitchen staff, and the other was older. This composition created a clear division between core members and part-time staff, both in terms of experience and authority. The restaurant functioned as a micro-society in which age, experience, regional origin, and language use structured daily interactions, creating both opportunities for belonging and potential sites of tension. These dynamics provided the framework for analyzing hierarchical relationships, the negotiation of authority, and expressions of soft power among staff members.

Age-based address terms and hierarchy

Address terms were central to understanding relational hierarchy and interpersonal expectations within the restaurant. Vietnamese language structures, with their distinctions based on age and gender, allowed staff to communicate respect and awareness of social positioning. Younger employees consistently referred to older staff using appropriate pronouns and honorifics. For instance, a younger female employee would refer to herself as *"em"* when speaking to a male elder as *"anh"* or a female elder as *"chị."* Larger age gaps prompted the use of *"cháu"* for the younger person and *"bác," "cô,"* or *"chú"* for the elder. The addition of the particle *"ạ"* at the end of sentences signaled politeness and deference.

During fieldwork, younger staff members were expected to initiate greetings when entering the restaurant, while older staff responded without taking the initiative. When a new employee failed to follow this norm, they were gently reminded, reflecting the implicit expectations embedded in the hierarchical structure. The behavior was interpreted as a continuation of Vietnamese social norms, reflecting the internalized moral structures, or moral habitus, that migrants carry with them into the diaspora context (Bourdieu, 1984). These practices extended beyond verbal communication. Observations showed that when older staff assigned tasks, younger members were expected to accept instructions without argument.

Conflicts occasionally arose when the hierarchical structure clashed with personal preferences or stress. One interviewee, a student in their early twenties, described situations in which disagreements with older staff could not be expressed openly without being seen as disrespectful. They noted that in such cases, yielding or avoiding confrontation was a common strategy, reflecting a learned response rooted in the moral habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) and the imperative to preserve social harmony. Another interviewee, aged around forty, described a generally positive experience, noting that their age and experience meant that even core kitchen members treated them with particular respect. Their seniority allowed them to guide new employees, especially part-time cashiers and servers, in learning the tasks efficiently. This dynamic showed that relational hierarchy was not only about formal authority but also about responsibility and care. Older staff used their experience to support and instruct younger members, while younger employees followed guidance respectfully, reflecting both practical and cultural expectations.

Shared meals as a site of social negotiation

The restaurant's lunch routines offered rich insight into how belonging and relational hierarchy were enacted through daily practices, primarily via commensality (Mennell, 1994). Staff usually ate together after the peak hours, with the timing depending on customer flow. On quieter days, lunch began around one thirty, while on busy days, it could be as late as two thirty, three, or even three thirty in the afternoon. Meals were rarely eaten individually. Exceptions occurred when the kitchen staff were either too busy to cook full

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meals or did not go shopping that day. On such occasions, they would still prepare some dishes from the menu for the cashiers or servers to eat.

The food itself reflected familiar Vietnamese flavors. The kitchen staff typically prepared *thịt kho* (braised pork in caramelized sauce), *gà chiên mắm tỏi* (fried chicken with fish sauce and garlic), *rau muống xào tỏi* (stir-fried water spinach with garlic), *cá thu kho* (braised mackerel), and *cá thu sốt cà chua* (mackerel in tomato sauce). These dishes were often accompanied by *cà muối* (pickled eggplant or vegetables in the Vietnamese style) and *nước rau luộc* (boiled vegetable broth). These dishes were placed in large communal bowls, and plain white rice was served separately, also in large bowls. Each staff member had a small personal bowl and a pair of chopsticks. During meal time, they would take portions from the shared dishes into their own bowls.

In the first weeks, when staff were not yet familiar with one another, there was noticeable hesitation at the table. Individuals served themselves quietly, with minimal conversation. As familiarity increased, interactions became more collaborative. Older staff often took the initiative to serve younger colleagues from the communal bowls. They encouraged them to eat generously, frequently saying phrases such as: *"Ăn nhiều vào để có sức làm việc, học tập" ("Eat more so you have energy to work and study")*. Younger staff also learned which tasks they were expected to do after meals, such as clearing the table and washing utensils, which they undertook without verbal instruction.

These practices illustrated a layered dynamic of relational hierarchy and care. The act of serving others and offering guidance communicated both authority and nurture. Non-verbal cues, such as who scooped rice or served particular dishes, reinforced the social order while simultaneously building a sense of collective responsibility and belonging. Hierarchical distinctions were thus not rigid; they were maintained through everyday gestures and acts of care, allowing younger or less experienced staff to integrate smoothly into the group while respecting established norms.

Lunch routines also revealed subtle differences when the restaurant owners joined the staff. Although they ate at the same table and shared dishes, the atmosphere was distinct. Staff tended to be more formal and attentive, reflecting the added layer of authority represented by the owners. Even in this setting, communal sharing continued, but gestures

such as serving and encouraging younger staff were adjusted, highlighting how hierarchy shifted depending on the presence of senior members.

Food, care, and expressions of soft power

Food acted as a key medium for expressing care and maintaining social cohesion within the restaurant, serving as a primary channel for the exercise of soft power (Nye, 2004). Both interviewees emphasized that one of the main reasons they enjoyed working there was the quality and familiarity of the meals. The dishes prepared were considered "authentic" according to their own standards, reflecting flavors and cooking styles from Vietnam. These included expensive food like *cháo cá hồi* (salmon porridge, eaten occasionally as a "special" meal), or Vietnamese snacks like *chè đậu đỏ* (sweet red bean pudding), *chè khoai dẻo* (sweet taro pudding), *bánh khoai lang chiên* (fried sweet potato cake), and even *bò sốt vang* (beef stewed in wine) during breakfast. They were often shared with younger staff or for them to take home after work. Senior staff would usually ask questions such as *"Đã ăn sáng chưa?"* *(Have you had breakfast?)* or *"Tối muốn ăn gì để anh/chị nấu?"* *(What do you want me to cook for dinner?)*, signaling care, attention, and a willingness to support younger members in both practical and emotional ways. It also reinforced bonds and created a sense of inclusion, reminding younger staff that they were part of a community that looked after one another.

Fieldwork also showed that younger staff internalized these gestures, understanding that respect and diligence were reciprocated through attention and care from older members. This created a system in which soft power operated subtly alongside formal hierarchy. Younger staff who consistently demonstrated respect and engagement were more likely to receive guidance, food, and social attention from senior members. This process involved an exchange of material care for deference, generating symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984) for the senior staff and securing inclusion for the junior staff. Self-reflection during the fieldwork revealed that actively following these norms, greeting staff, and completing tasks conscientiously led to greater acceptance and a warmer social environment.

Soft power also appeared in more playful and informal ways during meals. For example, one interviewee, in their early twenties, was often teased or jokingly "paired" with an older kitchen staff member during lunch. While occasionally slightly irritating, the interviewee reported that it actually helped them integrate into the group more quickly.

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Participating in such humor signaled that a younger member was willing to engage with the group's social norms, demonstrating openness, flexibility, and acceptance of the relational hierarchy. These playful interactions were another form of subtle influence: the older staff could show care, test group dynamics, and reinforce social norms without directly asserting authority. The younger staff, by laughing along or responding politely, learned how to navigate relationships, gain social recognition, and signal belonging.

This dimension of soft power highlights that care, guidance, and inclusion in the restaurant were not only communicated through explicit instructions or hierarchically structured tasks but also through culturally specific, everyday practices. Food and humor served as complementary tools for older staff to exercise influence, while younger staff reciprocated by following expectations, demonstrating respect, and responding to these cues.

Conflict, ambivalence, and negotiation

Although hierarchy and soft power largely structured daily interactions, moments of tension revealed the limits of these mechanisms. Conflicts tended to arise when work pressures or personal stress intensified, especially for younger staff navigating the expectations of deference to older colleagues. One interviewee explained how disagreements with senior staff were often managed through yielding rather than confrontation:

> *"Thôi cứ nhịn người ta để tránh phiền phức, dù sao cũng còn làm việc với nhau dài, nhún nhường một chút để còn dễ nhìn mặt mũi nhau."*
>
> *(English translation): "It is better to yield to avoid trouble, after all we will still be working together for a long time, let's yield a little so that we can still face each other decently."*

The phrase *"để còn dễ nhìn mặt mũi nhau"* carries significant cultural weight. In Vietnamese social norms, *mặt* refers not only to literal face but to one's social standing, dignity, and perceived respectability. By choosing restraint, the interviewee demonstrated an understanding that prioritizing the preservation of social harmony and *mặt* (Nguyen, 2015) was crucial for maintaining the social cohesion of the workplace. The interviewee's approach also illustrates a subtle negotiation of soft power. By exercising restraint and attentiveness to social norms, younger staff were able to secure acceptance, trust, and continued inclusion

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within the group. These strategies highlight how belonging in the restaurant was actively constructed and constantly negotiated, rather than assumed. Staff members learned to balance personal perspectives with cultural expectations, managing ambivalence and conflict in ways that reinforced both moral hierarchy and social harmony.

My own reflection during participation further emphasized the importance of minimizing conflict, actively following expectations, and reciprocating care. Greeting elders, completing tasks proactively, and participating in shared meals contributed to a positive perception from senior staff. Over time, these actions fostered greater openness, attention, and support, illustrating how individual agency interacted with hierarchical and relational structures to shape a sense of belonging.

Discussion

This study reveals the internal social organization of the Vietnamese diaspora restaurant, confirming it as a functional micro-society where traditional cultural structures are both sustained and adapted. The findings compel us to interpret relational hierarchy not as a negative lingering affect, but as the essential cultural framework through which staff actively negotiate and construct their sense of belonging. This enduring hierarchy, visibly manifested through age, language use, and the communal sharing of food, governs all processes of trust and reciprocal social investment.

Hierarchy as a mechanism for cohesion

The relational system continues to operate across different locations, with authority based on age and seniority guiding the use of particular address terms and expected respect (Nguyen, 2015). This hierarchy helps maintain order by making social interactions predictable. Junior staff often choose to give way rather than argue, a practical approach that supports long-term group harmony. This behavior reinforces the system, showing that concern for the group takes priority over individual preference and helps prevent conflicts that could disrupt the community.

The hierarchical structure shapes how staff give and receive support, actively creating a feeling of belonging. Senior members express their authority through gestures of care and patronage, such as encouraging eating and sharing food. This non-verbal

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communication establishes an implicit social debt: the nurturing guidance provided by elders is reciprocated by the loyalty and diligence of junior members (Mauss, 1990). By adhering to these reciprocal expectations, staff secure their social location and emotional attachment within the group.

Limitation

I am aware that as a researcher participating in daily restaurant life, my presence inevitably influenced interactions and shaped what I observed. Ethnography is never neutral, and the knowledge produced reflects the ongoing interplay between researcher and participants, as highlighted by Davies (2007), who emphasizes the importance of reflexivity in understanding the effects of one's own positionality on research outcomes. Other scholars, including Clifford and Marcus (1986), Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011), and Hammersley and Atkinson (2019), similarly stress the necessity of acknowledging the researcher's influence and the co-construction of ethnographic knowledge. Additionally, the three-month period of fieldwork limits the depth and breadth of this study, meaning the findings should be treated as a detailed case study rather than a generalization of Vietnamese diaspora practices across Central Europe.

Linguistic stratification and future research

The system's effectiveness lies in its adaptability, relying heavily on informal influence rather than rigid command. However, the study uncovered an internal complexity: the majority of staff originated from Central Vietnam and spoke a regional dialect difficult for outsiders to access. This suggests that language acts as an internal barrier, creating a subtle linguistic stratification within the co-ethnic group itself. This finding is crucial because it implies that the full negotiation of trust and access to resources, such as mediating critical external interactions, may be further defined by regional ties, even when the external environment is shared.

The study's contribution lies in illuminating these micro-level processes, which demonstrate that cultural survival is achieved through the continuous validation of an inherited relational structure. Future research must pursue comparative studies that specifically investigate how internal linguistic and regional hierarchies affect information

flow, the negotiation of authority, and the distribution of opportunity within Vietnamese diaspora enterprises. This would be essential for fully understanding the adaptive capacity of these social structures in varying transnational contexts.

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Nura Abukhalil

Moving Margins, Staying with Migrant Trouble: Posthuman Interpretations of Migrant Life in Budapest

From Roots of Nations
[https://www.facebook.com/Themotivationjourney]

Abstract: This paper examines how Arab migrants in Budapest negotiate belonging through everyday practices, moral reasoning, and more-than-human entanglements. Building on anthropological theories of boundary-making (Barth, Jenkins), social identity formation (Tajfel & Turner), and everyday politics (Scott; Bayat), combined with posthuman perspectives from Haraway and Braidotti, the study conceptualizes identity not as a fixed cultural attribute but as an ongoing, relational process shaped by material, digital, and affective infrastructures. Drawing on participant observation, interviews, and digital ethnography, the findings reveal three interconnected spheres—ideological territories, moral liminalities, and social solidarities—through which migrants navigate both external exclusion and internal diversity. Participants articulated belonging by mobilizing values, negotiating moral ambivalence, forming support networks, and interacting with digital platforms, symbols, bureaucratic systems, and transnational attachments. These practices destabilize dominant integration narratives that frame migrants as passive or incompatible and instead highlight quiet, everyday forms of political participation and world-making. The study argues that Arab migrants transform marginality into generative spaces for reimagining identity, community, and their place

within Europe, offering a more nuanced understanding of integration as a dynamic, multi-layered, and more-than-human process.

Keywords: migration, integration, posthuman, identity, postcolonial Europe.

Introduction

Migration scholarship has long emphasized integration as a measurable process through which newcomers adapt to the social, cultural, and political norms of a host society. Yet such accounts often privilege institutional frameworks and policy outcomes over the lived social worlds through which migrants negotiate belonging in everyday life. This paper examines how Arab migrants in Budapest construct and contest belonging through mundane practices, moral values, and social interactions, showing that integration is not a linear assimilation process, but a continuous negotiation marked by power, discourse, and agency.

In Hungary, Arab migrants occupy a paradoxical position. They remain largely invisible in national debates on migration and diversity, yet they maintain active social, cultural, and professional networks that circulate across the city. Their everyday lives unfold within an environment shaped by nationalist rhetoric, exclusionary narratives, and broader European racialized migration regimes. Their experiences reveal that integration is not only shaped by state discourse but also by the moral and symbolic negotiations migrants undertake within and beyond their communities.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2024 and 2025, including participant observation and in-depth interviews with Arab residents in Budapest, this study explores how individuals make sense of identity, morality, and belonging in this politically charged environment. Participants expressed diverse—and sometimes contradictory—orientations toward values, social norms, and identity categories. Some articulated clear boundaries around Arabness, moral conservatism, or resistance to Western liberal norms; others downplayed ethnicity, embraced universalist or cosmopolitan values, or resisted essentialized expectations of what it means to be Arab, immigrant, or Muslim. These variations demonstrate that Arab migrants are far from a monolithic group; instead, they navigate multiple moral and relational landscapes, choosing when to align with, distance from, or redraw boundaries within and beyond their communities.

Theoretically, this paper brings together Barth's (1969) and Jenkins's (2008) models of boundary-making, Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory, Derrida's (1976) deconstruction of binary logics, Goffman's (1963) work on stigma and self-presentation, and postcolonial perspectives inspired by Edward Said (1979). To these, I add insights from posthuman theorists such as Donna Haraway (1991) and Rosi Braidotti (2013), who challenge human-centered, fixed notions of identity by emphasizing relationality, fluid becoming, and the entanglement of subjects with their environments, technologies, and histories. Combined, these frameworks illuminate identity not as a stable essence but as an ongoing negotiation shaped by power, discourse, affect, and material conditions. Migrants navigate and destabilize categories such as "insider/outsider," "modern/traditional," or "European/non-European," revealing the constructedness and contingency of distinctions that appear naturalized in public discourse. A posthuman lens further shows how these negotiations unfold across digital spaces, transnational networks, and affective attachments, highlighting that belonging is never only human-to-human but embedded in wider socio-technical assemblages.

This study also examines how migrants respond to exclusionary narratives by creating parallel structures of support, visibility, and recognition—what Haraway (2016) might call "staying with the trouble" of their situated conditions. Through community-building, cultural events, symbolic gestures, digital infrastructures, and everyday moral positioning, Arab migrants transform marginality into sites of agency and meaning-making. Their practices complicate dominant narratives of integration that assume passivity, cultural incompatibility, or linear adaptation. Seen through a posthuman frame, these practices emerge as relational assemblages rather than purely individual acts: identity is co-produced with social media platforms, bureaucratic systems, memories of home, and local norms in Budapest. This shifts the analysis from migrants simply responding to exclusion to migrants continuously reconfiguring the social and symbolic terrain in which integration and belonging are imagined.

Together, these perspectives illuminate how Arab migrants in Budapest respond to exclusionary narratives by creating parallel structures of support, recognition, and meaning. Through community-building, cultural events, symbolic gestures, digital networks, and everyday moral positioning, migrants transform marginality into sites of agency. Their

practices complicate linear or state-centered models of integration by framing belonging as a multi-layered, relational, and more-than-human process

Theoretical Framework

Identity and belonging in migration contexts are best understood not as fixed attributes but as relational, negotiated, and situational processes. This paper integrates three major strands of theory—boundary-making, identity work, and posthuman relationality—to illuminate how Arab migrants in Budapest navigate social, moral, and political landscapes.

Boundary-Making and Social Identity

Following Fredrik Barth (1969), ethnic identities persist not through shared cultural content but through the maintenance of boundaries that distinguish "us" from "them." Richard Jenkins (2008) expands this to argue that identity emerges at the intersection of internal self-understanding and external categorization. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory further explains how in-group and out-group distinctions—especially in politically charged contexts—serve to enhance self-esteem, coherence, and security. Together, these perspectives show that boundaries are actively produced, shifting with context, pressure, and desire for recognition.

Stigma, Self-Presentation, and Discursive Instability

Building on Goffman (1963), migrants' strategies to manage stigma—through impression management, selective disclosure, or redefining negative traits—reveal identity as an ongoing performance shaped by power and moral expectations. Meanwhile, Derrida's (1976) deconstruction of binary logics highlights how categories like "insider/outsider," "modern/traditional," or "European/Arab" are unstable, relational, and constantly reworked in everyday life. Migrants' practices—embracing, rejecting, or hybridizing such binaries—expose the constructedness of social hierarchies.

Postcolonial Power and European Raciality

Although Hungary lacks a colonial past in the Middle East, Edward Said's (1978) insights on Orientalism help explain how Arab identity becomes racialized within broader European civilizational hierarchies. Migration regimes, public discourse, and institutional practices

reproduce symbolic boundaries that frame migrants as Europe's internal "others." Integration, therefore, functions not only as a social process but as a disciplinary mechanism that measures proximity to an imagined European norm.

