

VOLUME 25 | ISSUE 1 | 2023

# EthnoScripts

CONTEMPORARY  
ANTHROPOLOGY

## Ethics of Sharing



## Impressum

Volume 25 Issue 1

### Publisher:

Universität Hamburg  
Institut für Ethnologie  
Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1 (West)  
D-20146 Hamburg  
Tel.: 040 42838 4182  
E-Mail: IfE@uni-hamburg.de  
<http://www.ethnologie.uni-hamburg.de>

### Editors of the special issue:

Anders Sybrandt Hansen, Lotte Meinert and Thomas Widlok

### Editors-in-chief:

Mijal Gandelsman-Trier, Michael Pröpper

### Editorial advisory board:

J. Otto Habeck, Julia Pauli, Michael Schnegg

### Copy editing:

Caroline Jeannerat

### Layout: Mijal Gandelsman-Trier

### Cover image:

Maria Speyer 2012: Consolation 3

eISSN: 2199-7942

# Contents

## EDITORIAL

- 4 Anders Sybrandt Hansen  
Ethics of Sharing: A Situational Anthropology

## SPECIAL ISSUE

- 19 Michael Schnegg  
The Un/Ethical Demand: A Responsive Approach to Sharing  
and Its Ethics
- 41 Lotte Meinert  
Sharing Land, Sharing Faith: Ground Ethics amongst  
Missionaries and Ik in Uganda
- 61 Anders Emil Rasmussen  
Sharing Your Hand: Unhelpful Help and the Ethics of Sharing  
in Mbuke, Papua New Guinea
- 80 Thomas Widlok  
Hide and Seek a Share: The Ethics of Sharing between  
Presence and Distance
- 102 Maria Louw  
Sharing Being: Alterity and Sharing as an Existential  
Question amongst Kyrgyz Christian Converts
- 120 Alfred Sköld  
Shared Finitude: Intergenerational Death Awareness

## Ethics of Sharing: A Situational Anthropology

Anders Sybrandt Hansen

In many communities throughout the world, sharing is known to take on moral significance as the best course of action. *Mās [guisa ra hî*, ‘one just gives’, is how one of Michael Schnegg’s Damara informants expresses it in his article in this special issue. In the face of the explicit or silent demand of other persons present, it is widely held that sharing is the right response. In Thomas Widlok’s definition, sharing means to ‘allow others to access what is valued’ (Widlok 2017: 1; see also Woodburn 1998). This differs profoundly from gift exchange because the good that is achieved by sharing seems to belong to the situation itself: access to what is valued is given in response to a need. As numerous studies show, gifts enter into long-term cycles of exchange between parties who become mutually imbricated or indebted, and gifts are remembered for future reference and may be weaponised to embarrass and dominate those who receive but cannot return (Mauss [1925] 1990; Sahlins 1974; Strathern 1990). In contrast, it appears as if the social energy of sharing is practiced, expended, and comes to fruition within the situation itself. But why would this be so? What moral engine (Mattingly et al. 2017) drives the practice of sharing, and what are its limits? Even when sharing takes on the force of a moral norm, we know well that not all demands are heard and access to what is valued is sometimes refused.

In this special issue, we approach sharing as an ethical problem and ask how we may understand the ethics of sharing. We intend two things by this formulation. First, it appears clear that sharing cannot be understood as a simple following of rules. As Widlok writes in his article in this issue, the ethical dimension of sharing is constituted by the very fact that it can be refused. Sharing is not an automatic stimulus response but involves the practice of ethics. With this in mind, we ask, second, what dimensions we can fruitfully bring to bear on the notion of sharing. Does sharing involve anyone who is not present in the situation? And what are the ethics involved in sharing land, a world, a faith, one planet, or the human condition of existential finitude?

To answer these questions, the contributors to this issue find major inspiration in two bodies of literature. These are, first, the comparative anthropology of social transfers and economic exchange (see Graeber 2014; Hansen et al. 2019; Widlok 2017) and, second, phenomenological moral philosophy and its influence on what Eriksen (2020) calls ‘contextual ethics’, such as the ethical concepts of Knud E. Løgstrup ([1956] 1997), Bernhard Waldenfels



(2011), and others. In this regard, an important distinction that runs through many articles in this issue is the differentiation between, on the one hand, habituated forms of moral judgment and, on the other hand, situated moments of ethical responsiveness. At its most basic, this is the idea that we as human beings on occasion find ourselves in situations that demand of us a response and in which our pre-reflective habituated conduct does not seem adequate. One influential rendering of this problem is that of Jarrett Zigon (2007), who calls the two sides of this coin, respectively, morality (social norms and habituation) and ethics (responsive decision-making) (cf. Laidlaw 2014). The articles in this issue accentuate the interplay between morality and ethics in different ways but share the common point of departure that moments of ethical responsiveness are often brought about by the demands of other beings. Whether we speak of sharing in strictly material terms or in the existential sense of sharing the human condition, we find that there is an interpersonal responsiveness at its heart: sharing is an ethical response to the ‘with of being’ (Al-Mohammad 2010; see also Hollan and Throop 2008).

Human beings demand a share – of resources, of attention, and of each other’s lives or personhood. This ‘demand sharing’, often associated with hunter-gatherers, points our attention to a perceived, or invoked, obligation towards the other rather than to calculable debts or rights. In the contributions to this special issue, the notion of ethical demand is correspondingly opened up to go beyond the specific context of demand sharing typically understood as one special form of distributive transfer (see Peterson 1993; Schnegg 2015). Løgstrup ([1956] 1997) concisely described the ‘ethical demand’ as a ‘silent demand’ constituted by the presence of others, which need not be uttered. It is this existential demand that several contributors have in mind when discussing sharing ethics.

Finally, the most important source of inspiration for the contributions in this issue are the ethnographic situations in which the ethics of sharing unfold and which each author takes as a starting point. The notion of situation is key because it holds fast anthropology’s empirical commitment, and each contribution consequently begins from a situation that the author has documented ethnographically and which speaks to the ethics of sharing.

### Situations and the situational approach

In the classic situational approach of Max Gluckman and the Manchester School, situations were mined for analytical insight into the social organisation of societies. The main focus here was how situations served to play out and resolve conflicts that threatened to disrupt social reproduction (Gluckman [1940] 1958). However, the role of ethics in this transformation from dissonance into resonance remained underdeveloped in this approach, which can be argued to have been predicated on the stabilising force of morality as

norm and not on ethics as a challenge. Developing the situational approach further, Bruce Kapferer and Lotte Meinert (2015) more recently added the valuable qualification that situations need not culminate in the reproduction of social order since they provide room for innovation and creativity. Consequently, in this collection we are not using ethnographic situations simply as paradigmatic examples or even microcosms of larger, enduring cultural systems. Rather, we turn to situations for their undetermined quality. The genuine vitality of situations lies here. It is within situations that persons bring conflicting views and desires to bear, where action takes place, and, in short, where things may change. It is also within situations that ethical demands have to be faced and ethical questions answered.

What does this attention to the openness of situations mean for the study of sharing? On the one hand, it reinstates the ethical practice of sharing as a responsive phenomenon that is sensitive to context. This is well illustrated in several articles in this issue that see the situational approach as fruitful for a phenomenological anthropology and in particular for exploring sharing in terms of human ethical responsivity. On the other hand, what is particularly helpful about the notion of situation is exactly its double quality of being sensitive to contextual detail whilst also allowing for the human ability to section the flow of lived experience into recurring and qualitatively recognisable segments (Luhmann 1979). That means, as Zigon (2015: 503) has put it, that the notion of situation combines the peculiarity of events with the multiplicity that exceeds the localised instances of a situation across time, space, and scale. Situations are more specific than the broader notion of context, and they are unlike texts in that they connect people, places, and objects in their materiality and bodiliness (see Breyer and Widlok 2018: 8; Schnegg 2021).

No two situations are wholly identical. They are always in some sense unique, and yet human beings (as well as certain other mammals such as dolphins, as Gregory Bateson showed some time ago [Visser 2003]) are typically capable of some semiotic taming of what befalls them. As humans we can turn segments of experience into instances of types of situations that are not only unique but also typical, and which carry some meaningful and recognisable reference to us. If you were to recount your day, you would likely recount situations in this sense (waking up, washing, dressing, making breakfast, and so on), and to be understood, you would rely on the receiver of your communication sharing some sense of these occurrences as situations. In this way, types of situations enter our linguistic repertoires not as singular truths about being in the world but as semiotic tools at hand for living our shared social life. The situations that the articles in this issue discuss include food sharing, demanding, work parties, religious conversion, and theft, both in terms of ethnographic particularity and as recognisable types of situations.

Yet not every experience readily lends itself to such typification. Lived experience is phenomenally excessive of our linguistic categories, and situa-

tions may consequently remain undetermined or at least underdetermined. In some cases, people cultivate a receptive attention that allows them to dwell in this momentary potentiality of a situation (Louw, this issue). In other cases, situations confound the actors; they stick out – clearly – as if carrying a message, but without actors necessarily comprehending quite what the situation is telling them or in what kind of situation they are finding themselves. In yet other cases, the issue involves the interaction of different understandings, or definitions (Goffman 1959), of the situation, as is the case when one person's sharing is another person's lending, theft, or gift exchange (Graeber 2014; Meinert, this issue; Strathern 2011).

Let me turn here to an extended ethnographic example in order to open up to the reader some of the issues sketched above.

### Aunties in the field with knives and a plastic bag

During fieldwork in rural north China in May 2018, I stayed in the farmhouse dormitory of a community supported agriculture (CSA) farm. The farm worked on a membership model and supplied its member households in nearby Beijing City with fresh organic farm produce as well as eggs, chicken, and pork. Farm employees used an online platform to announce what was currently available at the farm. Members would then place their orders online, and these would be packed at the farm and delivered by lorry to the members' doorsteps the following morning. With this operation, the farm was responding to the food safety anxieties of middle-class consumers that had developed as a result of several widely publicised food safety scandals in the preceding decade (Bunkenborg and Hansen 2019).

We were supposed to eat at six, but dinner in the communal dining hall was delayed, so I borrowed a bicycle from a friend and took a ride through the fine haze of heat and micro particles that enveloped the sleepy village, passing by curved grey tile roofs and white brick facades of recently refurbished houses. As I exited the village and circled right to return to the farm, I was overtaken by Auntie Ren and a friend who jolted past me on the wagon bed of an old, motorised tricycle. I noticed that they left the road soon after to turn on to a dirt path that passed through the fence which separated the garden at the far end of the farm site from the main road. On an impulse, I decided to follow. When I caught up with them and bumped onto the garden plot, I found both women bent over the crops, knives in hand, chopping at vegetable stems. As I brought the bicycle to a halt, Auntie Ren (I call her so in keeping with the Han Chinese custom of using fictive kinship terms of address for friends and co-workers of different generations) straightened her frame to face me and for one apprehensive moment our eyes interlocked. 'Ah! I cannot pass through here,' I said, feigning surprise, and this conceit broke the spell. I was only trying to take a shortcut, suggesting that whatever they

were up to went unnoticed and was of no concern to me. We tacitly agreed to this with a little grinning and nodding. Turning to take the long way back, I kept on chuckling to myself.

What had just happened? Considering the available information, I hazard an informed guess. It was after working hours (during which I had tidied up considerable amounts of garlic chives, to be shipped in cardboard boxes to farm customers, alongside Auntie Ren and accepted her occasional and patient advice on how to do so more efficiently). The friend she was with did not work at the farm. Auntie Ren and the friend passed into the CSA garden through a gap in the fence at the far end of the farm. Her gaze had been quite intense. And so I conjecture that they were taking vegetables for their own consumption without permission. Auntie Ren recognised the ethical status of the situation without further explication and so it seems was our shared understanding of how we were going to deal with it.

When I visited the farm one year earlier, Yang Maowen, who oversaw production in one farm locality, had told me that the farm routinely lost crops to petty theft. This was really common in the Chinese countryside, he said. With an operation like the CSA farm, he claimed, it was the perception of ordinary local people (本地老百姓 *bendi laobaixing*) that the farm was run by 'big boss' outsiders (外地过来的大老板 *waidi guolaide dalaoban*) with more than sufficient means (see Hansen 2019). Maowen felt this was important to keep in mind when talking about the theft. Local employees, he claimed, would also occasionally make a detour to pick crops for private use. To him, this was an expected practice, a tolerated form of 'co-consumption' (Widlok 2017). As long as he did not personally see it take place, it posed no threat. If he did see it, he would have to confront it, and so he would prefer not to witness it.

### Moral supposition and bodily presence

The ethnographic situation described above points us to two issues at play in a situational approach to sharing. First, we see that actors bring moral suppositions to situations. In this case, the question of who gets a share of farm produce is imbricated with notions of just entitlement and the desirability of social levelling. Auntie Ren was a local woman in her sixties who had lived in the village throughout her life. In recent years, at the behest of the village party secretary, the majority of families had pooled their tiny individual farm plots into larger chunks of land which were then leased to outside enterprises, who used the proximity to the Beijing City consumer market to make a profit on such activities as organic agriculture and tourism. In return, the local families earned a modest rent and were in some cases hired as workers by the enterprises leasing their land.



Considering the widespread sentiment in rural China that the countryside has been unjustly left behind during the rapid economic growth of urban China, it is perhaps not surprising if villagers felt that they were entitled to a share of the fruits of the local soil. It might be understood as the residue of a socialist levelling ideology that was at least formally hegemonic in earlier generations. A further kaleidoscopic twist to our perspective makes clear the imposition of an overriding notion of property on to the situation. It is of course a cultural construct, and not an inherent quality in the vegetables, that they belong to someone in particular, and yet the modest drama of the situation sprang from the mutual supposition of the moral category of property: Who may take these crops? What role does legal ownership play, and what role hereditary rights? Does it matter who planted and tended the crops? Are there individuals who take on themselves the moral position to refuse anyone else access?

Second, the situation points to the importance of bodily presence and absence for the ethics of sharing. As long as the person who is supposed to enact the rule of property is absent, Auntie Ren and her friend can take a share. A tacit understanding of what is morally acceptable to do, respectively, in the presence and absence of others appears to pattern social practice. It is not just what one does that matters but, equally important, what one is seen to be doing and how things unfold in the course of being seen. As several articles in this issue demonstrate, the same holds for possession of what is valued. In either case, this distinction opens up some room for moral irreverence and for the situated practice of ethics in the sense discussed above. For example, knowing that possessing tobacco would prompt others to demand a share, Thomas Widlok's Haillom informants often keep a second, hidden tobacco pouch (Widlok, this issue). This sort of practice allows the person to safeguard a minimal interpersonal distance and ethical autonomy when faced with the demands of others. Anders E. Rasmussen and Michael Schnegg describe related situations in their articles in this issue, when their informants receive sharing demands from relatives and friends via text messages on their mobile phones. Such demands do not speak with the same urgency as do demands made in person. In consequence, they are often deferred and sometimes ignored.

This introduction concludes with a reflection on situations and scale, and on how the ethics of sharing articulates with the human condition in the Anthropocene. But first we first present the individual contributions of this issue.

### Featured articles

This special issue features six original research articles. Whilst certain interests are common to each article, such as the situational focus and the question

of who and what is able to register as present in a situation, it is possible to place the articles on a continuum of interest in elucidating, respectively, the social and the existential qualities of sharing ethics. We first present three contributions – by Michael Schnegg, Lotte Meinert, and Anders E. Rasmussen – that look to ethnographic situations to demonstrate the interpersonal responsiveness of sharing ethics and differing interpretations of situations and responses to sharing demands. This is followed by a second set of three contributions – by Thomas Widlok, Maria Louw, and Alfred Sköld – that tie situational analyses to existential arguments about the human condition and interpersonal being-*with*.

The first article is by Michael Schnegg. His contribution discusses the ethics of sharing as it plays out amongst the Damara in Namibia and uses ethnographic examples to construct a theoretical typology of what goes into sharing situations. As sharing typically takes place in response to a demand, argues Schnegg, our understanding of the phenomenon must begin with a grasp on human responsiveness. With inspiration from Waldenfels and other authors in the phenomenological tradition, he proposes that human beings attempt, in their confrontation with the alien (*das Fremde*) and alien needs, to find the right way to respond. Doing so, our situational experience leads to the construction of ethical orders that work as registers, with which we attempt to ‘tame’ alien experience. The existence of such ethical orders (which correspond quite well with ‘morality’ as used above) may account for sharing when it is performed, as is often the case, as a near-habitual response to the demands of others. As noted in the beginning of this introduction, ‘one just gives’ is one way to put this into words. When need is immediate and essential, this is the typical response. In other cases, the attempted fit between experience and ethical register is not as neat – something in the situation sticks out as *extraordinary* and prompts in the actor the need for a creative response. Schnegg’s article identifies that this reflective form of response is prompted in situations with multiple conflicting demands and in cases where the alien need sticks out as ‘unethical’, which is to say unassimilable to the response registers of the actor. With this approach, the author is elegantly able to account for sharing ethics as the ‘habitual and creative responses to the demands that situations create’ and to include decisions not to share as one outcome of this same ethical practice.

In her article, Lotte Meinert discusses ethics of sharing versus logics of exchange based on fieldwork in the Ik community and amongst missionaries in Uganda. Three cases concerning land, faith, and items describe different ethics of sharing and exchange in play between the missionaries and the Ik community. Sharing of the mountain landscape for living, hunting, and gathering is fundamental to the Ik ground ethics of dwelling, and sharing of land for agriculture is based on ‘caretakers of the soil’ entrusting the land to younger generations, whilst other items and goods are exchanged, sold, and

gifted. These and other ethics of sharing and exchange are part of everyday life, yet seldom take place without friction and contestation. Meinert argues that when international missionaries came to the Ika mountains, they too were driven by an ethics of sharing; but for them the ground ethics was a sharing of faith and the Bible. At the same time, the missionaries were also conveying various ideas about and moralities of exchange. The article features three cases regarding land, faith, and items which point to how communities of belonging and resonance may arise out of sharing and exchange practices; but they also show how friction builds up when parties do not agree about whether certain transactions are a form of sharing or exchange, or about which ethics to apply. The article draws attention to how the ethics involved in sharing phenomena that are radically different (such as land and faith) can be quite similar and grounded in wishes for belonging and resonance.

Anders E. Rasmussen's article takes the reader to Manus Province in Papua New Guinea, the quintessential homeland in the anthropological canon of ceremonial gift exchange. Rasmussen carefully untangles the sharing transfers that take place alongside gift exchange, particularly during large-scale work parties, and shows how monetisation of the local economy and the economic reliance of the Titan people on remittances has led to increased sharing both in scope and scale. He uses the work party as the ethnographic sharing situation to illustrate this. When a house or an outrigger canoe is being built, Rasmussen's interlocutors experience a moral obligation to involve and accept the help of everyone present – including unhelpful help – and to share out their wealth, which is displayed in the very fact of undertaking such a large-scale enterprise. If a canoe is built without the involvement of the local community, this is considered immoral, as is the canoe itself: immoral, shoddy, and likely to break. It is not seen as a real canoe. The article reveals a new social product of such work parties. They simultaneously illustrate and constitute the existence of 'the community'. The community is a new frame of reference for solidarity, implying some form of equality between its members, and at a much higher scale than the kinship ties that were formerly the frame of reference for Titan people. It is situations such as these work parties that allow for economic redistribution of new wealth that reaches local people in the form of remittances; and it is the sharing that takes place in these situations, which includes all who are present, that allows 'the community' to emerge as a meaningful frame of moral reference.

Thomas Widlok, in his contribution, emphasises that it is part of the situationality of sharing that, counter-intuitively, hiding regularly occurs. He underlines that sharing is more than simply a distributive technique, as sociobiology might have it, but that it has a distinctly ethical dimension. The humans involved make ethical decisions. These decisions are greatly influenced by the presence of others in need, which can be said to create a silent demand. Unlike pooling, which relies on having defined solidarity beforehand

in terms of who is in and who is out, sharing allows one to draw people near – and for others to get near to us even though they may be genealogically or categorically distant. At the same time, it does not require us to know the intimate motives of others or to commit these to a conventionalised morality. Not wanting to give but to keep is not an obstacle to sharing as long as those who have things to give remain responsive to legitimate demands and are prepared to put themselves into the situation of those in need. We can explain why hiding occurs regularly in social systems of sharing by placing sharing conceptually in its specific ethical space: a space that is characterised by mutually recognised presence combined with a degree of minimal distance that protects the autonomy of individuals and their judgement as to when and how to respond to demands.

In her article, Maria Louw is concerned with the sharing of being and the sharing of alterity as existential and ethical matters. Louw raises fundamental questions: Do we as humans, or do we not, share the world in an existential sense? Are there many worlds or one? What do we share by our thrownness into existence? And what are the limits of existential sharing? Louw explores these questions of sharing and faith in a situation where Kyrgyz Muslims, drawn to Christianity, encounter alterity in worlds they thought they knew. Questions about existential sharing of faith and experiences of alterity also arise in intimate relations with family members when relationships turn out to be different than expected. These experiences of conversion, passage, and indeterminate ontology open up deeper realisations of existential sharing that offer perspectives which potentially include experiences of alterity. The article discusses what it means to share when people share a faith, and how this is experienced in relation to other aspects of existential sharing, such as sharing blood, or sharing a family, or sharing fundamental conditions by being part of a historical generation. These questions about what people share with others, by virtue of their very being and thrownness into the world, become existentially and ethically striking in liminal situations when persons confront alterity amidst the familiar.

Drawing on fieldwork amongst recently bereaved people in Denmark, Alfred Sköld points out that death needs to be considered a shared condition and experience, even if Western philosophy has long considered it as having an ultimately individualising effect. Shared finitude (losing a life) implies shared living (having a life). Bereaved persons have lost a shared life, a shared home, and a shared life history. They often ask themselves the ethical question as to what right they have to live on in the face of their partner's death. The situation of the recently bereaved is a boundary situation and it is characterised by continuing bonds with the other. It introduces an ethical tension between feeling bound to the deceased partner and the need to carry on alone. The accounts that Sköld has collected show that from childhood our shared world is coloured by mortality and loss and by the knowledge that



one of us will mourn the loss of the other. The loss can create an experience of closeness (between a surviving parent and their children) but also of distance and alienation from others around us and a heightened sense for one's own death as the only remaining care person of a child. There is thus an intergenerational dimension to grief and to the connectedness of our lives that comes to the fore in the situation of death, of losing a close family member. This affects not only the surviving life partner but also the wider network of people with whom we share our lives. The shared knowledge of human finitude is ultimately also the source for a shared ethic to live for one another, an ethic that is actuated whenever a loss is anticipated or experienced.

### Sharing the present human condition

In this concluding section, I want to point out an irony involved in studying the ethics of sharing. On the one hand, the immediacy of sharing – allowing others access to what is valued – speaks in a register of immediate human mutuality and solidarity. This is a large part of the attraction of the phenomenon. Holding out the potential for more responsive forms of human being-*with*, sharing is likely to engage more than an abstract mechanism of reciprocity or a cool intellectual curiosity in the anthropologist. On the other hand, if presence is decisive for sharing, this introduces the tricky question of who and what is capable to register as present and to address the actor (a problem considered in particular by Louw and Schnegg, this issue). Whilst the social anthropological record shows countless cases of sharing as a living social and economic form across the world, this is perhaps principally the case with hunter-gatherers and pastoralists. This brings up the issue of whether and how sharing practices common in small-scale societies may translate into forms that are viable in a contemporary world brimming with human activity at many scales, including at very large scales and involving countless persons who do not encounter each other regularly or intensely. In this situation, it would be ironic if we were to find in the phenomenon of sharing a near flawless model of human solidarity and yet had to recognise that it cannot extend beyond the microscale of those who are physically present.

Fortunately, this does not seem to be case, at least not entirely. The articles in this issue point to the human ability of scaling and the potential for scaling up. In Louw's and Sköld's articles, we see an interpersonal meshing and widening of existential horizons that arise in intense moments of sharing the human condition. In Rasmussen's article, we see an unexpected effect of work migration, namely the advent of community as a meaningful category of identification and solidarity, which involves sharing at a higher level of social integration than was the case with the lineages that the Titan people formerly considered their solidary groups. Widlok, in his contribution, presents the ethics of sharing as responsive not only to concrete situations but,

at the same time, to the intrinsic injustice of the human condition: there are always human beings ‘out there’ who are separated from what they value and sharing is the fitting response when faced with this situation. The problem of scale thus recedes on the premise that the ethics of sharing is universally appropriate across instances of similar situations.

This finally brings us back to the question of how occurrences come to register as situations. What kind of attention and semiotic tools must human beings bring to situations to be able to ‘receive a message’ (see also Anna Tsing [2015: 17–26] on the arts of noticing)? What allows such situational messages to travel beyond the confines of one unique context? And what truly characterises the present human existential situation? In the early twentieth century, death and birth took centre stage in discussions of the human condition. Ecological thought and its offspring, the Anthropocene, has since drawn attention to a further crucial dimension to our shared existential situation. We now acknowledge that our lives do not take place against the backdrop of infinite nature; we rather cohabit and share the environmental life-support system of one limited planet, Earth (see, for example, Raworth 2017; Sloterdijk [2004] 2016: 312–313). If being is therefore always being-*with* on finite planet Earth, the argument goes, the species’ future of being may be said to hinge on the caretaking and maintenance of a shared life-support system. To drive home this point, English economist Kate Raworth and German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk both revive the same image from American architect R. Buckminster Fuller: we now live on Spaceship Earth. Spaceship Earth does not come with an operating manual and yet we have to keep it running since there is nowhere else for us.

But how does such a macro-level comprehension register – if at all – in actual ‘human-sized’ situations? An interesting example of this can be found in zoologist Rachel Carson’s classic *Silent Spring* in which the vehicle of ecological comprehension was found in a situational absence rather than a presence: ‘Spring now comes unheralded by the return of the birds, and the early mornings are strangely silent where once they were filled with the beauty of bird song’ (Carson 1962: 103). As is well known, this uncanny silence signified to Carson the biocidal effects of the indiscriminate use at the time of pesticides such as DDT in US agriculture. In turn, this message was lifted from its original context and used as poignant warning to rally people to the nascent ecological movement.