Posthuman Relationality and More-Than-Human Identity-Making

A posthuman perspective—drawing from Donna Haraway (1985, 1991) and Rosi Braidotti (2013)—pushes this analysis further by decentering the autonomous human subject. Identity becomes a relational assemblage, produced through interactions among human actors, digital infrastructures, bureaucratic systems, material objects, and affective atmospheres. For Arab migrants in Budapest, belonging is shaped not only by cultural values or interpersonal networks but also by:

● Digital platforms (Facebook groups, WhatsApp chats) that mediate visibility, community, and solidarity

● Transnational media flows sustaining emotional ties and shared imaginaries

● Immigration law and bureaucratic infrastructures that regulate mobility and shape precarity

● Material and sensory objects—food, dress, photos, badges, kufiyyas—circulating as anchors of memory and political meaning

● Affective environments of fear, pride, nostalgia, and moral discomfort

These elements form a more-than-human ecology of belonging, where agency is distributed and identity work unfolds through entangled social, technological, and material processes.

Methodology

This research employed a multi-method qualitative design grounded in participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and limited digital ethnography. Fieldwork was conducted between November 2024 and January 2025 in Budapest, primarily through participation in community events organized by Roots of Nations (RON), an Arab-led initiative focused on cultural exchange, professional networking, and the strengthening of Arab identity in Hungary.

Participant Observation and Interviews

Fieldwork for this study took place between 2024 and 2025 through a combination of participant observation and semi-structured interviews. I conducted participant observation primarily at events organized by RON—a Budapest-based Arab community initiative that hosts cultural, social, and professional activities. These events, typically held at a rented venue in central Budapest, brought together groups ranging from 10 to 60 participants and covered themes such as Arab cultural heritage, networking, soft skills development, and practical guidance on navigating life in Hungary. Attending these gatherings as both participant and observer allowed me to document interactions, shared values, and emerging forms of community-making in real time.

Alongside this, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with organizers, active participants, and occasional attendees. Interviews encouraged open narration and allowed participants to reflect on identity, belonging, morality, values, and their everyday negotiations within Hungarian society. Participants varied in age, gender, occupation, and migration histories, creating a diverse dataset that captured multiple trajectories and interpretations of Arab belonging in Budapest.

Digital Ethnography

Given the centrality of digital media to diasporic life, the study incorporated elements of digital ethnography. Rather than conducting full-scale online fieldwork, I focused on observing how Arab communities in Budapest used:

● Facebook and WhatsApp groups, such as those created by RON or other Arab diaspora networks, to share information, produce visibility, and organize events.

● Networking with external initiatives, such as DOSZ (Association of Hungarian PhD and DLA Candidates) and migrant-led groups like Ways to Europe Initiative ("Migrant Communities in Hungary"), to offer Hungarian and Arabic language classes, information sessions, and mixed-nationality events.

These digital spaces functioned as hybrid environments where belonging was shaped through a constellation of interactions—with algorithms, media flows, photographs, shared posts, invitations, and comment threads. In line with posthuman theory, these platforms were understood as co-producing migrant identities rather than merely reflecting them.

Findings

Ideological Territories: Values as Boundary-Making Tools

Participants navigated ideological boundaries through a network of human and nonhuman forces: digital platforms, material symbols, and affective atmospheres. While values such as religion, modesty, cultural pride, or liberal universalism appeared—at first glance—to be internal, psychological positions, a posthuman lens reveals them instead as relational effects, produced through interactions across spaces, technologies, symbols, and bodies.

For example, ideological debates around LGBTQ+ rights, religiosity, gender roles, or "Arab values" did not emerge solely from personal conviction. They were shaped by algorithmic environments (e.g., Arabic-language Facebook feeds reinforcing conservative content), diasporic media circuits, and transnational religious networks, which collectively sustained particular moral imaginaries. Likewise, the decision to attend or avoid RON events was influenced not only by interpersonal disagreement but by affective atmospheres in the venue, the circulation of event posters, and the pressure of visibility in diasporic public space.

Participants often articulated essentialized distinctions between "Arabs" and "Hungarians"—the latter framed as "*organized*," "*closed off*," or "*bad at communication*," and Arabs as "*sociable*," "*worldly*," and "*chaotic*" (P2, P6). Yet these binaries functioned less as fixed cultural truths and more as strategic affective narratives, mobilized to reinforce solidarity in an environment shaped by exclusionary political discourse. They reflected the interplay of media portrayals, state rhetoric, and everyday encounters in public space, which together assembled the migrant as a racialized "Other." In this sense, ideological territories were assemblages of values, emotions, technologies, and social discourses—not stable cultural categories.

Simultaneously, some participants destabilized these boundaries by identifying as "cosmopolitan," "transnational," or simply "human," refusing ethnic or national labels altogether. These alternative identifications likewise emerged through posthuman assemblages: participation in global online communities, everyday interaction with diverse migrant networks, and an orientation toward liberal democratic values circulating in international academic environments. Identity here appeared as fluid, networked, and

relational, produced across multiple environments rather than contained within fixed cultural categories.

Moral Liminalities: Navigating Conflict Through Embodied Practices

Moral dilemmas—around religious expectations, gender norms, lifestyle choices, or public representation—were also produced through interconnected human–nonhuman encounters. Participants described feeling "in between" moral worlds: Arab communal expectations on one side and Hungarian secular norms on the other. This liminality was not merely psychological; it was materially and socially mediated.

For example, the pressure some participants felt to explain fasting, prayer, or hijab emerged not only from interpersonal questioning but from the bureaucratic and linguistic infrastructures of the workplace, where certain practices were hyper-visible in open offices or meeting schedules. Similarly, decisions about self-presentation—such as what to wear to community events—were influenced by the visibility of images on social media.

One participant (P5) struggled with the tension between supporting LGBTQ+ friends and adhering to religious values, ultimately managing it through a split between internal belief and external behavior. This negotiation involved affective atmospheres of solidarity in friendship networks, social media discourses, and the transnational flow of moral debates— illustrating that moral liminality is enacted through multiple relational layers, not simply individual choice.

Others experienced this kind of liminality as a transformative process, rejecting earlier tendencies to "people-please" and instead embracing a more assertive Arab identity. Their shift was mediated through self-help frameworks, motivational content online, and engagement with diasporic community spaces, which together created new moral affordances for self-understanding. Liminality thus operated as a site of creative reconfiguration, where identities were reshaped through hybrid human–nonhuman alignments.

Social Solidarities in Integration: Networks, Infrastructures, and the Politics of Care

The final site of belonging emerges through collective efforts to bridge structural gaps left by the Hungarian state. Here, migrants built communities—events, classes, advice networks, and advocacy efforts—that functioned as grassroots integration mechanisms.

These efforts were not purely social; they were assemblages of people, platforms, and material resources. Facebook groups enabled the circulation of information about immigration laws, job opportunities, or racism. RON events transformed the rented café venue into temporary diasporic infrastructures of care. Collaborations with DOSZ and migrant organizations stitched migrants into broader institutional networks.

Participants saw these practices as both self-help and resistance. For instance, one participant (P6) reframed stigma by performing "exemplary" Arabness—cleanliness, hospitality, respectability—to counter dominant stereotypes. Another (P7) critiqued anti-immigrant labor policies, using the discourse of economic contribution to assert migrant value. A third (P4) described the affective instability of living under anti-Muslim rhetoric, pointing to how state discourse generates atmospheres of insecurity.

These solidarities show that migrants do not passively endure marginalization—they actively reorganize social life, using digital, affective, and material resources to create spaces where integration is redefined on their own terms. In doing so, they transform marginality into collective agency, filling structural voids through flexible, relational, posthuman networks of support.

Discussion

The findings reveal that Arab migrants in Budapest negotiate belonging through a series of relational practices that unfold across human, social, digital, and material domains. Rather than viewing identity as a stable cultural possession, the analysis shows that migrants inhabit what Haraway and Braidotti describe as more-than-human assemblages—networks of people, platforms, affect, symbols, and bureaucratic infrastructures that co-produce the conditions of belonging.

Across the three analytical sites—ideological territories, moral liminalities, and social solidarities—participants engage in continuous meaning-making shaped by both internal community dynamics and external pressures. Ideological boundaries are articulated through

essentialized contrasts (e.g., "chaotic" Arabs vs. "organized" Europeans), yet these boundaries are neither fixed nor universally accepted; they are strategic, situational, and often contested. Some participants reinforce in-group solidarity by emphasizing cultural values, while others reject essentialism entirely, aligning instead with cosmopolitan, liberal, or transnational identities.

Moral liminalities highlight how individuals navigate contradictions between personal beliefs, religious values, and perceived expectations from both Arabs and Hungarians. These tensions produce creative forms of identity work—balancing private convictions with public self-presentation, redefining stigmatized traits, or reframing moral commitments.

Finally, social solidarities demonstrate how migrants actively fill the gaps left by state institutions. By organizing events, forming support networks, or countering stereotypes through everyday conduct, participants build alternative infrastructures of visibility and value. Here, the posthuman perspective clarifies that belonging emerges not only from interpersonal relations but also from interactions with digital platforms, migration regimes, material symbols (like the kufiyya), and affective atmospheres of uncertainty, hope, and pride. Taken together, these findings reframe integration as a distributed, relational, and negotiated process, rather than a linear movement from "outsider" to "insider."

Conclusion

This paper has shown that Arab migrants in Budapest engage in complex forms of identity negotiation that exceed the limits of conventional integration discourse. Through everyday actions—whether organizing cultural events, navigating moral contradictions, or cultivating supportive networks—they assert agency in a context shaped by nationalism, bureaucratic constraint, and racialized perceptions.

By integrating posthuman perspectives with boundary-making theories and social identity approaches, the analysis demonstrates that belonging is produced through human and nonhuman forces alike: digital infrastructures, symbolic objects, affective climates, and the materiality of migration status all shape how people inhabit place and community. Migrants do not simply adapt to a host society; they actively rework the social and symbolic terrain in which integration is imagined.

The study challenges the assumption that marginal spaces are passive or peripheral. Instead, Arab migrants' practices reveal these spaces to be sites of transformation, where identities are renegotiated, hierarchies destabilized, and new forms of solidarity and visibility emerge. Their diverse strategies—ranging from asserting cultural pride to embracing universalist or cosmopolitan orientations—underscore that belonging is neither singular nor fixed but an ongoing, relational, and more-than-human process.

Ultimately, this work argues that understanding integration requires shifting from institutional metrics to the everyday negotiations through which migrants create meaning, community, and possibility. Their practices compel us to rethink Europe not from its imagined center but from the dynamic social worlds produced at its so-called margins.

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Linh Phung

Craft-Orientation and Community Building | Preliminary Ethnography Report at Helsinki Knitting Club

Abstract: This study is a preliminary ethnographic report of how craft-orientation manifests in community building practices within Helsinki Knitting Club (HKC), an English-speaking fibrecraft community in Finland. Building on previous academic work, this study aims to address the currently limited attention to intracommunal relationship in craft scholarship. The data contains 2.5 months of ethnography observation and two additional in-depth interviews. Selective coding was conducted to identify five themes.

HKC club members at Tampere Craft and De 1

The findings empirically support Rennstam and Paulsson (2025)'s three dimensions of craft-orientation: (i) activity guided by the desire to do a job well for its own sake, (ii) prioritization of human engagement over machine control, standardization and efficiency, and (iii) an epistemic rather than instrumental relationship to objects of production, and show how these are collectively enacted in HKC. The study contribute to the current body of craft literature by proposing two additional dimensions to craft-orientation: (iv) the harmonisation of group dynamics and (v) epistemic relationships among members.

Keywords: craft-orientation, post-growth, community building, alienation, consumer tribes

Introduction

> "In handicrafts and manufacture, the workman makes use of a tool, in the factory, the machine makes use of him … In manufacture the workmen are parts of a living mechanism. In the factory we have a lifeless mechanism independent of the workman, who becomes its mere living appendage."
>
> (Marx, 1867/1887, Vol. 1, Chap.15, Sec. 4)

In the words of Karl Marx and Thorstein Veblen, handicraft stands in opposition to factory production. The labour by craftsmen and craftswomen is ennobling, and craft is the quintessential medium for human skill and agency. In contrast, within mechanised production, and by extension, consumption of factory-made goods under capitalism, the worker is alienated from his tools and creations.

Research exploring how alternative practices can challenge this dominant market-driven system has a long history. Craft consumption, for example, has become an increasingly developed field of study in the context of our post-modern societies, where consumers engage directly in the making of products, not only for functional use but also for self-expression (Van Der Westhuizen & Kuhn, 2023) and personal fulfilment (Pöllänen & Weissmann-Hanski, 2019). Furthermore, research on consumer tribes has highlighted how people can establish communities that operate outside traditional market logics (Canniford, 2011; Goulding et al., 2013; Szmigin et al., 2007). Across these fields of research, a common theme emerges: the pursuit of meaningful practices such as handicrafts has the potential to subvert industrial alienation and re-centre human engagement.

However, existing literature remains limited in several respects. Research on consumer collectives emphasized managerial and marketing implications (Canniford, 2011; Cova & Cova, 2002; Goulding et al., 2013; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), often treating collectives as strategic resources rather than as sites of value creation and social transformation. Furthermore, while craft scholarship has deeply explored the human-to-object relationship and motivations of crafters, it rarely examines the implications for human-to-human social relations. This study addresses this gap by exploring community building within craft-oriented groups, guided by the research question:

How does craft-orientation manifest in community building?

To answer this, I begin by engaging with previous literature on craft and consumer tribes. With the theoretical framework in place, I describe my methodology, which includes ethnographic fieldwork conducted at the Helsinki Knitting Club and two additional in-depth interviews with its members. The interviews revealed personal relationships with crafting, which helped confirm Rennstam and Paulsson's (2025) three dimensions of craft-orientation. They also verify my on-field observations. The fieldwork largely examines group dynamics and how craft-orientation manifests within a communal context, which provides a basis for my theoretical contribution of two additional dimensions of craft-orientation that focus on human-to-human relationships. The paper concludes by a discussion of its contribution, acknowledgement of its limitations and suggestions for future research.

Recentering human engagement does not simply lie in subverting machine-caused alienation or improving the human-to-object relationship, but would require moving beyond these concerns. This study's theoretical contribution will hopefully be among the first steps to a future where creating and maintaining meaningful human-to-human relationships take precedence over fixing machine-caused alienation.

Literature Review

Craft in pre-modern societies

In pre-modern societies, at least within the Old World's contexts, goods were mainly produced with handicraft manufacture. Medieval Europe's production was organized at relatively small scales within guild communities of highly skilled artisans. Within these organizations, aspiring professionals entered at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy, typically as apprentices, before advancing to craftsmen and eventually master status. Apprenticeship contracts bound young people to a master's household for several years, during which they lived, worked, and trained under close supervision, acquiring not only technical skills but also the norms, values and networks of the craft community (Britannica Editors, 2025).

Learning in this system was fundamentally interpersonal and relational. Craft knowledge was transmitted through informal prolonged, face-to-face interaction: observing the master at work, engaging in repetitive practice, and receiving continuous correction and

demonstration (Li et al., 2023). These epistemic and relational dimensions of craft are central to understanding community building within craft-oriented groups.

These guilds also facilitated dense social structures by combining economic, social and religious functions, such as organizing communal feasts and celebrations, offering welfare to members and widows, representing their members in urban politics (Rosser, 1997). Professional guild life and community life were deeply intertwined.

The historical guild system tied craft to long-term intracommunal commitment. Rather than treating skill acquisition as an individual and decontextualized process, they showed how production and social belonging can be co-constitutive. This historical model is particularly helpful for thinking about the community building aspects of craft-orientation today.

Craft and alienation in industrial production

In works by classic social critics, craft has often been framed in explicit opposition to factory production. In Marx's work, the crafters can recognise themselves in their creations and retain control over the production process, whereas industrial production under capitalism subordinates workers to the rhythms of the machine, thereby alienating them from their tools, their products and ultimately from their own human potential (Marx, 1867/1887).

Veblen similarly contrasts "the instinct of workmanship" with industrial processes driven by economic motives and efficiency, stating that only "under the handicraft system...the instinct of workmanship again came into a dominant position...and so gave their characteristic bent to men's habits of thought" (Veblen, 1914, pg. 234).

The distinction between craft and factory production made by Marx and Veblen sets up the tension between alienated and engaged forms of labour. However, their work focuses primarily on alienation from objects of production and says little about alienation from other human beings.

Craft in contemporary scholarship

The term 'craft' has previously mainly been used to refer to a form of production. In contemporary academia, however, craft has increasingly taken the bilateral lens of

production-consumption or even moved solely into the consumption perspective, as large-scale industry becomes the dominating production mode.

Campbell (2005), for instance, introduces the notion of the "craft consumer" to describe some individuals that operate outside the binary spectrum of consumers' agency, i.e., either consumers are all-rational entities, or subjected to forces beyond their control. In his work, craft practices are not only about the technical process of making but also about lifestyle, aesthetic judgment and constructing identities.

Other notable literature on craft is similar, often exploring personal motivations and how craft practices are revived within post-modern consumer collectives (Stannard & Sanders, 2014; Pöllänen & Weissmann-Hanski, 2019; Rippin & Vachhani, 2018; Van Der Westhuizen & Kuhn, 2023). Craft practices are viewed mostly as a residual or archaic form of manufacture. Motivations for craft have often been the main trigger for curiosity, with a rich body of literature (Khademi-Vidra & Bujdosó, 2020; Pöllänen & Weissmann-Hanski, 2019; Stannard & Sanders, 2014), rather than other wonderful aspects craft may offer, such as its potential to facilitate community building.

Craft-orientation as an alternative mode of organising for post-growth society

Rennstam and Paulsson (2025) established the notion of craft-orientation as "(i) activity guided by the desire to do a job well for its own sake, (ii) prioritization of human engagement over machine control, standardization and efficiency, (iii) an epistemic rather than instrumental relationship to objects of production (p. 695).

The theoretical contribution of craft-orientation is commendable in that it advocates for the centrality of humans' agency. By articulating craft-orientation in this way, their work proposes a higher-order framework that could inform alternative modes of organising in a post-growth society, one that denounces taking linear growth and efficiency as unquestioned goals. This makes their contribution distinctive within craft scholarship, where empirical studies often focus on specific practices or markets without a generalizable or transferable abstraction.

Nonetheless, this theory has its limitations. By focusing primarily on the relationship between producers and their instruments of production, it gives inadequate attention to how

craft-orientation shapes human-to-human relationships and social organisation. Addressing this omission is central to answering the research question.

Consumer tribes

Parallel to this, research on consumer tribes has examined how people form loosely organised communities around shared passions, rituals and identities (Cova & Cova, 2002; Goulding et al., 2011; Szmigin et al., 2007). Rather than being stable and clearly bounded like other consumer collective, such as brand communities or subcultures of consumption, tribes are typically described as ephemeral, playful, imaginative and fluid, organised around shared practices and emotions and often do not bend to businesses' intervention (Goulding et al., 2013; Canniford, 2011). Consumer tribes are held together by linking value, which create and sustain social bonds, so that *links* (relationships) become more important than *things* (brands, products).

Consumer tribes' literature therefore have extensively and successfully covered how communities can be created and sustained (Goulding et al, 2013; Canniford, 2011). Much of this literature, however, has been developed within a managerial and marketing agenda. Studies frequently ask how firms can *manage*, *tame* or *capitalize o*n consumer tribes. More recent work begins to acknowledge the unpredictability and entrepreneurialism (Cova & Shankar, 2020) or even subversive agency of consumer collectives (Szimigin et al. 2007), but none have explored how tribal practices might prefigure a postgrowth society. This paper contributes to this gap by examining consumer tribes not as market assets, but as potential sites for alternative social forms and modes of community building.

Methodology

Background information of the field

Helsinki Knitting Club (HKC) was founded in early December 2022 in Helsinki, Finland. Despite its name, HKC is not limited to knitting but functions as a broader fibre-crafting group. The club has hosted knitters and crocheters of various nationalities, ages, and levels of experience.

The meeting location is a communal space provided by Helsinki's Kallio Church, although the group has no specific ties to any religious community. Typically, HKC has

between 10 to 15 participants at its official weekly meetings every Wednesday. There can also be unofficial gatherings on weekends at cafes, parks, etc., which usually attract a smaller circle, around 7 to 8 people. These meetings run throughout the year, with a break during the three summer months.

The demographic is predominantly women. Student members, often in their 20s, typically come to Helsinki for short-term study programmes such as exchanges or double degrees and usually move away after one or two years. Longer-term members tend to be in their 30s, often childfree, with higher education degrees, residing in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area (which includes four cities: Helsinki, Espoo, Kauniainen and Vantaa). They have deeper ties to Helsinki, such as Finnish nationality, full-time work, partners or family, therefore more likely to remain committed to the group over time. Occasionally, there are 1-3 male members, whose life situations are quite similar to those of the female members.

As the official language of communication is English and not Finnish, the group attracts mostly foreigners, with members from many different backgrounds: Vietnam, Korea, France, Germany, Lithuania, America, Australia, etc. HKC welcomes anyone regardless of their ability. In practice, however, those with higher levels of skill are more likely to remain and become committed members. The environment is less optimized for learning knitting or crocheting from scratch, functioning mainly as a socialization occasion for experienced crafters.

Evolution of Ethnographic Development
The drive for this study stemmed from a personal interest. I have been a fibre crafter for about three years. I began crocheting in the autumn of 2022 and learned to knit one year after that. Until September 2025, I engaged in fibrecraft almost exclusively on my own, teaching myself through YouTube tutorials, and occasionally seeking troubleshooting advice on Reddit.

Finding and fixing mistakes in handicrafts is especially difficult for beginners, who often do not know how finished work or errors can look like. This happened in my own knitting journey: I twisted my stitches for an entire year, which is a common mistake for new knitters, before someone on Reddit pointed it out for me. That experience made me

appreciate how quickly my skills can develop if I can get access to a supportive and knowledgeable community.

I do not have anyone in my pre-existing social circle who can really appreciate the skill and expertise that go in these craft creations. My non-crafting friends and family could only notice the aesthetic aspects of my work, such as choices of colours and materials.

This search for an in-person crafting community coincided with my wish to grow as a researcher. I approached HKC with these multisided intentions: first and foremost to learn and develop as a fibre crafter, then to find a community for my social life, and lastly to develop my skills as a qualitative researcher through ethnographic observation.

HKC is very open and egalitarian in nature, so the transition from outsider to insider happened naturally, albeit with some minor hiccups, the details of which will be explained in the upcoming Findings chapter.

From the very start, I have been a complete participant in the group. At the time of writing this paper, I have spent the last couple of months deeply immersed in the community, although also making a conscious effort to maintain scholarly distance. All ethnography-related tasks such as data collection and interpretation, as well as the triangulation of insights across interviews and fieldnotes, have been iterative throughout this period.

This paper serves as a preliminary report for an ongoing research project, which by its completion will contain data of up to nine months' worth of fieldwork and 12-14 in-depth interviews, or until the point of data saturation is reached.

Choice of field

As mentioned, HKC is composed mainly of foreigners residing in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area who have moved for work, study or family reasons. Arriving in a city where they have little to no prior ties means some members need to start from scratch in many aspects of their social life.

HKC members therefore have a core difference compared to other native Finnish-speaking knitting clubs, whose native Finn crafters have no need to seek out a language bubble in Finland, because they already have multiple established social circles. Although English is widely spoken in Finland, especially in the Southern capital region, having a space

where English is the official and fully prioritised language of communication is especially valuable for international residents.

This makes HKC a centrality in many members' social life. Because HKC functions simultaneously as a craft group and a key social hub for its members, it offers a rich and intensified setting for studying my topic of interest—human-to-human relations and building community with craft-orientation.

Ethnography fieldwork and in-depth interviews

This study is based on an ongoing ethnographic project at the HKC. The data presented in this paper were collected over 2.5 months, from 3 September to 15 November, and comprises of approximately 50 hours' worth of semiweekly fieldwork, as well as an immersive one-day excursion with the club to the Tampere Craft and Design Fair on 15 November. Ethical considerations have guided all stages of this research: all interviewees gave informed consent, all names are pseudonymized, and identifying details have been obscured. The study follows standard ethnographic protocols, including full transparency about my dual role as participant and researcher.

Ethnographic and "thick description" approaches have previously been central to the study of subcultures and other consumer collectives (Goulding et al., 2013; Schouten and McAlexander, 1995). It is particularly well suited to examine HKC because it focuses on lived practices, meanings and relationships as they unfold in situ. Active participation in the club helps me see how membership is negotiated, how newcomers are integrated, how conflict is handled, and how craft practices themselves organise sociality (such as who helps whom, whose expertise is recognised, etc.).

In addition, I conducted two semi-structured interviews with HKC members, "Rachel" and "Phoebe", together with countless on-site impromptu conversations. Sampling was purposive; both interviewees had been attending the club for about one year. Their time in the club was long enough to be familiar with its routines and norms, yet recent enough that their early days with HKC are still fresh in their mind. The interviewees were specifically chosen to help me reflect on my own integration process in the field and to triangulate my observations with the members' perspectives.

Constant fieldnotes were taken during every meeting with the club, often in quick scribbles, which are then enriched in regular "thick description" writing sessions. Fieldnotes and their "thick description" are organized chronologically using a word processor software. Both interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and coded shortly after they took place. All of the textual materials were then uploaded to ATLAS.ti for thematic coding.

Coding was done with ATLAS.ti through a three-level hierarchical process. I began with open coding and identified 161 initial codes across the interview transcripts and fieldnotes. These open codes were then grouped into 7 broader concepts through axial coding. In the final selective coding stage, I refined these into 5 main themes, eliminating those that were too broad or overlapping with others. These five themes are discussed in the following Findings and Discussion chapters.

Findings

The data was interpreted loosely based on Rennstam and Paulsson (2025)'s theory of craft-orientation. Other emerging themes, especially those connected to human-human relationship and community building allow me to extend their frameworks. This chapter in particular will first iterate the points in data that I believe reinforces Rennstam and Paulson (2025), and then the two additional themes.

(i) Activity guided by the desire to do a job well for its own sake

Knitting was often framed as something useful, productive, or time well spent. Members described satisfaction in creating tangible, wearable objects and in knowing their time produced something with purpose. Even when they expressed dissatisfaction with the outcome of creations, the act of creation was still viewed as a meaningful investment of time and effort. Rachel captures this clearly in her interview:

> "I'm okay if a project doesn't turn out okay. I just rip it off, and I don't feel bad that I spend so much effort and time on it. And the final products are cool. So I try to wear them as much as possible."

Meanwhile, Phoebe emphasizes that the value of knitting lies primarily in the act itself:

> "I love knitting so it doesn't matter if I'm finishing the project, it's just the process."

These accounts illustrate a craft-oriented logic in which the intrinsic pleasure of doing the work well and engaging deeply with the creation process takes precedence over instrumental concerns such as finishing a project.

Ethnographic fieldnotes similarly show that members consistently describe knitting as an affective practice. Many different emotions surface while members engage with their work and with one another. Members wear their own handmade garments to meetings. These are conscious choices, not only for self-expression, but also as proof of their skills and to invite affirmations from others. Compliments on finished garments are met with visible delight, and often times it is not a stand-alone compliment from one member to another, but almost always accompanied by a wave of appreciation from multiple people in the room. Members also show off their creations at subcultural events, as described by this excerpt from my fieldnotes on the one-day excursion to the Tampere Craft and Design Fair:

> *"Vivienne was wearing the most beautiful and elaborate shawl I had ever seen. It was crocheted, a large piece of fabric that she said had taken months of work. The shawl used at least seven different colours and as many different crochet stitches, or at least seven that I could recognise. No rows were identical to another, creating a variety of textures in her favourite colours of blues, pinks and especially purples. In every new hall we entered, people approached her to compliment the shawl, some even asked to take a photo. She was clearly very proud of it, as she should. A week before our trip, Vivienne had shared she felt inadequate at last year's fair because she had not realised it would function as a kind of fashion show for our proudest creations. She remedied that this year by bringing a showstopper."*

There are also times when negative feelings are expressed at the club. Members that share stories of work or family issues often receive sound and reasonable advice, which seems to also help them relieve stress or frustrations. Discussions within the group also sometimes move outward from personal craft practice to larger cultural and political critiques. Sustainability, ethical sourcing of yarn, and the undervaluation of handmade labour are frequent themes. Many members expressed their frustrations about how mainstream society underestimates the time and skill involved in handicraft. For example, during my second week with HKC, a Youtube video by the channel SciShow was repeatedly

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brought up and complained about. The video wanted to talk about interesting applications of knitting to physics but unintentionally carry condescending tones and misinformation.

Taken together, these observations suggest that HKC members engage in knitting as a practice guided by the desire to "do it well" for its own sake, while also embedding that practice in a web of shared emotions and mutual recognition

(ii) Prioritization of human engagement over machine control, standardization and efficiency

Another strong theme in the data is the reframing of knitting as a human-centric activity: a creative and intellectual exercise rather than "just a hobby". Both interviewees referred to knitting job as "art" and "brain exercises." Rachel, for example, explicitly compared knitting to her job as a mechanical engineer, emphasizing the logic, structure, experimentation and problem-solving skills needed to become a good knitter.

Both interviewees described constant experimentation in their projects. These activities demand analytical thinking (planning out a design, calculating stitches, adjusting a pattern, troubleshooting mistakes, etc.) alongside artistic imagination (colour choice, texture, silhouette). Knitting is thus framed as a sphere where logical reasoning and creative senses are both equally important.

This is especially interesting when I consider knitting's relationship to mechanisation. Unlike crochet, which cannot be replicated by machines, knitting can be industrially produced. Yet members insist on the value of the hand-knitted object precisely because it bears the marks of human involvement. Rachel articulated this clearly when she shared about having different standards for machine sewing versus hand knitting:

> "Because sewing is done with a machine, it feels industrial to me, that it has to be perfect as if it comes from the factory. But with knitting, I do it with my hands. So I don't care if it looks like it's from a store or not, because how it's done is just different."

Rather than trying to erase traces of human labour, crafters tend to embrace them, even errors. Inconsistencies are perfectly acceptable and add to the creations' charms. In this sense, HKC members internalize a craft-oriented prioritisation of human engagement over machine control, standardisation and efficiency.

(iii) An epistemic rather than instrumental relationship to objects of production

Members often expressed emotional and symbolic connections to their tools and creations. Beyond their immediate use value, projects were described as carriers of meaning and as extensions of the self. Knitting becomes not only a way to produce functional garments, but also a medium for identity work and self-expression.

Phoebe explicitly linked her sense of self to knitting:

"I joined the club last year after I got serious about knitting and decided it was part of my identity."

Through choices of colour, material and design, knitted creations become visible markers of taste, subcultural capital and technical skill within the group. Showing projects at HKC is a way of signalling one's competencies and stylistic preferences to other members. As Rachel put it:

"Other than the club, I don't really have anyone to brag about my projects. So, I'm very excited when I have a new project and I would bring it to the club to show it to people."

Here, the creation is not merely a finished product to be used, but within it is also hope for intracommunal recognition. The value of the item lies in the stories, techniques and emotions attached to it.

Another revealing comment came from Rachel, who described herself as *"a project person"*. She explained that she did not see much value in the yarn itself, because its worth only come to be once it has been knitted up into a project. She is more excited about the experimentation and the new skills she might learn, rather than being excited about the materials. Different members may have very different views on this: to Rachel, yarns possess use value (as potential inputs for making a sweater) but little expressive value, and their worth is created through the act of transformation (from balls of yarns to sweater, etc.). But to others, beautiful yarn in itself might hold a form of expressive value.

These differences show that HKC members do not have a solely instrumental or uniform relationship to materials (e.g. yarns) and tools (e.g. knitting needles). Instead, they often engage with them epistemically, as sources of learning, experimentation and meaning-making. Objects of production are therefore treated as partners in an ongoing process of

exploration, as things to think with, feel with and relate to, rather than merely "means to an end".

(iv) The harmonisation of group dynamics

HKC's communication occurs through a tiered system: The barrier of entry is low, anyone can follow HKC on their Facebook group or Instagram account and find the location for weekly meetings, but becoming an insider requires visible commitment, such as regular attendance events, connections with other members, joining and conversing in the WhatsApp groupchat. Conversation is open-ended, and members are free to discuss anything, as long as interactions remain respectful and considerate.

Nevertheless, subtle distinctions still exist. Long-term members, who have built friendships over several years, are closer to one another. They often share personal matters such as work or family issues within the group. Newcomers tend to engage in lighter or more general topics, like knitting techniques, ongoing projects, or discussions of popular culture. The club also creates a good setting for peer-to-peer relationships that extend beyond the knitting circle. Informal conversations on the walk from the metro stations, during tram waits, or on the way home allow members to connect on a more personal level. I experienced this myself in one-on-one conversations with many members.

During the meetings, all members bring their own projects to work on. These can be anything, from non-wearables like coasters, blankets, to small socks, beanies, or larger more complicated garments like sweaters, cardigans, etc. However, it is much more common for members to bring projects that are simple and repetitive, made with basic stitches, do not require counting or constant attention. These allow participants to stay engaged in the conversations. The knitting and crocheting actually become a backdrop to the dialogue rather than the sole focus of the gathering. The rhythm of conversation at HKC is distinctive and may appear strange to those unfamiliar with it. Long silences are common, but they carry a sense of comfort rather than awkwardness. There is no rush or pressure to fill the silence. Instead, the rhythmic clicking of needles, the synchronized motions of hands throwing yarn, and the total immersion in my own knitting, can sometimes create an almost trance-like feeling. Even in the middle of a conversation, members may suddenly pause talking to count stitches before seamlessly rejoining the discussion. These temporary moments of silence are

accepted patiently without any comment, and the conversation continues naturally as if never paused.

Seemingly mundane conversations about yarns reveal the group's tendency to prioritise harmony. Take the discussions around the brand DROPS for example (one of the cheapest yarn brands on the market, while still having 100% natural fibre options). Monica expressed doubts about animal welfare and sustainability in their production, but several members said they would continue to buy from the brand because of the low price. There is usually a sense of self-awareness when sustainability-related issues are discussed. Members often speak from the assumption that sustainability is a shared value within the group, but they also acknowledge pre-emptively the practical challenges of fully committing to it. Conversations about supply choices, ordering from AliExpress, for example, are often framed with careful disclaimers. While many members emphasize the importance of sustainability, they are usually quick to add that there is no judgment if someone chooses a cheaper alternative.

Integration into the group requires some time and careful attunement to pre-existing routines and norms. Missteps can occur if newcomers misinterpret the group dynamic. I have experienced this first-hand. During one meeting I voiced a criticism about a well-known knitting influencer, PetiteKnit. This created disagreement from members who were supporters of her work and reluctant to have their views challenged. This was an opportunity for me to get a peek into how bigger conflicts might be handled. It became apparent that HKC tends to favour harmonious, or even homogenous opinions within the group. Explicitly challenging views, even when formulated and expressed in a civil manner, may not be accepted easily. The disagreement was also a chance for me to reflect on my own stance toward this influencer, and my view did become more nuanced and positive afterwards. As a newcomer, it was clear that I have yet to fully understand what counted as "appropriate" to voice within the group. Nonetheless, I still have to emphasize that HKC does actively try to facilitate civil and meaningful communication among members from diverse backgrounds.

HKC also has a zero-tolerance stance toward discriminatory behaviour. An interview revealed that in the past, a member had openly expressed trans-exclusionary views in the WhatsApp group, which led to a significant conflict:

"A person in the WhatsApp group chat declared that they are a TERF - Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist. It caused a huge fallout … At the end, this person was removed from the group and not welcomed anymore"

Prior to this incident, there was virtually no moderation or screening of membership. In its aftermath, HKC introduced basic guidelines on its digital channels. This illustrates both the club's strong commitment to maintaining an inclusive environment and the limits of its otherwise informal and trusting approach to group governance.

(v) Epistemic relationships among members

A recurring feature of HKC meetings is the mentoring relationship between experienced and intermediate knitters. One of my fieldnotes illustrates this:

"Kat was so frustrated when she realised she had made a mistake in the previous row. The dark brown colour of the sweater certainly makes it hard to see the stitches clearly. Joey, who was sitting next to her, offered to help. With a quick glance, he immediately identified the problem: she had accidentally made a yarn-over, resulting in a small gap in the middle of the chest. He explained to her in detail why the gap had appeared and began fixing it for her. As other members overheard the yarn-over mishap, they chimed in with additional tips. I heard somebody suggesting adding an extra stitch and decreasing one on the next row, but by then Kat had already finished repairing the error with Joey's help."

Interactions like this happen every meeting, which really shows how knowledge circulates within the group and how members rely on one another as epistemic resources. I myself learnt new knitting techniques like the Norwegian purl from another member of the club. These moments indicate a subtle hierarchy in this otherwise generally egalitarian atmosphere: knitting skills and knowledge are a form of subcultural capital here. However, I feel like these interactions do not carry tones of superiority but of generosity from the teachers. Teaching and learning are not only technical, but perhaps also social, a way to weave people into the social fabric of the group. This process will allow the less experienced knitters to gain more subcultural capital and knowledge themselves, to then claim their place within the circle.

Members also often feel emboldened to learn new things after joining HKC, as explained by Phoebe:

"I started making sweaters when I joined the club. Before, I was just making blankets, hats and scarves… More ambitious and functional projects … More art-form pieces."

Many members are also visibly excited about learning new skills, especially when they can learn together. This was evident after the Tampere Craft and Design Fair, where many of us bought unwound yarn (long hanks, not yet turned into manageable balls to use). Since then, several members have expressed interests to learn and practice winding yarn at the upcoming meetings. A simple task is now turned into a collective learning moment.

Members often describe themselves as beginners, or emphasise how much they still have to learn, even with years of experience under their belt. They come to the club equally willing to learn new skills and to teach others the techniques they have mastered. At the same time, some express feeling inspired, or even pressured to knit quicker or to finish a certain project, particularly after seeing other members' impressive finished pieces. Members also look up to one another as role models for their skills, aesthetic sense and bravery for bold experimentations.

Together, these five themes show that craft-orientation at HKC extends well beyond the individual craftsperson's relationship to objects, tools or techniques. The first three themes reaffirm Rennstam and Paulsson's (2025) dimensions. The final two themes demonstrate that craft practices here become the incubator for trust, reciprocity, emotional attunement and shared learning. The findings propose an expanded conceptualisation of craft-orientation that incorporates both human-to-object and human-to-human orientations, suggesting that the collective, relational work of crafting may be as central to the practice as the material labour itself.