Quite possibly I will be seen to shift the conversation into strange terrain with this example and to overtax the concept of sharing. Even so, I will end in this train of thought by noting one possible future line of inquiry. There is perhaps something remarkable to be found by relating the ethics of sharing to our Anthropocene condition on an abundant but finite planet that is marked simultaneously by plenty and poverty, wastefulness and want. One such example is Raworth’s 2017 book *Doughnut Economics*. With the

flippant image of the doughnut, Raworth aims to fasten in the reader's mind the image of a circular form bounded by inner and outer limits as the guiding model for planet-friendly economic life. We are invited to imagine that this shape delineates the space of sustainable human flourishing. Beyond its inner limit lies critical human deprivation, beyond the outer limit critical planetary degradation (Raworth 2017: 11). Raworth attempts to capture with this image both shortfall and overshoot in human interaction with the planetary ecology. That is, the distributed simultaneity of too little and too much satisfaction of human demands – in the ecological and not the religio-moral sense (see Sloterdijk [2004] 2016: 657–658) – as measured against the yardstick of sustaining individual and species human life.

As the articles in this issue elegantly illustrate, the ethics of sharing is responsive to the needs of others. Sharing is felicitous whenever 'one just gives' in response to such demands. Since there is an expression of human mutuality or solidarity in this gesture of freely letting go of something of value, it is worth asking what an ethics of sharing will look like in response to the inverse problem of too much satisfaction of human demands in excess of the regenerative capacities of the planetary life-support system. What can the ethics of sharing tell us about getting the balance right for general and sustainable human indulgence whilst preventing self-destructive overindulgence? What are the situations in which the ethics of sharing would require us to reject demands that are out of proportion and unjustified?

### Acknowledgements

The present publication is an outcome of the conference 'The Ethics of Sharing' hosted at the Aarhus Institute of Advanced Studies, Aarhus University, on 11–12 May 2021. The editors would like to thank the Carlsberg Foundation (CF19-0808) for generously funding the conference. Personally, I thank Lotte Meinert, Thomas Widlok, and the journal editors at *Ethnoscripts* for their valuable critiques, comments, and suggestions on the introduction.

### References

- Al-Mohammad, Hayder (2010) Towards an Ethics of Being-With: Intertwinements of Life in Post-Invasion Basra. *Ethnos* 75 (4): pp. 425-446. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2010.544394>
- Breyer, Thiemo and Thomas Widlok (2018) Editorial Preface. In: Thiemo Breyer and Thomas Widlok (eds.) *The Situationality of Human–Animal Relations*. Bielefeld: Transcript: pp. 7-8.

- Bunkenborg, Mikkel and Anders S. Hansen (2019) Moral Economies of Food in Contemporary China. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 48 (3): pp. 243-261. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1868102620919>
- Carson, Rachel (1962) *Silent Spring*. Boston: Riverside Press Cambridge.
- Eriksen, Cecilie (2020) Contextual Ethics: Taking the Lead from Wittgenstein and Løgstrup on Ethical Meaning and Normativity. *SATS – Northern European Journal of Philosophy* 21 (2): pp. 141-158. <https://doi.org/10.1515/sats-2020-2015>
- Gluckman, Max ([1940] 1958) *Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Goffman, Erving (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Graeber, David (2014) On the Moral Grounds of Economic Relations: A Maussian Approach. *Journal of Classical Sociology* 14 (1): pp. 65-77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468795X13494719>
- Hansen, Anders S. (2019) Subsistence Solidarity and the Extension of Trust: Moral Economies of Organic Farming in Northern China. *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 48 (3): pp. 301-321. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1868102620920506>
- Hansen, Anders S., Susanne Højlund, Cecil Pallesen, and Mikkel Rytter (eds.) (2019) *Hvad vi deler. Antropologiske perspektiver på deling som socialt fænomen*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.
- Hollan, Douglas and Jason Throop (2008) Whatever Happened to Empathy? Introduction. *Ethos* 36 (4): pp. 358-401. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1352.2008.00023.x>
- Kapferer, Bruce and Lotte Meinert (eds.) (2015) *In the Event. Toward an Anthropology of Generic Moments*. New York: Berghahn.
- Laidlaw, James (2014) *The Subject of Virtue. An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Luhmann, Niklas (1979) *Trust and Power*. Hoboken: Wiley.
- Løgstrup, Knud E ([1956] 1997) *The Ethical Demand*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Mattingly, Cheryl, Rasmus Dyring, Maria Louw, and Thomas Schwarz Wentzer (eds.) (2017) *Moral Engines. Exploring the Ethical Drives in Human Life*. New York: Berghahn.
- Mauss, Marcel ([1925] 1990) *The Gift. The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. London: Routledge.
- Peterson, Nicolas (1993) Demand Sharing: Reciprocity and the Pressure for Generosity among Foragers. *American Anthropologist* 95 (4): pp. 860-874. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1993.95.4.02a00050>
- Raworth, Kate (2017) *Doughnut Economics. Seven Ways to Think like a 21st-Century Economist*. London: Random House.
- Sahlins, Marshall (1974) *Stone Age Economics*. London: Tavistock.



- Schnegg, Michael (2015) Reciprocity on Demand: Sharing and Exchanging Food in Northwestern Namibia. *Human Nature* 26 (3): pp. 313-330. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12110-015-9236-5>
- Schnegg, Michael (2021) What Does the Situation Say? Theorizing Multiple Understandings of Climate Change. *Ethos* 49 (2): pp. 194-215. <https://doi.org/10.1111/etho.12307>
- Sloterdijk, Peter ([2004] 2016) *Spheres. Volume 3: Foams*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Strathern, Marilyn (1990) *The Gender of the Gift. Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Strathern, Marilyn (2011) Sharing, Stealing and Borrowing Simultaneously. In: Veronica Strong and Mark Busse (eds.) *Ownership and Appropriation*. Oxford: Berg Publishers: pp. 23-42.
- Tsing, Anna L. (2015) *The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Visser, Max (2003) Gregory Bateson on Deutero-Learning and Double Bind: A Brief Conceptual History. *Journal of History of the Behavioral Sciences* 39 (3): pp. 259-278. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jhbs.10112>
- Waldenfels, Bernhard (2011) *Phenomenology of the Alien. Basic Concepts*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Widlok, Thomas (2017) *Anthropology and the Economy of Sharing*. London: Routledge.
- Woodburn, James (1998) Sharing is not a Form of Exchange: An Analysis of Property-Sharing in Immediate-Return Hunter-Gatherer Societies. In: Chris Hann (ed.) *Property Relations. Reviewing the Anthropological Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: pp. 48-63.
- Zigon, Jarrett (2007) Moral Breakdown and the Ethical Demand: A Theoretical Framework for an Anthropology of Moralities. *Anthropological Theory* 7 (2): pp. 131-150. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499607077295>
- Zigon, Jarrett (2015) What is a Situation? An Assemblic Ethnography of the Drug War. *Cultural Anthropology* 30 (3): pp. 501-524. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca30.3.07>

---

Anders Sybrandt Hansen is an Associate Professor of Anthropology and China Studies at the School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University, Denmark. His research in the anthropology of contemporary China focuses on ethics and society and includes publications on language ideology ('Guanhua! Beijing Students, Authoritative Discourse and the Ritual Production of Political Compliance', 2017), on moral economy ('Subsistence Solidarity and the Extension of Trust: Moral Economies of Organic Farming in Northern China', 2020), on political culture ('Purity and Corruption: Chinese Communist Party Applicants and the Problem of Evil', 2013), and on existential temporality ('The Temporal Experience of Chinese Students Abroad and the Present Human Condition', 2015).

## The Un/Ethical Demand: A Responsive Approach to Sharing and Its Ethics

Michael Schnegg

### Introduction

Food sharing secures livelihoods and belonging within communities. Anthropologists have typically theorised these transfers as intentional acts in which someone gives to someone else.<sup>1</sup> The question of what motivates people to give has guided this research, and common explanations have included generosity, reciprocity, and virtues. In these views, one shares because (1) generosity is valued amongst the people with whom one lives (Sahlins 1972), (2) one has received or expects to need and receive in the future (Cashdan 1990; Gurven 2004), or (3) the practice of sharing co-constitutes a person as a virtuous being (Widlok 2004).

The underlying assumption of these explanations is that actors are – and/or experience themselves as – the source of the act of giving. In this view, giving follows an impetus; it is an act that springs forth. Consequently, the ethical dimension of giving resides ‘inside the box’ of a giving self that evaluates whether to give or not against the backdrop of values (generosity), experiences and expectations (reciprocity), or larger life projects (virtues). I call these theories ‘impetus approaches’ to sharing and its ethics because impetus describes a force that encourages or impels the act of giving.

For several years now, however, ethnographers have challenged some of the long-held views on the nature of these transactions. They have demonstrated that sharing is often not initiated by the giver but is the result of a receiver’s demand (Peterson 1993; Schnegg 2015; Widlok 2017; Woodburn 1998). Demand sharing is characteristic not only of former and post-egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies but describes equally well the situation in which my neighbour comes to ask for an egg to bake a cake on a Sunday afternoon. Should this give us pause? Do we need a different theoretical model to conceptualise sharing and its ethics if it is not so much an initiated act but a response to a demand? My response in this article is that we do.

---

1 A prominent exception is the work of Marcel Mauss. He assigns a significant amount of agency to the spiritual forces of the gift (conceptualised as *hau*), which must be circulated within the society. Mauss applies these ideas to durable material objects, not to food sharing, but I question whether or not they can be extended easily to the latter domain (Mauss 1925).

To this end, I theorise food sharing as an ethical situation in which we respond to the demands that a situation creates.<sup>2</sup> With this I follow a number of scholars who have recently turned the direction of the ethical question around (Dyring and Wentzer 2021; Mattingly 2018; Wentzer 2018a, 2018b; Zigon 2007, 2021). The established question of what motivates people to do good becomes that of ‘What is the “appropriate” or “just” response to the demands a situation contains?’ To answer this question, Waldenfels’s responsive phenomenology is a valuable resource (Schneegg forthcoming). What seems to be giving is, in light of his phenomenology, a response or a doing that originates outside the actor in a realm that Waldenfels calls the alien (*das Fremde*) (Flatscher 2011; Leistle 2020a, 2022; Waldenfels 1994, 2010). The following episode from my fieldwork in rural north-western Namibia offers a glimpse why this might be productive.

Charles and I are neighbours. Charles considers himself a Damara (*#Nūkhoen* in his language Khoekhoegowab) pastoralist.<sup>3</sup> He has lived most of his life in the hinterland of Fransfontein, a Namibian community 450 km north of Namibia’s capital, Windhoek, where I have worked for twenty years (Schneegg 2021b, 2023; Schneegg and Breyer 2022). Like most people in the area, Charles keeps goats and sheep, less than 50 head, for meat and milk consumption and occasionally to sell in order to buy cloth or pay school fees (Schneegg et al. 2013). During one of my last stays Charles slaughtered one of his goats so that we would have meat to eat for the coming days. After he slaughtered the animal, he put part of the meat into a big pot on the fire. Then we sat in the shade next to it, from time to time stirred the pot, and talked.

Pete, a herder who lives in the community, came by whilst the meat was cooking. He joined the conversation but did not fully enter the yard. Whilst talking, Pete went around, picking things up, putting them aside, and keeping himself busy. When Charles felt it was time to eat, he put a second pot on the fire to cook maize meal. Peter was still there when the food was done. As Charles and I prepared to eat, Pete’s presence began to articulate a demand. We could not begin eating without giving him a share. He of course knew this. That was why he came – and stayed. Standing there, smoking, stretch-

2 In the anthropological literature, the terms ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ are, unlike in philosophical debates, often used interchangeably. When differentiations are made, they are not uniform. I perceive ethics as a more encompassing term that includes both unreflected ways of being and doing ‘good’ and ‘right’ things as well as the more abstract systems that orient, reflect, and justify these behaviours. For this reason, I largely think in terms of ethics in this article and only refer to morality when the authors I cite explicitly use this term.

3 Khoekhoegowab is a language of the Khoe-Kwadi family with four (primary) click sounds (ǀ – palatal; ǁ – lateral; ǃ – dental; ! – alveolar) that function like other consonants. Khoe-Kwadi languages belong to the southern African non-Bantu languages with click phonemes that, although not forming a single linguistic unit, are conventionally subsumed under the cover term Khoisan (Güldemann and Fehn 2014: 2).



ing out the conversation, he articulated a demand to which we now had to respond. Yet not a single word was said about food. When the maize meal was done, Charles went into the house to get plates and spoons. He handed them to us and served himself, Pete, and me. When I asked him later to explain the situation to me, he was surprised how I could question that he might not *mās* |*guisa ra hî*, which could be translated as ‘one just gives’. Interestingly, in Khoekhoegowab the grammatical construction does not have a personal pronoun. Through the normalisation of the verb ‘giving’ (*mās*, from *mā*, ‘to give’), the act is deeply rooted in the situation itself, just as in the English phrase ‘the giving is being done’.

This type of demanding is common around Fransfontein and other parts of Namibia (Klocke-Daffa 2001; Laws 2019; Stutzriemer 2022; Widlok 1999, 2013, 2017). Amongst the Damara people it is referred to as |*goragu*. |*Goragu* describes a situation in which something that has been prepared at the house is shared, such as making tea or cooking food. The verb |*gora* means to separate, and the suffix *-gu* is a reciprocal that indicates that the relationship goes both ways. It is differentiated from other forms of sharing, most importantly *augu*, which happens when someone asks for something she needs specifically. *Augu* is a compound as well. *Au* is a composition of the verb *au*, which means ‘to let, to give, to borrow’, and the suffix *-gu*, which again indicates reciprocity (Schneegg 2021a). Whereas *augu* needs to be uttered to become clear and binding, |*goragu*, although also performed, is much more embedded in the situation itself.

I will illustrate this further with the following situation.

Shortly after we finished eating and Pete had left, Magdalena came. Like Pete, Magdalena was a member of the community, and they were both Charles’s kin. She had assisted Charles in the past, as Pete had. When she saw the (second) pot – next to the pot for porridge, which is always there – she knew that something special like meat had been prepared. Referring to the pot, she said that she had not tasted meat for a long time and asked us if we could give her a piece of the leg, the part she liked the best. She *au-ed*, as people sometimes say in English. *Augu* is expressed verbally and is sometimes supported by a gesture in which the demanding person holds out an open hand as if she wants the other to put something in it.

Charles’s response is ethical and a much more conscious choice. As mentioned, we had planned to eat the meat over the course of the next couple of days. Moreover, Charles had made a deal with Carla, a teacher from Fransfontein, to sell her part of the carcass so that he could buy his son the shoes he needed for the upcoming school year. For reasons I detail below, Charles did not give any meat to Magdalena. Whilst the ease of just giving would have most likely been his preferred response, these factors played a role, making it a much more difficult and conscious choice. However, so as not to offend Magdalena, he explained to her that he had made another plan and that he

would think of her the next time he slaughtered a goat. Magdalena accepted this and replied that she understood. How can this be explained?

Both situations occurred the same afternoon. Charles had what Magdalena and Pete wanted. According to the models on generosity, reciprocity, and virtue, he should have given both of them meat. They were neighbours, and he had received from them in the past and could expect to again (reciprocity). If generosity is a general cultural principle, it should apply for all interactions (generosity). And finally, if people are motivated by becoming or being seen as virtuous, this should also apply to all transactions (virtue). But why did he consider it right to give food to Pete and to reject Magdalena's demand for the same?

This article introduces an approach to answer this question. I theorise ethics as a response to the demands a situation creates, whilst simultaneously providing affordances on how to respond. With this, the focus shifts from ethics as an intentional act rooted in the subject and guided by, for example, practical wisdom, emulation of an exemplary person, or value realisation (the 'impetus approaches') to ethics as an 'appropriate' or 'just' response to the social situation and to others for whom we feel *responsible*. In anthropology, the idea of responsivity was, to my knowledge, introduced through the seminal work of Jarrett Zigon (2007) on moral breakdowns and ethical demands. Zigon builds on Emmanuel Levinas, who argues that the infinity one experiences in the face (*visage*) of the other calls for a response, which creates ethical subjects. Therefore, to develop an anthropological theory of ethics, Zigon (2021: 389) extends this relationality beyond the other as a person, to encompass the 'between of the situation' space that calls for a response.

In a similar manner, Cheryl Mattingly (2018: 174), drawing from Bernhard Waldenfels, argues that ethical moments often occur unexpectedly in the everyday, striking with surprise. In her analysis of family life and its ethics among African American families in Los Angeles, she shows convincingly how situations become ethical when they transcend expectations, norms, and routines, posing a call and demanding a response. In my analysis, I also draw explicitly on the phenomenology of Waldenfels because I find that he offers a more convincing explanation for what causes demands than Levinas.

For Waldenfels, the world appears to us as *fremd* (alien) as it exceeds the normative and symbolic orders which we use to structure it. In these moments, this alienness solicits us, causing a demand to which we must respond. This demand does not, as with Levinas (1979, 1984), originate in the experience of the ethical priority of the Other as the other person but is a genuine aspect of every experience (Wentzer 2020: 123). This makes it comparably easy and straightforward to apply Waldenfels's responsive phenomenology to experiences as diverse as reading this text, an accident, and my neighbour's demand for sugar and meat. As I attempt to demonstrate, a major advantage of such a responsive approach to ethics is that it can deal

effectively with (1) the embodied and affective dimension of ethical conduct and (2) its situationality. Before moving on to demonstrate this, some words on the social, political, and economic contexts in which sharing takes place are in order.

### Ethnographic context

I first came to north-western Namibia 20 years ago when my wife and colleague, Julia Pauli, and I were looking for a place to do a community ethnography (Pauli 2019). Since then, I have lived for more than three years around Fransfontein and have experienced how sharing is part of the everyday and is structured by the economy, the ecology, and the region's colonial history. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, the land around Fransfontein was occupied by the German colonial state. The Damara people (‡*Nūkhoen*), who had largely inhabited the region until then, mostly lived as hunters and gatherers with occasional contributions from livestock keeping, trading, and crafts. The occupation of land by the German military (the so-called *Schutztruppe*) and the establishment of a settler colony not only took away most land from the indigenous population but also introduced boundaries to people's mobile livelihoods.

From the start, the German colonial state needed labour for its political and economic projects. It started to collect taxes (for grazing, dogs, and many other things), a demand that forced people into the labour market and the colonial economy. At about the same time, and with support from the state, the Rhenish Missionary Society (*Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft*), a Protestant church organisation, established a permanent settlement in Fransfontein, which included a school and a church. Thus, the settlement we know as Fransfontein today began with the combined efforts of colonisation and Christianisation.

With the end of the German occupation and the establishment of the South African apartheid regime, the colonial state extended the 'reserve area' it had established for indigenous communities. The colonial state bought neighbouring commercial farms and resettled Damara people from all over Namibia. But it was clear from the start that the land would be far too small to allow for a sustainable pastoral economy and livelihood for all. This was a deliberate act on the part of the colonial state, for it forced people into the labour market which was in constant need of workers, particularly in the mines (Schnegg et al. 2013; Sullivan and Ganuses 2020).

The social and economic consequences of these developments were immense. Fransfontein, a community where in the past people could make a living from pastoralism, hunting, gathering, and seasonal work, became a place where people depended on migration, remittances, and the state. Even now, whilst the higher-educated people work in towns, their children spend

their preschool years with relatives in Fransfontein. At the same time, those who leave for work still remain present in and part of the community. Fransfontein is where they keep livestock, spend Christmas holidays, and celebrate weddings and funerals.

With independence, the social and economic stratification initiated during apartheid increased (Pauli 2019, 2020). Because of these developments, most people in Fransfontein currently live a precarious life. Food sharing has always been a salient part of it.

### Waldenfels and a responsive ethics

Edmund Husserl, the founding father of phenomenology, argued that consciousness, which he referred to as intentionality, is relational (Duranti 1999). We think, dream, and remember something *as something*. World and consciousness are intertwined. The phenomenological task, therefore, is to show *how* and *as what* things appear *in* consciousness *for* a subject, not so much how they ‘really’ are in the external observable world. Waldenfels builds on Husserl but gives the world–mind relationship a different direction (Wentzer 2020). The fundamental intervention of his phenomenology is to turn the arrow around. Building on gestalt psychologists like Wolfgang Köhler and Kurt Lewin and their notion of *Aufforderungscharakter* (a demand character) or *Gefordertheit* (a requirement), which James Gibson (2015) later rendered as ‘affordance’ (see also Ingold 2018), Waldenfels argues that the mind does not reach out to ask, ‘What is this?’ Rather, the world asks us: ‘What am I?’ It affects us.

But why? This has to do with the world’s most fundamental phenomenological property. For Waldenfels, the world presents itself as *fremd*. This holds true for objects such as this table, for feelings such as my pain, for other beings and their intentionality, and for basically everything. In presenting themselves as *alien*, ‘things’ solicit us; they call us. Waldenfels (2011: 87) refers to this calling as ‘pathos’, designating that when we experience ‘things’, something is happening to us, affecting us; to say it in German, something *widerfährt* (befalls) us. Basically, this demand requires a response.

In response, then, we apply some ‘order’ (*Ordnung*, sometimes also called *Antwortregister*, an ‘answer register’) to ‘tame’ the alien, attempting to control it, if you will (Waldenfels 1987: 164). Waldenfels uses order as a very general term that includes norm, symbols, concepts, world views, and much more. However, the order we apply never fits perfectly, and the phenomenon remains *fremd to me* as it exceeds and ‘withdraws from’ my attempt to order it. The ordering always partially fails, so the alien remains that which cannot be ‘drawn into that order’. It is *extraordinary*, as Waldenfels (2011: 83) says. According to Waldenfels, then, the phenomenon (that which appears or shows itself) emerges through the interaction of the demanding world and the re-

sponding subject: ‘Erst im Antworten auf das, wovon wir getroffen sind, tritt das, was uns trifft, als solches zutage’ (It is only in responding to what we are struck by that that which strikes us emerges as such) (Waldenfels 2002: 59).

Let me provide a brief example to illustrate how phenomena emerge at the intersection of demand and response. During my visit to Namibia in 2022, I was sitting at the fire with my friend Robert when I saw a piece of metal lying on the sandy ground. I could not properly identify it because it was partly covered in sand. It demanded an answer to the question, ‘What am I?’ So I picked it up. It was a coin, but it did not look familiar to me. I remembered how, as children in Germany, we collected coins and speculated on their origins and what they might be worth. The metal thing was asking: ‘Can one use me to pay? What can I buy? Where do I come from?’ It looked like something from Namibia. Given where I had found it, it was unlikely to have come from abroad; tourists do not come here. I looked at it more closely and tried to decipher the date: from the 1980s was all I could make out. When I mentioned to Robert that I had found a coin, he looked concerned. Better you leave it, he recommended. I did not understand and he explained: This is the space of my ancestors and it might be theirs. It can bring bad luck if we take it away. You know, they still come to visit as winds, birds, and other animals. Leave it. It’s theirs.

In this example, the piece of metal appears to Robert and me through the questions it asks. *Being-in-my-way*, the ‘thing’ solicits a response. It calls for a response when it touches us as partly alien. The example also reveals how *what* the ‘thing’ asks (‘to what do we respond?’ in Waldenfels’s words) originates in our way of relating to the entity, which has to do with the ways we use it and how we have gotten to know it before. There is a historicity to the sense of things. The demands the coin poses are to some extent questions it asks through us, or that we ask through it. Taken together, we begin to see how a responsive phenomenology can help us understand why the coin appears as something different to Robert and to me.

A salient aspect of Waldenfels’s phenomenology is that the relationality between the demanding world and the responding subject is established through the *Leib*, the feeling body (Waldenfels 2005: 76; Waldenfels 2011: 43). Picking up the coin and remembering how I experienced similar situations as a child affected me in an embodied way. It recalled the enchantment about unknown countries I felt as a child. But Robert was affected too. His worry and fear made him answer unusually curt, and he felt uncomfortable.

Whilst the process of demanding and responding constitutes the phenomenon, the order that is applied equally stabilises through this interplay. Waldenfels gives an example for this: ordering my partner’s behaviour as ‘cheating’ not only ‘tames’ the alien of my observation or feeling but equally stabilises the order of what cheating, in/fidelity, and partnership are. Even the very act of cheating does this. The order and the phenomenon are co-con-



stituted. In the same way, ethics as an order about doing right and wrong is constituted through ordering particular situations and the alien they contain (Waldenfels 2010). The *extraordinary* – of the situation, but also more generally – is what exceeds the ordering, what sticks out and remains alien. It forces a much more explicit and reflective ethical choice to be made (Zigon 2007; Mattingly 2018).

Waldenfels's phenomenology is new in anthropology. Amongst those who have engaged with his work, Bernhard Leistle's (2022) contribution stands out. For one, Leistle has provided several introductions to Waldenfels's theory in which he focuses on Waldenfels's notion of alterity (Leistle 2016, 2020a, 2020b). For another, Leistle applies these conceptions effectively to the analysis of rituals, possession, and other ethnographic fields (Leistle 2014). In addition to Mattingly's fascinating work which I introduced above, other anthropologists and philosophers who have engaged with Waldenfels's approach include Lone Grøn (2017), whose rich ethnography renders Waldenfels's notion of responsivity into a responsive self. Maria Louw argues that the esoteric experiences of women in Kyrgyzstan may be seen as an example of radical alienness that casts doubt on interpretation itself (Lous 2019), and Lotte Meinert and Susan Whyte (2017) analyse processes of violence and trauma in northern Uganda through Waldenfels's phenomenology.

Furthermore, approaching responsivity as a philosopher, Thomas Wentzer (2018b) shows how the ethical is bound to human responsiveness as a fundamental characteristic of existence, and Rasmus Dyring (2018) demonstrates that the notion of responsivity allows rendering our understanding of freedom beyond our command and power. Finally, Dyring and Wentzer (2021) indicate how Waldenfels's thinking can be mobilised to study ethics more broadly.

All these authors utilise Waldenfels's fundamental revision of ethical responsibility: the subject does not initially or primarily act ethically by following their impetus or intent. Instead, the subject encounters situations in which they must respond – taking responsibility by answering the demands they experience (Waldenfels 2006, 2010). In the following ethnographic analysis, I build on these works and explore Waldenfels's framework for the study of sharing by asking (1) who or what makes demands, (2) what is alien in these demands, (3) how do people respond, and (4) how does this constitute the ethics of sharing.

### Who demands?

Who demands? In sharing situations, the demand comes not only from those who ask for a particular thing, like Pete and Magdalena in my example. Ethical situations are typically characterised by plural demands. Otherwise no choice would be necessary (Laidlaw 1995; Robbins 2004; Zigon 2007).

With demand sharing, the demand comes first and foremost from the person who has not. Second, the demand comes from the self who ought to share. But how can I demand from myself? Simply because to some extent, wants, needs, and desires are alien to me as well. Do I know them? Often not! Third are the demands of other people present in the situation. Finally, there are the demands of the wider social situation. Let us consider the two situations described above to explore this further.

In the first encounter, when Pete came to demand some of the meat we were cooking, he makes an explicit, albeit non-verbal demand. He will not leave before we start to eat. However, in this situation it is not only Pete placing the demand. Charles makes a demand on himself, too. He wants to be a respected person, and not sharing would not feel good. When we talked about this later, he said: You feel bad. It hurts if you do not give. If Charles does not share, people might talk about him as being */gîxa*, a man who does not give (literally, likely to refuse to give, from */gî*, to refuse to give/share), something he surely wants to avoid. However, there are other people present as well. In this case, I also place a demand on him, to which he must respond if he wants to present himself to me in a particular way. And there are even demands from people who are not (yet) there, such as his children. They might come later and ask where the meat is when they see that the pot has been used. Finally, the wider social situation creates a demand: the pot is visible; the meat has an aroma; food is available in an environment in which meat is scarce. This shapes the value of the meat in the pot and the demand, too.

When Magdalena comes, the situation gets more complex. For one, Magdalena is making an explicit demand. For Charles, it is not only his self and the demand to be an ethical person but also his demand to be a good father that shapes his response. In addition, Carla (the teacher from Fransfontein), his son, and I are making demands. And again, the larger situation imposes or shapes the intensity of these demands. Because it is not entirely clear to Magdalena how much meat there is in the house, this decreases the intensity of her demand and makes it easier for him to avoid or ignore some of it. Even without lying, he can give the impression that there is really very little left beyond what is publicly visible in the pot.

In brief, both situations create multiple demands and Charles, as the person being asked, needs to navigate between them. To do so, he addresses the alien (*Fremde*) that these demands contain by trying to order it. This brings me to the second question.

### What is *fremd*?

Ethics, as responsibility, emerges when people respond to the demand a situation creates, as Zigon (2021: 396) says. But why do we need to respond in the first place? According to Waldenfels, we need to respond because the other

contains something that is *fremd* (alien). This *Fremdheit* (alienness, state of being alien) is a basic property of all phenomena. But then, what is alien in sharing situations? In the situations I describe, the phenomenon that sticks out as alien is the ‘need’ of the other. When demanding, this need is presented by someone and presents itself.

In Khoekhoegowab, need is referred to as *#hâb*, which is the substantification of the verb *#hâ*, to want. We cannot know the needs of the other; we are often even unsure of our own needs. A need must be addressed. Through answering, we attempt to make this *#hâb* intelligible, to draw it into an order, as Waldenfels says. Thus, we apply some order – Waldenfels also speaks of an answer register (*Antwortregister*) – to it. It should be clear by now that this attempt cannot succeed as the alien withdraws from and exceeds the ordering attempt. It is *extraordinary*. However, in our attempt to respond to it, to order it, we take responsibility, and the ethics of sharing – as an order – co-evolves through it.

To explore this ethnographically, it helps to consider the context in which the sharing takes place and the relationships people have with sugar, meat, and other essential goods. Fundamentally, the things people own (and others can demand) have specific purposes attached to them. Maize meal is the staple food. The sugar I have at my house makes the meal nutritious (calorie-rich) and sweet. These items, along with tea, milk, tobacco, and cooking oil, make up most of the goods that are shared. They constitute a class of things considered essential because they make up 80–90% of the diet for most households (Schnegg 2015).

One of the interesting aspects of this ‘need’ is that it is not primarily valued according to who has it. Whilst my need might be more important to me than yours, it is only slightly so. At least for essential goods, need is framed more abstractly. This applies not only to humans but to other beings, too. I remember how surprised I was when Charles gave some of the meat he had cooked to his cats and dogs. I asked him why he did this. The food, I said, would not even be enough for the family. He did not understand my astonishment. They are hungry, too, he said, and they also help us. The dogs take care of the goats, and the cats keep the snakes away. At the same time, such a tendency to equalise needs does not imply that it is unspecified. But what contributes to the intensity? Here immediacy comes in. For a need that is more removed temporally, like my desire to buy shoes, other solutions might be possible. These possibilities devalue a need in comparison to a more immediate need, such as one with fewer alternatives that could develop before it is urgent.

Being ethical is, as Levinas says, always an attempt to compare the incommensurable. Making *#hâb* intelligible, I suppose, is a means to enable such a comparison. In sharing situations, the evaluation of these needs plays

a central role. They are done, as I will now show, through the body, through body language.

## Responding

### *Embodied listening*

This evaluation of the demand – or listening to the alien call, to use Waldenfels’s metaphor – comes first and occurs through the body. After Pete left, Charles and I sat there drinking tea. I asked Charles why he had given so readily. I knew that his children were supposed to come later that day or the following day and that they would be happy to eat some meat too. He was truly astonished that I could ask this. Did you not see it in his face that he has not eaten for days, he replied. I had not. He had not said a word about eating or the food. I wanted to learn more and asked Charles how he knew. Well, you can see it already from the way he approached us. How humble or even shy he was. Remember how he was standing there, withdrawing all the time, going to the yard, keeping himself busy, looking at the ground? He was not feeling comfortable. Then you must also consider the time. People usually visit each other before or after meals when there is ample time to talk. But if someone comes more or less around the time of the meal, he either wants to cook something himself or get something from what you are cooking.

He continued to explain that this time it was especially obvious. You can see it from the lips, he says. The lips get dry. They open here on the sides. He touched his lips whilst explaining this to me. And you can also see it from the eyes. They fall deep inside. When I asked Charles how this affected him, he continued: We know how it is to starve. Since we were children, this has been part of our experience. This situation creates tremendous stress. You are *huio*, helpless. This is how it feels.

In Khoekhoegowab the suffix *-o* indicates that a particular property is not present. So *huio* literally means that the situation is without help. To explain *huio*, Charles continued: You wake up and this is all you can think of. How do I get something to eat? You cannot think of anything else. Your thought always comes back to that. How can I get some money, who can I ask? What will people say and will they support me? Those thoughts come again and again, and they do not leave you alone. In the end, you often go, even if you feel ashamed. Or if it is only for you, you decide to leave it and to wait for another day. Maybe a solution comes up without you stressing yourself all the time.

This description illustrates how Charles evaluates the needs of the other, in this case Pete, in an almost habitual and pre-reflective way. Given the shared experience of suffering, being with each other in the same embodied situation triggers a register that he only partly controls. He knows about

Pete's struggle to make a living, his situation, and never really questions it. It also circumscribes how he responds: com-passionate, we could say. When I asked Charles again why he gave, he answered, *mās |guisa ra hî*, one just gives, knowing and having experienced similar feelings himself.

In a recent article, Thiemo Breyer and I used Edith Stein's notion of *Einfühlung* to refer to situations in which the we does not actively 'read the mind' of the other but knows bodily and intuitively in a 'pre-reflective other-awareness' (Schneegg and Breyer 2022). Its importance becomes especially evident when we consider a case where bodies are not co-present. Whilst most demands for food are articulated in face-to-face situations, the rise of mobile communication and short messages has extended the practice of demanding to mediated spheres. Whilst making demands via SMS has become more popular, it changes the context in a particular way, as my encounter with Sen reveals.

I was sitting with Sen in a place called Rockies, the farming community where Sen kept his livestock and lived part of the time. Our conversation was continuously interrupted by beeps from his Nokia phone. It was just after payday, and I knew the situation well enough to ask him who it was and what she wanted. He laughed. He must be a popular man, I added jokingly. He replied, well, the popularity comes once a month and lasts for a day. In Namibia, pensioners, government employees, and other groups get their payments on a specific day and those days are well known. The twentieth is the day for teachers, the thirtieth is typically for pensioners.

On payday, people buy the most of their basic goods. Those who have some extra money might go to one of the nearby towns where food is cheaper and where they can also buy other goods like cloth. This month's end, Sen had already bought the basic things and had then driven to the rural hinterland, where the demands on him would be much less intense than in Khorixas or Fransfontein. The SMSs continued to come in, but he rarely replied. When I asked him why and how he felt about these demands, his response was clear. It made a big difference whether they were made via SMS or face-to-face, he said. On the phone, you can always pretend you did not see it. This is what he often did, he said. Waldenfels makes a similar point when saying: 'Jeder weiß, daß man sich fremde Ansprüche am besten vom Leibe hält, indem man wegschaut und weghört' (everyone knows that the best way to keep foreign claims at bay is to look away and not listen) (Waldenfels 2006: 43).

Sen also pointed out another difference. The lack of bodily co-presence makes it difficult to assess how essential the need is. It might be that they just pretend, he said. Or it might be that they want to do something entirely different with the money you send. How would you know? There is nothing you can do. It is also difficult to judge the immediacy of the need. Maybe the person does not need it right now and there is another solution to her problem. This unspecified immediacy leads to an opacity that makes it much



easier to deny a request and to defer it to some future point in time when one will decide and possibly help.

In brief, the embodied presence allows one to evaluate a demand and can give the demand a sense of urgency that makes it hard to ignore, thus restricting the answers to specific registers.

### *Pre-reflective and reflective answering*

When I asked Charles why he shares, his response was *mās |guisa ra hî*, one just gives. This is the ethical order, an answer register that is utilised for responding to the alien. Partly, it is also a norm that has been socialised. In most cases, it can order the situation sufficiently well and people just give. In a survey in which I asked households about the demands they had made and received, an astonishing 91% of the demands led to transfers (Schnegg 2015: 318). This number supports what Charles said: *mās |guisa ra hî*. It took me some time to realise that this explanation was not an attempt to avoid a more detailed answer but was exactly what people wanted to say. It is a default that we might call a pre-reflective response in phenomenological terms. With ‘pre-reflective’, the phenomenological literature typically refers to an embodied being-in-the-world where we are so immersed in the world that we do not actively reflect on our way of feeling and doing.<sup>4</sup>

In some situations, however, the answer is ‘no’. Recall Magdalena who also wanted a piece of meat or Sen who declined many of the demands that reached him via SMS. To explore the reasons for this, I build on work in the anthropology of ethics that deals with the relationship between pre-reflexivity and reflexivity (Robbins 2004; Schielke 2009). In his influential paper, Zigon (2007) mobilises Martin Heidegger to explore the relationship between the two ways of being morally in the world. For Heidegger, when we do practical, routine activities we are ‘in the groove’, a mode that ‘covers’ or obscures the true nature of the phenomenon. Other aspects of a phenomenon only become apparent when we disrupt these routines so we can see clearly. Heidegger (2006: 218) would even say that this is when we can find ‘truth’. In his theoretical proposal for moral anthropology, Zigon (2007, 2014) furthers this argument to show how these breakdowns can become productive entry points for the anthropological study of morality.

The basic phenomenological distinction between reflective and pre-reflective ways of knowing and being-in-the-world is also salient in Waldenfels’s work (Wehrle 2013: 84). Waldenfels, however, stresses the creative aspect of the response, also to differentiate his approach from simplistic stimulus–response models which he found in earlier psychological works

4 When Thomas Widlok (2004: 63) says that sharing is not by default but by turnout, he has a slightly different perspective. He argues that sharing is constituted as a virtue through the practice of doing it and does not exist as something we can apply by default.

(see also Mattingly 2018). In my ethnographic observations, however, habituality and reflexivity/creativity clearly constitute a duality, two sides of the same coin. Whilst most responses are habitual, a reflective turning towards (*reflexive Zuwendung*, as Husserl termed it) is triggered in two moments: (1) the presence of a multiplicity of conflicting demands that Zigon (2007) points out and (2), importantly, the extent to which a situation remains alien and thus the inability to fit it into order. What cannot be fitted in sticks out as too *extraordinary*, calling for a more reflective response.

The existence of multiple demands is already important in Levinas's (1979, 1984) work. Whilst Waldenfels initially adopted Levinas's arguments, in his later writing he warned against a 'Hypostasierung des Anderen' (hypostasis of the Other [my translation]), a fragmentation, if you will (Flatscher 2011; Waldenfels 2005: 231). He now proposes that ethical situations are better described as attempts to apply one order to the alien. According to this view, there is typically a single order that fits the situation, and a friction emerges when the phenomenon cannot be fully answered using this order (Waldenfels 2005). The alien is what exceeds this ordering attempt or what cannot be 'drawn in'. The more it stands out, the more it touches us. For an ethical situation and an attempt to order it, we can perceive the extraordinary, that which is not drawn in, as what poses the ethical question most explicitly. As it touches us, it might lead to a shift in our being-in-the-world from pre-reflective responses to reflexivity.

In philosophy, these two positions (the multiplicity of demands and the degree of alienness) have been considered conflicting interpretations of the 'situationality' in which we encounter the Other (Flatscher 2011). As an anthropologist, I prefer treating them as alternatives and will be asking whether and how they occur empirically. Both processes cause friction, leading to a shift in our moral way of being-in-the-world (Zigon 2007). In the cases I discuss, they help to explain why the pre-reflective response 'one just gives' does not fit and why transactions do not take place. With this, they allow us to identify and theorise why people share or refrain from sharing.

The first kind of friction – the multiplicity of demands in a situation – is common. I have shown this in the situations I experienced with Charles, Pete, and Magdalena (see Table 1 below). In the case of Magdalena, the demands conflicted to such an extent that they led to a reflective choice. For Charles, these demands included those of the teacher and of his son, and the demand to be a good father. All of them conflicted with the demand Magdalena made as well as the demand that came from attempting to be an ethical member of the community: to be known as someone who shares. Because the frictions were so pronounced, they led to an uncovering of normal habit and to what Zigon (2007) calls a moral breakdown.

My intervention is to add a second kind of friction that has not been discussed much. It occurs when the demand sticks out as especially alien or

when the order does not seem to match. This became evident in the situation in which Sen denied the demand placed via SMS. The embodied means he usually used to assess the needs of the other did not work, and the demand remained to a large extent alien. It could not be ordered and the way he responded was much more reflective; he eventually said no.

Such a moment – when the alien sticks out significantly – also occurred to me when Jacob, a man in his twenties, passed by the house where I was sitting with Tim, my host. We could see, as he approached from afar, that he was on his way to Fransfontein. Like many herders, he lived on the approximately 800 Namibian dollars he received for this job. He owned two or three sets of clothing (t-shirts and trousers) and, as he approached us, I could see the headphones around his neck, non-functional but a symbol of the style he preferred to project. We engaged in friendly banter, and it soon became clear that he had seen my car and hoped that I could give him a lift to Fransfontein. I replied that I would be staying a bit longer and would only leave in the evening, which was not what he wanted to do. Then he approached Tim and asked him if he could give him some of the food we were having so that he could eat on his way. Tim replied that the meat would still need some time to be cooked, which I knew was not entirely true.

When Tim and I talked about the situation a few days later, I asked him why he had lied. He explained: When Jacob and his friends go to Fransfontein, they just drink. Most likely he'll put the food in a plastic bag and sell it at one of the places where you can buy cheap, self-brewed beer. Then, when the alcohol is finished, they'll want more and, with the combination of alcohol and a group mentality, they will feel strong. Then they might come at night to steal a goat from our kraal. It is easy for them to steal because the dogs know them and won't bark. Even their footprints cannot be recognised as we find their footprints around the kraal all the time.

Jacob, like the others, created a situation in which he demanded something and in which his need affected Tim, demanding itself to be understood. However, this need did not fit the ethical order Tim had. Thus, 'the giving is done' when needs are essential and immediate. But the way Jacob dressed and his body language – proud, like someone dressed up for going out – indicated to Tim that he was most likely not going to eat the meat himself but use it for another need. In this situation, Tim's need sticks out as alien. I refer to it as exceeding the order of ethics – as a moment where it becomes a much more reflective choice whether this is right or wrong, ethical or unethical. Whilst in this case this leads to not-sharing, this need not always be the response, as shown in Table 1.

<b>Demanding</b>	<b>Responding</b>	<b>Embodiment</b>	<b>Shared</b>	<b>Pre-reflective response</b>	<b>Cause of reflexivity</b>
Pete	Charles	Yes	Yes	Yes	--
Magdalena	Charles	Yes	No	No	Multiplicity of demands
Numerous acquaintances	Sen	No	No	No	Alien sticks out as unethical
Jacob	Tim	Yes	No	No	Alien sticks out as unethical

Table 1. Comparison of the cases discussed and the demand–response relationships

Why and when do Damara people share? ‘The giving is being done’ happens without being initiated or intended. There is a profound and habitual relation to radical alienness here, couched in culturally particular terms. With this and as the empirical observations reveal, almost all demands lead to a transfer. But when is sharing denied and what are the ethics behind it? In terms of Waldenfels and the responsive phenomenology of the alien, the (not to give) responses to the demands of Magdalena and Jacob and the numerous acquaintances demanding from Sen can be characterised as ethical responses, that is, responses taking place within a particular system of ethics. At the same time, the demands are either multiple or hard to order, sometimes sticking out as *extraordinary*, such that a more reflective choice takes place. In these moments, it needs to be decided whether it is ethical or unethical. This is in situations where the order does not fit easily, as in the interaction between Tim and Jacob, and where a much more active ethical choice becomes likely that might, and often does, lead to denial. Taken together, I refer to this duality as an open and creative response.

## Conclusion

Most established approaches to sharing assume that, when acting ethically, we follow an impetus. The problems with these approaches are, for one, theoretical. As Waldenfels, Levinas, and other current theorists argue (especially Hartmut Rosa), the notion that we are ‘free’ to apply whatever principle we would like to frame a situation is questionable (Levinas 1981; Rosa 2019; Waldenfels 2010). Moreover, the problems are also empirical. In Namibia and elsewhere, many transactions follow an explicit demand; they start somewhere else, outside of control.

In this article, I have built on others – including Dyring (2018), Grøn (2017), Mattingly (2018), Wentzer (2018a, 2018b), and Zigon (2007, 2021) – to argue for an alternative to this ‘impetus approach’, a responsive phenome-

nology of ethics. Such a responsive approach takes ethics ‘outside the box’ of the self. Acting ethical now starts somewhere else. In my understanding, a major advantage of this is that, in locating the mainsprings of ethical action outside the subject, we can embed ethical action firmly in the situation that constitutes it, including the affordances and suggestions a situation makes. Therefore, we can explain the situational variations we observe (for example, why most of the time people give but sometimes do not).

To conclude, I address the limitations and advantages of a responsive approach to sharing and its ethics, and why we might want to further such an approach. I find there are at least four arguments.

First, approaches that make the acting agent and their impetus the starting point of the analysis of sharing tend to simplify the ethical dimension of sharing. Recent critique has rightly indicated that approaches such as ‘reciprocity’ run the danger of conceptualising marginalised people as following simplified rules, whilst equally holding that in industrialised societies these rules do not account for behaviours that follow ‘more complex’ decision heuristics. The responsive approach allows for addressing varied situations under one theoretical framework and with a less stereotyped view of social and economic relationships.

Second, most established sharing theories have relatively little to say about the affective and embodied dimension of sharing. As I have shown, this embodiment is an essential link between demand and response in Waldenfeld’s phenomenology. The co-presence often leads to an evaluation of a situation where sharing becomes a pre-reflective default. I would consider this as a major advantage of a responsive sharing theory.

Third, the focus on the interplay between pre-reflexivity, habituality, and embodiment gives us a way to theorise ethics that acknowledges the duality of being ethical without reflexivity and the explicit ethical choice. Proposing two processes that lead to this friction – (1) the multiplicity of demands and (2) the extent to which they stick out from existing orders, which makes them become *extraordinary* – offers a way to link what many have considered to be two sides of the same coin in creative responsivity (Mattingly 2018; Robbins 2004; Schielke 2009; Zigon 2007).

Fourth, whilst the framework cannot explain how orders come about and why they differ between societies, it can explain how orders change over time. With each demand, the ethical order is challenged. If these challenges are so severe that they make it difficult to ‘tame’ the alien, a more reflective process takes place which has the potential to alter the order itself. We can image this interplay between demand and response as an interactive and creative game in which the order that has been challenged by the alien never remains the same.

In brief, sharing ethics are habitual and creative responses to the demands that situations create.



## Acknowledgements

Without the continuous support of numerous people and communities in Kunene, this research would not have been possible. This text emerged from a talk I gave at the ‘Body and Ethics’ conference at the University of Aarhus, 8–9 December 2021. I thank the participants for the stimulating discussions and the organisers for inviting me. Moreover, I thank Julia Pauli, Thomas Schwarz Wentzer, Jarrett Zigon, Bernhard Leistle, Julian Sommerschuh, Coral O’Brian, Christian Strümpell, and Inga Sievert for responding so creatively to the demands this text created for them. The research presented here was funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) as part of the projects ‘Knowing the Weather in Namibia’ (423280253) and ‘EXC 2037 CLICCS – Climate, Climatic Change, and Society’ (390683824).

## References

- Cashdan, Elizabeth A. (1990) *Risk and Uncertainty in Tribal and Peasant Economies*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Duranti, Alessandro (1999) Intentionality. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 9 (1-2): pp. 134-136. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jlin.1999.9.1-2.134>
- Dyring, Rasmus (2018) The Provocation of Freedom. In: Rasmus Dyring, Cheryl Mattingly, Maria Louw, and Thomas S. Wentzer (eds.) *Moral Engines. Exploring the Ethical Drives in Human Life*. Oxford: Berghahn Books: pp. 116-134.
- Dyring, Rasmus and Thomas S. Wentzer (2021) How Life Makes a Conversation of Us: Ontology, Ethics, and Responsive Anthropology. In: Andrew Brandel and Marco Motta (eds.) *Living with Concepts. Anthropology in the Grip of Reality*. New York: Fordham University Press: pp. 50-72.
- Flatscher, Matthias (2011) Antwort als Verantwortung: Zur Dimension des Ethisch-Politischen in Waldenfels’ Phänomenologie der Responsivität. *Etica and Politica* 13 (1): pp. 99-133.
- Gibson, James J. (2015) *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. New York: Psychology Press.
- Grøn, Lone (2017) The Tipping of the Big Stone – and Life Itself: Obesity, Moral Work and Responsive Selves Over Time. *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 41 (2): pp. 267-283. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-017-9535-x>
- Güldemann, Tom and Anne-Maria Fehn (2014) *Beyond ‘Khoisan’. Historical Relations in the Kalahari Basin*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Gurven, Michael D. (2004) To Give and to Give Not: The Behavioral Ecology of Human Food Transfers. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 27 (4): pp. 543-560.
- Heidegger, Martin (2006) *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.

- Ingold, Tim (2018) Back to the Future with the Theory of Affordances. *HAU* 8 (1-2): pp. 39-44. <https://doi.org/10.1086/698358>
- Klocke-Daffa, Sabine (2001) 'Wenn du hast, musst du geben'. Soziale Sicherung im Ritus und im Alltag bei den Nama von Berseba/Namibia. Münster: Lit Verlag.
- Laidlaw, James (1995) *Riches and Renunciation. Religion, Economy and Society among the Jains*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Laws, Megan (2019) *All Things Being Equal: Uncertainty, Ambivalence and Trust in a Namibian Conservancy*. Dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Leistle, Bernhard (2014) From the Alien to the Other: Steps toward a Phenomenological Theory of Spirit Possession. *Anthropology of Consciousness* 25 (1): pp. 53-90. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anoc.12019>
- Leistle, Bernhard (2016) Responsivity and (Some) Other Approaches to Alterity. *Anthropological Theory* 16 (1): pp. 48-74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14634996166628>
- Leistle, Bernhard (2020a) Ethnologie als Xenologie. *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 68 (1): pp. 101-120. <https://doi.org/10.1515/dzph-2020-0006>
- Leistle, Bernhard (2020b) Schwerpunkt: Fremdheit – Ordnung – Antwort. Bernhard Waldenfels und die empirischen Wissenschaften. *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 68 (1): pp. 72-78. <https://doi.org/10.1515/dzph-2020-0004>
- Leistle, Bernhard (2022) Waldenfels among Spirits and Saints in Morocco. In: Nils Bubandt and Thomas S. Wentzer (eds.) *Philosophy on Fieldwork. Case Studies in Anthropological Analysis*. London: Routledge: pp. 464-480.
- Levinas, Emmanuel (1979) *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*. Dordrecht: Springer Science and Business Media.
- Levinas, Emmanuel (1981) *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.
- Levinas, Emmanuel (1984) Ethics and Infinity. *CrossCurrents* 34 (2): pp. 191-203.
- Louw, Maria (2019) Burdening Visions: The Haunting of the Unseen in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. *Contemporary Islam* 13 (1): pp. 33-47. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-017-0403-9>
- Mattingly, Cheryl (2018) Ordinary Possibility, Transcendent Immanence, and Responsive Ethics: A Philosophical Anthropology of the Small Event. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8 (1-2): pp. 172-184. <https://doi.org/10.1086/698269>
- Mauss, Marcel (1925) *The Gift. Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. London: Routledge.