Discussion

This study set out to explore the research question: *How does craft-orientation manifest in community building?*

In the literature review, I drew on three main bodies of work: (1) historical and sociological accounts of craft versus industrial production, (2) Rennstam and Paulsson (2025)'s theory of craft-orientation as an alternative mode of organising for a post-growth society, and (3) research on consumer tribes and other consumer collectives. The HKC

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findings both confirm and complicate these perspectives, which allow me to extend craft-orientation with two additional dimensions.

Revisiting and extending craft-orientation through HKC

Rennstam and Paulsson (2025) conceptualise craft-orientation through three core dimensions, which my findings support and also push beyond the human-object relationship.

First, HKC members strongly exhibit an orientation to doing a job well for its own sake. This resonates with the craft-orientation dimension as proposed by Rennstam and Paulsson (2025), but HKC shows how this value is collectively reinforced: through shared admiration at meetings, public "showing off" at the Tampere fair, and the communal celebration of technically demanding pieces like Vivienne's shawl. Second, the HKC data strongly confirm the prioritisation of human engagement over machine control, standardisation and efficiency. Members repeatedly contrasted hand-crafting with the expectations for other works that incorporate a machine. Third, HKC clearly illustrates an epistemic rather than instrumental relationship to objects of production. Members do not see the raw materials (e.g. yarn) and tools (e.g. knitting needles) simply as means to a functional end.

Taken together, these three thematic clusters suggest that craft-orientation holds up empirically in a small, grassroots craft community. However, the HKC case also shows that these dimensions are not just characteristics of individual workers but are actually co-produced in intracommunal relationships. This leads to my main theoretical contribution, the proposal of two additional, relational dimensions of craft-orientation:

(iv) The harmonisation of group dynamics

(v) Epistemic relationships among members

Harmonisation of group dynamics

This theme highlights how craft-oriented communities actively cultivate a particular social atmosphere that prioritises harmony. At HKC, this is evident in:

- The tiered communication structure (social media → in-person meetings → WhatsApp chat) where deeper involvement is associated with stronger relational commitments.
- The norm of non-judgmental acceptance around consumption choices (e.g. DROPS yarn, AliExpress) despite shared sustainability ideals.
- The tendency to avoid open conflict and protect a sense of comfort and safety, as seen in the PetiteKnit incident and the careful framing of disagreements.
- The zero-tolerance policy for overt discrimination, as in the removal of the self-declared TERF, followed by the introduction of explicit behavioural guidelines.

These practices show that craft-orientation is not only about how people relate to their work and tools, but also about how they relate to each other. Harmonisation here is not pure, there are tensions, exclusions and implicit boundaries. But overall, the club prioritises emotional safety and inclusiveness over direct confrontation.

This extends craft-orientation into the affective and ethical organisation of community life. If postgrowth futures require forms of organising that centre care, mutuality and conflict containment rather than competition and growth, HKC illustrates what such micro-practices can look like in everyday settings.

Epistemic relationships among members

The fifth theme shows how knowledge is produced and circulated collectively. At HKC, expertise in knitting functions as subcultural capital, but it is also constantly shared:
- Experienced knitters mentor others in troubleshooting
- Members teach and learn new techniques together
- Even highly skilled members insist on being "beginners" in some respects, normalization of lifelong learning.

These practices show that craft knowledge is not simply an individual asset, but rather a collective resource that binds people together. Teaching-learning is not only technical but also social: it is a way to weave newcomers into the group's fabric, to recognise them as legitimate members, and to democratize subcultural capital. In postgrowth terms, this resonates with ideas of knowledge commons and peer-to-peer learning as alternatives

to proprietary, competitive knowledge regimes that can facilitate practices such as gatekeeping, etc.

From craft consumers to craft communities

The craft-consumer literature, particularly Campbell's (2005) notion of the "craft consumer", emphasises the individual who engages in making as a way of exercising creativity, self-expression and taste. Much of this work focuses on motivations, identity and lifestyle. My findings are consistent with this in several ways: HKC members do use knitting to express identity, to seek eudaimonic well-being, and to differentiate themselves from mass consumption.

However, HKC demonstrates that craft consumption is intrinsically social and that community is not just a backdrop but a key source of value. Members do not only knit "for themselves"; they craft for and with others: to show projects to the group, to gain recognition, to teach, to learn, to gossip, to criticise YouTube videos. The guild literature in my review already hinted at this. HKC echoes this historical model: like the guilds, it ties skill development to long-term relationships and shared rituals (weekly meetings, excursions) and collective identities. Where earlier scholarship often treats contemporary craft as either residual production or individualised consumption, the HKC data suggest that craft communities operate as small-scale, living descendants of those historical craft ecologies, albeit in a post-industrial, leisure-oriented form.

HKC as a consumer tribe

In the consumer-tribes literature, tribes are theorised as loose, playful, fluid collectives built around shared passions and "linking value", rather than formal membership (Cova & Cova, 2002; Goulding et al., 2011; Szmigin et al., 2007). HKC fits many of these features. It is informal, entry barriers are low and participation is organised around the shared practice of fibrecraft rather than a brand or organisation. The "linking value" is also very clear: the projects, yarns and meetings serve primarily to create and sustain social bonds.

At the same time, HKC adds nuance to dominant portrayals of consumer tribes. Much of the existing literature approaches tribes from a managerial/marketing perspective. HKC, by contrast, is non-brand-centred and non-firm-sponsored. Its value regime is largely non-

market: the most important currencies are time, care, knowledge, humour and inclusion, rather than loyalty to a brand or consumption volume. This supports my critique that consumer-tribes research often neglects the everyday intracommunal relationships and non-market values that matter most to crafters.

"Microdosing" post-growth

HKC can be interpreted as a micro postgrowth experiment. The club's practices often de-centre growth-oriented logics:

- Members celebrate slowness and accept re-doing work (frogging) without framing it as a waste of time.
- They do not see efficiency as a central value, instead want to prioritise enjoyment, which aligns with postgrowth critiques of productivity and efficiency.
- They embrace imperfection and resist industrial standards of flawless output.
- They invest heavily in relational "wealth": through friendships, emotional support, mentoring.
- The club's management is oriented toward inclusion and safety, not towards expansion or scaling up.

This does not mean HKC is operating outside of capitalism. Members still buy yarns, negotiate sustainability versus affordability and sometimes feel pressured to create more or faster. HKC perhaps fits better to a hybrid value regime: one that softens growth-oriented ideas but has yet to fully escape them. This hybrid character is important. It suggests that postgrowth-oriented practices may emerge not in purely marginal spaces, but in messy grey zones inside consumer culture such as informal clubs or hobby communities. Craft-orientation, especially when extended with the relational dimensions identified here, can therefore be seen as a micro-political practice that prefigures alternative ways of living together within, and sometimes against, dominant value regimes.

Limitations and future research

As a preliminary report, this study has several limitations, which also point toward promising directions for future research. First, the five dimensions of craft-orientation proposed here should be treated as provisional rather than definitive. The current analysis

draws on approximately 2.5 months of fieldwork and two interviews. I have not yet reached a point of data saturation. As fieldwork continues, additional patterns may emerge that might change or challenge the five dimensions identified here

Second, the analysis reflects my own position as both researcher and participant, and as an international crafter of similar age and background to many HKC members. While this has enabled quick integration, deep immersion and rich data, there might also be risks of blind spots, especially around more subtle forms of exclusion, discomfort or power asymmetry that might not be visible to me. Future work could benefit from additional perspectives, for example by including one more member as co-analysts.

Third, the postgrowth lens is only partially developed at this stage. While I have highlighted several practices that resonate with postgrowth ideals, a more systematic engagement with postgrowth theory and environmental impacts is still to come. Future research could explicitly track "object pathways", a dimension of value regimes defined by Gollnhofer et al. (2019). "Object pathways" studies could look at yarn consumption, repair practices, getting yarns from second-hand sources, etc. and explore how environmental and economic concerns are negotiated within the value regime of HKC and similar groups.

Fourth, because HKC's members are predominantly young, international, English-speaking women, the demographics of the group also shape the kinds of social dynamics and craft practices that emerge. This may limit the transferability of the findings to more diverse or intergenerational craft communities, where norms of participation, expertise, and social support may unfold differently.

Lastly, future stages of this research will involve conducting an in-depth interview with Monica, the club's founder, as part of a more formal member-checking process. This will help validate emerging interpretations, identify overlooked dynamics, and further minimise observer bias. Additional iterative feedback sessions with other members may also enhance the overall validity and reliability of the study's findings.

Despite these limitations, this study demonstrates that looking at craft-orientation through the lens of intracommunal relationships has the potential to open up new ways of understanding craft communities. Future research that builds on and tests these two additional dimensions across different contexts can deepen our understanding of how small-

scale collectives might contribute to imagining and enacting more sustainable, post-growth-oriented ways of living together.

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Sofyan Essarraoui

Economic Integration in Question: A Critical Assessment of Sub-Saharan African Migrants' Access to Labour Market in Morocco

Abstract:

Morocco's evolving legal and institutional frameworks have demonstrated a significant improvement in sub-Saharan African integration in several key domains since 2013, particularly in the economic sector. Thanks to a progressive rights-based approach enshrined in the 2011 Constitution, legal reforms, and the National Strategy of Immigration and Asylum Seekers, sub-Saharan Africans are able to access the labour market. However, despite this achievement, the lived experiences of many migrants reveal persistent gaps between policy ambitions and practical implementation. Drawing on thematic analysis of interviews conducted in Morocco with migrants, Moroccan stakeholders, and migration

policy experts, this study explores the extent to which recent reforms have facilitated the economic integration of sub-Saharan Africans, with a focus on labour market access. The findings reveal that, albeit Morocco's progressive migration agenda, administrative barriers, inconsistent procedures, and restrictive labour regulations continue to constrain migrants' access to formal employment and continue to push them into the informal economy where they face precarious conditions. The study ultimately highlights that a genuine economic integration of sub-Saharan Africans into the labour market requires more coherent and effective labour market policies capable of translating Morocco's progressive legal and institutional framework into tangible socio-economic opportunities.

Keywords: Morocco, sub-Saharan Africans, Migration, Economic Integration

Introduction

Throughout history, Morocco has been a site of complex mobility, making it a compelling case within global migration systems. The country's geographical and geopolitical position situated at the crossroads of Europe, Africa and the Middle East has shaped patterns of movement into, from, and through the country. In recent years, Morocco has been positioned as a default destination for a variety of immigrants, especially those of sub-Saharan origins (Berriane et al 2021). This influx has transformed the country's migration profile (Dalouh 2024): no longer only considered a transit facilitating the journeys of migrants on the move to Europe, but also as a country of settlement.

This remarkable surge in the immigrants' population is paralleled with a policy dynamic aimed at an efficient management of migration as well as migrants' residence in the kingdom. The first major step in this direction emerged with the introduction of the first legislation known as law 02-03, in 2003. The law, which has been described as a form of 'decolonizing' migration law, marks a break with Morocco's long past of concealing immigration (ElMadmad 2004).

A more significant turning point occurred in September 2013, when Mohammed VI, the Moroccan Monarch, announced a groundbreaking step that initiated the New Migration Policy (NMP). This policy framework marked a shift from a predominantly security-oriented framework to one grounded in human rights and humanitarian principles (Naama 2017). The policy introduced major reforms, including two unprecedented regularization

campaigns taking place in 2014 and 2017, the enactment of anti-trafficking legislation (Law 27.14), and the establishment of key institutional bodies such as the Inter-Ministerial Delegation for Human Rights (DIDH) and the Directorate of Migration Affairs within the Ministry in Charge of Moroccans Living Abroad and Migration Affairs. These developments have significantly positioned Morocco as a prominent international actor on issues of migration, demonstrated by hosting "the Fourth Ministerial Conference of the Euro-Dialogue on Migration and Development (Rabat Process), contributing to the development of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM), and hosting the African Migration Observatory" (Zaanoun 2023: 31).

Notwithstanding these pro-active reforms, major constraints remain. The implementation of the NMP has revealed persistent discrepancies between policy rhetoric and practical outcomes. Sub-Saharan African migrants continue to face numerous obstacles in securing legal status, accessing basic services and integrating socially and economically. Empirical studies (e.g., Berriane 2015; IOM 2017) reveal how persistent xenophobia and structural discrimination shape migrants' experiences, exacerbating their exclusion and marginalization.

This disjuncture between policy ambitions, their practical effects on the ground, and migrants' lived realities constitutes the core concern of this study. While Morocco has gained recognition for its forward-looking migration reforms, many of these measures have fallen short of expectations, highlighting the urgent need to examine the Kingdom's migration policies. This analysis therefore aims to examine the effects of Morocco's legal and institutional reform on the integration of sub-Saharan Africans, with a primary focus on economic integration.

Economic integration and access to Labour Market:

Economic integration is often regarded as a cornerstone in the incorporation of migrants in any host society. Access to the labour market not only provides a means of subsistence but also establishes a pathway for social recognition, autonomy, and interaction with the host society as active participants in economic and social life (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018). Morocco has endorsed a forward-looking legal framework to promote the economic

inclusion of sub-Saharan Africans by adopting a robust legal framework and institutional initiatives.

The 2011 Moroccan constitution guarantees immigrants the full enjoyment of basic rights and freedoms on an equal footing with citizens, in line with the national law (Moroccan Constitution 2011)[33], and in alignment with international commitments such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (National Council of Human Right 2025). Morocco is also one of the first countries to ratify the International *Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant workers and Members of Their Families*[34], and remains among the few that have ratified the fundamental instruments of the International Labour Organisation relating to migration, namely Convention No. 97[35] on Migrants Workers, and Convention No. 143[36] on migration in abusive conditions, equal opportunities and treatment for migrant workers, known as the Migrant Workers Convention.

Domestically, migrants' employment in Morocco is subject to the provisions of the *2004 Labour Code[37], (Title V, Articles 516 to 521*) and Law No. 19.12, regulating conditions of employment. Notably, Article 9 of the Labour Code prohibits:

"Any discrimination between persons on the basis of race, colour, sex, disability, marital status, religion, political opinion, trade union membership, national origin, or social origin, which would violate or distort the principle of equal opportunity or equal treatment in the field of employment or occupation, particularly with regard to recruitment, work management and distribution, vocational training, remuneration, promotion, access to social benefits, disciplinary measures and dismissal from work" (Article 9 of Labour Code 2021: 12).

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[33] Article 30 of Moroccan constitution.

[34] Decree No. 1.93.317 issued on Ramadan 1st, 1432 (2 August, 2011) publishing the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on (18 December 1990). Official Gazette No. 6015, dated 23 January 2012.

[35] Decree No. 1.14.119 issued on Ramadan 10, 1435 (8 July 2014) to implement the Law No. 87.13 approving Convention No. 96 concerning Migrant Workers (Revised) 1949, Official Gazette No. 6277, dated 28 July 2014.

[36] Decree No. 1.16.115 issued on 6 Dhu al-Qe'da 1437 (10 August 2016) implementing Law No. 01.16., which approves Convention No. 143 governing migration in abusive conditions and the promotion of equal opportunities and treatment for migrant workers, known as the Migrant Workers Agreement (Supplementary Provisions), 1975, Official Gazette No. 6493, issued on 22 August, 2016.

[37] Decree No. 1.03.194 issued on 14 Rajab 1424 (11 September 2003) implementing Law No. 65-99 regarding Labour Code. Official Gazette No. 5167 dated 13 Shawal 1424 (8 December 2003), page 3969.

In 2013, Morocco sought to operationalize these initiatives and expand access to employment services to migrants through the adoption of the New Migration Policies (NMP), leading to the launch of the *National Strategy of Immigration and Asylum*. Since its inception, the initiative has put in place several measures in the labour market, enabling regular immigrants to access employment, and create businesses while helping Morocco to meet labour needs in specific sectors (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). Measures included extending the National Agency for Employment Promotion and Skills (ANAPEC[38]) job search services and trainings to migrants, particularly sub-Saharan Africans, by helping qualified ones to align their skills with labour market demands. Between 2015 and 2018, 717 migrants benefited from such programs. In addition, a platform called *Taechir*[39], introduced in 2017 to simplify the procedures for granting necessary work visas for regularized migrants, has led to the establishment of six external offices in Casablanca, Marrakech, Agadir, Fes and Tangier, to decentralise the procedures (IOM 2017).

Notwithstanding such a robust legal framework, the thematic analysis of interviews demonstrates that its effects are only partially realized in practical terms. The majority of the interviewees repeatedly emphasize that their experiences accessing the labour market in Morocco has been extremely hard, and although the situation has improved for some over the recent years, serious barriers impeding their economic integration remain. Official reports from SNIA (2017-2020) indicated that the number of beneficiaries in the area of employment are considerably low, limited to around one hundred people per year. A recent graduate from Niger narrates the difficulties in navigating the administrative procedures when seeking to renew residency permits, which is a pre-requisite for employment: "*I am trying to renew my residency in Morocco so I can apply for a job, but the conditions of such a simple procedure are quite inconsistent*" (Informant 9).

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[38] The National Agency for the Promotion of Employment and Competencies, In French L'Agence Nationale de Promotion de l'Emploi et des Competences- ANAPEC) is a public service company that supports employers to achieve their recruitment goals and job seekers looking into entering the labour market. It is an active intermediary in the labour market. Retrieved from: https://www.gfmd.org/pfp/ppd/361

[39] Taechir is a program developed by the Ministry of Labour and Professional Integration, intended for employers, whether legal entities or individuals, who require foreign skills. Retrieved from: https://www.mites.gob.es/ficheros/ministerio/mundo/consejerias/marruecos_archivos/GUIDE-POUR-RECRUTER-UN-SALARIE-ETRANGER-AU-MAROC.pdf

These administrative challenges are aggravated by a lack of consistent and reliable information. A Moroccan respondent who contributed to the drafting of Moroccan migration policies highlighted these barriers:

"Sub-Saharan Africans in Morocco face many significant problems accessing to basic services, but one of most prevalent issue is lack of information" (Informant 11)

Similarly, GADEM (2023) published a report, highlighting how significant difficulties in obtaining and renewing residency permits persist and continue to obstruct any possibility of economic integration. Even for those who manage to regularize their status, structural obstacles persist. Chapter 9 of the Labour Code demands that any employer wishing to hire a foreign worker must obtain a permit from the Ministry of Labour and the National Agency for Employment Promotion and Skills (ANAPEC). Upon a successful application, a first-time permit valid only for one year is provided, even if employment contracts are longer. Any employer violating these requirements (i.e., employing a foreigner without authorizations) is subject to a fine ranging from 2,000 to 5,000 Moroccan dirhams (equivalent to 200 to 500 usd) (Labour Code Article 521). Furthermore, Article 518 of the same code stipulates that "in cases where the government refuses to grant work permit, the employer is responsible for covering the costs of repatriating the foreign worker to their country of origin or residence" (Article 518: 148)

These overly complex procedures create insecurity for employees and lead to additional administrative burden for the employers, hence impeding economic opportunities for migrants which in turn lead to their marginalization. Furthermore, the national preference principle which requires employers to justify that no other Moroccan national is able to do the same job for which any foreigner is hired (Bendra 2019) is another burden that further restricts economic opportunities for sub-Saharan Africans. This principle not only stands in stark contrast with the equality principle stated in Article 9 of the Labour Code but also imposes a discriminative attitude. A Senegalese NGO president remarked:

"Finding a job here [Morocco] is extremely challenging. Based on our experience as an official NGO in Morocco, we observed that many of Senegalese migrants find extreme difficulties accessing the formal labour market in Morocco. The

same applies to other nationalities, who have reached us for assistance. As a result, they chose to engage in informal jobs such as street vending" (Informant 1).