- Meinert, Lotte and Susan Reynolds Whyte (2017) 'These Things Continue': Violence as Contamination in Everyday Life After War in Northern Uganda. *Ethos* 45 (2): pp. 271-286. <https://doi.org/10.1111/etho.12161>
- Pauli, Julia (2019) *The Decline of Marriage in Namibia. Kinship and Social Class in a Rural Community*. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Pauli, Julia (2020) Class-Switching: Migrants' Multiple Class Identities in Rural and Urban Namibia. *Africa Today* 66 (3-4): pp. 115-135.
- Peterson, Nicolas (1993) Demand Sharing: Reciprocity and Pressure for Generosity among Foragers. *American Anthropologist* 95 (4): pp. 860-874. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1993.95.4.02a00050>
- Robbins, Joel (2004) *Becoming Sinners. Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rosa, Hartmut (2019) *Resonance. A Sociology of our Relationship to the World*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Sahlins, Marshall David (1972) *Stone Age Economics*. Chicago: Aldine-Atherton.
- Schielke, Samuli (2009) Being Good in Ramadan: Ambivalence, Fragmentation, and the Moral Self in the Lives of Young Egyptians. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (S1): pp. S24-S40. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2009.01540.x>
- Schneegg, Michael (2015) Reciprocity on Demand: Sharing and Exchanging Food in Northwestern Namibia. *Human Nature* 26 (3): pp. 313-330. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12110-015-9236-5>
- Schneegg, Michael (2021a) Becoming a Debtor to Eat: The Transformation of Food Sharing in Namibia. *Ethnos* 88 (2): pp. 392-412. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2021.1887913>
- Schneegg, Michael (2021b) Ontologies of Climate Change: Reconciling Indigenous and Scientific Explanations for the Lack of Rain in Namibia. *American Ethnologist* 48 (3): pp. 260-273. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.13028>
- Schneegg, Michael (2023) Eleven Namibian Rains: A Phenomenological Analysis of Experience in Time. *Anthropological Theory* 23 (1): pp. 33-55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14634996211035365>
- Schneegg, Michael (forthcoming) Phenomenological Anthropology: Philosophical Concepts for Ethnographic Use. *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*.
- Schneegg, Michael and Thiemo Breyer (2022) Empathy Beyond the Human: The Social Construction of a Multispecies World. *Ethnos*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2022.2153153>.
- Schneegg, Michael, Julia Pauli, and Clemens Greiner (2013) Pastoral Belonging: Causes and Consequences of Part-Time Pastoralism in Northwestern Namibia. In: Michael Bollig, Michael Schneegg, and Hans-Peter Wotzka (eds.) *Pastoralism in Africa. Past, Present and Future*. Oxford: Berghahn: pp. 341-362.

- Stutzriemer, Manja (2022) *Teilen und Geben in Prozessen der Kontinuität und Anpassung*. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Sullivan, Sian and Welhemina Ganuses (2020) *Understanding Damara/ǀNūkhoen and ǁUbin Indigeneity and Marginalisation in Namibia*. In: Willem Odendaal and Wolfgang Werner (eds.) 'Neither Here Nor There'. *Indigeneity, Marginalisation and Land Rights in Post-Independence Namibia*. Windhoek: Legal Assistance Centre Windhoek: pp. 283-324.
- Waldenfels, Bernhard (1987) *Ordnung im Zwielficht*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Waldenfels, Bernhard (1994) *Antwortregister*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Waldenfels, Bernhard (2002) *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung. Phänomenologie, Psychoanalyse, Phänomenotechnik*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Waldenfels, Bernhard (2005) *Idiome des Denkens. Deutsch-französische Gedankengänge II*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Waldenfels, Bernhard (2006) *Schattenrisse der Moral*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Waldenfels, Bernhard (2010) *Responsive Ethik zwischen Antwort und Verantwortung*. *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 58 (1): pp. 71-82. <https://doi.org/10.1524/dzph.2010.58.1.71>
- Waldenfels, Bernhard (2011) *Phenomenology of the Alien. Basic Concepts*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Wehrle, Maren (2013) *Horizonte der Aufmerksamkeit. Entwurf einer dynamischen Konzeption der Aufmerksamkeit aus phänomenologischer und kognitionspsychologischer Sicht*. München: Wilhelm Fink.
- Wentzer, Thomas S. (2018a) *Selma's Response: A Case for Responsive Anthropology*. *HAU* 8 (1-2): pp. 211-222. <https://doi.org/10.1086/698272>
- Wentzer, Thomas S. (2018b) *Human, the Responding Being: Considerations towards a Philosophical Anthropology of Responsiveness*. In: Cheryl Mattingly, Rasmus Dyring, Maria Louw, and Thomas S. Wentzer (eds.) *Moral Engines. Exploring the Ethical Drives in Human Life*. New York: Berghahn Books: pp. 211-229.
- Wentzer, Thomas S. (2020) *Vermächtnis und Geschichte: Überlegungen zu Figuren responsiver Geschichtlichkeit im Anschluss an Waldenfels*. *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 68 (1): pp. 121-138. <https://doi.org/10.1515/dzph-2020-0007>
- Widlok, Thomas (1999) *Living on Mangetti. 'Bushman' Autonomy and Namibian Independence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Widlok, Thomas (2004) *Sharing by Default? Outline of an Anthropology of Virtue*. *Anthropological Theory* 4 (1): pp. 53-70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499604040847>

- Widlok, Thomas (2013) Sharing: Allowing Others to Take What Is Valued. *HAU* 3 (2): pp. 11-31. <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau3.2.003>
- Widlok, Thomas (2017) *Anthropology and the Economy of Sharing*. London: Routledge.
- Woodburn, James (1998) 'Sharing Is Not a Form of Exchange': An Analysis of Property-Sharing in Immediate-Return Hunter-Gatherer Societies. In: C. M. Hunn (ed.) *Property Relations. Renewing the Anthropological Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: pp. 48-63.
- Zigon, Jarrett (2007) Moral Breakdown and the Ethical Demand: A Theoretical Framework for an Anthropology of Moralities. *Anthropological Theory* 7 (2): pp. 131-150. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499607077295>
- Zigon, Jarrett (2014) An Ethics of Dwelling and Apolitics of World-Building: A Critical Response to Ordinary Ethics. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 20 (4): pp. 746-764. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12133>
- Zigon, Jarrett (2021) How is It Between Us? Relational Ethics and Transcendence. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 27 (2): pp. 384-401. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13496>

---

Michael Schnegg is Professor for Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Universität Hamburg, Germany. His work engages anthropology with a range of disciplines to better understand how people collectively enact and make sense of the world. For so doing, he combines long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Mexico and Namibia with conceptual philosophical work and mathematical modelling.



## Sharing Land, Sharing Faith: Ground Ethics amongst Missionaries and Ik in Uganda

Lotte Meinert

### Introduction: sharing mountains, belonging to land

Alfred was a clan elder in the Ik community<sup>1</sup> and an *amazeya jumui* (elder of the soil, sing.). *Roba zeika jumui* (elders of the soil, pl.) are considered care-takers of the land and in that capacity lead processes around sharing of land for cultivation and for hunting in the Ik mountains. Most of the time, using and sharing land and mountain resources happen smoothly in and between families and generations, and without much leadership. Sharing territory is very much part of the ordinary ethics that pervades thinking, speaking, and action (Lambek 2010).<sup>2</sup> Inspired by philosopher Knud Løgstrup (1956), I propose the term ‘ethical ground’ to think about how the Ik consider access to land and a place to dwell. In the Ik mountains, all beings belong to and exist in place. This is a universal condition and demand that reaches beyond the norms and rules of right and wrong. When visitors come – from other clans, ethnic groups, or countries – and ask for access to land, the *amazeya jumui* shows the visitors where to cultivate, graze animals, or build. The visitors are then considered ‘users of the land’. There is no rent or price charged for staying. The elders of the soil keep an eye on the land and on the people occupying it to ensure peace between people and they are expected to balance how much, when, and where to allow cultivation to occur in the fragile forested mountain landscape. Alfred explained it thus: ‘The problem is not [the lack of] land but people who encroach on each others’ gardens, pushing the boundaries. [...] So they start quarrelling and in the end they may call upon the *roba zeika jumui* to talk and do a ritual.’<sup>3</sup> When I asked Alfred, ‘So, do you lead mediations on the land that belongs to your clan?’, he laughed

1 The Ik community is a group of around 6,200 indigenous people living in the mountains bordering Kenya and South Sudan. Most live from a combination of subsistence agriculture, trading, hunting, and gathering. All names in this article have been anonymised.

2 By ‘ordinary ethics’ Lambek refers to ‘ethical entailments of speech and action’ that ‘demonstrate the centrality of ethical practice, judgment, reasoning, responsibility, cultivation, and questioning in social life’ (Lambek 2010: 5, 1). Rather than focus on codes of conduct or hot-button issues, he and the authors in his edited volume make the cumulative argument that ethics is profoundly ‘ordinary’ and pervasive – and possibly even ‘intrinsic to speech and action’ (Lambek 2010: 1).

3 All translations from Icetot to English were done by Jacob Lochul.

and explained a nuance about belonging worth noticing for understanding this form of sharing: ‘Mmmm, you can say it like that – or the other way around: I lead the clan that belongs here to this land [...] like the Ik belong in these mountains.’ This way of thinking about belonging raises the questions: Does the land belong to the people, as stated in the Ugandan constitution (see Meinert and Kjær 2018), or do the people belong to the land (Adol et al. 2023)? In this article, I take Alfred’s lead to consider belonging and the ground ethics of sharing mountains and land ‘the other way around’.

I consider and compare specific empirical and everyday cases of the sharing of land, the sharing of faith, and the sharing of material items, three different phenomena that give rise to both similar and varied forms of sharing. My method of delving into empirical cases and details draws on the phenomenological tradition of radical empiricism (Jackson 1989) as a way of making what Mattingly (2019) terms ‘perplexing particular’ data destabilise doxa and defrost (Arendt 2003) our thinking to renew concepts around ethics of sharing. It is now well established in anthropology that sharing is not a form of exchange (Marshall 1961; Peterson 1993; Woodburn 1998; Widlok 2017) and has its own logics and dynamics (Widlok 2004, 2009, 2013, 2017; Ferguson 2015). I contribute to this discussion by drawing attention to how the ethics for sharing phenomena that are radically different (for example land and faith) can be quite similar and grounded in wishes for belonging and resonance (Rosa 2019).

Mountains and land are bound to a place (they are immobile) and sharing of their resources depends on being granted access to the place by other humans or species. Faith is a mental, spiritual, existential phenomenon and sharing of faith depends on mutual understanding, communication, a sense of community, inner dedication, and imagination (Robbins 2004). Material items are visible (unlike faith), are mobile, and can move both between places and between humans (unlike land); and sharing items depends on access, giving and taking, proximity, and trust. The sharing of each of these three phenomena depends on mutual understandings and ‘granting of access to something that is considered of value’ (Widlok 2017: xvii). Yet the nuances between them can point to subtle aspects of sharing and can show how misunderstandings arise when actors do not agree about what kind of sharing is at stake or whether it is a kind of exchange, with a return expectation implied (Woodburn 1998). I begin with Alfred’s case about land, then examine missionary faith, and end with a case about material items.

Alfred and other elders had patiently explained to me the Ik principles of sharing different kinds of territory and land and I had come to understand how these principles are similar to and different from practices in other parts of Uganda (Meinert and Whyte 2023) and East Africa (Gabbert 2021; Shipton 2009). In Alfred’s words, the Ik mountains are the place of belonging for Ik people: where they are at home, where they dwell, and where they ‘come

from'. The mountain landscape is considered a common existential place of belonging, which is and should be generously shared with other humans – mainly Ik, but also Turkana from Kenya and Dodoth from Uganda, missionaries, NGO people, the military, and others who come and ask for access to a place to be. The mountain terrain is also shared with other species: livestock, wild animals, insects, bees, and various kinds of spirits. Trees, rivers, plants, grass, rocks, and soil are all presences that are regarded as beings and parts that belong to the place with specific life forces. All parts are unique and contribute with what they have. In this way, humans and non-humans belong to the place and share it.

Access to land for cultivation, grazing, hunting, and gathering is based on an ethics of sharing and entrustment. Nine Ik clans belong to and each looks after a territory, but land is borrowed across clan boundaries and there is a great deal of flexibility depending on security issues and needs. There are no 'landowners' in the strict sense: people who use a piece of land for cultivation are considered caretakers of the land, but they own the crops grown from the land. A son or daughter may be entrusted with a garden that their father or mother had been using or they may be granted access to new land by elders of the soil such as Alfred. This system of entrustment and sharing expresses a radically different relationship to land than property ownership (see Shipton 2009; Laltaika and Askew 2021). You can get access to land for a garden by asking an elder of the soil, who will show you where to farm. If you do not use the land, you cannot hold on to it for long as others may start to cultivate it or ask for access. Disputes and wrangles are part of this dynamic, especially if people try to sell land (Meinert and Kusk 2023) or keep more land for themselves than they can cultivate. Crops grown on the land follow a different logic, namely one of individual and family property: they are stored, exchanged, sold, pooled, stolen, and so forth. When crops are transformed into cooked food, they are again shared within families and between neighbours and people who are present when the food is cooked.

Territories for hunting and gathering are shared differently from land for cultivation as they follow logics of larger communal belonging and shorter timespans. Gathering honey is considered individual wealth, but hunting meat is shared immediately after the hunt and in waves of sharing (see Widlok 2017) according to specific principles. These waves of sharing are not smooth and frictionless – indeed, they can cause quite a lot of palaver; and yet they seem to reinforce an ethics of sharing. Land for building houses and establishing villages is usually allocated by *roba zeika jumui* within clan territories, but settlement patterns are semi-nomadic and fractions of a village may decide to move to a new area and settle there temporarily. Until 2015 there were hardly any permanent (thus brick and corrugated iron-roofed) private houses in Ik County (Meinert et al. 2017). All houses were (and mostly still are) made of clay and grass-thatched roofs, which disintegrate with

time. Lasting building materials such as wooden poles are taken along when people move to a new place and abandoned dwellings are shared with other humans and species. Permanent houses involve a less flexible and thus more lasting attachment to the land on which they are built, which raises new questions about sharing and belonging – as we see in the following case with missionaries’ houses.

### Sharing the field

Since 2010 I have done fieldwork amongst the Ik community twice a year (except during the Covid pandemic in 2020–2021), carrying out studies on burials, death, time, land, old age, ethics, kinship, gender, and marriage. Over the years my position has been established as ‘the regular visitor’ who asks many questions and writes about the community. I was first introduced to the Ik mountains by my friend Hillary Lokwang, who later became a politician and Member of Parliament. Retrospectively, I see how this positioned me as one of his family’s and clan’s visitors, with its benefits and limitations. The first years I did fieldwork with a colleague and we were shown a place in Tultul village to build a small clay house to stay in. At that time, I was simply grateful for the hospitality and did not think far ahead about sharing the land, place, and house. Later a friend and neighbour took over the house and cared for it and I started staying as a visitor in Hillary’s house. I learnt in practice that you cannot hold on to a place or house unless you use it continually. This was also the case with garden land. After some years I asked Komol, one of the elders of the soil, for some garden land for growing vegetables. Komol showed me a piece of land where my field assistant and I started growing vegetables. After a couple of years, the garden was taken over by one of Komol’s sons because, as Komol rightly concluded, we did not really need or take care of the garden.

I am still only a visitor and an outsider to the Ik community, but the fact that I come back twice a year and have stayed in contact over twelve years gives me a feeling of being a long-term friend of the place, one who understands at least some of the complexity of social life.

During my first fieldwork stints, my colleague and I were worried about ‘sharing the field’ and being associated with Colin Turnbull and his book *The Mountain People* (1972) about social breakdown during famine in the Ik community. The book had become world famous and was highly critiqued (Barth 1974; Heine 1985; Townsend et al. 2020). But few in the Ik community knew about the book and no one seemed to have read it, partly because not many had gone to school. We reasoned with Hillary that the community had a right to know what had been written about them and we thus read selected sections of Turnbull’s book out aloud for groups of elders and discussed his descriptions and recommendations with them (see Willerslev and Meinert

2017). To our surprise the elders confirmed many of the empirical descriptions; yet they strongly objected to Turnbull's bizarre recommendations of dissolving the Ik people. Even though it was a vulnerable point in the fieldwork to share Turnbull's writings, it also gave us an opportunity to create distance to his recommendations and explain the purpose of our fieldwork. In turn this created the basis for trust and mutual understanding.

In 2015, a group of eleven missionaries settled in Ik County to do what they termed 'Training in Missionary Outreach' (TIMO). They were members of different Christian denominations, including Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal, but they had teamed up through outreach training organised by Africa Inland Mission. The mission leaders had earlier worked in Western Uganda for a German mission organisation and now felt 'called' to begin their work in the Ik mountains. The leaders asked for access to land in various Ik villages to build houses for the team members. They explained to the village elders that they were not going to build churches but would use existing churches for praying; however, they did want to build houses to live in.

At first I kept a polite distance to the missionaries and it took me a while to accept that they had entered what I had, admittedly, come to perceive as 'my' field. But then I became increasingly friendly with some of them. They were eagerly learning the Ik language and building their little houses, creating Euro-American mini-universes of baked bread and brewed coffee. I began studying the relationship between the missionaries and the Ik community, focusing on mutual moral responses between the two groups.<sup>4</sup> My guiding question was: What dynamics occur when groups attempt to include others in their moral communities? Some of these dynamics appeared in relation to different ideas about sharing.

The missionaries built a first house for the TIMO leaders. They told me how they got permission to build from the village leader nearby. The agreement was, they said, that they would contribute 'something' to the village; and after they had left, the house would be 'for the community'. The village leader confirmed that he had given them permission to build a house but added that the missionaries agreed to pay 28 million shillings for the land, which they had not done yet. The missionaries, in turn, could not confirm this large amount and wondered why the village leader would tell me this. They expressed frustration about what they perceived as confusing and contradictory communication about the land. Seeing me as an expert on land (since I was busy studying land issues in the Ik mountains), the missionaries asked me about the Ik rules about land. I tried to convey what I had learnt about ethics of sharing, entrustment, and recent cases of selling land (Meinert and Kusk 2023), where pragmatism rather than set rules and prices applied. The

---

4 The research project 'Ethics after Individualism' explored questions about the moral community. It was located at Aarhus University and funded by the Danish Research Council (Louw 2022).



missionaries, I argued, must accept the ethics of sharing of common ground: agreements about land were pragmatic, flexible, and temporary and depended on the relationship with the neighbours.

When a heavily loaded truck brought the building materials for the missionary house, it lost control on the rocky road up the mountain and caused an accident through which a girl lost a leg. The tragic incident brought building to a halt. Meetings were held and the missionaries gave financial compensation to the person and family involved. The accident did not cause accusations or disagreements; rather there was a mutual acceptance of the fact that accidents happen when people live together. Indeed, the sharing of life and death seemed to bring the missionaries and the local community closer together in a generally good relationship. However, misunderstandings between the parties were also part of the everyday life that ensued and they reveal differences in ethical and moral stances – not least in relation to the sharing of land and houses.

#### Land okay, but what about the houses?

After the missionaries had been in the Ik mountains for about four years, Alfred and his son Peter talked about a dispute which evolved towards the end of the missionaries' stay. Alfred said:

*The missionaries asked for access to land for building, so we let them build a house near our village. They told us they were going to stay for two to four years. We give access when someone like that is here and asks for land to build. [...] You have seen how almost every year Turkana herders from Kenya come with their animals to graze when drought hits Turkanaland. They put up their kraals and small houses and, when rain returns, the Turkana also return back home. [...] We share with them the grass, water, even food when it is there. [...] With the missionaries, it was their first time to come here to the mountains and we did not know what to expect. But missionaries usually bring something [...] – like in Kaabong town they built a church, or they build a hospital, school, [...] something for the community.*

*These missionaries were very quiet and they did not tell us about their intentions. They did not build a church or school. This did not happen. But they built their houses and so we thought at least they will leave this house for us to use when they are leaving. Now these missionaries are leaving but tell us that new missionaries are coming and taking over the house. They have locked the house with a padlock.*

In turn, the missionary leaders Hallie and Christian explained the situation from their perspective. They got access to land from each of the village heads to build six houses for the TIMO team. Nobody owns Ik land, the missionaries were told, so they just needed permission to stay and build. They were welcomed and got permissions from the local village heads. But to their frustration, these agreements and arrangement kept changing over time. It turned out that some of the village heads also expected them to contribute to various projects in the village, which they did. In other villages the missionaries paid for the land and considered this a sale or lease, but the village heads kept disturbing them for more money. As becomes clear, the village heads did not consider the agreements as ‘done deals’ but rather as continuing transactions.

### Two padlocks

After about four years, some of the missionaries left and gave the key to their house to Christian, one of the mission leaders. One day not long after, Christian described, Alfred and Peter came to ask him whether they could use the house for drying their crops for some weeks. Christian let them have the key. But Alfred and Peter ended up keeping their crops in the house beyond the weeks that they had agreed on. Christian asked them to leave the house and give him back the key as he had to pass it on to the mission organisation, in preparation for the new missionary. But Alfred said that he did not know where the key was. Christian got upset and said he would have to put a new padlock on the front door and give that key to the mission office.

When I spoke to Alfred about this, a cheeky smile flit across his face before he said:

*It is fine if they want to put another padlock. Then we will both have a key to the house. [...] It means we will have to agree on who will use it. [...] They have a key; we also have a key.*

This case about land, a house, and two padlocks points to some of the grey zones of sharing and to the questions sharing can raise. There was an interesting slide from an ethics of sharing to a logic of selling and an ‘I give if you give’ idea about access. The specific issue was about the house and the land, but the overall question really points to the social relationship between the parties, who seem to have been asking themselves: Are we together here? How and in what sense are we together? Who belongs to this ‘we’ (see also Alava 2022)? What do we share and what do we keep to ourselves? The implications and consequences of belonging and sharing emerge and we see that time and timing also matters for this.

In this case of land and house, sharing largely depends on presence. Amongst the Ik, you have to be physically present on the land to make claims

to this land. If someone makes themselves present, temporarily, and expresses a need (as the missionaries did), then land will be shared with them for some time. This way of sharing land often has a levelling effect because it prevents individuals or families from holding on to large amounts of land. They have to be present and use the land continuously. (Buying and fencing land are the opposite – methods to make claims to land even when one is absent.) The Ik way of sharing land is a continued process, based on trust and words (rather than papers). In this sense it is immaterial: you are not given soil to have but you are granted access for a time. It reverberates with Widlok's (2013: xvii) definition of sharing as 'granting others access to something that is of value'. And to some degree, sharing land with visitors also involves extending the circle of people who have access to what is valued, as Widlok (2013: 16) describes – at least temporarily (for the missionaries, two to four years). We can ask whether this sharing is about an underlying ethics of solidarity and spontaneity, which Løgstrup (1972) articulates as a universal human trait. Perhaps so, because in the situation there is an expression of a common human 'ground need' that the giver responds to spontaneously. But with time the 'free access' is partly withdrawn, in particular when the giving party realises that access and sharing could potentially be something different, something that someone could try to benefit and profit from. Sharing of land is not articulated as a solution to injustice or inequality, even though it may have this effect. Rather, many Ik consider sharing access to land to be a form of basic commonality: sharing that which is good and essential for living is necessary and thus sharing land is a pragmatic and existentially ethical stance.

When the missionaries came, both they and the Ik were trying to figure out what kind of relationship they would have with each other. Locals such as Albert were trying to find out why the missionaries had come, what they wanted, and what they had to give. The people who arrived in the Ik mountains did not seem to fit into the commonly held missionary mould: they did not build churches and they did not preach. This was puzzling to many. But it was straightforward to others, such as the local Pastor James who explained that to these missionaries it was all about sharing faith. I now turn to the issue of sharing faith, starting from the missionaries' ethical ground.

### Sharing faith

The missionaries all had different individual motives for going to the Ik mountains. I interviewed six of them between two and four times over the course of four years. I had long conversations with two of them, with whom I lived for ten days in 2020. The missionaries were a diverse group in several ways. They came from a range of countries: Germany, the United States, South Africa, Uganda, and Austria. They were of different generations, gen-

ders, and walks of life. They also belonged to different Christian denominations and churches: Lutheran, Catholic, and Pentecostal. But they shared a common ground reason for being missionaries in the Ik mountains: they wanted to deepen and share their faith. They were (to me surprisingly) careful and reflexive about how they could, would, and should share their faith. Faith, in their view, could and should only be shared if the other side asked for it. It could not be forced upon anyone.

If we take Knud Løgstrup's (1956) call for the need to distinguish between motives and grounds, and between morals and ethics (Løgstrup 1956; also see Widlok, this volume), an interesting distinction appears: the missionaries' motives and moralities in relation to local practices of, for example, borrowing and stealing were topics of ongoing internal debate, but their ground project of sharing faith was a common ethical stance for all missionaries. In Løgstrup's philosophy, ethics are not primarily about distinguishing between what is morally right and wrong but rather about realising common human grounds as an ethical demand.

One of the missionaries, Karen, expressed well how the missionaries understood their presence: they were 'amongst the Ik to share the word of God and share the experience of living with Jesus'. Even though their ideas of sharing are different from those of land sharing, I argue that their grounds (different from motivations) emanate from what they perceived as an ethical demand of sharing (rather than a logic of exchange). Some of them did, however, evoke the metaphor of 'the gift' of faith and 'the obligation' to pass on this gift; and they felt they received a 'return gift' by having a 'cultural experience', thus using the rhetoric of an exchange. Yet most missionaries were also remarkably explicit about the inappropriateness of giving or 'pushing a gift' on to anybody who did not ask for it. Their specific way of doing mission work was quite opposite to the common stereotype of missionaries who force their way into their hosts' lives by visiting them in their homes and putting their foot in the door if a host attempts to refuse them access. The TIMO missionaries' strategy was rather to make themselves present in the community by living there. They were accessible if anyone wanted to talk about the Bible and about Jesus. If anyone, child or adult, initiated conversation, or stayed around the missionaries' houses, then they were welcomed and if someone asked for a Bible, the missionaries would give it to that person for free.