This tendency has been observed by High Commission for Planning (2021) which found that 84.9% of migrants interviewed for a report on forced migration declared that it was difficult to access the job market in Morocco, with 60% finding it extremely difficult. The same was echoed by another respondent who underlined the wider employment context, stating:

"Moroccans themselves suffer from chronic high unemployment, especially among youth. This makes it very hard for the majority of immigrants to get jobs, given the national preference criteria in place" (Informant 12).

Census data from HCP confirmed this in its latest report on the unemployment rate in the country, indicating that there has been a substantial increase in the national unemployment rate which amounts to 21,3% in 2024, compared to the 16.2% registered in 2014 (HCP 2025)[40]".

These instances reflect how the policy framework governing the labour market in Morocco is designed to protect Moroccan workers rather than securing legal venues for the economic inclusion of migrants, particularly sub-Saharan African migrants.

The restrictions are even more pronounced in the public sector, where a Decree No. 1.58.008 explicitly states that "no one can be employed in a public service position [...] unless they have Moroccan nationality" (Decree No. 1.58.008 2024: 9)[41]. Such a condition reflects an underlying and a deeply rooted contradiction in Morocco's labour legal framework. Due to these highly restrictive measures in public service jobs, and overly tight private sector prospects, several sub-Saharan African migrants are pushed into the informal economy. The latter refers to an "all income-earning activities that are unregulated by legal codes in an environment where similar activities are regulated" (Portes 1995: 29). This includes construction, street vending, domestic labour, and seasonal agricultural jobs. The High Commission for Planning (2021) indicated that 48% of migrants in Morocco were employed,

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[40] High Commission for Planning (HCP) is the main producer of official statistics in Morocco. Data retrieved from: https://www.hcp.ma
[41] Decree No. 1.58.008 issued on 4 Sha'abane 1377 (24 February 1958) concerning the rules governing employment in public service. Amended and completed in 2024.

with the service sector being the leading provider of jobs (53%) of active migrant population, followed by trade and construction, (12.8%), then agriculture and fishing, (7.9%) and lastly industry (4.3%). Among all the active migrants employed, only 57.2% are in permanent employment, suggesting that nearly half of the employed migrants work under temporary, casual, or seasonal conditions. In describing their conditions in these sectors, interviewees highlight the exploitative and precarious nature of the informal sector. A respondent highlighted:

"I have friends who worked in agriculture in the outskirts of Agadir, Souss Region. Although they worked there for months, some of them for years, their savings remain minimal due to low wages. Occasionally, they only receive a partial wage in order to discourage them from seeking alternatives" (Informant 4).

Bendra (2019) and Weyel, (2015) show that migrants employed in the informal sector typically earn between 40 to 60 Moroccan dirhams daily (equivalent to 3-5 Euros) with almost no protection against withheld wages, or overwork. These earnings fall below the minimum wage, which is set at 2200 Moroccan dirhams.

The precariousness of informal employment further subject migrants to social conflict and discrimination. Because many of these activities, such as street vending, are embedded in public spaces, migrants find themselves in direct contact with Moroccan citizens, often resulting in physical conflict. One of the respondents whom I met in Rabat not too far from the office of UNHCR spoke of his experiences with Moroccans in public spaces, where he was attacked by a group of Moroccan young men:

"I got into an argument with a young Moroccan man in one of the neighbourhoods of Marrakech over my presence there. Unfortunately, the argument got physical, leading, as you [the researcher] can see, to an injury on my face" (Informant 7).

This Sudanese migrant's experience represents one of the many experiences faced by many migrants in the country. Reports from international organizations (e.g., GADEM 2022) documented that sub-Saharan Africans frequently encounter racist and xenophobic assaults, violence, and mistreatments that are rarely inspected by law enforcement. This migrant's account was echoed by a respondent, who pointed out that such incidents between some Moroccans and migrants unfortunately sometimes end deadly.

We were informed once about a fight involving one of the Senegalese migrants against a Moroccan young man. The migrant was selling electronic accessories in the streets of Rabat when a Moroccan young man approached him to buy earphones. Three days after, the Moroccan young man went back to the Senegalese migrants to argue that the earphones stopped working without a reason and that he demanded his money back. When the migrant refused, they got into a fight which ended with the migrant being stabbed to death" (Informant 1).

These instances demonstrate how scarce economic activities often push sub-Saharan African migrants into precarious situations, either by being exploited in informal jobs, or being forced to navigate a sometimes-hostile environment where access to economic resources can lead to violence, aggravating their exclusion.

Conclusion:

Based on this thematic analysis of the interviews, obtaining employment in Morocco is extremely difficult for sub-Saharan African migrants. Several factors explaining this challenge can be advanced. Particularly, there is an inherent inconsistency between the policy and its application. Despite Morocco's ratification of several International Conventions and the advancement of inclusive national strategies to guarantee equal access to employment, sub-Saharan African migrants continue to face substantial administrative and structural barriers. Namely, extremely complex procedures to obtain residency and work permit, beside restrictive labour regulations such as the national preference principle, and scarce employment opportunities in the private sector severely hinder their integration into the economic sector.

Exacerbating this exclusion is the precarious conditions migrants endure especially in the informal sector where they are exposed to discrimination, exploitation, and extreme work conditions. The graph below represents the four themes that emerged from interviews

in Morocco. The themes collectively summarize the obstacles hindering the economic integration of many sub-Saharan Africans.
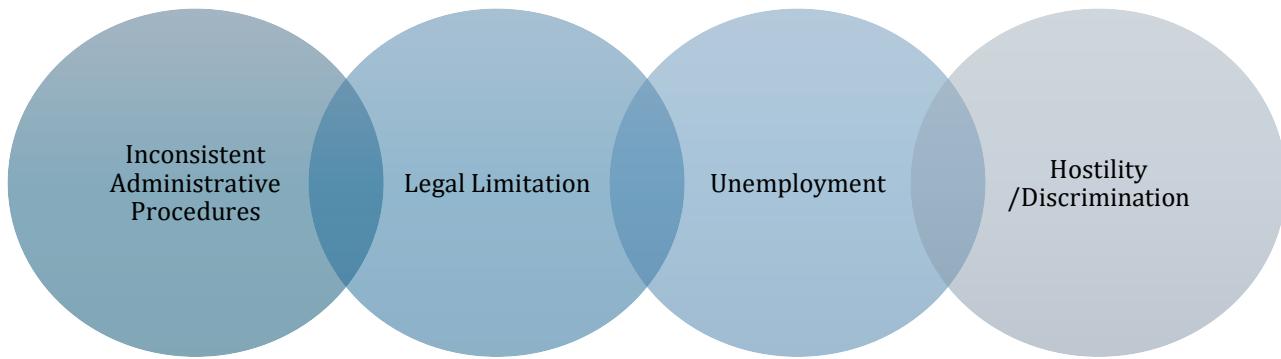
Ultimately, the progressive agenda that Morocco has pursued since 2013 to facilitate the integration of sub-Saharan African migrants fall short of expectations. There is a significant gap between the country's legal and institutional framework and the lived experiences of migrants, highlighting deep inconsistencies that continue to hinder genuine economic integration within the Kingdom.

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Appendix

List of Informants

Interviewee Code	Country of Origin	Gender	Profession	Mode of interview
Informant 1	Senegal	Male	President of Association	In person
Informant 2	Guinea	Male	President of NGO	Online, Teams
Informant 3	Ghana	Male	Doctor at Military Hospital in Rabat	In person
Informant 4	Mali	Male	Student	In person
Informant 5	Mali	Male	Student	In person
Informant 6	Sudan	Female	Refugee	In person
Informant 7	Sudan	Male	Refugee	In person
Informant 8	Somalia	Male	Student	In person
Informant 9	Niger	Male	Student	In person
Informant 10	Rwanda	Female	Student	In person
Informant 11	Morocco	Female	Former staff at Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Human right consultant, IOM	Online and in-person

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Informant 12	Morocco	Male	Policy expert and University Professor, Rabat	Online, Teams
Informant 13	Morocco	Male	Project Manager, Migration and Mobility and Communication coordinator at Heinrich Boll Stiftung Rabat	Online and in person
Informant 14	Morocco	Male	Project Assistant on Policy research at IOM	Online, google meets
Informant 15	France	Male	Pope and activist	Online, Teams
Informant 16	Spain	Male	Consultant, researcher and University Professor	Online, Teams
Informant 17	Spain	Male	Director of a research Network on Migration	Online, Teams

Anujin Amarbayar

A Field with No Field: An Ethnographic Study of Contemporary Esoteric Practitioners

Abstract

This paper examines how contemporary esoteric practitioners - primarily tarot readers and astrologers create meaning and define their practices within a fluid, decentralized landscape. Using an exploratory ethnographic approach incorporating participant observation, interviews, a focus group, and a participatory workshop, the study adopts an emic perspective that foregrounds practitioners' lived experiences. Rather than treating tarot and astrology as fixed systems, participants describe them as intuitive, relational, and adaptable frameworks shaped by personal style, client interactions, and ethical self-reflection. The "field with no field" methodology reflects the dispersed nature of contemporary esotericism,

revealing how temporary communities form through shared practices and collaborative encounters. A central finding is that authenticity emerges through ongoing negotiation of credibility, belonging, and energy exchange, with legitimacy grounded not in formal certification but in experience, emotional labor, and responsiveness to clients. Energy exchange, such as monetary, emotional, and symbolic functions, serves as a key moral and ethical structure that sustains both boundaries and well-being. Overall, the study contributes to anthropological research on magic and Western esotericism by showing how esoteric knowledge operates as a dynamic process embedded in everyday life.

Keywords: Esotericism, tarot, astrology, spiritual labour, energy exchange

Introduction

The term esotericism comes from the Greek esōterikós, meaning "within," and in modern English, it refers to knowledge or practices understood by only a small, specialized group (Britannica Editors, 2016). Esoteric knowledge is not necessarily secret in content but requires contextual understanding and informed interpretation to reveal their deeper meanings (Quayle, 1976). Such esoteric knowledge is interpreted and transmitted by esoteric persons such as monks, mystics, prophets, ritual specialists, mediums, and others who guide access to knowledge that is meaningful only to those who can understand it, and this process takes place through practices like meditation, contemplation, chanting, dancing, prayer, and rituals that connect with higher powers or entities (Quayle, 1976). The terms 'esoteric,' 'spiritual,' and 'divinatory' are often used interchangeably because they overlap in describing practices that engage with non-ordinary knowledge and personal or transcendent meaning, noted by both my participants and scholars.

"Esoteric practitioners" as a descriptor was chosen collectively by my participants, reflecting their engagement with a range of practices, including tarot and astrology, as well as chronobiology and dreamwork. This research focuses primarily on tarot readers, who constitute the core of my fieldwork, while also engaging with astrologers where relevant. A tarot reader interprets tarot cards (a deck of 78 cards) used by practitioners as symbolic tools to explore emotions, relationships, and personal or spiritual questions (Farley, 2009), while an astrologer studies planetary positions and celestial cycles to offer insight into timing, personality traits, and life events (Bird, 2006), and these definitions are not rigid. In

practice, each participant shapes their use of tarot or astrology according to their personal interpretive style, context, and client relationships, reflecting the fluid nature of contemporary esoteric practices.

This study is exploratory and ethnographic, focusing on how esoteric practitioners create meaning and define their practice on their own terms. I approached the field without a fixed research question, allowing themes to emerge organically through observation and interaction. A central theme that arose is the question of what it means to be an authentic esoteric practitioner. For these practitioners, authenticity is not defined by adherence to standardized systems but rather by remaining true to their intuition, unique interpretive style, ethical responsibility, emotional balance, and client relationships, while navigating confidence and self-doubt in their practice.

Although tarot reading has been popularized through the New Age movement, which emphasizes personalized and eclectic spiritual practices outside institutional religion (Farley, 2009), anthropological studies of tarot practitioners remain limited. Existing research often comes from psychology, where tarot is framed as a therapeutic tool (Clinton, 2024; Hofer, 2009; Ivtzan, 2007), or from sociology (Gregory, 2018; Lavin, 2021; Ryan, 2012), which tends to emphasize broader social patterns and structures rather than the lived experiences foregrounded by anthropological research. Anthropology has long engaged with esotericism and magic, though often from an external or skeptical perspective. Greenwood (2009) advocates studying magic from within, using an emic approach that understands practitioners' realities through shared experience. This study follows that approach by engaging directly in esoteric practices alongside participants and adopting the conceptual language through which they understand and articulate their work.

Methodologically, I employ participant observation, narrative interviews, a focus group, and a participatory workshop, with the focus group being central to this paper. Many participants were previously isolated in this "field with no field", so the research setting also facilitated community-making, which emerged as both a theme and a method. In this paper, I portray Silvia, Lilith, Morpheus, Rita, Artemis, and Neptune, pseudonyms chosen by participants to ensure privacy.

Ultimately, this research examines how contemporary esoteric practitioners construct meaning through practice, social interaction, and personal narrative, revealing

how esoteric knowledge becomes a living, relational process rather than a fixed belief system. Tarot and astrology are therefore not only symbolic or psychological tools but also embedded in everyday life and interpersonal relations, mediating identity, community, and moral economies of care and energy.

In the following section, I trace anthropological debates on esotericism, moving from early rationalist approaches to more recent phenomenological and ethnographic perspectives. This framework provides analytical tools for understanding how esoteric practitioners negotiate knowledge, legitimacy, emotional labor, and ethical decision-making, highlighting the complex, embedded dimensions of contemporary esotericism.

Literature Review

Knowledge, Power, and Esotericism

Esoteric practice integrates multiple modes of knowing: rational, intuitive, and embodied (Crockford & Asprem, 2018; Cohen, 2024; Blume, 2024). Rationality reflects practitioners' engagement with the material world and the systems in which they live and work, while intuition connects them to an inner voice or gut feeling, inseparable from embodied experience (Bird, 2006). Long-term personal and professional experience cultivates a holistic knowledge that combines these modes. Fieldwork revealed that participants often consider formal academic knowledge insufficient without spiritual or intuitive epistemologies, highlighting how ethnography can capture situated, experiential, and practice-based forms of knowing (Crockford & Asprem, 2018; Cohen, 2024).

Access to esoteric knowledge is frequently restricted through secrecy and insider epistemologies, producing emic/etic tensions (Crockford & Asprem, 2018; Cusack, 2010; Ewing, 1994). Academic frameworks of esotericism are historically Western and exclusionary (Hanegraaff, 2012; Cohen, 2024), emphasizing the need for decolonial approaches that challenge universal interpretations of tarot symbols and instead foreground intuition, imagination, and embodied knowledge (Greenberg, 2023), with examples discussed in the findings section. Within this context, participants negotiate legitimacy and ethical practice in ways that resist purely materialist or rationalist frameworks.

Framing Spiritual Labor

Spiritual labor encompasses the emotional, ethical, and energetic work involved in guiding and supporting others' spiritual, personal, or emotional growth. Practitioners regulate this labor through strategies such as framing readings psychologically, maintaining boundaries, and setting appropriate fees, balancing professional, ethical, and economic responsibilities.

Ethically, practitioners navigate multiple epistemic registers, blending esoteric and formalized knowledge systems to legitimize their work. Legitimacy labor is the effort practitioners put into showing that their work is credible, using storytelling, accurate interpretation, and strong client relationships to build trust and professional authority. For example, at the Tarot Center, readers distinguish themselves from 'illegitimate' psychics by framing services as counseling or life coaching, charging up to $250 per hour (Gregory, 2013, 2018). Some practitioners embed their practices within scientific or therapeutic frameworks, using credentials as symbolic capital (Lavin, 2021, pp. 319, 326). In this study, Silvia frames her tarot sessions through a psychological lens; Lilith identifies as an "occult therapist," combining intuition with psychotherapeutic expertise; Rita prefers "spiritual consultant," while Neptune explicitly rejects scientific validation, stating, "we don't need to prove anything." These self-(un)defining strategies convey professional legitimacy, shape client expectations, and reflect the multifaceted nature of esoteric practice.

Spiritual labor is highly precarious due to the absence of standardized credentialing and formal labor protections, requiring independent practitioners to establish norms around pricing, ethics, and boundaries (Lavin, 2021, pp. 320, 330, 335). Part of this precarity involves recognizing the self as socially dependent on others, namely clients (Gregory, 2018). Emotional labor is central, as tarot sessions resemble therapy, with clients sharing deeply personal and vulnerable topics; practitioners must manage these emotions while maintaining professional boundaries and regulating their own energy (Hochschild, 2012, pp. 186–189). This context also produces challenges such as underpaid sessions, unequal energy exchanges, and client skepticism, illustrating the informal dynamics of the 'spiritual marketplace,' where seekers pursue meaning through spiritual goods and services (Heelas, 1996).

Financial transactions in esoteric work are morally and symbolically charged. Payment is often framed as an "energy exchange," a term used by Gregory (2018, pp. 213–

215) and echoed by practitioners in this study. Energy exchange may include money, reciprocal favors, or other forms of mutual support, depending on the practitioner–client relationship. Charging fees is essential for professionalization, yet can provoke anxiety or guilt; pricing functions as self-care, boundary management, and ethical practice, protecting practitioners from emotional depletion while ensuring reciprocity.

Together, these literatures illustrate that contemporary esoteric work is relational, emotional, and entrepreneurial. Tarot, astrology, and related practices operate within informal labor markets, shaped by precarity and emotional labor, while drawing on complex epistemologies that blend intuition, embodiment, and reasoning. Ethnographic approaches allow scholars to foreground practitioner experiences, revealing the nuanced epistemic dimensions of spiritual labor in ways that textual analyses alone cannot capture (Crockford & Asprem, 2018).

While previous research on spiritual labor in tarot communities by Lavin (2021) and Gregory (2018) examined larger groups of readers, my study focuses on participants who are mainly isolated. The focus group sessions in my research create a space for community-building, allowing participants to discuss all aspects of their labor, which will be detailed in the next methodology section.

Methodology

Participant observation: Positionality in the No-Field Field

Conducting research in a "field with no field" required ongoing reflection on my positionality, relationships, and power dynamics, in line with feminist ethnographic principles (Skeggs, 2001). Unlike traditional ethnographies with defined sites, there was no established community, physical space, or recurring event where tarot readers gathered, making participant observation challenging. There was no consistent pattern in how I met them; sometimes it was informal and friendly, and sometimes it started with an interview. This reflects the unpredictability inherent in people, both the participants and the researcher.