In relation to faith, the ground ethics were about sharing. Hallie explained: 'Jesus is not a limited resource but endless love. It is the kind of love that gets bigger when shared [...]. But the wish to take part *has* to come from within a person, it should never be forced upon anyone.'<sup>5</sup> To Hallie, reading

5 There is a connection here to what Child (2021) describes as 'how to sell a friend' when discussing Tupperware parties. At these parties the focus is on connecting, not selling. The host of the party transfers the responsibility of commercialising the relationship on to the buyer – but the overall goal is to sell. For the missionaries the overall goal is to share faith, but the initiative

the Bible every morning was an important routine of quiet contemplation and sharing: ‘Every morning we read a section of the Bible. It is the same part as other Christians around the world. [...] We call it quiet time, or you can say precious time, because this is a time alone with God’. This kind of sharing was immaterial, invisible, and in some cases implicit: there was a sense of commonality in knowing that others around the world, and perhaps around the corner, were reading the same verses and praying the same prayer. It was individual, internal, quiet prayer, and in that sense separate, and depended on physical distance (between individuals). This idea of sharing resembles Benedict Anderson’s (1989) ‘imagined community’ of newspaper readers around the nation, which depends on the individual knowledge and imagination of others doing and believing the same across distance.

Yet experiences of sharing faith depended to a large degree on presence, according to the missionaries and other Christians in the area. On several occasions I joined the missionaries to the various churches and prayers in the area, but one morning the aspect of presence became particularly clear. I had joined two of the young missionary women for Sunday prayer in the small Pentecostal Assemblies of God church. A young Ik woman called Nakiru was leading the service and a small group of Ik girls formed the choir. We were about twenty people – mostly women and girls – in the small room, which had wooden logs for sitting. The Bible was read in Akarimojong but the missionaries showed me how to follow the text in their English Bibles. Most of the songs and chanting were in Icetot and all – including the missionaries – knew the songs by heart. The atmosphere was intense and lively with a lot of singing, dancing, and chanting, interrupted by periods of quiet individual prayer, when each prayer was turned inwards, and common prayers. The service ended with giving thanks to the Lord and everyone shaking everybody else’s hand. On our way home, Karen explained that this kind of experience was particularly rewarding and worth all the hardship of staying in the mountains because it was a real experience of sharing faith, being with other believers, and sensing the Holy Spirit together: ‘You just feel the presence of God so strongly when we are together in that small church.’ Nakiru, the Ik woman who had led the prayers, found these words: ‘When the missionaries come to church and pray with us, it a special day. They have come to share the presence of God and we all feel it.’ Then she turned to me and asked: ‘Did you feel it?’ And I answered that even though I was not a practicing Christian, I had indeed felt the energy of being together and the sensation of being part of something larger and spiritual. When I discussed this with a small group of missionaries later, they agreed that the sensation I had felt ‘is what it is all about’; ‘this [spiritual experience] is what we hope for’; and ‘sharing those

---

has to come from the seeker and the responsibility is thus transferred from the missionaries to the potential convert.



kinds of special moments is precious'; 'spending time together in the church provides a different sense, not just community but fellowship'.

Even though the missionaries and some of the local Ik like Nakiru had a mutual understanding of this kind of sharing of faith, there were others, both churchgoers and others, who were critical and felt the missionaries should do more than just share faith. They expected something more, especially something material, from the missionaries. Julie, a middle-aged Ik woman and seasoned Catholic, responded as follows when I asked her what she thought about the missionaries' mission:

*I don't know what their mission is. You tell me! What are they here for? What are they bringing? What are they getting from us? The Catholic fathers in Kaabong, they built churches, schools, health clinics. [...] These missionaries say they are not going to build a church or a health clinic. So what are we getting from them?*

Julie and others like her did not give much for sharing faith as a human ground or ethical demand, to use Løgstrup's terms, if something material did not follow. Julie saw the relationship as a transactional one of exchange: the missionaries get access to local souls to promote their faith and in return locals should get a physical building of some kind.

Hallie strongly disagreed with Julie in many ways, but especially on this point. To her, to build infrastructure would be a very old-fashioned way of doing mission work. The sphere of faith was supposed to be one of sharing, not exchange. At school, for example, the missionaries were supporting what other churches had already built up over the years. Yet there were also spheres where the missionaries were all for, and strongly promoted, logics of exchange. I look at these in the next section.

### Something for something

For the missionaries, resources such as goods, food, and most services followed a very different transactional logics to the sharing of faith, namely that of a 'something for something' exchange. Most material items were to be exchanged through trade, as gifts, or in acts of borrowing and lending, and these acts were to be clearly distinguished from stealing. The missionaries had agreed amongst themselves the prices they were prepared to pay for individual items: they would buy an egg for 500 shillings, an onion for 200, and so forth. They established small exchange markets outside their houses where their neighbours could sell vegetables and other goods when they needed cash and had something to offer. The exchange markets also worked the other way around: when people asked the missionaries for an onion or other goods, these were supposed to ask for money in exchange. If a person

was unable to pay, they might get the onion but would have to promise not let others know that they had been given the onion for free. Hallie would charge 100 shillings for repairing people's clothes on her Singer sewing machine from Germany. It was a small amount and financially insignificant for Hallie, and even for most locals, but it was the principle that counted for Hallie. When Christian lent out one of his tools, which he kept meticulously ordered in his shed, he said to the man: 'Please use this tool but bring it back! [...] And next time I am stuck with my car in the mud, you will help me push!' These kinds of services of lending a tool were to be remembered and later reciprocated.

Moralities of 'something for something' transactions were imperative – especially for missionaries like Rainer who often took the moral high ground when talking about his local neighbours:

*They need to learn and also practice the difference between borrowing and stealing. This is very important. The children borrow the toys I have in the house, and when they bring them back, I count. If something is missing, they don't get to play again before the missing toy has been returned.*

Christian did not agree with Rainer about his reaction when a toy or tool went missing. Christian thought Rainer was too strict when enforcing the rules and that this led to unnecessary tension. Rainer, on the other side, thought that Christian was too soft and was reacting emotionally. He felt that people would not learn anything from seeing Christian being sad. Christian, again, disagreed: for him showing emotions was a strong way to communicate that 'we all depend on each other and the agreements we make'.

Hallie explained why she took the trouble of having people pay for her services of repairing their clothes: 'So even though people don't give much, it is the principle that they *have* to give something in exchange.' She was particularly aware of earlier missionary work creating what she and her colleagues called 'the dependency syndrome'. When things were given out for free, it created unhealthy dependency in the long run and undermined people's own dignity. So the missionaries' efforts to enforce the rules of exchange was not simply about communicating a Protestant work ethic and the spirit of capitalism (Weber 1934) but also about communicating the conscious relational ethics that guided the missionaries. Hallie commented on my habit of giving second-hand clothes to people I knew. She asked me whether I was aware of the risk of creating a kind of dependency. I had not thought about my small gifts in this light, so Hallie lent me her copy of Glen Schwartz's (2015) *When Charity Destroys Dignity* to read. The blurb on the back cover read as follows:

*'Give generously' is our biblical mandate (Romans 12:8), but generous giving to the missionary cause, though essential to the expansion of the church, can create unhealthy dependency. [...] A powerful factor in the growth of Christianity is the use and misuse of financial resources both local and foreign.*

The book was part of the TIMO curriculum and it was clear that the missionaries were trying hard to apply its lessons to avoid creating 'unhealthy dependency' by practicing small-scale trade. China Scherz (2013, 2014) describes dynamics of dependency and market economics in relation to churches and charity work in much more detail for elsewhere in Uganda.

Access to certain services were, at least partly, exempted from the 'something for something' paradigm and shared freely. The missionaries all had strong solar panels for power and water tanks for collecting rainwater. Neighbours who needed to have their phones charged would come by and hand in their devices for charging and pick them up later in the day, without any fee or expectation of reciprocity. This practice seemed natural and implicit and was not discussed; but in situations when locals raised the critique that the missionaries were not contributing to the local community, some of the missionaries mentioned this service. Access to rainwater from the missionaries' overflow water tanks was also given freely. Christian even built a small fence to guide those fetching water at the overflow tank: he agreed that the missionaries should share the water freely, but he expected order when the people came to fill their jerrycans. When one day the crowd pushed over the fence in their excitement, he felt quite disappointed. Hallie commented on Christian's disappointment: 'Giving is not easy. [...] It is very complicated to help people in a way where you do not create conflict and dependency, but dignity.' She explained that a similar situation had developed when she was selling second-hand clothes cheaply from their compound and Christian gave the many buyers access to drinking water from their own water tank inside the compound. After everyone had left Christian and Hallie realised that someone had 'punctured' the water tank with a nail. The felt very disappointed, Hallie explained: 'We give something freely, and then you expect [...] at least that people are careful, grateful, friendly [...]. But, ah, the water tank is punctured!' It is not of importance here who punctured the water tank or how they did it; the point for my discussion of the difference between the moralities of sharing and exchange is that, as they shared their power and water generously, the missionaries expected something in return. For the missionaries the morality of exchange and 'something for something' surpassed the ethical demand of sharing.

The expectation of mutual understanding and a 'we are together here' feeling was held not only by the missionaries towards the local population but was also extended by members of the Ik community towards the missionaries. I

end with a story about a blue basin that points to how assumptions and expectations about sharing or exchanging material items can cause confusion.

### Taking the blue basin

Compared to most in the local population, the missionaries had very many different material items: tools, cooking utensils, books, toys, clothes, furniture, and so on. The missionaries considered these items their ‘belongings’ in the sense that they belonged to individuals or households. These belongings were neatly unpacked for use during the day and packed away and stored carefully every night. Hallie showed me with quiet pride how she kept order in her sewing box, inherited from her grandmother, with the thread organised by colour, the needles neatly arranged, and the buttons sorted by size and material. It seemed like an entire cosmology of order. When the Ik girls that Hallie was teaching to sew used something from this box, learning how to place it back into the box was clearly part of the lesson. Order and the taking, using and replacing of items were important virtues for Hallie. She kept a close eye on her belongings and wanted to pass these virtues on to others.

Hallie recalled how one day she discovered that she had lost one of her basins for washing clothes. She needed all her basins for doing laundry, a laborious task. But she also saw the missing basin as a chance to talk to the young Ik who were interested in Christianity about borrowing and stealing. Hallie thus brought up the missing basin during their next meeting. But weeks passed without any word about the basin. Then one day Clement, one of the preachers, said, ‘I know where it is.’ He led Hallie to a home in a village nearby and said, ‘It is inside this house of Martha.’ Hallie knew Martha from everyday interactions. She entered Martha’s house and found the basin, filled with grains. When Hallie said to Martha, ‘This is mine,’ Martha grumpily emptied the basin but did indeed give it back. Hallie explained: ‘When people here see you have something they need, and they think you have plenty, they simply take. But this is not okay. You should ask! This is the difference between stealing and borrowing.’ Did Martha consider it stealing, I asked her. Hallie replied:

*I don’t think so. She was just annoyed because she had to empty the basin and find another way to store her grains. [...] But my point is that she should have known that this was not right and this was stealing, because she did not ask. [...] There are different Ik words for stealing, and for borrowing, lending, giving, taking [...], so they know of the difference.*

As Marilyn Strathern (2012) points out with an example of missionaries in the Pacific, the boundaries between sharing, borrowing, and stealing often appear differently for actors in various positions. And as Widlok (2017: 29)

explains, what is considered a simple transfer of sharing from one perspective may be considered an exchange from a different perspective; as a consequence, different expectations emerge. Assumptions about a transfer imply expectations and moral evaluations of motivations: what is right and wrong depends on whether participants in a transfer perceive it to be an act of sharing or an act of exchange. The moral evaluations also reveal whether the two sides share an ethical stance, thus the basic ideas about the deeper grounds they stand on. If we think about Martha's grounds from Widlok's sharing perspective, we might say: Martha did not criticise the missionaries for not giving out material objects or building a church (as she and others had expected), but she made an ethical stance by taking a basin. Implicitly she was saying that 'we are together here, we all belong here, belonging(s) are for all: we share what we have and take what we need from each other'. In a sharing ethics she was demanding that those who have should let go of some of their belongings when there are others who are in need. As Widlok points out, that way sharing is a practical ethical response in a world of haves and have-nots. Some of the missionaries might have agreed to this overall ethical stance, but Hallie would still have observed that Martha forgot the most important part of the sharing logic: she should have asked for permission.

### Concluding the sharing grounds

Looking more closely at the negotiations of ethics around sharing and exchange between members of the Ik community and a group of international missionaries reveals that both groups had distinct ideas that differed between sharing and exchange. They all considered the need, wish, or ethical demand to respond with sharing when what they held as the basic ground for existence was requested from others, be it land for dwelling or faith for meaning. At the heart of sharing lay ideas about belonging as a common human ground: belonging to a place, belonging to a group or humanity, and belongings as items perceived as extensions between selves and others. Friction between the groups occurred when members did not agree on what should be shared and what should be exchanged. Tension built up when mutual assumptions and expectations did not fit as to whether something can change over time from being sharable to being exchangeable and vice versa. I explored sharing and disputes over land, faith, and material items that are phenomena holding significantly different properties: land is ground, fixed in space, tangible and finite, and sharing is granted by others. Faith is spiritual, infinite, and intangible; it can be accessed by an internal demand and can increase when shared. Material items are tangible, finite, and mobile, and decrease for the giver when shared. At the heart of the disputes, I argue, were different ideas about whether something is to be shared freely or exchanged



with an obligation to reciprocate – and ideas about what kind of belonging is at stake.

In the Ik community, sharing of land was perceived as an ethical demand. When a human in need asked for access – such as the missionaries who expressed wish for land to build on – it was usually granted freely. This system of sharing land and entrusting it over generations had a social levelling effect. But access to land depended on presence on the land; no one could ‘own’ or sit on large tracts of land they did not need or use. The sharing of land thus came with the important condition of letting go of one’s share with time and sharing the land with others. Disagreements occurred about the temporality of access to land, in particular if a durable house had been built on it as the missionaries did, making the claim to land appear permanent. This raised questions about belonging: Who should have access to the house in the future? Who belongs to the group or lineage with whom land and property should be shared? Who gets to decide who could ‘inherit’ access? Disputes occurred when it was unclear whether a transaction was temporary entrustment sharing, an exchange with mutual obligations, or a sale with finitude.

For the missionaries, sharing of faith should be done in a manner where receivers demanded this sharing to happen. Experiences of sharing faith could occur spontaneously or through prayer and create feelings of universal being. In this sense the missionaries’ idea about sharing faith resembled Ik ideas about sharing land as an existential ground. Yet some of the Ik assumptions and anticipations to missionaries about faith were outright transactional: they expected the building of a church, a school, or a clinic in return for being available for preaching and praying.

Transactions such as the taking of a basin might have appeared as sharing from one perspective, as borrowing from another, and as stealing from yet another. These were not necessarily Ik versus missionary perspectives; there was overlap between as well as internal disagreement within the groups.

With these cases I hope to have destabilised some of our thinking around sharing as phenomena mainly understood and practiced by former hunter-gatherers such as the Ik and principles of exchange practiced most purely by westerners such as the missionaries. Both groups practiced and made a virtue of both forms of transaction; and a transaction could slide from one paradigm to the other, as a pragmatic response to others. The ethics of sharing were not so much about following rules, logics, and agreements but about understanding the other’s grounds, their situation, and their longing for belonging and resonance.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank friends, interlocutors, and missionaries in Ik County who generously shared their views and experiences on sharing and ethics with me. I am grateful for funding for numerous studies over the years from the Research Council for Culture and Communication (Denmark), the Research Council for Development Research (Denmark), the Velux Foundations, and the Carlsberg Foundation. Research clearance for the studies was given by the Ethical Review Board of Gulu University and by the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology. I also thank the anonymous reviewer and the editors of *Ethnoscripts* for their effort and suggestions for improving this chapter.

## References

- Adol, Ben, Michael Whyte and Susan Reynolds Whyte (2023) *Belonging*. In Lotte Meinert and Susan Reynolds Whyte (eds.) *This Land Is Not for Sale. Trust and Transitions in Northern Uganda*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Alava, Henni (2022) *Christianity, Politics and the Afterlives of War in Uganda. There Is Confusion*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Anderson, Benedict (1989) *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Arendt, Hannah (2003) *Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture*. In: Jerome Kohn (ed.) *Responsibility and Judgment*. New York: Schocken Books: pp. 159-189.
- Barth, Fredrik (1974) *On Responsibility and Humanity: Calling a Colleague to Account*. *Current Anthropology* 15 (1): pp. 99-103. <https://doi.org/10.1086/201443>
- Child, Curtis (2021) *How to Sell a Friend: Disinterest as Relational Work in Direct Sales*. *Sociological Science* 8 (1): pp. 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.15195/v8.a1>
- Ferguson, James (2015) *Give a Man a Fish. Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Gabbert, Echi Christina (2021) *Introduction: Futuremaking with Pastoralists*. In: Echi Christina Gabbert, Fana Gebresenbet, John G. Galaty, and Günther Schlee (eds.) *Lands of the Future. Anthropological Perspectives on Pastoralism, Land Deals and Tropes of Modernity in Eastern Africa*. New York: Berghahn Books: pp. 1-38.
- Heine, Bernd (1985) *The Mountain People: Some Notes on the Ik of North-Eastern Uganda*. *Africa* 55 (1): pp. 3-16. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1159836>
- Jackson, Michael (1989) *Paths toward a Clearing. Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- Laltaika, Elifuraha I. and Kelly Askew (2021) Modes of Dispossession of Indigenous Lands and Territories in Africa. In: Echi Christina Gabbert, Fana Gebresenbet, John G. Galaty, and Günther Schlee (eds.) *Lands of the Future. Anthropological Perspectives on Pastoralism, Land Deals and Tropes of Modernity in Eastern Africa*. New York: Berghahn Books: pp. 99-122.
- Lambek, Michael (2010) Introduction. In: Michael Lambek (ed.) *Ordinary Ethics. Anthropology, Language, and Action*. New York: Fordham University Press: pp. 1-37.
- Løgstrup, Knud E. (1956) *Den etiske fordring*. København: J. W. Cappelens.
- Løgstrup, Knud E. (1972) *Norm og spontanitet. Etik og politik mellem teknokrati og diletantokrati*. København: N.P.
- Louw, Maria E. (2022) *Ethics after Individualism: Phenomenological Explorations of Moral Community*. <https://projects.au.dk/ethicsafterindividualism> [accessed: 20 April 2023].
- Marshall, Lorna (1961) Sharing, Talking, and Giving: Relief of Social Tensions among !Kung Bushmen. *Journal of the International African Institute* 31 (3): pp. 231-49. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1157263>
- Mattingly, Cheryl (2019) Defrosting Concepts, Destabilizing Doxa: Critical Phenomenology and the Perplexing Particular. *Anthropological Theory* 19 (4): pp. 415-439. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499619828568>
- Meinert, Lotte, Rane Willerslev, and Sophie Hooge Seebach (2017) Cement, Graves, and Pillars in Land Disputes in Northern Uganda. *African Studies Review* 60 (3): pp. 37-57. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.119>
- Meinert, Lotte and Anne Mette Kjær (2018) 'Land Belongs to the People of Uganda': Politicians' Use of Land Issues in the 2016 Election Campaigns. *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10 (4): pp. 769-788. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2016.1274251>
- Meinert, Lotte and Susan Reynolds Whyte (eds.) (2023) *This Land Is Not for Sale. Trust and Transitions in Northern Uganda*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Meinert, Lotte and Mette Lind Kusk (2023) Transactions. In: Lotte Meinert and Susan Reynolds Whyte (eds.) *This Land Is Not for Sale. Trust and Transitions in Northern Uganda*. New York: Berghahn Books: pp. 57-72.
- Peterson, Nicholas (1993) Demand Sharing: Reciprocity and the Pressure for Generosity among Foragers. *American Anthropologist* 95 (4): pp. 860-874. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1993.95.4.02a00050>
- Robbins, Joel (2004) *Becoming Sinners. Christianity and Moral Torment in Papua New Guinea Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rosa, Hartmut (2019) *Resonance. A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World*. Newark: Polity Press.

- Scherz, China (2013) Let Us Make God Our Banker: Ethics, Temporality, and Agency in a Ugandan Charity Home. *American Ethnologist* 40 (4): pp. 624-636. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12043>
- Scherz, China (2014). *Having People, Having Heart. Charity, Sustainable Development, and Problems of Dependence in Central Uganda*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schwartz, Glenn J. (2015) *When Charity Destroys Dignity and Sustainability. Improving Aid Effectiveness in Global Health*. New York: Springer.
- Shipton, Parker (2009) *Mortgaging the Ancestors. Ideologies of Attachment in Africa*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Strathern, Marilyn (2012) *Sharing, Stealing and Borrowing Simultaneously*. In: Veronica Strang and Mark Busse (eds.) *Ownership and Appropriation*. Oxford: Berg: pp. 23-41.
- Townsend, Cathryn, Athena Aktipis, Daniel Balliet, and Lee Cronk (2020) *Generosity among the Ik of Uganda*. *Evolutionary Human Sciences* 2: pp. 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ehs.2020.22>
- Turnbull, Colin (1972) *The Mountain People*. New York: Touchstone.
- Weber, Max (1934) *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*. Tübingen: Mohr.
- Widlok, Thomas (2004) *Sharing by Default? Outline of an Anthropology of Virtue*. *Anthropological Theory* 4 (1): pp. 53-70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499604040847>
- Widlok, Thomas (2009) *Norm and Spontaneity: Elicitation with Moral Dilemma Scenarios*. In: Monica Heintz (ed.) *The Anthropology of Moralities*. Oxford: Berghahn: pp. 20-45.
- Widlok, Thomas (2013) *Sharing: Allowing Others to Take what is Valued*. *HAU* 3 (2): pp. 11-31. <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau3.2.003>
- Widlok, Thomas (2017) *Anthropology and the Economy of Sharing*. London: Routledge.
- Willerslev, Rane and Lotte Meinert (2017) *Understanding Hunger with Ik Elders and Turnbull's The Mountain People*. *Ethnos* 82 (5): 820-845. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2016.1138984>
- Woodburn, James (1998) *Sharing Is not a Form of Exchange: An Analysis of Property-Sharing in Immediate-Return Hunter-Gatherer Societies*. In: Chris Hann (ed.) *Property Relations. Renewing the Anthropological Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: pp. 48-63.

---

Lotte Meinert is Professor of Anthropology at Aarhus University. She has carried out research in Uganda since 1993 and has led research capacity building projects there for 15 years. Her main fields of research are medical anthropology with a focus on life worlds and the pursuit of well-being across gender and generations; and changing human security situations including responses to transformative historical events such as the AIDS epidemic and armed conflict in Africa. Her book publications and edited volumes with colleagues include *Hopes in Friction: Schooling, Health, and Everyday Life in Uganda* (2008); *Ethnographies of Youth and Temporality: Time Objectified* (2014); *In the Event: Toward an Anthropology of Generic Moments* (2014); *Time Work: Studies of Temporal Agency Biosocial Worlds* (2020); *Configuring Contagion: Ethnographies of Biosocial Epidemics* (2021); and *This Land is Not for Sale: Trust and Transition in Northern Uganda* (2023). Meinert is currently working on a book project called 'Sharing Mountains: Ethical Change in Ik Land'. She is principal investigator for the research project 'Imagining Gender Futures in Uganda' and is overall leader for the European Union-funded project 'ANTHUSIA: Anthropology and Human Security in Africa'.



## Sharing Your Hand: Unhelpful Help and the Ethics of Sharing in Mbuke, Papua New Guinea

Anders Emil Rasmussen

### Introduction

On the Mbuke Islands in Papua New Guinea (PNG), like in other parts of Melanesia, sea transport is of great importance in inter-island traffic and exchange relations. Until the mid-twentieth century, locally produced sailing vessels such as outrigger canoes and catamarans tied the whole region of Island Melanesia together and were of paramount value (Finney 2007: 112; Rasmussen 2013: 8). The largest such vessels – those used for long distance traffic – have largely been replaced by imported fiberglass boats, causing the vessels and adjacent boatbuilding traditions to either become forms of heritage associated with historical and cultural identity or to disappear entirely (Finney 2007: 112; Rasmussen 2013: 8). Manus Province, where the Mbuke Islands are located, is an exception. Here the craft has survived and the big outrigger canoes, *n'drol*, are still of economic significance, whilst also having become a source of collective identity. For specialised boatbuilders the skill is a valuable asset and subject to a form of ownership (Rasmussen 2013: 74–75).

During my fieldwork on Mbuke Islands, I therefore spent considerable time hanging around boatbuilding sites. My aim was to document how local Mbuke men were building their large outrigger canoes, work which was typically done in groups including both specialised builders and 'helping hands'. Initially, I did not participate in the work but simply observed. Nevertheless, like the other men present who were almost as practically unhelpful as I initially was, I was treated with food, cigarettes, and betelnuts that were shared amongst the men present at the site. As one man told me when handing me some food: 'You should eat also!' When I queried, 'But I am not helping?', he replied: '[...] True, but you are here.'

In anthropological literature on non-monetary forms of transfer, Melanesia plays a major role since it is characterised by elaborate ceremonial exchange and reciprocity between persons and groups across the region (Akin and Robbins 1999). However, even in Melanesia, where key theories of 'the gift' found much inspiration (Malinowski [1922] 1983; Mauss [1925] 1990; Gregory 1982; Strathern 1988), sharing is also widely found (Gell 1992; Rasmussen 2015). In presentations by ethnographers, it has often been overshadowed by reciprocal exchange, but situations like the one sketched above

occur all the time, making sharing part of the everyday also in Melanesia. Not only is sharing part of solidarity amongst close kin (Gell 1992; Rasmussen 2015), but, as my case of boatbuilding illustrates, it is also a mode of transfer with integrative force beyond kinship. I argue that it is particularly relevant in many contemporary settings that are characterised by work migration and an increasing dependency on the cash economy such as the Mbuke Islands. These ongoing changes contribute to an increasingly uneven access to important resources. This, I argue, causes sharing to grow in scope and importance since it helps to even out growing inequalities. This is remarkable as the increasing influence of money has in other cases been considered as necessarily threatening sharing arrangements as well as gift-exchange practices (Bohannan 1959; Altman 2011: 194–196). In Mbuke it is the other way around: sharing is on the increase not despite growing monetarisation but, rather, because of it.