Half of the participants became my close friends over the course of the research, blurring boundaries between objective professional observation and subjective personal connection, which feminist ethnography recognizes as a valid and valuable part of

knowledge production (Skeggs, 2001). My approach involved spending extensive time with participants individually, attending events they hosted, joining esoteric gatherings such as witch fairs, and occasionally acting as a client by receiving readings. These experiences allowed me to shift between observer, participant, and client while remaining attentive to how my presence shaped interactions and responses.

Participant feedback on questions, exercises, and facilitation of the focus group highlighted my assumptions and guided methodological adjustments, reflecting the dialogical and collaborative method in feminist ethnography (Skeggs, 2001). This flexible approach aligns with contemporary anthropological perspectives that understand the field as socially produced rather than geographically bounded (Marcus, 1995; Crockford & Asprem, 2018).

Selection of Participants

Participants were selected through chance encounters and personal networks, which then led to referrals via snowball sampling.

Silvia and Morpheus

Participant observation was easiest with Silvia, as I attended the women's gatherings she organizes. She is both a writer and a psychologist, which lends her a poetic style of expression and informs her ethically grounded tarot consultations. At the end of the first interview we did, I requested a paid tarot reading with her, but she offered a free session for this research, which I reciprocated with a testimonial video. Over time, spending time together outside formal settings allowed me to see both her personal and professional sides (Davies, 2008). I met Morpheus, Silvia's partner, at one of her events. He has long been active in esoteric communities, previously giving tarot readings and now hosting monthly dream circles (Edgar, 2021). I attended two sessions to observe his facilitation and Silvia's participation. They also share private "tarot dates" where they read tarot to each other in a cafe, forming a ritualistic use of tarot in their relationship. I interviewed Morpheus at his school, where he teaches primary grades, to observe him in a professional setting, complementing my understanding of their domestic and professional environments (Lavin, 2021).

Artemis

I met Artemis at university when she asked about an article I was reading on tarot. Introduced to tarot through the TV series Carnivale, which has visual aesthetics of tarot cards. She is self-taught and has had a strong intuitive sense since childhood. Artemis reads tarot mainly as a hobby, usually for friends, and her approach is informal and intuitive (Greenwood, 2000). Over time, we spent a great deal of time discussing tarot, and I later interviewed her and invited her to join the focus group.

Lilith

Lilith approached me at university after noticing my planetary symbol tattoos. She comes from a very spiritual background through a line of shamans, and she is highly intuitive and sensitive. I invited her to join Wiccan ritual events, where I could observe her interactions and participate in shared spiritual activities. We often engage in discussions about astrology and esoteric philosophies, which deepened both our personal and professional connections. With a strong online presence, she offers readings, gives workshops, and teaches classes in tarot, numerology, energy healing, and shadow work. Lilith's combination of lineage, intuitive skill, and active online entrepreneurship made her a valuable participant.

Rita and Neptune

I met Rita through a friend who had received a tarot reading from her. Rita studied astrology and tarot at a spiritual education center under several teachers. As a philosopher and mathematician, she integrates her logical and conceptual skills into her tarot and astrology readings. To support my research, she offered a free astrology reading, which I reciprocated by purchasing a session as a gift for a friend (Hanegraaff, 2013). She later introduced me to Neptune, a sociologist and an astrologer who co-facilitated a series of workshops with her. She also practices numerology (the study of numbers with correlation to personality and life events) and chronobiology (the study of bodily cyclical rhythms). I interviewed Neptune online due to geographical distance and later invited her to the focus group, covering her travel expenses as reciprocity. Together, they exemplify how esoteric knowledge is shared and professionalized through semi-formal networks, reflecting the growing collaboration within contemporary spiritual practice (Gregory, 2018; Crockford & Asprem, 2018).

Individual Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

Narrative semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant early in the fieldwork. Interviews took place in diverse settings: Silvia and Rita at home, Morpheus at his workplace, Lilith in a restaurant, and Neptune and Artemis online. Questions, generated from participant observation, explored practitioners' personal experiences, daily practices, social perception, and the impact of tarot on their lives:

1. What does tarot / astrology mean to you?
2. How were you introduced to tarot / astrology?
3. How do you use tarot / astrology in daily life?
4. How are you socially perceived as an esoteric practitioner?
5. How has practicing esotericism affected your life?

Follow-up questions emerged organically during the conversations. Participants often asked about my focus, to which I replied, "I don't know yet; we can find out together." Their curiosity and support shaped the interviews as dialogical exchanges rather than extractive encounters, consistent with feminist and reflexive ethnographic ethics (Davies, 2008; Greenwood, 2000, Skeggs, 2001). After completing individual interviews, a focus group was organized with the six participants in a community space where I volunteer. The session lasted four hours, with short breaks, and refreshments were provided. Focus group questions mirrored those in the individual interviews to compare responses and observe group dynamics:

1. What does tarot/astrology mean to you?
2. How do you position yourself within esoteric communities?
3. What are the most difficult and rewarding aspects of being an esoteric practitioner?
4. How do you approach charging for your work?
5. What makes you feel qualified in your practice?

Neptune, Lilith, Silvia, and Morpheus were particularly active, offering detailed examples, responding to one another, and building on each other's interpretations. Their engagement fostered a sense of trust and safety, allowing strangers to connect and resonate (Greenwood, 2000; Guenther et al., 2021).

Questions about challenges and the ethics of charging generated the most in-depth conversation. Participants reflected on the difficulty of determining fair compensation and negotiating the exchange of energy, which naturally led to planning a follow-up session as a participatory workshop dedicated to this topic (Hochschild, 2012; Mauss, 1990; Graeber, 2001).

Reflections and Feedback

An online questionnaire collected participants' reflections on the focus group due to a schedule collision to meet in person. Feedback highlighted issues of question design, language, and researcher assumptions. For instance, Morpheus suggested reframing the question "How is your relationship with charging for your work?" to "What are your thoughts on the ethics of charging for or receiving these services for free?" Artemis noted that economic-focused questions excluded hobbyist practitioners, leaving her unable to respond meaningfully. These reflections underscore how researcher's assumptions can shape participation (Crockford & Asprem, 2018; Greenwood, 2009).

Participants also reflected on my facilitation. Silvia recommended structuring sessions with "core" and "optional" questions to prevent any single topic from dominating. Neptune would have preferred more active facilitation rather than a largely observational stance. Artemis noted that repeated discussion on pricing and client relationships left her disengaged, illustrating the challenge of balancing open dialogue with targeted guidance in heterogeneous groups (Greenwood, 2000; Guenther et al., 2021).

Interpersonal dynamics varied. Silvia reported positive impressions overall, while Lilith felt ambivalent, describing some participants as 'weird in a not good way,' which she attributed to her own guardedness during initial encounters. Rita gained inspiration from the group, and Neptune found the participants unusually reflective and open-minded, contrasting them with her previous experiences with less receptive spiritual communities. Morpheus noted participants' sincerity and care for their work, while Artemis found the

group pleasant but not memorable. These perspectives illustrate the diversity of interpersonal resonance within the session (Crockford & Asprem, 2018; Greenwood, 2009).

Responses to the idea of a follow-up workshop were also mixed. Silvia found the proposal novel and appealing, but needed more explanation. Lilith was surprised and impressed, describing it as "professional." Rita expressed both openness and uncertainty, while Neptune found it compelling but ambitious. These reflections reinforced the importance of accessible and participatory ethnographic methods (Hanegraaff, 2013).

Focus Group Workshop

A second session focused entirely on the concept of energy exchange, attended by Silvia, Morpheus, Rita, and Lilith. The workshop included a collective tarot exercise, allowing participants to observe one another's methods, followed by a mental mapping activity designed to explore themes from the first focus group and the follow-up questions, during which Silvia and Lilith described payments in esoteric work as "energy" rather than personal income, emphasizing that practitioners act as intermediaries, with money flowing to the source rather than to themselves.

1. Who or what is the source?
2. Who are the transmitters or "middle managers"?
3. How does exchange circulate between practitioner, client, and source?
4. Where does energy go when giving or receiving without compensation?

The mapping exercise began with a brief slide presentation, noting that artistic skill was not required and participants could use words, colors, symbols, or tarot cards, and lasted about twenty minutes before participants shared their maps in a circle (Guenther et al., 2021; Lavin, 2021). Notable reflections included Silvia's comment that payment is not for the practitioner but flows from the source, and Lilith's concern about karmic consequences when receiving favors without repayment. These themes will be further discussed in the findings section.

By combining individual interviews, focus group discussion and workshop, the research generated rich data across verbal, visual, and embodied forms. This multimodal approach illuminated not only participants' ideas but also how these ideas manifest in practice (Crockford & Asprem, 2018; Greenwood, 2000). The following chapter presents the key findings that emerged from these activities, with themes, tensions and shared understandings that developed across the group.

Ethnographic Findings

This chapter presents findings generated through participant observation, individual interviews, focus group discussions, and a follow-up workshop. Rather than treating tarot and astrology as fixed belief systems, the findings demonstrate how esoteric practices function as flexible, relational, and ethically charged forms of labor. The chapter is organized into three thematic sections. First, it examines how esoteric practices function as tools for meaning-making in everyday life. Second, it explores how practitioners establish credibility and professional legitimacy in informal labor markets. Finally, it analyzes energy exchange as a moral and affective economy encompassing emotional labor, reciprocity, and monetary compensation.

Esoteric Practice as Meaning-Making

This section addresses how practitioners use tarot, astrology, and related practices to interpret experience, regulate emotion, and orient everyday life. Across accounts, these practices are not treated as sources of absolute truth but as interpretive frameworks that shift with life circumstances, emotional states, and levels of engagement. Meaning emerges through practice rather than belief and doctrine. Participants consistently emphasized that tarot and astrology are embedded in daily routines and interpersonal interactions. These systems operate simultaneously as symbolic languages, reflective tools, and practical methods for navigating uncertainty.

Esoteric Knowledge as Symbolic Languages

Several participants framed tarot and astrology as coherent symbolic systems that structure intuition and interpretation. Morpheus situated tarot within a wide range of divinatory practices, comparing it to tea-leaf reading, sortilege, and dream interpretation. He referred

to these practices as "secret sciences," not because they are intentionally hidden, but because they rely on interpretive capacities that contemporary materialist frameworks often marginalize. From this perspective, meaning is not extracted mechanically but emerges through symbolic resonance. Artemis similarly emphasized tarot's autonomy, describing it as a language that belongs to the practitioner rather than to any institution. She highlighted the balance between structure and agency (Ortner, 1984): tarot is public enough to be learned, yet open enough to allow personal interpretation. This openness enables practitioners to develop practices without dogma or authority.

Tarot as Tool for Reflection

Tarot was most frequently described as a reflective and psychological tool. Silvia, who is trained in psychology, uses tarot as a visual medium to bring subconscious feelings into the surface. She explained that daily self-readings (reading tarot cards for oneself) function as an emotional check-in, helping her remain attuned to her intuition. Notably, she observed that when she stops reading tarot for herself, her readings for others become "more psychological and less intuitive," suggesting that intuition as a skill requires persistence rather than being a static trait.

Lilith similarly described drawing three cards each morning to sense the emotional tone of the day. She also consults tarot for interpersonal questions, recounting moments when interpretations aligned unexpectedly after days, weeks, or months since the initial reading. This shows that the use of tarot is not merely "fortune-telling" but shows the reader's memory and trust in the interpretive process.

Rita emphasized tarot's communicative function, describing it as a way to "name things" quickly and bypass superficial conversation with people. During her early years of study, she engaged in daily tarot and astrology practices, using apps such as Galaxy Tarot and annotating cards with brief reflections. These examples show tarot as embodied meaning-making: repeated use internalizes symbols, blending practice, discipline, and self-reflection.

Astrology as Timing

Astrology appeared in participants' lives in more selective and strategic ways than tarot. Morpheus described using astrology primarily for elective timing rather than daily involvement. During one of Morpheus's dream circles, where participants gather regularly to share dreams and explore them deeply, I observed that he organized his weekly calendar according to planetary symbols rather than weekday names. He preferred booking travel on Wednesdays, marked by Mercury who rules transportation, and hosting gatherings on Fridays, associated with Venus and sociability. For him, astrology functions as a system for structuring time and anticipating the atmosphere.

Neptune described a more cyclical engagement with astrology. She monitors major planetary transits roughly once a month, often relying on interpretations from astrologers she trusts. Astrology also informs her creative work: she co-hosts a podcast on spirituality and self-discovery and releases episodes on New or Full Moons to align the project with lunar rhythms. Rather than detailed analysis, Neptune emphasized attunement to planetary cycles without becoming constrained by fixed meanings. These accounts illustrate astrology as a temporal framework that organizes decision-making, creativity, and anticipation.

Changing Engagements Over Time

Participants emphasized that relationships with esoteric practices are not static. Neptune described being "between phases" uncertain about astrology's role in her life at present. Although astrology had previously "opened a lot of doors" of opportunity to understand herself and others, she sometimes found them increasingly restrictive, expressing a desire to take a pause from spirituality. Others also described stepping back due to exhaustion or difficult interactions with audiences. Both Lilith and Silvia mentioned taking breaks after burnout or receiving disrespectful online comments. These pauses were not outlined as abandoning spirituality but as necessary periods of rest and recalibration. Such cases highlight how engagement with esotericism fluctuates over time, shaped by emotional capacity, labor demands, and personal boundaries.

Establishing Credibility in an Informal Field

This section addresses how practitioners establish credibility in the absence of formal certification or institutional regulation. Participants did not define qualification through credentials alone; instead, legitimacy was articulated through ethical orientation, experiential knowledge, reflexivity, and recognizable competence. Credibility emerged as something continuously negotiated rather than permanently achieved.

Ethics and Boundary

Ethical responsibility manifested as a central dimension of credibility. Lilith emphasized prioritizing clients' emotional states over financial considerations, particularly because many clients seek tarot during periods of crisis in their lives. While she maintains professional boundaries, she is willing to extend sessions or reduce fees when necessary. This flexibility is shown not only as generosity but as ethical responsibility toward vulnerable clients.

Neptune emphasized the ethical dimension of power dynamics in her practice, deliberately limiting access to personal information with less familiar clients and reserving more intensive engagement for those with whom she has a closer relationship, framing her role as one that cultivates the seeker's potential, gifts, and talents rather than asserting authoritative knowledge or pathologizing personal experiences.

Expertise and Continuous Learning

Sustained practice emerged as a central source of legitimacy among participants. Neptune emphasized the importance of emotional readiness, noting that practitioners are responsible for their own healing and should not bring unresolved issues into sessions to operate at full capacity. Rita highlighted repeated readings, ongoing self-reflection, and gradual skill development as foundational to competence, a view echoed by Morpheus, who likened spiritual work to professions such as teaching that require clear communication, environmental presence, and continual learning.

Lilith reframed the focus group question "What makes you qualified to do what you do?" as "What makes you qualified to charge?" For her, legitimacy is grounded in time, effort, and accumulated experience, reflecting the broader concern that spiritual skills should not

be expected for free simply because they are non-material. Across participants, there was a shared sense of a dismissive outsider perspective, as both strangers and acquaintances often request free services, thereby devaluing the labor invested in esoteric practices.

Calling, Validation, and Reflexivity

For some practitioners, a sense of vocation further reinforced credibility. Silvia described her introduction to tarot as a personal calling, where she felt compelled to continue tarot seriously, after reading at a party for the first time that revealed both her ability and the resonance her readings had with others. Over time, practice made intuitive messages "easier to channel" while feedback from clients, expressions of relief, hope, or emotional lightness, affirmed the value of her work. Silvia and Morpheus described practitioners as intermediaries, or "middle management" between the source of information and the client. Payment, from this perspective, is not a reward for personal insight but an acknowledgment of the channel.

Participants also emphasized the importance of balancing confidence with self-doubt. As Morpheus mentioned, he can't always give accurate tarot readings, and this doubt is always with him. Neptune described a "professional mindset" that takes responsibility seriously without becoming patronizing. Lilith similarly argued that some doubt is healthy, functioning as a safeguard against overconfidence. In this view, uncertainty supports ethical practice rather than undermining legitimacy.

Energy Exchange: Labor, Value, and Reciprocity

Across interviews, focus groups, and the follow-up workshop, energy exchange emerged as a central concern through which practitioners articulated the moral, emotional, and economic dimensions of their work. Participants framed money, emotional effort, time, and reciprocity as interconnected forms of value within a moral and affective economy (Gregory, 2018; Hochschild, 1983; Mauss, 1990). Rather than treating payment as a simple transaction, they understood exchange as necessary for sustaining ethical practice, energetic balance, and personal well-being.

Precarity in Spiritual Labor

The precarity of spiritual labor shapes practitioners' experiences, influencing compensation, client expectations, and the emotional demands of their work. In the absence of standardized credentials or labor protections, participants reported underpaid sessions, unequal exchanges, and skepticism from clients. As Gregory (2018) suggests, feeling precarious involves recognizing oneself as socially dependent on others, primarily clients, for validation, income, and recognition. Participants situated their work within an informal spiritual marketplace (Heelas, 1996), where emotional labor is expected but often undervalued.

Esoteric work involves substantial emotional labor, often resembling counselling therapy in which clients share deeply personal and vulnerable information. Practitioners noted they must remain empathic and attentive while managing their own emotional states and maintaining professional boundaries. Neptune described her astrology readings as particularly draining, explaining that she "gives too much" and struggles to regulate her energetic output. Lilith similarly acknowledged extending sessions or undercharging clients out of care, even when this left her emotionally depleted and unequally transacted. Emotional labor thus extends beyond client support to include ongoing negotiations of authority, responsibility, and self-protection. Practitioners expressed discomfort with appearing as figures who know everything, resisting authoritative postures while still carrying the weight of clients' expectations and emotional reliance.

Equal Exchange as Boundary-Making

Charging for spiritual work was described as morally charged and emotionally complex. Silvia recounted feeling "robbed and taken advantage of" when she held donation-based sessions, which resulted in inadequate compensation of receiving few coins, which eventually led her to set prices comparable to psychological consultations. This has resulted in her losing clients, which reflected the quality of people and filtered the less respectful clients. Neptune contrasted this with a free workshop she facilitated, which only attracted four participants who expressed only casual curiosity with less intentionality. One participant continued to request the transcript of the exact words Neptune had spoken in the workshop, asking for even more free labor. This experience reinforced for Neptune the

importance of ensuring the right exchange with participants. These revealed how lack of exchange can undermine the perceived value of the work.

Similarly, for Lilith, charging fairly for her sessions functions as a form of protection, filtering out those clients who seek free emotional labor and reinforcing reciprocal respect. Among participants, pricing emerged as a key boundary-making practice: communicating skill, regulating access to time and energy, and protecting practitioners from overgiving.

Morpheus reflected on long-standing cultural narratives that spiritual work should be free or inexpensive, in conflict with the substantial time, preparation, and emotional investment such work requires. He noted that the traditional Aikido teachers in Japan were historically supported by students' families. He highlighted the complexity of modern practice, where payment is often indirect or mediated, and emphasized the need for structured systems to balance financial sustainability with ethical obligations.

The following section examines further conceptualizations of energy exchange and reciprocity as represented through a visual method.

Visualizing Energy Exchange

The mental mapping workshop provided a unique opportunity to observe how practitioners conceptualize energy exchange beyond verbal explanation. By asking participants to visualize the flow of energy between source, practitioner, and client, the exercise externalized otherwise implicit processes, revealing how exchange is understood as a dynamic process rather than a fixed transaction.

Lilith's depiction of the source as a planet and the practitioner (herself) as the "High Priestess" (Tarot Card representing intuition, divine feminine) reflects a cosmology in which structure, responsibility, and consequence are central. In her model, money and gratitude are not payments to the practitioner but mechanisms through which balance is restored. When this return is absent, energy drains the practitioner, reinforcing her earlier claim that undercharging or overgiving results in exhaustion. Exchange here is not optional but necessary for maintaining energetic and moral equilibrium.

Rita's analytical two-by-two matrix translated spiritual exchange into a structured model of reciprocity. Her framing of imbalance as "cheating" suggests a moral economy in which fairness and symmetry are central ethical principles. Unlike purely spiritualized

interpretations, Rita's model foregrounded responsibility on both sides of the interaction: the practitioner must be prepared and capable of giving, while the client must be open and willing to receive. She acknowledges that exchange sometimes fails when the source does not provide information or the client is not ready. This introduces uncertainty as an inherent feature of spiritual labor.

Silvia understands the source as an expansive, fungal communication network from which information flows through collective subconscious networks, often passing through multiple intermediaries before reaching its intended recipient. She illustrated this with a personal practice of holding onto objects or books until the moment feels right to pass them on, framing this as a metaphor for how information from the source travels and circulates. In this system, individuals can simultaneously be messengers, receivers, and part of the source itself. Regarding energy exchange, Silvia noted that readings feel misaligned when she feels drained after, prompting her to reconsider pricing. Initially offering sessions on a donation basis led to disappointment, while fixed prices reduced her client base. She ultimately adopted a more fluid approach, allowing energy to return in forms beyond money. At present, she occasionally provides readings to friends without expecting anything in return, trusting that the energy will flow back to her in the appropriate way and time. Silvia's mapping challenges reductionist economic models by emphasizing the distributed nature of value.

Morpheus's image of the source as the sun situates exchange within a cosmology of generosity and overflow. Energy radiates outward, nourishing individuals, communities, and institutions without immediate expectation of return. While he acknowledged that compensation is necessary to sustain practice, he cautioned that overly transactional thinking risks diminishing the spiritual essence of the work. His perspective introduces a tension between sustainability and altruism, suggesting that not all spiritual labor can or should be governed by strict reciprocity.

Collectively, these visualizations reveal that energy exchange operates simultaneously on ethical, symbolic, and practical levels. The workshop showed that practitioners navigate multiple, sometimes conflicting frameworks of exchange: balancing reciprocity, generosity, protection, and meaning rather than adhering to a single model. By translating abstract concerns about pricing, burnout, and legitimacy into visual form, the

exercise highlighted energy exchange as a lived moral practice, functioning not only as compensation but also as a way to regulate relationships, sustain ethical integrity, and maintain the practitioner's capacity to continue their work.

Conclusion of findings

The findings illustrate that esoteric practices operate as flexible, relational, and ethically mediated forms of labor. Practitioners use tarot, astrology, and related modalities not as fixed systems of belief, but as interpretive frameworks that support meaning-making, self-reflection, and practical decision-making in everyday life. Legitimacy and credibility are continuously negotiated through sustained practice, ethical responsibility, experiential knowledge, and reflexivity, rather than formal credentials. Energy exchange emerges as a central organizing principle, encompassing emotional labor, monetary compensation, and reciprocal responsibility, and functioning simultaneously as a moral, symbolic, and practical practice. Visualizations of exchange revealed how practitioners manage boundaries, protect their well-being, and navigate tensions between sustainability, generosity, and spiritual integrity.

Discussion

This study contributes to the anthropological understanding of contemporary esoteric practice by highlighting how practitioners negotiate legitimacy, skill, and sustainability across ethical, relational, and practical dimensions. The findings align with Crockford and Asprem (2018), Cohen (2024), and Blume (2024), who argue that esoteric knowledge integrates rational, intuitive, and embodied ways of knowing. Participants' emphasis on practice and feedback underscores the experiential nature of expertise, existing alongside and sometimes in tension with dominant epistemologies, as described by Hanegraaff (2012) and Greenberg (2023).

The research highlights the centrality of emotional labor and energy exchange in esoteric work, supporting Greenwood's (2000) observation that magical and divinatory practices are ethically and relationally charged. Practitioners balance client needs with self-care, manage energy, and negotiate compensation to sustain practice. Experiences of overgiving, burnout, and misaligned exchanges demonstrate that ethical, symbolic, and

practical aspects of labor are inseparable, echoing Gregory's (2018) and Hochschild's (2012) analyses of affective labor in precarious contexts.

The study also demonstrates how esoteric knowledge functions as a flexible and adaptive system. Tarot and astrology were described as reflective tools, symbolic languages, and temporal frameworks that integrate psychological and embodied dimensions, supporting decision-making and everyday meaning-making. Practitioners combine these esoteric systems with rational and therapeutic frameworks to establish legitimacy, as noted by Lavin (2021) and Gregory (2013, 2018). Examples from the study include Silvia framing tarot sessions through psychology, Lilith presenting herself as an occult therapist, Rita as a spiritual consultant, and Neptune rejecting scientific validation from skeptics. These approaches illustrate how professional legitimacy is enacted through preparation, ethical engagement, skill development, and responsiveness to clients rather than through institutional certification.

Energy exchange emerged as a central principle for understanding the moral and practical dimensions of spiritual labor. Participants framed payment, time, and emotional effort as interconnected forms of value, consistent with Gregory (2018), Heelas (1996), and Mauss (1990). Pricing and reciprocity operate as mechanisms of boundary management, ethical practice, and sustainability. Visualizations from the mental mapping workshop revealed that energy flows between source, practitioner, and client are both symbolic and practical, highlighting the distributive nature of value. Participants negotiated tensions between generosity, sustainability, and the symbolic integrity of their work, reflecting broader debates in the anthropology of magic regarding commodification and the preservation of sacred value.

Overall, these findings illustrate that contemporary esoteric practice is a dynamic, relational, and ethically mediated form of labor. Meaning, value, and professional competence are co-constituted through ongoing practice, reflection, and negotiation. By attending to these dimensions, this study contributes to broader conversations about spiritual labor, informal economies, and the complex epistemologies that sustain esoteric expertise.

Conclusion

This study explored contemporary esoteric practice as lived, negotiated, and sustained by practitioners themselves. Through an ethnographic approach combining participant observation, narrative interviews, a focus group, and a participatory workshop, the research examined how tarot readers and astrologers create meaning, define their roles, and manage the ethical, emotional, and economic dimensions of their work. Rather than approaching esotericism as a fixed belief system or symbolic tradition, the study demonstrates that esoteric practice operates as a flexible, ethically mediated practice embedded in everyday life.

Methodologically, this research contributes to anthropological debates on how to study diffused, individualized, and informal fields. Conducting ethnography in a "field with no field" required flexibility, reflexivity, and an acknowledgment of how relationships shape knowledge production. The focus group and workshop did not merely generate data but also temporarily created a sense of community among initially isolated practitioners. This underscores how ethnographic methods can be both analytical and generative, producing spaces for reflection, articulation, and collective sense-making. Feminist and collaborative approaches proved particularly suited to capturing the relational and ethical dimensions of esoteric practice (Skeggs, 2001; Greenwood, 2000).

The findings show that tarot and astrology function primarily as interpretive frameworks rather than systems of absolute knowledge. Practitioners use these modalities to orient themselves emotionally, reflect on relationships, structure time, and navigate uncertainty. Meaning emerges through repeated engagement, embodied experience, and context-sensitive interpretation rather than doctrinal authority. This supports anthropological approaches that emphasize experiential and intuitive modes of knowing alongside rational forms of knowledge (Bird, 2006; Crockford & Asprem, 2018; Greenwood, 2009). By engaging in these practices from within, the research highlights how esoteric knowledge is produced through the interplay of symbols, intuition, personal history, and social context.

A central contribution of this study lies in its analysis of how practitioners establish credibility in the absence of formal certification or institutional regulation. Authority was

not grounded in credentials alone, but in ethical responsibility, emotional readiness, sustained practice, and reflexivity. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of boundaries, preparation, and care for clients, particularly given the vulnerability often present in divinatory encounters. Confidence was repeatedly described as something that must coexist with doubt, with uncertainty functioning as an ethical safeguard rather than a weakness. These findings extend existing scholarship on spiritual labor by showing how legitimacy is continuously negotiated through practice, feedback, and self-regulation rather than fixed professional standards (Gregory, 2018; Lavin, 2021).

Energy exchange emerged as a key analytical lens through which practitioners articulated the moral, emotional, and economic dimensions of their work. Participants framed money, time, attention, and emotional effort as interconnected forms of value within a moral economy. Charging for services was understood not simply as income generation, but as a means of maintaining balance, protecting boundaries, and sustaining the capacity to continue practicing. Experiences of undercharging, donation-based work, or unpaid offerings often resulted in exhaustion, frustration, or the devaluation of labor, reinforcing the role of pricing as an ethical and practical concern. These findings align with anthropological discussions of emotional labor, reciprocity, and precarity in informal economies (Hochschild, 2012; Mauss, 1990; Gregory, 2018), while foregrounding the emic language of energy exchange used by practitioners themselves.

The participatory mapping workshop made visible the diversity of models through which practitioners conceptualize exchange. Maps revealed that exchange operates simultaneously on symbolic, ethical, and practical levels, encompassing ideas of flow, responsibility, generosity, and protection. Rather than adhering to a single framework, practitioners navigated multiple and sometimes conflicting logics of reciprocity. Some emphasized balance and equivalence, while others highlighted abundance or altruistic circulation. These models were not abstract theories but practical tools for addressing burnout, client expectations, and moral responsibility. By translating implicit concerns into visual form, the workshop demonstrated the value of creative and participatory methods for accessing embodied and affective dimensions of spiritual labor.

Overall, this study demonstrates that contemporary esoteric practice cannot be understood solely through belief, symbolism, or market logic. Tarot and astrology operate as

lived moral practices in which knowledge, care, labor, and value are constructed through ongoing negotiation. Practitioners continuously balance intuition and discipline, generosity and protection, care and economic survival. Based on practitioners' own conceptualizations and experiences, this research contributes to anthropological understandings of esotericism as a dynamic, relational, and ethically complex field. Future research could build on these findings by examining client perspectives, comparative cultural contexts, or the long-term sustainability of esoteric labor within increasingly digital and precarious economies.

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Reviews section | Recenziók szekció

Prónai Csaba

Jegyzetek a fotóantropológia történetének egyik fejezetéhez. Growth and Culture (1951) | Notes on a Chapter in the History of Photoanthropology. Growth and Culture (1951)

A „Growth and Culture" című könyv kitüntetett helyet érdemel a fotóantropológia történetében. Ennek tudománytörténeti jelentőségét mutatom be ebben a tanulmányban.

Margaret Mead és Gregory Bateson 1936 márciusától 1938 márciusáig és 1939-ben további 6 hétig folytatott résztvevő megfigyelést Balin, Indonéziában (Mead 1951a:ix). Terepmunkájuk során – az adott korszakhoz viszonyítva – kifejezetten rendkívül nagy mennyiségben készítettek vizuális anyagokat. A 16 órányi filmfelvétel (Henley 2020:69) és a 25.000 fénykép (Bateson 1942:49) szokatlanul soknak számított abban az időben. Feldolgozásuk nem történt meg egyik napról a másikra.

A filmfelvételekből 6 rövidfilm készült az 1950-es években és egy 1978-ban, Margaret Mead halálának az évében (ld. Bateson – Mead 1951, 1952a, 1952b, 1953c, 1954a, 1954b, 1978). Ezek hossza összesen 115 perc.

A fényképekből, amiket egytől egyig Gregory Bateson készített, mostanáig kb. 1200 jelent meg nyomtatásban:
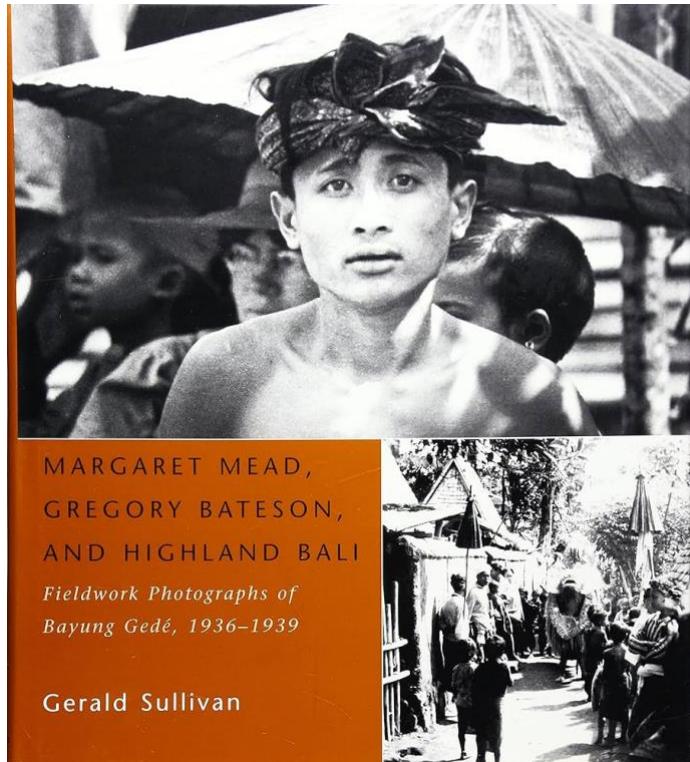
. 759 Gregory Bateson és Margaret Mead 1942-es „Balinese Character. A Photographic Analysis" című könyvében (Bateson 1942:49);

. 380 Margaret Mead és Frances Cooke Macgregor „Growth and Culture. A Photographic Study of Balinese Childhood"-jában (Mead 1951b:55);

. 200 Gerard Sullivan 1999-es „Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, and Highland Bali. Fieldwork Photograps of Bayung Gedé, 1936-1939" című könyvében (Sullivan 1999:belső borító első fele);

. néhány Jane Belo „Trance in Bali"-jában (1960) és az általa szerkesztett, de már a halála után megjelent „Traditional Balinese Culture"-ben (1970);

. magazinokban;

. Margaret Meadnek a fényképezés kultúra és személyiség tanulmányokban való felhasználásáról szóló tanulmányában (1956);

. szintén Meadnek az „Anthropology and the Camera" című írásában, ami a Willard D. Morgan által szerkesztett „The Encyclopedia of Photography" 1. kötetéhez készült (1963);

. valamint további Meadről és Batesonról szóló munkákban (Sullivan 1999:2).

Ebben a történetben kétségkívül fontos szerepet játszott Gregory Bateson és Margaret Mead találkozása 1932 karácsonyán Pápua Új-Guineában. Noha ennek a kezdetéről nincsenek pontos ismereteink, a „Blackberry Winter"-ben olvashatunk arról, hogyan mesél erről 40 évvel később az egyik szereplő, Margaret Mead (ld. Mead 1972:208-tól). És abban egyetérthetünk Antonello Riccivel (2023:117), hogy ez a találkozás az antropológia történetének egyik leglenyűgözőbb intellektuális kalandjához vezetett (vö. Henley 2013:79-80).

Még nem Balin (Indonéziában) vagyunk, hanem a Sepik-folyónál (Melanéziában), de a közös érdeklődés már itt jelen van. Bateson olvasta Mead 1930-as „Growing Up in New Guinea"-jét (Mead 1972:208), és itt kapták kézhez Ruth Benedicttől a „Patterns of Culture" kéziratát (Mead 1972:217), ami aztán 1934-ben jelent meg. Mead és Bateson közös kutatásában Balin éppen a kultúra és személyiség kapcsolata volt a központi kérdésük, azon belül is kifejezetten a gyermeknevelés (Heider 1994:28). Margaret Mead ezzel a témával foglalkozott már a „Coming of Age in Samoa"-ban is (1928), és akárcsak Ruth Benedict, ő is az ún. „kultúra és személyiség" irányzat (ld. Barnouw 1963) egyik ikonikus figurája. A Balin végzett vizsgálat ennek az irányzatnak az ún. konfiguracionalista megközelítéséhez (Bock

1995:41-77) kapcsolódik. Bateson és Mead feltételezték, hogy létezik egy sajátos bali karakter, ami megfeleltethető egy bizonyos személyiségtípusnak. Szerintük ez a társadalomban megjelenő jellegzetes viselkedési módokban érhető tetten. Azok eredete pedig a nevelésben keresendő.

Bateson-nek ehhez az elmélethez való kapcsolódását jól mutatja például a „skizmogenezis" fogalma, amit ő egy 1935-ös tanulmányában vezetett be (Graeber – Wengrow 2025:80). Ezen az egyéni viselkedési normák differenciálódásának a folyamatát értette (Bateson 1936:176). Szerinte ez az egyének közötti interakciókból ered, és fontos szerepet játszik az egyén formálódásában.

Adva volt tehát a közös téma: a jellegzetes viselkedési mintákat kell megfigyelni és azt, hogy azokat hogyan sajátítják el a gyermekek az adott kultúrában. És ehhez hívták segítségül a fényképezőgépet és a filmfelvevőt, amikről az etnográfiai megfigyelési technikák keretében tanultak egyetemi képzésük során (Ricci 2023:120).

Gregory Bateson esetében ez a Cambridge-i Egyetemen történt (Amit 2004:54), ahol Alfred Cort Haddon volt a mentora (Amit 2004:52; Lipset 1980:122).

Alfred Cort Haddon munkássága kapcsán két dolgot szoktak hangsúlyozni, amivel hozzájárult a korai brit antropológiához. Egyrészt annak az expedíciónak a vezetését, amely a Torres-szoros szigeteken végzett tudományos kutatásokat. Másrészt azt a fáradozását, amit az antropológiának az Egyesült Királyságban való létrehozásáért tett (Amit 2004:307). Ugyanakkor a vizuális antropológia történetében is kiemelkedő a jelentősége (ld. Griffiths 2002:129-148), ő készített először terepen etnográfiai felvételeket tudományos célból (Henley 2020:31). Ez az egyik Torres-szorosi szigeten, a Mer-szigeten (angol elnevezése szerint: Murray-sziget) történt.

Jól mutatja Haddon fotóantropológia iránti érdeklődését az is, hogy 80. születésnapja alkalmából kollégái egy olyan ajándékkal lepték meg, ami annak a 10.000 képnek a másolatát tartalmazta, amit Haddon gyűjtött és adományozott a cambridge-i Régészeti és Antropológiai Múzeumnak (Quiggin 1942:148, idézi Walsh 2023:157 is).

Haddonnak a vizuális antropológia iránti érdeklődése bizonyára hatással lehetett Gregory Bateson-re is, mivel mentora lelkesen bíztatta a kollégáit arra, hogy ha terepre mennek, vigyenek magukkal fényképezésre alkalmas eszközöket is (Brigard 1995:16).