#### Background: many hands make a canoe

Building a large outrigger canoe is a major collaborative endeavour. In fact, the term ‘canoe’ is somewhat misleading, as one might associate with it small unstable vessels propelled by paddles. The term has roots in colonial times and has been integrated into English and local Pidgin, and for this reason I use it also. On the biggest of these vessels, known as *n̄drol*, the main hull is up to 18 meters long and it can carry up to 30 people over long distances, propelled by a combination of sail and large outboard engines. These are vessels that, at certain stages of building, entail considerable collaborative work and require costly materials sourced from other islands (see also Rasmussen 2013). In Mbuke, building an outrigger canoe is therefore a vast display of wealth and it is generally expected that the work to build such a canoe is shared. This also means that food, betelnuts, and tobacco will be expected to be distributed amongst those sharing the work, in the first instance by the person ‘commissioning’ the boat. In fact, collaborative boatbuilding is a social activity that brings together several different modes of transfer: reciprocal exchange, commodity transactions, and sharing. Which mode of transfer participants take part in depends on several things: on the skills of the persons involved, the reasons for them being present at the building site, their relationship with the person organising the activity, and the future ownership of the vessel, amongst other things. It is not only visiting anthropologists who hang out at building sites; indeed, in situations like the one described above, I observed the presence of an unproportionally large number of ‘helping hands’, not all of them continuously or substantially contributing to the work effort. All of them were given a share of the food and of the tobacco distributed during the work by those who commission the work. This sharing is not a straightforward form of payment for work. Rather, boat-

building is a social event for redistribution through sharing, with volunteers from the community at large. As we see below, these somewhat unhelpful helpers often received a bigger share of the food distributed during building than those specialised builders who were most important for the work. I therefore argue that in their case the distribution of food is neither payment nor part of reciprocal circles, but a kind of sharing.

In the past this was not the case, or at least not on a ‘community’ scale. Until the 1940s, each village was organised as clusters of settlements each centered around a dominant *lapan*, a form of big man (Crocombe 1965: 44), and men would build and maintain their canoes near their individual houses with help from a specialised builder (Crocombe 1965: 44; Rasmussen 2015: 178–180). Only after the colonial authorities started appointing *luluais* (representatives of whole villages or islands) in government entities did Mbuke acquire one overall spokesperson (Crocombe 1965: 49) and, by implication, become viewed as one social entity, covering all the settlements. Similar points have been made for other parts of colonial and early postcolonial PNG and scholars have argued that it was not useful to describe PNG settlements and socialites as ‘societies’ or even ‘social groups’ (Wagner 1974; Strathern 1988). Rather, socialites were specific and dynamic social networks based on kinship and formed through alliances produced and reproduced in ongoing exchanges (Strathern 1988). Social formations that exist independent of specific persons or specific relationships, such as ‘the community’, did not exist (Wagner 1974). Tellingly, there is no equivalent word for ‘community’ in the Titan language, the language spoken by Mbuke people, and the English word is used. Historically ‘*lau*’ was the only term used that would denote a larger group of people. But such a group was precisely related through kinship or alliance with a *lapan*. The word ‘*lau*’ has been described as referring to the followers or constituency of a particular *lapan* (see Otto 1994: 225–226). The occupants of the clusters of settlements were the constituencies, the *lau*, of particularly powerful *lapans*. The *lapan* would help younger men with bride wealth and would lead trading expeditions, amongst other things, and the *lau* would give him loyalty and work in return (Fortune [1935] 1969: 94). The idea that the work – and adjacent distribution – should be shared with the whole community is, therefore, correspondingly new.

Hence it is part of my argument that sharing has grown in scale and scope in the Mbuke Islands. Ultimately, this can be attributed to the growing influence of money and the growing economic stratification related to it; and to the emerging notion of a community within and across which a moral obligation to ‘enable others to access what is valued’ (Widlok 2017) is articulated. Boatbuilding is one of the occasions at which the growing stratification becomes particularly apparent visually for everyone to see and materially manifest through the boats themselves. Therefore, these are also the occasions at which sharing expands as a remedy against growing discrepancies in

access to assets. Part of this transformation is the emergence of ‘community’ as a new and larger level of social organisation and as a category. It is in these contexts that sharing not only evens out inequalities of income (as a form of ‘sharing out’) but in which it also acts as socially integrating (as a form of ‘sharing in’) (Bird-David 2005: 207).

### *Singaut*: demand sharing on Mbuke Islands

Mbuke Islands is a small group of islands populated by people who identify as members of the Titan ethnic group. At the time of my census in 2009, approximately 40% of the population of around 1,000 persons was away as temporary work migrants in the county’s bigger cities (Rasmussen 2015: 31–55). Consequently, the village economy is largely based on incoming remittances.

The Titan were previously specialised fishermen and sailors. They traded and exchanged with other groups in the region who, in turn, had specialised in small-scale farming, amongst other things (Mead 1930; Schwartz [1975] 1995). The Titan themselves owned no or very little land and did not practice farming. They therefore depended on other groups for the starch component of their diet. These groups in turn depended on them for fish and other trade goods. For considerable time the Titan monopolised sailing and boatbuilding, a monopoly they defended with force if necessary (Schwartz [1975] 1995: 114–115). This regional system of ecological and technological specialisations, and the barter-trade that came with it, eventually collapsed after the cash economy had replaced barter in the interaction between the various groups (Schwartz [1975] 1995: 114–115). Members of other groups started fishing for themselves and new kinds of vessels (fiberglass dinghies with outboard engines, in particular) destroyed the Titan monopoly on transport and trade across long distances (Rasmussen 2013: 11–12). But, seeing that the Titan had been an ‘information society’ (Harrison 1995: 12), which based its livelihood on boatbuilding knowledge since precolonial days, it was perhaps natural that they entered eagerly into formal school education when this was introduced in the middle of the twentieth century. Whatever the full range of reasons that led to this development (see Rasmussen 2015: 31–34), it is now the case that the Titan are one of the most highly educated ethnic groups in PNG and this now forms the basis of their livelihoods (Rasmussen 2015: 31–34).

Currently, Mbuke people depend on a combination of continued small-scale fishing and on high education and the well-paying jobs that education grants access to in PNG, such as public servants, politicians, and managers or specialists in the private sector in big cities around the country. However, the high level of education does not mean that everyone succeeds well in the education system; consequently, not everyone has access to a well-paid job. The difference between small-income generating local fishing and large-income

generating jobs away from the islands has created a situation of great economic inequality. People in the Mbuke villages depend largely on remittances. These most often take the form of solicited sharing, or demand sharing (Rasmussen 2015: 47–48). Sharing is a helpful mechanism and pragmatic solution to even out some of those growing inequalities. At the same time the notion of ‘mechanism’ is somewhat misleading since the process of eliciting and delivering remittances is subject to constant moral debate amongst migrants and villagers alike. Moral arguments are made concerning the obligation to share but also regarding the limits of this obligation (see also Martin 2009: 112; Rasmussen 2015: 142). The debate includes the whole social fabric of the islands because there is not only a marked inequality, in terms of access to money, between migrants and village-dwellers but also unequal access in terms of who is connected to relatives who work as migrants. Some have many successful migrants amongst their siblings and children and others have only a few or none.

Much sharing – both in the form of remittances asked for and sharing within the villages – is described, and debated, under the term ‘*singaut*’. ‘*Singaut*’ is the word in Tok Pisin (PNG’s lingua franca) for requesting or demanding. It is derived from ‘to *sing* [call] *out* to’ someone (to receive a share). We can consider *singaut* the local manifestation of what is comparatively known as demand sharing (Peterson 1993). Elsewhere I have termed these practices of sharing a ‘*singaut* economy’ that takes place in relations amongst close kin and amongst friends (Rasmussen 2015: 47–58). The reason I have termed it an ‘economy’ is to place it in dialogue with – and as a complement to and critique of – Gregory’s (1982) renowned description of two parallel economies in Melanesia, namely the gift economy and the commodity economy. Gregory (1997) later emphasised that these two economies are in fact not to be understood as two separate and distinct economies but as coeval principles of transfer that are not mutually exclusive. Likewise, I would claim that *singaut*, as a third economic principle (Rasmussen 2015: 27–55), is one form of transfer amongst other forms of transfer; and often, as we shall see, the boundaries between them are socially negotiated and morally disputed. As I show in more detail below, in the anthropological literature on Melanesia sharing is often overshadowed by the discourse on gift exchange governed by reciprocity under which sharing has also been subsumed (for example, Sahlins 1972).

There is reason to believe that across Melanesia there has always been some sharing practiced in everyday life (Gell 1992: 152), along with other forms of transfer. The remittances that are transferred from work-migrant relatives to people in the village are conceptualised and practiced locally as a form of sharing, and often this is described in direct opposition to exchange and reciprocity (Rasmussen 2015: 8). Concepts and practices that have been in use for daily sharing are now also used when talking about the incoming



remittance money. *Singaut* as a category includes numerous accepted forms of demand sharing, some more affirmative and pressing than others. Ceremonial exchange typically takes place very prominently between intermarrying descent groups (as elsewhere in Melanesia). By contrast, sharing of the *singaut* kind is very clearly associated with transfers *within* the descent group, but normatively not *between* descent groups, and it is considered shameful to *singaut* to an in-law (Rasmussen 2015: 47–53). Regarding the ethical dimension of these transfers, there is a marked moral critique associated with attempts to avoid sharing, which often centres on an articulation of emerging individualism associated with the cash economy, or with selfishness more generally.

So far anthropologists have tended to explain the moral obligations to pay remittances, and otherwise helping close kin in the villages in Manus Province, as indirectly or directly being caused by ceremonial exchange and the associated morality of reciprocity (Carrier and Carrier 1989: 213–214; Otto 1991: 247; Dalsgaard 2010: 231). It would be fair to say that gift exchange has received most of the attention in this part of PNG at the cost of sharing practices, which also play a large role but which should not be confused with gifts and reciprocity, also in terms of the morality involved (Rasmussen 2015). In fact, upon close reading, it turns out that the literature on Melanesia is full of examples of sharing, except that they are given less attention than situations of exchange. In *Moala*, his monograph about a Fijian island, for example, Sahlins (1962) mentions ‘secular economic activities’ – activities outside ceremonial exchange – and in this context also refers to the Fijian notion of *kerekere*, which literally means ‘request’ (Sahlins 1962: 203). *Kerekere* is therefore a request for sharing, which, Sahlins claims, primarily generates an implicit reciprocal obligation. This claim echoes Sahlins’ comparative analysis of transfers which he put forward ten years later when he introduced the notion of ‘generalised reciprocity’ in his book *Stone Age Economics*: ‘This is not to say that handing over things in such form, even to “loved ones,” generates no counter-obligation’, but that ‘the expectation of reciprocity is infinite’ (Sahlins 1972: 194). In this view, the time span of reciprocity is relative to the distance or closeness of the relationship between the exchanging parties. In other words, there is a longer time span between handing over things and the obligation to return them amongst relatives and a shorter one between strangers (Sahlins 1972: 196–197, 231–232), but both could ultimately be characterised in terms of reciprocity. Following this logic, we could say that in commodity exchange, to use Gregory’s term, the distance of relationship is the farthest of all and so the time span of reciprocation the shortest of all. At its extreme it would be constituted by a totally alienated exchange, which would often be the case in a shop transaction. There reciprocity is balanced, it evens out immediately and entirely. By contrast, amongst



the very closest of relatives the time span of reciprocation is practically infinite, but it is nevertheless present in principle.

However, in *Moala*, where Sahlins discusses *kerekere* at length, he also makes clear that ‘*kerekere* is not necessarily one side of a reciprocal transaction. It can be used repeatedly to effect a flow of goods from the affluent to those who are in need’ (Sahlins 1962: 145–146). This, I would argue, is then actually no longer following the logic of reciprocity. Rather, it follows the distinct logic of sharing that Widlok (2017) and others have pointed out is not that of reciprocity at all (Woodburn 1998). The challenge facing the exchanging parties in gift exchange is, as Widlok (2019: 37) notes, ‘how [and when] shall I reciprocate this gift?’ As such, it is not that different from the concerns of people who, running up monetary debts in the local store, ask themselves, ‘How shall I pay this back?’ Therefore, gift giving and debt accountancy in commercial exchanges can in this regard be meaningfully placed on one and the same continuum (as Gell already noted in 1992). Widlok indicates that the key question facing a person involved in sharing is entirely different and would be something like: ‘How do I respond to the fact that others need what I have?’ This is different on a number of levels. The point of departure is not a problem of distributing an asset but rather one of responding to a need. The relationship to time is also not as linear in sharing as it is for exchange amongst kinsmen or strangers. Sharing can be said to be immediate or short-term, on the one hand, but at the same time it is also long-term in that sharing typically moves in waves or ripples whereby the person who receives (for instance a salary) would be expected to share parts of that with a relative who, in turn, may be expected to share it out further with other relatives back home in the village, and so forth. Finally, whereas gift giving and debt accountancy are often highly personalised transfers between particular persons or groups as a consequence of a track record of transfers that bind them to one another, no such particular relationship and indebtedness needs to be present in the case of sharing, as I point out in the following section.

### Building big things – enabling others to access what is valued

During fieldwork in Mbuke, I noticed many instances of sharing as part of relations between close kin. This much was in line with what Sahlins had noted for *kerekere*, too. However, I also realised that sometimes sharing went much further and also beyond kinship altogether. In *singaut* someone typically asks for something that he or she needs, something that the potential giver is known to be in possession of, based on specific relationships (Rasmussen 2015: 115) – but also sometimes irrespective of any particular relationship, though only in certain types of situations. The case of housebuilding and, in particular, canoe building (with which I started this contribution) shows this very clearly: in these situations, kinship is not necessarily or even typically

the key. Rather, as Widlok argues in his contribution in this special issue, the key for understanding the transfer is the (shared) presence of those who demand and those who are in the position to give. In fact, various distinctly different kinds of transfers can take place as much amongst close kin as amongst more distant kin. Which mode of transfer is being employed will largely depend on the social situation and not on the specific (kin) relationship involved. Sahlins' model suggests that the degree of reciprocity necessarily maps on to the distance of kinship ties and that the latter would then determine the form of transfer chosen, but this is clearly not the case across the situations that I observed in Mbuke. It is not that kinship does not matter, but it is only one of the aspects that influences the overall social situation. In the case of building big things, such as houses or large outrigger canoes, we find that at various stages in these complex collaborative practices there is room for reciprocal exchange and also for sharing. Both can coexist and the degree to which they are realised may differ in accordance with the reason for social participants being present at the scene but also their performative skills to forge their presence and their unfolding relationships with others. Simply being in a specific kinship category does not predetermine the transactions that are going on, as the following example illustrates.

One day during fieldwork, I sat under the house of a man I shall here call Mike, chatting with him. Houses in Manus, like elsewhere in PNG, are built on stilts, which creates a shady space under the house where various activities take place. People may use it to cook or smoke fish and it is a favourite spot for making and repairing various things. More generally, this is a place where people hang out with others. Most houses on Mbuke Islands are made of what is locally termed 'permanent materials', such as fibre cement and plated iron or aluminium. But adjoining to the actual house is always a structure that houses the kitchen, most often made with a thatched sago leaf roof, which allows smoke from the kitchen fire to exit through the roof. On this occasion I noticed that the roof of Mike's kitchen had a new sago leaf roof, but that the roof had no gables. This is not ideal under the tropical weather conditions, as funnel winds and tropical thunderstorms can tear off the entire roof far more easily if there are no gables. What was particularly surprising was that he had the thatched sago-leaf sections for the work standing there all finished under the house, ready for finishing the new roof by adding the gables. From where we sat, we were looking at a pile of roof sections right in front of us. And so I asked him why he did not finish the roof, so to avoid the risk of having it destroyed by the weather and to avoid rain and wind entering his kitchen. 'I can't afford all the helping hands that I will get if I start the work,' he told me.

To understand Mike's dilemma, we need to know more about housebuilding practices in Mbuke: sago leaf sections for roofing are generally bought from neighbouring groups who grow sago palms and housebuilding

has in general become an activity that requires money to acquire building materials, even those that are locally referred to as 'bush materials' (such as sago leaves), as opposed to the 'permanent materials' already mentioned. In the past these materials would have been acquired through barter with members of neighbouring groups. But barter has been replaced by buying and selling after the system of regional specialisations collapsed. This means that even to build a house of local materials, one must always have access to considerable amounts of money. This money typically comes from work-migrant relatives. Mike was lucky regarding the sago leaves, though. At the time he was married to a woman from a neighbouring village where he had gotten sections of roofing through ongoing exchange relations based on marriage. However, he still had to save up for the voluntary help that he would get when he began putting up the roofing sections. As he explained to me, this would require him to give cigarettes, food, and betelnuts that the helpers would expect him, as the owner of the house, to provide to all who gave him a helping hand during the construction period. Unfortunately, he had not yet been able to save up sufficiently to have these provisions at hand for work to continue. He had already spent all his savings on food, cigarettes, and betelnuts when the first part of the roof was constructed. Then he ran out of sago leaves, but new ones had arrived in the meantime. In fact, it would not have been a big effort for him to put the remaining sheets up together with the carpenter from his kin group and thereby finish the kitchen within a few days. But Mike feared that many people would speak ill of him and label him as selfish if he did the remaining work without welcoming those who would inevitably offer their hands and presence to do the work – regardless of whether he needed their help or not. Hence, the social pressure was on him to allow others to come and join him to complete the construction, helpers who in turn would expect to be given a share because they were there.

This is not to say that no one can build a house without sharing with the whole community. Part of the particular social constellation sketched above is that Mike is the *lapan* of one of Mbuke's seven descent groups. For these leaders, often particularly rigid expectations to share are in place. These shares are due first and foremost to members of their own descent group and their alliances (such as in-laws), what would in the past have been the *lau*, the constituency. But leaders are now expected to act in ways that benefit the community more widely. This community concern (or obligation) has become increasingly important for the legitimacy of local leaders during the past decades (Rasmussen 2015: 175–176). Often local leaders would be challenged on the basis of their moral obligation to 'benefit the community' through large projects they were involved in, including building houses or vessels. There are particularly high expectations for them not to act selfishly by avoiding sharing but rather to use these occasions as opportunities to allow many community members access to resources that they otherwise would not easi-

ly be able to access. Whilst *lau*, as noted earlier, may be described as the constituency of a traditional leader, the persons in specific reciprocal relations with him, 'community' implies a kind of equality between all members and refers to a much larger scale. Simply by living in a village, which is no longer organised in terms of clusters but as a whole village, one becomes part of the village community (Rasmussen 2015: 183). And herein the dominant logic of transfers is not based on reciprocity between a leader and his constituency but rather follows the moral obligation to share with fellow community members irrespective of kin ties. Building a house has, therefore, become more complicated for people like Mike. What is true for housebuilding practices also holds for constructing canoes, to which I turn in the next section.

### Moral debates: the community canoe and he who wants to be alone

During the building of large sailings canoes in Mbuke Islands, the future owner of the canoe, or more generally the person heading the organisation of the construction process, is often responsible for feeding everyone who is present at the building site. This is above all a moral expectation. Not everyone can or will meet this expectation, but not to do so comes at a cost. It is an expectation that holds for many people in the villages and the failure to live up to it will generally result in moral critique. As soon as the work of hollowing out the large log for a canoe begins on the beach, many men will show up to spontaneously to volunteer a helping hand. Most often these 'helpers' are way too many to be practicable. Meanwhile, a few specific men with specialised skills have been actively asked for help and these will typically have been recruited within and amongst those with whom ongoing exchange relationships exist and who are amongst the limited number of specialised boat-builders on the islands (Rasmussen 2013). These are often relatives within the same descent group or in-laws from intermarrying descent groups who are engaged in ongoing exchange and reciprocal relations.

As soon as someone talks about building a canoe or simply starts doing preparatory work, the moral obligation to allow others to help is there. If the preparations are carried out avoiding public spaces and the scrutiny of the public eye or if it is openly declared that the future owner will not need any voluntary help, this will raise moral objections. Intending to do the work alone or exclusively with the help of a few specialised builders invites community criticism that uses the same terminology as when people talk negatively about others who refuse to share food or money. 'That man wants to be alone' is then a widespread formulation. The implied negative moral judgement is not always clear-cut since it depends on a number of conditions, including the size of the canoe, where the canoe owner sourced the building materials, and, more generally, the owner's situation: Did he save up for years by selling fish at the market? Or did a wealthy migrant brother wire him a

load of money? The latter would be a prime target for moral pressure to use some of the remittance earning to share food with the helping hands that would volunteer. The communication practices in this process are indirect, often through the choice of location for the building process. In some cases, this can lead to the somewhat absurd situation of a fairly big vessel being built tucked away under a house where there is not really room for it, but where it is somewhat out of the public eye and, notably, where smaller vessels that do not entail these moral obligations are usually built. The largest canoes, thus vessels whose main hull is over nine and up to eighteen meters in length, will attract many helping hands and are generally built on communal land rather than near individual houses.

During my very first period of fieldwork on Mbuke Islands, I had made it known that I was interested in following and participating in the building of a large outrigger canoe. When eventually construction started on such a canoe, it was organised that I could be part of that. A wealthy migrant relative had already sponsored a large log for his brother and their group. It had been roughly hollowed out, but the building had come to a stop due to reasons very similar to those that made it hard for Mike to finish his kitchen: money had run out. The remaining materials – for the boom construction, outrigger float, platform deck, and so on – were to be found in the local bush or, alternatively, on and amongst retired vessels. But they were not for free. They had to be accessed through various forms of exchange relations or even bought or lent. Various debates and conflicts can occur in the process. In one particularly interesting case during this canoe building process, a tree of a species of wood suitable for various planks had already been felled months earlier, but this had triggered a dispute not just over the tenure of the land on which the tree had grown but over ownership of the tree itself – two aspects which are not always the same thing. At the end, the tree trunk was left in the bush because the dispute could not be resolved. Eventually it was agreed upon that the dispute could be ended by giving the tree to a neutral third party, namely the community. Through this solution both parties in the conflict received credit for ‘benefitting the community’. But in any case, the biggest monetary expense was the provision of food, cigarettes, and betelnuts for sharing amongst the volunteers who were offering their help during the building of the canoe.

Organising work for the building of this canoe in which I was involved was carried out by the *lapan* of whose household I had become a member. He did not do any of the actual work of building, though, since in this case a master builder was appointed. But the burden of organisational work consisting of the preparation of (some) food every day for a period of over several months, and many other things, were left to him. As I was part of his household, the money I contributed to this household ended up buying large quantities of cigarettes and food for the project, which for me was a perfect



way of contributing to the community and to the men who threw themselves into the building process.

In canoe building, the specialised builders are crucial for the project and, as already noted, their participation often ties into ongoing relations of reciprocity amongst kin. One specialised canoe builder will usually be heading the work. The rest of the men present, usually termed the 'helping hands', show up and help with simpler tasks and otherwise hang around during the building process. They are still treated with food and other things even though they might not always be particularly helpful, or might even be totally incapable as is sometimes the case for returned work migrants who never learnt the basic skills of village life. They receive their share simply because they are present. Some are hardworking and participate every day, others less so. There are also those who seem to appear just as food and cigarettes arrive, this group often consisting of young men, and their conspicuous appearance on the scene is often tolerated. Very little differentiation is made between those who contribute heavily to building activities and those who contribute only lightly or occasionally. It is generally the head builder who distributes the foodstuffs and tobacco on behalf of the organiser who is typically the future owner, but in this particular case was my *lapan*.

The actual practice of sharing sometimes takes the form of a distribution, but often it follows a kind of collective demand sharing mode. During every event of building houses and canoes that I have been part of during two years on the islands, I would quite frequently hear someone say, excessively loudly, something like 'Let's hope people don't go around saying that we are hungry' or 'Hey, I sure could smoke a cigarette, right now'. These sorts of comments were intended to make the chief builder distribute cigarettes to everyone in the vicinity of the building site. They were prompts which would cause the head builder to announce that food was coming soon or to distribute cigarettes.

During the building of the large outrigger canoe that I documented, I noticed that vast amounts of food were not only consumed on the spot but were sometimes carried away from the building site when food was served. Initially I was under the impression that it was the wives of the builders who were given food prepared by those who had enrolled their husbands in the work, compensating for the fact that these men therefore could not go fishing to feed their families as they otherwise would. But it soon became clear to me that the women who came with large empty bowls which they filled up with food and carried back to their houses were mostly not the wives of the specialised builders who did most of the work. In fact, it was the wives of the *lapan* in charge, the prospective owner, and the specialised builders who were more often the ones cooking the food because paying and providing for the food was expected of the prospective owner and also of specialised builders involved. By contrast, those who carried food away were mostly the



wives of the spontaneous helpers. It appeared that two different modes of transfer were involved here. The specialised builders made their contributions as part of much longer-term reciprocal relationships with the organiser. They were often related to the organiser as in-laws, for example brothers of the organiser's wife, and therefore following distinct kinship obligations. Apart from these long-term (transgenerational) exchanges that were parts of the overall gift economy, there were also other exchanges, for instance short-term exchanges such as buying large trees from people on other islands. But apart from these exchanges, sharing formed the other main mode of transfer involved. The families represented by the helping hands received shares that were clearly not in any way proportional to their contribution to the project, nor reciprocations of earlier exchanges in gift-giving cycles. Rather, I would argue, the case of people making themselves present at particular moments constitutes a distinct mode of transfer whereby the presence itself was sufficient to elicit a share. The larger part of the substantial distribution and transfers that took place in conjunction with building projects had fairly little to do with the logic of payment or reciprocal obligation which went on in other contexts.

It is important to underline that there is ongoing moral debate about what happens and should happen during the boatbuilding process. Many people disagree as to whether or when sharing should take place. For instance, there may be disagreement as to whether it is fair that the wives of helpers carry food away or whether it should only be consumed by the men on the building site, and so on. Then there are always the particularities of a situation that influence the course of the distributions. During the particular canoe building process I discussed above, the future owner of the vessel (whose relative had obtained the log) had himself been heading a certain part of the canoe building process, whilst the person appointed by the *lapan* in charge headed the rest of the work. During the process the future owner of the canoe suddenly decided to name the vessel after his mother and her place of origin. The general wish of the community was, however, to name it after my place of origin since I had documented the building process and this would add to the fame of the community. I did not want to be caught in the middle of this debate and was quick to argue that, seeing that the vessel was now named, it would be bad luck to rename it, according to custom of my homeland. This got us out of the pickle – or at least that was how the resolution was explained to me – and the canoe kept its local name. But, interestingly, the man who had created this pickle was afterwards criticised for undermining the interests of the community. Hence there is often some competition between the interests of kin relations and those of the wider community which can play out in these contexts. Part of the discourse with which the owner was criticised was that that part of the canoe the building of which he had headed would quickly fall into disrepair because he had prioritised his personal kinship alliances

above the shared interest of the wider community. Such a connection between disregarding moral expectations and the loss or disrepair of things are often made in related contexts. For instance, instances when money was lost quickly were related to the refusal to share when this was morally expected when demands for it was made (Rasmussen 2015: 104–106). In the past, such negative consequences would be ascribed to the agency of ancestors, who were generally the strict upholders of the moral code and who would fiercely punish their own descendants for moral breaches (Fortune [1935] 1969).

Whilst the building process that I have discussed was taking place, a younger man was also building a large canoe on one of the other islands. He attempted to build his canoe in secrecy and out of the public eye. I, for one, only realised that the canoe was being built late in the process. This seemed strange to me, as everyone was always eager to help me get as much information as possible on the craft of building canoes. When I asked my adoptive father, the *lapan*, he explained that it was not a ‘real canoe’ and that it would go into disrepair quickly. He said that it was in fact a ‘garbage canoe’, even though the man who was building it was a skilled canoe builder. The reason for this negative judgement was that the man had built it himself and had refused the help from others. He had started the building process near his house, indicating that the canoe was not the big kind of canoe that would attract helpers. The value and quality of the canoe was, at least according to my host, lowered by the breach of the moral obligation to share in conjunction with the building process. In other words, the refusal to share in these contexts not only did damage to the wider community but also lowered the value of the boat itself. Doing things on your own, without sharing, was a risk that people like Mike with his unfinished kitchen were clearly not happy to take. The consequences were not only a public moral debate and open criticism but, arguably, were also material in nature and undermined the main purpose of the building effort. The *lapan* explained that, in his opinion, the tendency to *e mo ye* (‘that man him’, or to want to be alone) as opposed to wanting to share was increasing amongst the Mbuke and that the case of the man and his garbage canoe was part of this tendency. The young man who built the canoe in an ‘alone’ sort of way in turn argued that the canoe was small and that he had the right to build the canoe in the way he wished. And so the debate continued. What it shows is that the course such a project takes depends on many things and on the way in which moral arguments are intertwined with very practical matters. In the case of leaders, and men aspiring to be leaders, and their wives, there are much clearer expectations of sharing and distribution in conjunction with their projects than in ‘smaller’ cases. However, in some constellations, including the one of the young man, people may find it easier to ignore public opinion, even at the peril of ending up with a ‘garbage canoe’.

## Conclusion

The building of large things is the ultimate demonstration of wealth in Mbuke villages. These are diagnostic events that show the importance of sharing and that of presence in a setting that has for a long time been described mostly in terms of long-term gift exchange. The building of large things is a social situation where it is not the specificity of kinship ties that govern (all) transfers but where (re)distribution is facilitated through sharing as allowing others access to what is valued (Widlok 2017). In Mbuke the dominant form of sharing in such settings is articulated with reference to the moral obligation to 'benefit the community' or 'help the community'. This is a new level of social organisation that has emerged during the late colonial and postcolonial era (Rasmussen 2015: 120–140). What is important to note is that this is not the only way in which community is being built. There are institutions, such as the medical aid post or the school, which are also often associated with benefits to the community (Rasmussen 2015: 140–147). Beyond these direct forms of building the community institutionally and materially, the community also appears as a moral entity as it is invoked as the social place where sharing must take place. Sharing at collaborative work endeavours not only allows more members of the village community to benefit from remittances than those who have close relatives who migrated. It also allows 'the community' to emerge as a frame of reference for structuring transfers beyond the established long-term gift exchange relations in kin networks or the precolonial barter exchange relations between different locations.

In the Mbuke Islands, the building of a house or a canoe provides a context in which sharing takes place on a community-wide level. As I have argued, it is the manifestation of a mode of transfer that has always existed but was previously limited largely to everyday small exchanges amongst kin and co-residents. The sharing of food, cigarettes, and betelnuts with passive bystanders and with uninvited not particularly helpful helpers is levelling out new inequalities that have emerged through migrant work and remittances. As such it is a kind of levelling practice, a function that, as Widlok (2017: 26–27) has argued, sharing often fulfils. It may not be coincidental that sharing is morally expected in exactly those situations that are also the strongest and potentially most problematic demonstrations of inequality and self-interest. As a result, the owning of big assets such as boats and houses will alter the social position of the owner and, in a sense, they must pay everyone in the community for this for it to be morally defensible. The moral debates and accusations of selfishness concerning emerging individualism in Melanesia is often contrasted with the relational personhood embedded in exchange relations that is undermined by individualism (Sykes 2007; Robbins 2004, 2007). But here we see that relational personhood based on gift exchange can also be a potentially selfish raising of personal status and, thereby, at odds with the ethics of village solidarity and sharing. As we have seen, the special-

ised builders are crucial for the project and they are almost always persons with whom ongoing exchange relations exist. But then there are all the others who show up and help with simpler tasks and otherwise hang around during the building process as they are only needed during a few crucial moments in the process. Sharing in this case is, therefore, not a kin-based economy as we know it from contexts of ceremonial gift exchange; in some sense, it effectively stands in opposition thereto.

Based on an analysis of boat- and housebuilding in Mbuke Islands, this contribution explored community-scale sharing and, within that, particularly the levelling effects involved in sharing. Boats and houses can be spectacular demonstrations of wealth. They are also demonstrations of – in most cases – being well connected, of having access to particular kinds of kinship networks that also extend to successful work migrants who have moved from Mbuke to the big cities of PNG. I have argued that these potentially problematic demonstrations of wealth have led to many and massive distributions taking place at these events to which the owner of things of paramount value are morally committed. The building events are complex as they consist of a series of transactions which reconfirm and reconstitute many different sets of relationships. Exchange relations with specialised builders are strengthened and tie into multiple ongoing exchange relations. But there is also extensive sharing with the wider community taking place. The organiser of such an event does what relatives tend to think he should do, namely take care of his and their family interests through exchange and the building of canoes. However, he also does what is today generally expected from a member of the community: sharing food and other things with those who volunteer to be present as helpers. The co-occurrence of sharing and gift giving is in a sense the material expression of a double moral commitment, namely to key kinship alliances in the villages and to the community at large.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deep gratitude to the people of Mbuke Islands for welcoming me into their lives and teaching me about the value of sharing. *Kama tu lisi aua. Uro!*

Some of the research that resulted in this article was funded by the Velux Foundation's Museum Programme, Grant no. 34239. I am grateful for the support.

## References

- Akin, David and Joel Robbins (1999) *Money and Modernity. State and Local Currencies in Melanesia*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Altman, Jon (2011) A Genealogy of 'Demand Sharing' from Pure Anthropology to Policy. In: Yasmine Musharbash and Marcus Barber (eds.) *Ethnography and the Production of Anthropological Knowledge. Essays in Honour of Nicolas Peterson*. Canberra: ANU Press: pp. 187-200.
- Bird-David, Nurit (2005) The Property of Sharing: Western Analytical Notions, Nayaka Contexts. In: Thomas Widlok and Wolde G. Tadesse (eds.) *Property and Equality. Volume 1: Ritualisation, Sharing, Egalitarianism*. New York: Berghahn Books: pp. 189-196.
- Bohannon, Paul (1959) The Impact of Money on an African Subsistence Economy. *Journal of Economic History* 19 (4): pp. 491-503. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050700085946>
- Carrier, James and Achsah Carrier (1989) *Wage, Trade, and Exchange in Melanesia. A Manus Society in the Modern State*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Crocombe, Ron (1965) *The M'Buke Co-operative Plantation*. New Guinea Research Unit Bulletin 7. Canberra: New Guinea Research Unit, ANU.
- Dalsgaard, Steffen (2010) *All the Government's Men: State and Leadership in Manus Province, Papua New Guinea*. Dissertation, University of Aarhus.
- Finney, Ben (2007) 4 Ocean Sailing Canoes. In: Kerry R. Howe (ed.) *Vaka Moana, Voyages of the Ancestors. The Discovery and Settlement of the Pacific*. Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press: pp. 100-153.
- Fortune, Reo ([1935] 1969) *Manus Religion. An Ethnographic Study of the Manus Navies of the Admiralty Islands*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Gell, Alfred (1992) Inter-Tribal Commodity Barter and Reproductive Gift-Exchange in Old Melanesia. In: Caroline Humphrey and Stephen Hugh-Jones (eds.) *Barter, Exchange and Value. An Anthropological Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: pp. 142-168.
- Gregory, Chris (1982) *Gifts and Commodities*. London: Academic Press.
- Gregory, Chris (1997) *Savage Money. The Anthropology and Politics of Commodity Exchange*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers.
- Harrison, Simon (1995) Anthropological Perspectives on the Management of Knowledge. *Anthropology Today* 11 (5): pp. 10-14. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2783185>
- Malinowski, Bronislaw ([1922] 1983) *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. Oxford: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Martin, Kier (2009) Custom: The Limits of Reciprocity in a Village Resettlement. In: Karen Sykes (ed.) *Ethnographies of Moral Reasoning. Living Paradoxes of a Global Age*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan: pp. 93-117.

- Mauss, Marcel ([1925] 1990) *The Gift. The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. London: Routledge.
- Mead, Margaret (1930) Melanesian Middlemen. *Natural History* 30 (2): pp. 115-130.
- Otto, Ton (1991) *The Politics of Tradition in Baluan: Social Change and the Construction of the Past in a Manus Society*. Dissertation, Australian National University.
- Otto, Ton (1994) Feasting and Fighting: Rank and Power in Pre-Colonial Baluan. *History and Anthropology* 7 (1-4): pp. 223-240. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.1994.9960846>
- Peterson, Nicholas (1993) Demand Sharing: Reciprocity and the Pressure for Generosity among Foragers. *American Anthropologist* 95 (4): pp. 860-874. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1993.95.4.02a00050>
- Rasmussen, Anders Emil (2013) *Manus Canoes – Skill, Making and Personhood in Mbuke Islands (Papua New Guinea)*. Occasional Papers 13. Oslo: Kon-Tiki Museum.
- Rasmussen, Anders Emil (2015) *In the Absence of the Gift. New Forms of Value and Personhood in a Papua New Guinea Community*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Robbins, Joel (2004) *Becoming Sinners. Christianity and Moral Torment in a Papua New Guinea Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Robbins, Joel (2007) Afterword: Possessive Individualism and Cultural Change in the Western Pacific. *Anthropological Forum* 17 (3): pp. 299-308. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00664670701637750>
- Sahlins, Marshall D. (1962) *Moala. Culture and Nature on a Fijian Island*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Sahlins, Marshall D. (1972) *Stone Age Economics*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.
- Schwartz, Ted ([1975] 1995) Cultural Totemism: Ethnic Identity Primitive and Modern. In: George De Vos and Lola Romanucci-Ross, *Ethnic Identity. Creation, Conflict and Accommodation*. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press: pp. 48-72.
- Strathern, Marilyn (1988) *The Gender of the Gift. Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Sykes, Karen (2007) Interrogating Individuals: The Theory of Possessive Individualism in the Western Pacific. *Anthropological Forum* 17 (3): pp. 213-224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00664670701637669>
- Wagner, Roy 1974 Are There Social Groups in the Papua New Guinea Highlands? In: Murray J. Leaf and Bernard Grant Campbell, *Frontiers of Anthropology. An Introduction to Anthropological Thinking*. New York: D. Van Nostrand: pp. 100-122.



- Widlok, Thomas (2017) *Anthropology and the Economy of Sharing*. London: Routledge.
- Widlok, Thomas (2019) Deling som alternativ økonomisk aktivitet. In: Anders S. Hansen, Susanne Højlund, Cecil M. S. Pallesen, and Mikkel Rytter (eds.) *Hvad vi deler. Antropologiske perspektiver på deling som socialt fænomen*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, pp. 33-55.
- Woodburn, James (1998) Sharing Is not a Form of Exchange: An Analysis of Property Sharing in Immediate-Return Hunter-Gatherer Societies. In: Chris M. Hann (ed.) *Property Relations. Renewing the Anthropological Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: pp. 48-63.

---

Anders Emil Rasmussen holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from Aarhus University. He is Curator and Lead Developer of Museums Anthropology at Moesgaard Museum in Denmark and is Associate Professor of Anthropology at Aarhus University. He is currently principal investigator on a research project on the materiality of home and belonging, funded by the Velux Foundation's Museum programme. His research interests include materiality and craft/making practices in relation to notions of personhood and temporality. Another strand of research deals with economic anthropology, exchange and sharing practices, value, migration, and social change in Melanesia. He has conducted extensive fieldwork in Papua New Guinea since 2004 and currently also works in Fiji and north-eastern Australia (among migrants from Melanesia).

## Hide and Seek a Share: The Ethics of Sharing between Presence and Distance

Thomas Widlok

### Introduction

Tsab lives in northern Namibia and he likes to keep his tobacco for smoking in small tins that originally contained snuff tobacco, because that way it keeps dry. This is, of course, not the only way to keep your personal stock of tobacco. I do not smoke, but my San interlocutors in the field in Namibia<sup>1</sup> expect me to provide tobacco and I am regularly asked to share the tobacco that I buy when I am doing field research in southern Africa. Some men and women who are younger than Tsab now prefer cigarettes, but I know that Tsab and most others are happier with loose tobacco. I buy it in bags of 500 grams and give a round whenever sitting down with people to talk. Pretty much every period of my field research starts with me giving rounds of tobacco to people gathered. And every time I realise how many different possibilities there are to store tobacco: some people keep it in little plastic or cloth pouches which they recycle from their original uses, others keep it in all sorts of tins or other types of bags. Sometimes the tobacco is kept in makeshift pouches folded from pieces of old newspaper, sometimes it is simply tucked under the knitted woollen beanie that many wear or stuffed into the pocket of a pair of trousers, a shirt, a jacket. The ethnographic present comes naturally as I write about this since, over several decades of field research, the routine of sharing out and receiving tobacco has hardly changed. To be sure, there are more plastic bags now than bags made of cloth. This is not appreciated by everyone because some women used to sew old tobacco bags into pieces of clothing.

The routines of sharing tobacco have also remained fairly stable (see Marshall 1961; Widlok 1999, 2017). But so have the routines for hiding tobacco. As I give out my tobacco to Tsab, he puts most of it into his snuff box, but he also places some of it into a separate little pouch. When other people approach, they not only ask me for a share of tobacco, but they also turn to Tsab because they know (or reasonably assume) that he has already been given. Tsab then produces the pouch and takes out ever smaller quantities as

---

1 Throughout this text I use the currently widely accepted term 'San' when referring to (former) hunter-gatherers in southern Africa with whom I have carried out extensive field research over several decades. Where appropriate I use the autonym 'Hailom' for the group with whom I have spent most of my time in the field (for details, see Widlok 1999).

one neighbour after the other approaches us. For Tsab and many other San, it seems that, whatever the means of storage, it is important to have more than one container: one that is readily shown to others and a second that can be hidden for as long as possible. Whenever I give out tobacco to someone, other people in the camp in northern Namibia watch me keenly. In fact, they do not actually need to watch me; they know that when I am around, I will be giving out tobacco, just as they know that as soon as someone, anyone, arrives newly in the camp, people will share a smoke and maybe other things. Whenever a person approaches a fireplace, an open hand will be extended as a silent demand to request either tobacco to fill their pipe or to take at least a smoke from the pipe that has just been lit (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: Sharing amongst Haillom San in northern Namibia. Video still: T. Widlok.

San are now subject to health education and many know that sharing the same pipe can cause the spreading of tuberculosis and other diseases. Also, the commercial tobacco bags in southern Africa now have health warnings printed on them, so it is possible that smoking might decline in the future. At this stage, however, there are only few San who do not smoke. The future of the practice of smoking is one thing, but the future of sharing practices is another matter and it is the latter that is central to this article. Other researchers working with San and other hunter-gatherers have also observed the ‘two pouches syndrome’ (see Marlowe 2004; Myers 1988; Woodburn 1998). But does the fact that things are hidden mean that sharing is increasingly weak-

ened? Does hiding contradict and counteract sharing? Does it necessarily undermine the ethics of sharing practices? To what extent is storage and hoarding the opposite of sharing? This contribution tries to answer some of these questions.

### Sharing is not merely a technology of distribution

In this article I outline what exactly the ethics of sharing consists of, especially if practices of hiding are part and parcel of it. However, the point that needs to be established first is that, even in the rather everyday example of sharing tobacco, there is indeed an ethical dimension to sharing and that we are not just dealing with a technology of distribution or a technical means to buffer uncertainties in supply.

Tobacco (and many other products) reach Namibia largely as a consumer product bought and sold along global and local commodity chains. However, once it arrives in a San camp, as we have seen in the opening ethnographic vignette, it is hardly ever sold from person to person. Rather, it is shared. Looking at it from the outside and from a distance, the sharing mode appears primarily to provide a system of transferring goods within a camp, just as market relations provide a system of transferring goods outside the group. So why and how does sharing tobacco and similar items have anything to do with ethics? After all, we may think of it as a technicality, a technology of distribution. And at face value, the fact that San do try to hide tobacco may support this view. There seems to be no moral urge or rule to ‘give away’ that governs the whole process. Much of the standard evolutionary theory of sharing seems to work without any assumptions about ethics. Especially those who insist (against the evidence, see Widlok 2017) that sharing is predicated on reciprocity and is a form of balancing out (Jaeggi and Gurven 2013) manage to keep the axiom of ‘the selfish gene’ intact in sharing contexts. In this view, sharing is nothing but a rational strategy of buffering fluctuations in resource availability, devoid of ethics. Then there is the opposite view, namely that sharing is all about morality. It treats sharing along similar lines like practices of almsgiving and caring (see John 2016) in the Abrahamic religions. As I show in a moment, both of these positions are undermined by the comparative ethnographic record.

It is problematic to see sharing simply as a technicality or a technology, a mode of distribution and a kind of logistics of buffering the uneven distribution of resources. To be sure, there is no doubt that sharing does have logistic-distributive effects, or can have them, but I want to highlight that this is not its key characteristic. A main feature of San ethnography, but also of comparative ethnography from other parts of the world, is that it underlines that the distributive effects of sharing vary considerably across situations: shares can be small or large; sharing can be narrow or wide; it can take place

within households and beyond; it can involve the material or immaterial; it may be reciprocal and non-reciprocal, one-way or two-way, essential for survival or not; and – when extreme shortage hits – it can be shown to intensify in one case but it can disintegrate in another (see Widlok 2017: 51–56). This variability already throws serious doubt on the rather mechanistic models with which sociobiologists tend to approach the topic of sharing.

When Voland (2007: 15), for instance, insists that sharing is an expression of altruism, he means a mechanism that follows a programme of ‘inclusive fitness’ driven by ‘selfish genes’ which causes organisms to give in order to eventually receive back – independently of whether we are dealing with amoeba, chimps, hunter-gatherers, or urbanites. But such a programme, if it exists, seems unable to explain why sharing takes place, and in what shape or to what extent, in one case rather than in another. As a ‘mechanism’, it would seem to be a very unreliable technique since the dynamics and outcomes vary so widely. Apparently something else has to come in. What explains why humans find it useful and desirable to imagine that sharing of a particular kind is desirable in some instances but not in others? As the ethnography shows, sharing is highly sensitive to context and therefore not a mechanistic sequence operating in the same way everywhere. This context includes an ethical evaluation by participants as to what can be demanded and how one should respond to these demands (see also Peterson 1993, 2013). More specifically, value and evaluations enter the sharing process in two separate ways, first, morally, and second, ethically.

First, humans can take a reflexive stance towards practices of sharing (and non-sharing), they can value sharing as a morally prescribed value. But as the ‘second pouch of hidden tobacco’ indicates, they can also value practices of keeping for themselves which may compromise the value of sharing and they can negate individually what is socially considered to be morally ‘proper’. Second, but more fundamentally, sharing is a means to respond ethically to the fact that (fellow) humans are repeatedly separated from what they value. This is captured in the common anthropological definition of sharing as ‘widening the circle of people who have access to what is valued’ and about ‘granting others access to what is of value’ (Widlok 2017: xvii). This touches upon the intrinsic ethical aspect of sharing: there are always some humans that are separated from what they value. And there are others who are in the position to change that and to create access for those who are in need. And this, I maintain, is also the foundational situation of ethics. If the human condition is characterised by ‘fundamental intrinsic injustice’ (see Løgstrup [1972] 1989: 188), then sharing as an expression of solidarity is the appropriate ethical stance. In many instances the transfer practice appropriate for this condition of continually reproduced inequalities is sharing.

But what about hiding tobacco or other forms of evading sharing that may be found elsewhere (see Berman 2020)? Do these practices undermine



the moral and ethical dimensions of sharing? Quite to the contrary. With regard to morals, the fact that Tsab has a second pouch of tobacco that he has to hide is proof of the strength of the sharing morality amongst San. If tobacco is visible, ‘on the table’ so to speak, it becomes very hard indeed to avoid sharing, given the moral pressure on those who have. Instances (and suspicions) of non-sharing are an important device when keeping up sharing as a moral value. In San conversations, a lot of complaints can be heard about people ‘no longer’ sharing as much as they once did or should. With regard to ethics, it is ultimately only owing to the fact that tobacco *can* be made ‘invisible’ through hiding and the fact that this happens regularly that it becomes an ethical issue at all, an issue that makes people ponder how to reconcile their choices, decisions, and actions (and those of others) with what is intrinsic to tobacco, namely that many like to smoke it. If there was no way of avoiding sharing tobacco, there would not be any need for the moral imperative to share it, nor would it be of ethical relevance.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, we do not normally consider air to be an ethical agent or breathing to be of ethical concern because air itself cannot negate being breathed in by humans, but fellow humans may act in ways that others ‘cannot breathe’ and that adds an ethical dimension to it.

The intrinsic ethical value of sharing does not disappear when humans try to ‘opt out’ in a particular situation. Rather, the ethical dimension is constituted by the fact that it can be denied. Moreover, sharing, even where it routinely occurs, is not promising to rid humankind of all injustices for ever. It is not a moral utopia – and in this respect, it is very unlike a once-and-for-all communist redistribution of property and also unlike the utopian liberal goal of welfare and affluence for all through free market mechanisms. The complexities of life will always result in some hunters receiving more returns to their hunts and some individuals getting more tobacco from visiting anthropologists than others. Sharing does not abolish the conditions that produce unequal access to goods in the first place, but it provides humans with an appropriate ethical and practical stance towards this feature of the human condition, and this makes it an eminently ethical affair. I argue that it is this aspect which provides sharing with its specific ethical content different

---

2 This distinction between morality and ethics follows Knud Løgstrup ([1972] 1989: 59) who argued that moralism is in some ways the opposite of ethics: ‘Moralism is the way of morality to be immoral’ (Løgstrup [1972] 1989: 59, my translation). When we see others who suffer, Løgstrup says, we may spontaneously feel compassion, a spontaneous expression of being, which he called ‘sovereign expressions of life’ (or, in the original Danish, ‘suveræne livsytringer’). We can also decide to distance ourselves from those who suffer by replacing the co-pain with indignation, a moral complaint that the others (or someone) did something wrong so that as a consequence they are now in a deplorable situation. But indignation and moral outrage is ultimately a form of aggression, Løgstrup argues. The ethical demand is not about applying norms but about responding spontaneously.



from that of other modes of transfer, be they gift giving, pooling, or market exchange.

### Sharing is not the same as the morality of altruism

In the previous section, I argued against the notion that sharing was a distributive evolutionary mechanism devoid of an ethical dimension. I also hinted at the fact that this ethical dimension should not be confused with sharing being solely a matter of prescribed morality. San who hide tobacco are not in any ethical disagreement about the fact that sharing is about realising and performing what is good, as, for example, sharing food and drink that nourishes a person, sharing a smoke, or providing company. When they demand tobacco from one another, they perform what Løgstrup ([1956] 1997) calls 'the ethical demand'. In this context Løgstrup also refers to 'the silent demand', thus a demand that is not only non-verbalised but intrinsically an ethical demand, in his view, because it emerges whenever humans meet as embodied beings. Løgstrup describes the silent ethical demand as being created by the presence of a person in need. He uses episodes from novels to illustrate many of his theoretical points, but the everyday practice of many hunter-gatherers in fact provides a perfect illustration for what he describes. In this practice the ethical demand is not about declaring (morally) what is good but is primarily about consummating (ethically) what is good. It is fundamentally a matter of ethics from which moral rules may be derived (and not vice versa). As soon as we stop talking about declared 'motives' and instead move on to desirable 'grounds', we move from morality as a surface phenomenon to the underlying ethics. My motives are none of the others' business (see Løgstrup [1972] 1989: 183). In fact, it seems that it is important for the stability of a central social practice such as sharing that it is not built on moral intentions or particular motives which are potentially feeble and unreliable but that it is rather grounded in underlying ethical structures.