Margaret Mead a Columbia Egyetemen tanult (Amit 2004:485), ahol – Ruth Benedict mellett és mindenekelőtt – Franz Boas volt a mentora (Durington – Ruby 2011:193; Howard 1984:29; Shankman 2021:2, 11-12).

Franz Boast az amerikai antropológia egyik megalapítójának tartják (vö. Lewis 2008). Ira Jacknis pedig, aki talán leginkább Franz Boas munkásságának úttörő vizsgálatairól ismert (Glass – Jensen 2022:201), azt írja, hogy egyesek szerint Boas a vizuális antropológia egyik megalapítója is (Jacknis 1984:2).

Boas kétségkívül szeretett rajzokat készíteni a terepen (ld. Glass 2017; vö. Cole 1983:14; Joseph 2015:225), és például az 1927-es „Primitve Art" című könyve egyike azoknak az első tudományos, etnográfiai műveknek, amely fényképeket is tartalmazott a szövegek között (Marano 2007:51). Filmezéssel is próbálkozott. 1930-ban, 70 évesen technikailag többé kevésbé ahhoz hasonló eszközöket vitt magával, mint amilyeneket 3 évtizeddel korábban Haddon is vitt a Torres-szoroshoz (Henley2020:66). Ez volt az utolsó útja a kvakvaka'vakv (az angol szakirodalomban korábban „Kwakiutl") néphez (ld. Henley 2020:76). Táncokról, játékokról, kézműves módszerekről stb. készített felvételeket, arra törekedve, hogy azokkal kiegészítse az adott kultúrára vonatkozó ismereteit (Ruby 2000:55). Nem állt szándékában azokat bemutatni a nyilvánosságnak, számára ezek a terepen készült vizuális jegyzeteknek számítottak (Griffiths 2002:304). És – többek között – éppen ez volt az, ami ahhoz is elvezetett, hogy elkezdjünk gondolkodni a képek etnográfiai szempontból való tudományos használatáról (vö. Piault 2000:117).

Boasnak továbbá abban is szerepe volt, hogy Margaret Mead a gesztusok megragadására koncentrált. Korai tanítványait arra bíztatta, hogy fordítsanak figyelmet a testmozgásokra (Farnell 2011:145). Margaret Mead ezt fel is idézte abban a levelében, amit Boasnak írt 1938. március 29-én (éppen a Torres-szoroson áthaladva), aki azt mondta neki, hogy „ha Balira mennék, gesztusokat tanulmányoznék" (Mead 1977:212). És ennek megfelelően Mead fő érdeklődése Balin éppen a gesztusok mint kulturális jellemvonások tanulmányozása lett, abban bízva, hogy az elvezet a fő kérdéshez miszerint a szocializáció hogyan befolyásolja a viselkedést (vö. Henny 2012:15). Ennek megragadására pedig kézenfekvőnek tűnt a kamera használata.

Batesonnal közösen tudatosan hozták meg a döntést, amikor a terepmunkájukat megtervezték, hogy filmezni és fényképezni fognak. Aztán az első 45 perces megfigyelésük

után, aminek során felvételeket is készítettek, rádöbbentek arra, hogy jóval nagyobb fába vágták a fejszéjüket, mint ahogy azt elsőre elképzelték (Mead 1972:234). Bateson minden egyes mozgás minden mozdulatát megpróbálta lefényképezni (Schaeffer 1995:274). Ez olyan mennyiségű filmet eredményezett, ami meghaladta az addig (1895-től 1935-ig) készült valamennyi antropológiai film összmennyiségét (Hockings 1995:509). Ezt követelte meg tőlük a kutatásuk tárgya (Brigard 1995:26). A fényképek adatgyűjtésre való használata központi szereppel bírt a pszichológiai orientációjú vizsgálatuk számára. Ez egy olyan kísérlet volt, amelyben vizuális eszközökkel próbálták megállapítani és elemezni a kulturálisan standard viselkedést (vö. Barre 1947; Hewes 1955).

Marvin Harris híres „The Rise of Anthropological Theory"-jában az írja, hogy Margaret Mead döntése szigorúan módszertani volt. A kamera használatával megfigyeléseinek szemléltető erejét szerette volna megerősíteni. Harris szerint Mead fotográfiákhoz való fordulása egyúttal válaszként is szolgált az első három konfiguracionalista monográfiáját (ld. 1928, 1930, 1935) ért kritikákra (Harris 1992:417).

Bateson és Mead a kamerát adatrögzítőnek tekintette (Hasque 2014:40), Mead pedig kifejezetten az állványra rögzített verziójában hitt, szemben Bateson-nel (ld. ehhez Brand 1976). A fényképezéstől a kutatási adatok objektívitását várták (Tania 1994:147).

A teljesítmény lenyűgöző volt, és ezt Margaret Mead úgy élte meg, mintha korábbi munkáihoz viszonyítva más szinten dolgozna (Mead 1977:213). De a képeknek és a szövegnek ezt a fajta kettős megjelentetését abban az időben némi értetlenséggel fogadták (Jacknis 1988:160). Bateson és Mead 1942-es „Balinese Character"-éről az „American Anthropologist"-ban megjelenő recenzióban pedig a szerzők egy rendszerezett keretrendszert hiányoltak (Murphy – Murphy 1943:619).

Margaret Mead egyrészt meg volt győződve az általuk Balin készített fényképek társadalomtudományi jelentőségéről (Lakoff 1996:2). Másrészt valószínűleg az előbb említett el nem fogadottságot egy fajta kudarcként élhette meg. Részben ezek vezethettek oda, hogy kilenc évvel a „Balinese Character" megjelenése után, 1951-ben – immáron Gregory Bateson nélkül – újra a kezébe vegye a Balin készült felvétleket. Ebből születtek meg azok a rövidfilmek, amik szerepelnek ennek a tanulmánynak az elején megadott és a hivatkozásban visszakereshető felsorolásban. És az a bizonyos „Growth and Culture" című

könyv is, ami a vizuális antropológia történetének egy újabb fejezete, amit én itt most elsősorban ebből a szempontból ismertetek.

A könyvben 380 kép szerepel, valamennyit Gregory Bateson készítette Balin még az 1930-as években. Ezek mind gyermekekről készült közelképek, és azokat 4000 kép közül választotta ki Frances Cooke Macgregor, aki itt Mead társszerzőjeként szerepel.

Frances Cooke Macgregor (1906-2001) egy rendkívül sokoldalú személyiség volt, széles érdeklődési körrel. Közgazdász, szociológus és antropológus diplomát szerzett, több egyetemen is tanított professzorként, és kiváló fényképész is volt. Mivel szülei vakvezető kutyákkal foglalkoztak, már gyermekkorában részt vett fogyatékos emberek segítésében. És úgy tűnik a látás kérdése szinte vezérfonalként elkísérte hosszú élete során. Antropológus férjét követve rezervátumokban fényképezett, és ebből lett a „Twentieth Century Indians" (1941), magával ragadó képeivel. Fényképei és az általa gyűjtött tárgyak ma a washingtoni Smithsonian Institution tulajdonában vannak. Másik híres fotósorozata Eleanor Roosvelt (az Egyesült Államok akkori first ladyje) könyvét illusztrálta, a „This is Americá"-t (1942). Élete jelentős részében foglalkozott az arctorzulások és a plasztikai sebészet pszichológiai és szociológiai vonatkozásaival. Ő volt az első tudós, aki dokumentálta a születés, a baleset, a betegség vagy a harci események miatt arcdeformációt elszenvedők társadalmi és pszichológiai stresszét. Több száz beteget és családtagokat interjúvolt meg, és az a három könyv (1953, 1974, 1979), amit ebben a témában írt, Macgregor-trilógia néven vált ismertté a sebészek, az ápolók és más egészségügyi dolgozók körében (Oliver 2002).

Macgregornak úgy kellett kiválasztania a képeket, hogy azok a gyermekek mozgásfejlődését illusztrálják. A kiválasztás során együtt kellett működnie Meaddel és Arnold Gesell csapatával (Mead 1951b:55-56).

Arnold Gesell (1880-1961) amerikai pszichológus és gyermekorvos volt. Nevéhez köthető az ún. érés-elmélet. Standard fejlődési fokozatokat állapított meg, amikkel követni lehet a gyermek fejlődését. Ez elfogadható, azt a nézetét azonban, ami ebben a genetika elsődlegességét hirdeti, kritikával illették.

Az egyes fejlődési szakaszok meghatározásának érdekében Gesell egy sajátos megfigyelési technikát dolgozott ki, és annak dokumnetálásában a fényképezés központi szerepet játszott (Lakoff 1996:4).

Az 1942-es „Balinese Character" látszólag intuitív megközelítési módjához képest az 1951-es „Growth and Culture" egy szisztematikus módszertant követett. Mead Gesell megközelítési módjában megtalálta azt, amit keresett.

A könyv nagyobbik részét 380 kép teszi ki, 58 lapon. A jobb oldalon szereplő képeket minden esetben pontosító és magyarázó szöveg kíséri a bal oldalon. A könyv további, csak szöveget tartalmazó részét – követve John W. M. Whiting 1953-as recenzióját – 3 egységre bonthatjuk. Eszerint az egyikben (ami az I. rész 1. és 2. fejezete) Meadtől kapunk egy összefoglalót az elmúlt három-négy évtized Egyesült Államokbeli gyermeknevelés jellegzetességeiről. A másik (ami az I. rész 3 fejezete és a II. rész) a képek elemzésével balinéz csecsemők növekedési mintáit mutatja be Gesell fogalmi rendszerének megfelelően. A harmadik (ami a Függelék) az adatgyűjtés és adatelemzés során alkalmazott technikákat tárgyalja.

Az előbb említett John Wesley Meyhew Whiting az interdiszciplináris viselkedéstudomány központi figurája volt a 20. század közepén az Egyesült Államokban. Olyan innovatív programok kötődtek a nevéhez, amelyben kulturális antropológiai, gyermekfejlődési és pszichoanalitikus kutatások kapcsolódtak össze, kvantitatív és kvalitatív módon is. Résztvett a korszak mindkét fő interdiszciplináris kísérletében: a Yale Institute of Human Relations és a Harvard Department of Social Relations kiemelkedő vállalkozásában is. És úttörő szerepe volt abban az eredeti kutatásban is, aminek során a gyermekkori és a serdülőkori fejlődést hasonlították szisztematikusan össze különböző kultúrák között (Munroe – LeVine 2010:3). Ez utóbbi az általam itt írt tanulmányban korábban említett ún. kultúra és személyiség irányzat egyik sajátos verziója.

Whiting tehát a „Growth and Culture" biztos szakértője. Recenziója ugyan rövid, és egyáltalán nem nélkülözi a kritikus megállapításokat sem. A bevezető fejezeteket és a függeléket azonban dicséri. „A módszertani függelék már önmagában is megéri a könyv árát", fogalmaz szinte szarkasztikusan (Whiting 1953:263).

Clifford Geertz is a módszertan kapcsán emeli meg a kalapját Margaret Mead előtt. Így fogalmaz: „...az az energiája, amellyel az etnográfiai módszer legmegoldhatatlanabb problémáit kutatta és kísérleteinek és elmélkedéseinek nagy hatása a kutatási gyakorlatra általában véve aligha tagadható." (Geertz 1989:338-339)

Ira Jacknis a Balin végzett kutatást mérföldkőnek nevezi (Jacknis 1988:160, vö. Piault 2000:119). Bateson és Mead felismerték a kamera fontosságát (vö. Mendonça 2012:215), és elindították azt a folyamatot, amely tudatosította bennünk, hogy a fénykép olyan „emlékeztető eszköz" a tudós számára, amely egyenértékű a ceruzával, a jegyzetfüzettel vagy az írógéppel, írja Sol Worth (1980:17): egy „aide-mémoire".

Bateson és Mead úttörő módon (Shankman 2021:80) letértek a hagyományos írásos narratíva által kitaposott örvényről (Freire 2003:36), és példát mutattak arra, hogy a fotó és film is használható adatok tárolására és elemzésére az antropológiai kutatásban (Ball – Smith 2001:308). A verbális és a vizuális regiszterek együttes és szisztematikus használatával egy teljesen új módszertan felé mozdították el az antropológiát (vö. Samain 2004:68), és az 1930-as években végzett közös munkájuk a módszertanilag öntudatos antropológia egyik legkorábbi megjelenésének számít (Ruby 2000:169).

A fotográfiának és a filmnek más terepmunka technikák mellet történő „bevetése" egyúttal a relfexív megközelítést is magával hozta a néprajzi vizsgálatokban és előadásokban, írja Anne Grimshaw (2001:87). Marc Henri Piault (2000:53) is arra mutat rá, hogy ezeknek az eszközöknek a terepmunka keretében történő használatáról való elmélkedés éppen Margaret Mead és Bateson közös kutatása során jelent meg.

Az antropológiában a vizuális antropológia csak az 1960-as évek végén, az 1970-es évek elején „kristályosodott ki" (Grimshaw 2001:87). Ehhez képest Mead és Bateson 30 évvel megelőzték a korukat. Nem véletlen, hogy amikor Jean Rouch, a vizuális antropológia ikonikus alakja ennek a tudománynak a totemisztikus őseiről beszél, akkor Robert Flaherty, Dziga Vertov és Marcel Griaule mellett tisztelettel adózik Gregorgy Bateson és Margaret Mead előtt is (ld. Rouch 1995:217)

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Biographies

Kuvonchbek Kushboev

Centring the Nation: (Re)constructing Uzbek National Identity

Kuvonchbek Kushboev holds a master's degree in Anthropology and has professional experience at an Anthropology and Ethnology Centre in Uzbekistan. He is currently pursuing a Master of Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney, Australia. His research interests include economic culture, digital media and cultural practices, national identity, masculinity, health communication, and the influence of social media influencers in Uzbekistan.

Gemeda Odo Roba

Protective Aphorisms, Customary Laws and Domestic Violence against Women in Guji Society, Southern Ethiopia

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Vu Hoang Linh

Manifestations of Hierarchy and Soft Power in the Making of Belonging inside a Vietnamese Diaspora Restaurant

Vu Hoang Linh is an MA student in Cultural Anthropology at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE). Her research focuses on the Vietnamese diaspora, with particular attention to interpersonal dynamics and to the ways identity and belonging are negotiated within migrant communities. She has conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Budapest and has begun presenting her research at student-level academic gatherings. Her broader interests include Southeast Asian studies, transnationalism, and the formation of identity in diasporic contexts.

Arsenii Stepanov

Shirli-Myrli and Brother as Two Frames of Memory of the 90s in Russia

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Hysteresis of the Native's habitus and the Structural Corruption of the Colonial Bureaucratic Field in India

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Ana Luiza Nardi

Care as Relational Ethics and Resistance: Lessons from Creole Seeds

Ana Luiza Toaldo Nardi holds an MSc in Sustainable Rural Development and an MA in Cultural Anthropology. Her research focuses on rural social movements, political ecology, environmental care and human and more-than-human relationships. She explores how communities navigate socio-environmental transformations through interdisciplinary and ethnographic approaches.

Nura Abukhalil

Moving Margins, Staying with Migrant Trouble

Nura Abukhalil is a Jordanian researcher with an MA in Cultural Anthropology from Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE). Her work has been published twice in Antro-Polus, and in 2025 she received the First Award in the Anthropology and Minority

Studies category at the ELTE Conference of Scientific Student Circles (TDK). Her research focuses on migration, identity formation, and integration discourse, with a particular interest in Arab communities in Europe.

Farah Ghoul

Whose Peace? Whose Liberation? A Critique of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda

Farah Ghoul is a Jordanian of Palestinian descent and a second-year International Relations student at ELTE. Her academic work is shaped by a deep interest in post-colonial theory, social justice, liberation, and the politics of knowledge.

Linh Phung

Craft-Orientation and Community Building | Preliminary Ethnography Report at Helsinki Knitting Club

Nguyet Linh Phung is a Master's student in Marketing at Aalto University. Her previous research examined second-hand fashion consumption and the value–action gap among young consumers, which was recognized with First Prize at the 2023 TDK of Budapest University of Economics and Business. Linh's broader research interests include craft, consumer collectives, consumer movements, and subcultural sociology.

Sofyan Essarraoui

Economic Integration in Question: A Critical Assessment of Sub-Saharan African Migrants' Access to Labour Market in Morocco

Sofyan Essarraoui is PhD candidate at the Doctoral School of Sociology at ELTE. He is a Fulbright Scholar who taught Arabic in the USA and served, over the recent years, as in-country program coordinator for several Fulbright Hays Study Abroad Programs in Morocco. Sofyan Essarraoui's areas of expertise and research interests include Migration, focusing on Migrants' integration in Morocco and the MENA, Migration governance, and ethnicity and race in Morocco.

Alina Park

The Descendants of "Unreliable People": Identity and Memory Narratives of the Koryo-saram diaspora in Bishkek

Alina Park is an MA student in Cultural Anthropology at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE). Her current research focuses on the Koryo-saram diaspora in Bishkek,

Kyrgyzstan, specifically on the collective memory of the 1937 deportation and the identity of its members. Research interests include collective memory, transnationalism, identity formation, and Koryo-saram communities in the post-Soviet space.

Rusudan Margiani

Towards Interdisciplinary Approaches in Street Art Research: Lessons From Russo-Ukrainian War-related Works

Rusudan Margiani is a Georgian researcher, lecturer, and editor based in Budapest. She is a PhD candidate in International Studies at Eötvös Loránd University, where she also teaches courses on European Studies, Academic Writing, and Reading Academic Texts. Her work bridges art history, cultural anthropology, and international studies. Her PhD research focuses on street art as a form of resistance against Russian aggression and propaganda in Ukraine, Georgia and Poland. She also has held roles as Junior Fellow at ELTE and guest editor for Intersections. East European Journal of Society and Politics (IEEJSP). She recently started working with the Invisible University for Ukraine at CEU, co-leading the course on: Post-Empire Transformations: Georgia and Ukraine in Comparative Perspective.

Anujin Amarbayar

A Field with No Field: An Ethnographic Study of Contemporary Esoteric Practitioners

Anujin Amarbayar is a Mongolian second-year cultural anthropology MA student at Eötvös Loránd University.

She holds a BA in Communication and Media, with a thesis that examined the cinematic portrayal of sexualization and fetishization of East Asian women through an intersectional feminist lens, focusing on the reproduction of harmful stereotypes and their impact on audiences.

Her current research interests include contemporary esotericism, spiritual labour and community-making as both a process and method. Her work explores how meaning and practice are negotiated in decentralized spiritual fields, with particular attention to lived experience and relational knowledge production.

Prónai Csaba

Jegyzetek a fotóantropológia történetének egyik fejezetéhez. Growth and Culture (1951)

Csaba Prónai is a Hungarian cultural anthropologist and academic. He is a habilitated associate professor at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), where he teaches in the Department of Cultural Anthropology and leads the department within the Institute of Social Relations. He was elected dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at ELTE, serving a term that began in June 2022. His academic work focuses on Romani studies, cultural anthropology, and issues of intercultural coexistence, visual anthropology, and the history of the discipline. Prónai has contributed to the development of Romani studies and cultural anthropology curricula in Hungary and authored and edited several scholarly works on these subjects.