This matches the comparative ethnography: sharing here emerges as not primarily being about a motive. You need not be a self-declared altruist or a devout giver of alms in order to be good at sharing. We see this in so many instances of demand sharing which often manifests itself in tolerated scrounging, allowing others to take, and so forth. The motivation in sharing is not predetermined in these cases. In fact, in sharing practices the motives of the giver are often unknown and excluded from consideration and amongst the San they are certainly understated. For them what counts is the task ahead. Sharing is practically defined by what it achieves, which is reflected when we define it anthropologically along the lines of 'enlarging the circle of people who have access to what is valued' or of 'allowing others to take'.

Neither in social practice nor in anthropological theory is sharing defined with regard to a moral norm, such as the golden rule 'do to others what

you would have them do to you’ or ‘do-ut-des’ (I give so that you give) or any similar principle. This also emerges from my ethnography with Hailom San in Namibia, but it has been noted more widely as we have numerous ethnographic accounts that show quite explicitly that sharing does not presuppose particular moral motives. Take Fred Myers’s (1988) account of Pintupi Australian Aboriginal sharing, for instance: everyone amongst the Pintupi knows well that others try to hide things so that they do not have to give up what they value themselves. But that does not prevent sharing from going ahead, however reluctantly, and it does not prevent that the practice can continue. Pintupi are not indignant about others who may not have the moral motivation to help others, but they are taking an ethical stance by demanding that those who have should, in the end, let go of whatever it is that others need. This underlines sharing as practical ethics. A corresponding morality can be a complement, but it need not be. It does not depend on your moral conviction but rather on your practical response when realising that we live in a universe that produces injustices all the time, a universe that is (and will always be) inhabited with haves and have-nots. Morality, which is often instrumentalised to flag and defend group boundaries, may in fact undermine the universalising that is characteristic for the ethics of sharing. To spell out this difference in more detail, it is useful to take a short excursion into the philosophy of ethics.

#### Universalised mutuality – not generalised reciprocity

How does the ethics of sharing differ from ethical concerns and moral norms that have been discussed with regards to commoning and pooling? It is helpful here to draw a sharper distinction between generalising and universalising, both of which have been discussed in the literature on ethics. The ‘contextual ethics’ of Løgstrup’s work (see Eriksen 2020) provide a particularly promising starting point for this. In Løgstrup’s scheme, ‘generalising’ is about rules without exceptions, generalised for ‘the many’: many participants and many situations (Løgstrup 1989: 59–60). Taxation, commons, many digital platforms, and other collective pooling examples work on that basis. The logic of generalisation is to determine at an abstract level as to who is part of the same group (or part of the extended self, in Belk’s conceptualisation; see below). This can involve those who are very close, but in fact it can also involve those who are physically very distant as long as they are in the right category. Many pools and commons are predicated on membership, citizenship if you will, but not necessarily on situations of need.

By definition, these forms of pooling do not go well with singularising and attention to the particulars of a situation because the pool is ‘blind’ towards the particulars: at least ideally, you pay tax because you are in a certain category, a bracket of those earning above a certain threshold amount of money,

not because of a particular personality trait or the specific life situation you find yourself in. If there were a tax that would pick on such a singular criterion, it would be deemed unjust. Sharing resources, by contrast, follows the logic of universalisation (and in that sense, too, Sahlins got it seriously wrong when he subsumed sharing under the label ‘generalised reciprocity’). Sharing could be called ‘ethically universalised giving’ in contradistinction to ‘generalised giving’ because the ethical guideline here is something like ‘You should do the same when faced with the same situation’ (see Løgstrup [1972] 1989: 65). This is exactly what we find in the so-called ‘waves of sharing’ which have so often been described in the ethnography and which I was also able to observe: A big animal is slaughtered. There is a first wave of sharing for those who participated in the kill. They take the stuff back to camp, where immediately there is a second wave of sharing with those who provided the arrows to the successful hunter or information on the whereabouts of animals. Then folks start cooking and, once that is done, another wave of sharing is set in motion that involves anyone who happens to be around and who is hungry, even those who had no part in the hunt at all. The wave of sharing continues. If you do not have, you are given, but then you become someone who has and when you encounter someone else who does not have, it is your turn to share from that which you received in sharing. This is universalised in the sense that it applies to anyone who finds him/herself in that situation, indiscriminately of status or membership. But it is not generalised to a category of people or statistically generalised in the sense of you have to give up 10% of your harvest to the landlord or 25% as tax to the state, or a fixed amount of your salary as a contribution to the pension fund, and so forth. These latter examples are generalisations that rely on principles of ‘apportionment’. The sharing examples, by contrast, are examples of universalising across sharing events that constitute similar situations and constellations.

As Løgstrup ([1972] 1989: 59) points out convincingly, in terms of ethics this is a major conceptual difference. Generality means no exceptions from the accepted rules, irrespective of circumstances (for Løgstrup this constitutes a moralist, not an ethical stance). Universality, by contrast, can work without reference to abstract rules. All that universality means in ethics is: ‘I am not an exception, you are not an exception. We can change roles any time. I receive a share now, I may be asked a share tomorrow. There is no privilege that exempts me (or you) from these roles; there is no disciplining that bars me (or you) from any of these roles.’ To say that we can change roles (or imagine changing roles) is different from saying, ‘You and me are the same, we are always in the same category or pool’. In fact, the notion of changing roles assumes some minimal distance between roles but also between persons and their roles.

All of this allows us to distinguish two kinds of distance. One is ‘generalising/measured distance’ whereby the measures can be metric (like spatial

distance measured in meters) or kin-metric (close relatives versus generic kin). This distance follows the logic of generalising. Distance here is always between ego and other. However, there is another mode of distance, ‘universalising distance’. Here it is not the distancing from an ‘ego’ to an ‘other’ but rather your ability to take distance from yourself. It is the intrinsic distance to a universe that is equidistant from me and from you and that is not ideal for either of us. Being able to distance (ex-centre) from yourself is a move of universalising, of being able to put yourself in the shoes of others because one shares the same universe in which humans have an ex-centric position (see Plessner 1980). Let us now return to the ethnography to see how this fresh conceptualisation of presence and distance works out in practice.

### The ethical shape of sharing: sharing and presence

Having established above that sharing is neither a mere technical mechanism of distribution nor to be confused with moralism and generalised generosity, we still need to establish what exactly gives sharing its particular ethical shape, in the case at hand and more generally. If sharing as practice can range from providing food, tobacco, or other material means of subsistence to coming for a visit and keeping company, what unites all these instances ethically?

The cover of the paperback edition of my 2017 book *Anthropology and the Economy of Sharing* is an artist’s rendition of a video still from a sequence of sharing that I filmed in the course of my field research in northern Namibia (see Figure 2). Just like Tsab whom I mentioned in the opening vignette, the people shown belong to a group of San who call themselves †Akhoe Hai||om. I have accompanied them over the last thirty years as their hunter-gatherer lifestyle has been transforming, largely through attempts by the Namibian state to make them sedentary and effectively to turn them into farm laborers and welfare recipients. More precisely, what the situation in Figure 2 depicts is locally known as a practice called †gona, which translates as ‘hanging around waiting for a share’. There is a lot of †gona going on in Hai||om social life and there are parallels for this kind of behaviour which have been reported from many parts of the world where extensive sharing is practiced. It is a version of demand sharing that is a silent demand. It is important to underline here, though, that we are not simply talking about an ‘unvoiced’ demand expressed by a gesture. A ‘silent demand’ here means that the mere presence of those who lack certain things constitutes an ethical demand. Whilst Laws (2021:11), who also worked with San in southern Africa, sees demands as limited to friends and to be absent from distinct transactions amongst family, I would argue that we are dealing with a continuum. The continuum ranges from a voiced demand, across forms of voiceless (gestured) demands to those that are based on close social and spatial presence

alone. The ethical content, I argue, is independent of the particular form of an explicit or implicit demand. They are all examples of what counts as the ethical demand as defined by Løgstrup, spelt out above.



Figure 2: ‘Hanging around waiting for a share’ in northern Namibia. Video still: T. Widlok.

As I have explored in more detail elsewhere (see Widlok 2017), being present here matters; it is critical for sharing to take place. Moreover, the specific forms of presence involved also help to distinguish sharing from gift giving (or from almsgiving, for that matter): sharing at my field site was clearly associated not only with ‘hanging around waiting for a share’ but more generally with co-presence that would regularly trigger sharing. It was very hard *not* to share if a person clearly in need was right there in front of you. By contrast, reserving things over time and space, which also happens in Hailom society from time to time, is, I suggest, a case of gift giving, not sharing, which has also very different ethical implications. Individuals may be sitting together making a knife, carving, and blacksmithing for days and they would say things like, ‘Oh, this is a gift for so and so’, a particular friend or kinsperson whom they were planning to visit in the future. Reserving that item for the other person, distant in time and space, marked that transfer as really special. It was not shared but it became part of a personal gift exchange relationship that forged particular bonds (see Woodburn 1998). Such gifts



initiated the obligations of giving, receiving, and returning the gift, just as Marcel Mauss (2002) would have it.

By contrast, the sharing I observed was very different from the description of gift exchange by Mauss. It had to be extended to anyone who happened to be around. So when making knives, for instance, you would need a fire and bellows for blacksmithing and there was very little you could do to prevent others from sitting down at the same fire, joining you in blacksmithing, sharing the fire that you made, making use of your bellows, and sharing what I call *Halbzeug* (half-finished stuff), pieces of iron that have been worked on, not completed, and then temporarily discarded, allowing others to pick them up to work on and maybe to put them down again (see Widlok 2022a). A forging fire and a Haillom camp will be surrounded by these items which have been brought there by somebody and left there for others to take. This corresponds with what I include in my definition of sharing, namely as ‘allowing others to take’ and ‘allowing others to access what is valued’ (see Widlok 2013).

Note that I am not proposing that the embodiment of presence is only important in the specific San contexts, or only in small-scale face-to-face societies for that matter. Quite the contrary, I maintain that it is not difficult to find corresponding examples from ‘the urban West’ (see Widlok 2019). A modern example of such sharing is, for instance, free access to the internet that is granted in public places, for instance at railway stations. This shared access is very much tied to my presence in the train or on the station platform. I cannot claim internet connection time and take it home with me.<sup>3</sup>

Contrast that with an urban example of gift giving, for instance bonus programmes for long-term customers. Again, if you as a train passenger rode a certain number of miles on the network, you would get free gift vouchers to use in the train’s board bistro or even to pay the train fare for someone accompanying you. As with other bonus schemes, these are not convincingly considered sharing. Rather, they are instances of gift giving because these are attempts to create a special bond between companies and their customers: customers get the bonus because of they have previously shown allegiance to the company. Not everyone gets the bonus; it is earmarked for faithful customers only and it is typically personalised so that only these specific customers can use the extra minutes, miles, or whatever it is they are given by the company that wants to cement the bond they have. The ethics of these gifts is a contractual, binding relationship of friends or members, detached from spatial presence, creating a virtual bond instead. Typically,

3 Up until recently, at least in the Netherlands and Germany, free internet access was limited to those actually sitting on a train; it was not available within the train station. So if you were in the train station in Utrecht, you would see me and others sitting on a platform preparing emails on our electronic devices. Whenever a train pulled in, we would quickly login for free into the train’s access point and send off these emails before the train left the station again.



these gifts can be accumulated and kept across time and space, at least for some extended period.

A first element of the particular shape of an ethics of sharing is, therefore, its relation to the here and now of those who are involved. But this relation is more than a correlation between 'being there' and 'sharing'. It is more dynamic. It is not just a correlation between spatial nearness and sharing but it is an active 'anchoring' of sharing in the here and now that is done repeatedly and even routinely. This requires some explanation because there have been attempts to force a straightforward linear relation between presence and modes of transfer. In Sahlins's (1988) much cited scheme of reciprocity, sharing only occurred with those with whom you are very close. However, ethnographically such a simple correlation does not hold: it is not necessarily the case that the closer people are and the more intimate presence there is, the more sharing there is. Attempts to hide things from fellows (as in the instance of the two tobacco pouches) are also found amongst close relatives and close neighbours – although hiding is more difficult to realise when a life space is shared closely, as in a small camp. Again, this is not only the case amongst the San. Myers (1988) noted the same tendency to try and hide something from close fellow residents and family amongst indigenous Australians.

Still, there is a strand of research (notably in consumer studies) in which sharing is theorised exactly in this way. For instance, in Russel Belk's view, sharing is essentially giving to oneself; it is not an exchange at all because it takes place within the boundaries of who is part of your 'extended self' (Belk 2010; see Widlok 2019). Who exactly is part of your extended self may be culturally variable, but in principle Belk argues the following: whoever you are closest with, you share most with. His prototypical example is the family fridge that is open to all members of the family to take things from. And in my book-length discussion of sharing I have suggested that examples from student flat shares (in Japan) are similar, too (see Widlok 2017). But here a word of caution is in order: most examples of the extended self, I want to argue, should actually be classified as examples of pooling rather than sharing. Pooling and sharing are closer to one another than, say, reciprocal gift exchange and sharing, but I still think it is good to treat them as separate analytic terms. Many issues discussed under the label of communalism/communism are, in fact, issues of pooling and not of sharing. For pooling, I would argue, distance (or closeness) matters in the sense that you are either in or out, member or non-member, within the circle or outside the circle, which is like 'having presence' or 'not having presence' as a status; it follows the generalising logic (see above). Sharing, by contrast, is not about membership within or without the circle but all about dynamically widening the circle of those who have access. It is not about status and membership nor about absolute closeness in that sense. Following the logic of universal-

ising (as explained above), it is not simply about ‘being close’ but rather it is performative, a practice of ‘making yourself present’, of ‘allowing others to be present’, and of ‘allowing others access to what is present’. This is more than a semantic subtlety because, practically, ‘allowing others to be present’ is something entirely different from ‘being an insider’. Making yourself present is a move that requires the interplay between those who present themselves and their needs and those who recognise those needs and allow others to be present and therefore to be considered legitimate claimants. Demand sharing is based on performatively recognising that one shares the same demands of everyday life as others. Compare this to a gated community, which is a perfect example for a pool, in this case pooling privileged access to an enclosed garden and other facilities of the estate. As I have shown elsewhere, the gated community is also the perfect example of how to disable sharing in urban planning (Widlok 2019). The same is true for changes affecting the San camps in Namibia. Many of Tsab’s neighbours, in their process of becoming farm labourers, have started using sheets of corrugated iron for constructing little inner courtyards around their cooking fire. These courtyards create distance insofar as they keep visitors at bay and decrease the opportunity for *#gona* and other forms of demanding a share. Those who use enclosures have less need of carrying things around in secret pouches. However, whilst pouches are an individual affair, the enclosures made of corrugated iron foster the pooling of resources, separating an inside from an outside or, rather, creating an inside/outside boundary through distancing. It is therefore important, in the next section, to investigate more closely the relation between sharing and distance, complementing that between sharing and presence.

### The ethical shape of sharing: sharing and distance

If presence is not a one-dimensional affair, if it is not only about being close versus being far away, we need to spell out all the dimensions that are involved. As we have seen, the claim ‘the closer and the more intense the presence, the more frequent and intense the sharing’ does not necessarily hold because presence is not only spatially constituted in interpersonal encounters. Genealogical distance, for instance, is reconcilable with creating a presence that enables sharing. San engage in demand sharing also with non-kin or distant kin. Sharing is, therefore, not impossible under conditions of genealogical or other forms of categorical distance since we can draw people near to us (also through sharing) who are otherwise distant. Practices of kinning, of drawing people closer through establishing kin relations, are the main strategies of overcoming such distance. Kin-talk, calling someone by kin terms, is a strategy commonly applied (see Widlok 2004), as are more complex arrangements such as forms of adoption (Stutzriemer 2019) or extending the kin idiom across ethnic boundaries by using namesakes or making clan

identities compatible (Widlok 2000). Spatial and genealogical distance may create obstacles in the process of sharing, but these are not insurmountable. In fact, these distances are a common feature of all social life and there are routine ways of dealing with them, of bridging space, and of overcoming genealogical or ethnic boundaries.

Generally speaking, hunter-gatherers are not collectivists (see Widlok 2022b) – they do not pool their labour, their political power, or their property – but rather recognise that individuals may own property and consider it acceptable to defend possessing personal items, including personal convictions, plans, and heterodox ideas. In this context, demand sharing is typically directed at things that people can ‘spare’, either temporarily as part of lending or permanently. Demands made on items that individuals not only own but also possess, in the sense of using it regularly (for instance the clothes they wear), can reasonably be deflected and rejected. In many contexts this goes hand in hand with valuing personal autonomy highly and with an aversion to being forced into collective regimes. There are many ethnographic reports indicating that San (and other hunter-gatherers) are averse to being reduced to the status of a ‘follower’ who has to do what others say (see Silberbauer 1982: 29; and other contributions in Leacock and Lee 1982). The ambivalence of pooled resources is that pooling is always also about enclosing a space for transfers since the pool is demarcated with regard to a specific membership or a circle of beneficiaries, whilst sharing is intrinsically opening up a space for transfers. The refusal to pool resources has, again, been documented for many hunter-gatherers. Whilst sharing is maintained as a desirable practice, contributing to a pool is not necessarily valued positively in the same way (see Widlok 2019, 2022b). We may go as far as to argue that the hidden ‘second pouch’ is an expression of that attempt to maintain a degree of autonomy insofar as it secures individual authority over what one is planning to use up in the near future. Unlike pooled resources, for example seasonal harvests, which are either kept for future redistribution or as an accumulated good that can be converted into other forms of ‘capital’ such as authority and status, the hidden tobacco is not a ‘hoard’. It does not go beyond the ordinary use of the item and it is also not big enough to be turned into a form of economic capital that is easily converted into social capital, thus to make people dependent on you. Rather, the hidden pouch primarily helps to make sure that you yourself can keep going on tobacco for the foreseeable future until some new source of sharing tobacco will open up.

Lest it be assumed that tobacco is a rather special case of sharing, it is useful to introduce another example of San hiding items that I observed in the field and which I documented elsewhere: preparing underground burrows for a fruit that the Hailom call *!no-e* (*Strychnos pungens*, see Widlok 1999: 107). This fruit is harvested when it is still unripe and is placed into sand burrows. Covering the fruit with warm sand speeds up the ripening

process but also prevents animals (and other humans) to consume the highly prized sweet fruit whilst it is still on or under the fruit-growing tree. For the time that the fruit lies in the sandy hole and is still unripe, it is considered ‘private property’ in the sense that the owner of the burrow has the right to decide when to dig it up and bring it into the open. Once that decision is made, however, the now ripe *!no-e* is subject to sharing demands such as any other foodstuff would be. If no one happens to be around at the time, the person emptying the burrow will be able to consume everything themselves. If there are others around, the owner of the burrow will be able to keep a few but will have to part with the ‘excess’. The creation of such a storage, therefore, is not automatically judged as problematic or antisocial. Moreover, there is no discussion about the motives behind having such a storage; after all it helps the fruit to ripen and protects it from pests and animals. In that sense it is similar to putting tobacco in a safe place which keeps it dry and useful. Keeping *!no-e* in an underground burrow and keeping tobacco a pouch or a tin is, therefore, not intrinsically bad. Storage in itself is not ethically objectionable. The ethical issue emerges only when storage is kept out of reach despite legitimate demands having been made and by others in appropriate ways. Moving from individual to collective storage is not just a matter of gradual upscaling. Collective storage, even if only a small number of people are involved, would follow the logic of a ‘club economy’ in which ownership and access is always connected to membership (see Buchanan 1965), so that much of the social effort and the economic rationale is determined by membership issues. In other words, there is a qualitative difference between individual storing and collective storage.

### Sharing, gift giving, and autonomy

In my experience, San may happily gloss over the egoistical motive of anyone wanting to secure *!no-e* or other types of tasty food – as long as the owners are prepared to give up a share when the appropriate requests are made in a situation of ‘affluence’. Up until that point individual autonomy is protected and that includes the right to let go of things only begrudgingly. There is no moral expectation that people will happily give away what they are being asked for – as long as they share when the situation is right. Laws (2021) has recently observed for another San group that a sense of opacity, of concealing ill feelings and suspicions, is particularly pronounced amongst close relatives. Avoiding being confrontational, in my experience, includes not expressing suspicions of non-sharing directly but, rather, doing so indirectly in terms of gossip (see Widlök 2021 for details on the relation between opacity and autonomy). For the owners of desired objects, the easiest way of complying to expectations of sharing and individual autonomy at the same time is to avoid distribution in the form of handing things over ceremoniously. Rather

it is by ‘allowing others to take’ when they are present and when the item to be shared is present in sufficient quantity. In other words, the ethics is not about equal outcomes for everyone but rather equal opportunities for everyone to make a legitimate demand, to appropriately deal with such demands, and to give up things eventually when demands and responses lead to it.

When discussing ethical dilemmas with San (see Widlok 2009), it becomes clear that they, too, realise that under certain circumstances possessing a storage can be at conflict with the (maybe silent) demand of others who need whatever is being stored. But this is indeed considered a dilemma: keeping things in a safe place and for future enjoyment is good, but responding to legitimate demands is also good. In debates about such dilemmas, San tend not to invoke abstract principles but rather accept that any ethical judgement is only possible by attending to the concrete details of the case. If having is not intrinsically bad and giving is not intrinsically good, then it does depend on what exactly is kept, for how long, by whom, for whom, and so on, just as it is important to know what exactly is given, when, upon request by whom, and so on.

Thus, whilst creating presence is important for sharing to happen, the other half of the truth about sharing and presence is that a minimal distance in the sense of a zone of non-violation is being safeguarded.<sup>4</sup> Contrast that with many forms of gift giving which violate this distance. Here, at least in places like Melanesia and India, the ideology of the gift is actually that the transaction undoubtedly does interfere with the very identity of giver and recipient. You are someone else if you have given a lot: you become a Big Man in Melanesia and you become a lower caste member accumulating the impurity of the higher casts in India (see Busby 1997). This goes together with accountancy (and accountability) that goes into much of gift giving. During mortuary rituals in Melanesia, participants keep a painstaking public record of who gave what (see Levinson 2020). Chris Fowler’s (2004) graphic description of gift exchange indicates just how much such an exchange is expected to change the identity of giver and recipient, right to the core of their personhood and bodies, obtrusive and distanceless. Here there is indeed, to some degree, a violation of persons or personal boundaries. The integrity of persons is being violated, or at least substantially affected, by the gift exchange.

I have already alluded to the fact that the ethical question of sharing is not so much about how to apportion items to be given, about how much one owes to whom, but rather about how to respond to demands, not all of which can be fulfilled. In other words, in practical matters the typical starting point is not me sitting on a heap of meat (or some other hoarded stuff) that I need to allocate; rather, sharing starts much earlier with people making claims all

---

4 When looking for a corresponding term for this in Løgstrup’s philosophy, we find the notion of *ukrænkelighed* (personal inviolability) (Løgstrup [1972] 1989: 186).



the time, polite requests, open claims, silent demands, the whole lot. Having a second pouch of tobacco helps in fending off claims and helps to protect the autonomy of the sharer in a sharing event. In that process, the use of intermediaries and of avoiding a celebrated public giving event helps to protect the autonomy of the recipient.

The ethical problem of gift giving (and the shape of gift-giving ethics) is, therefore, quite different from that of sharing. The strategic problem of gift giving is what to give to whom. This is not only a strategic question – thus, what to give to whom in order to receive good returns. It is also one of morality in the sense that my selection of gift-giving partners is a public statement about who I draw close to me and who I keep at a distance. Physical distance can get fairly easily ignored or overcome in gift giving. I can have a gift waiting for you, even after my death – think of inheritance. But my giving typically infringes with your public presence: I can try to promote your status or damage you through gift giving, shaming you as in the *potlatch* or outrunning you and accumulating status at your cost in the *Kula*. My gift giving affects the relation between me, you, and others, and the consequences of that can indeed make gift giving an ethically highly intricate business.

By contrast, what counts – ethically – in sharing is not simply ‘presence’ in the naturalist sense of ‘proxemics’, which would mean the closer in physical space, the more sharing. Proxemics do matter insofar as bodily performativity is the main means whereby humans create presence. However, it is not the only way to create distance and closeness. Therefore, the ethical problem of sharing has to include presence also in the sense of social personhood. First, I have to recognise your presence as a social person and partner, then you have to recognise me in my attempt to make autonomous decisions, and then the modalities of sharing kick in. In everyday life, this mutual recognition is achieved through acts of greetings, of establishing mutual terms of address and other ways of recognising others as relevant persons, even if they are (temporarily) distant in terms of spatial proxemics. Acts of sharing, of allowing others to take, then help to maintain presence and to reassure one another of the mutual recognition as relevant persons.

## Conclusion

This contribution began with the counter-intuitive observation that hiding is often part and parcel of a successful economy of sharing. Moving towards a resolution of this apparent paradox requires us to understand that sharing is not a mere ‘technical’ adaptation. Sociobiology has for a long time treated sharing as something like an automatism that is in the self-interest of those who share (and therefore is not really an issue of morality or ethics) because it optimally distributes scarce resources for the benefit of the inclusive fitness of everyone involved. The ethnographic accounts of practices of hiding,



by contrast, underline that sharing is not mechanistic and that people often also have an interest in keeping things. Even in societies where a lot of sharing takes place, individuals can on occasions negate when others demand a share and they are not necessarily confronted directly when they attempt to hide things. Comparatively, 'granting others access to what is valued' (the definition of sharing employed here) varies in depth, width, intensity, and frequency. Therefore, positing an 'ultimate' fitness rationale as a driver for sharing is not enough to explain in which situation sharing takes place and to what degree. Here the ethical component of sharing needs to be spelt out.

I have argued that it is also not sufficient to think of the ethics of sharing in terms of a prescribed morality. The morality of altruism, which is often mentioned in this context, is not characteristic for many situations in which sharing takes place. Moral rules and norms of altruism are evidentially neither necessary nor sufficient for sharing to occur. My own findings support Pryor and Graburn (1980: 235) who found that empirically there was an inverse relationship between acclaimed generosity and actual acts of sharing: those who held up sharing in terms of morality were giving less in acts of sharing than those who questioned the prevalence of generosity (see Widlok 2017:20). Hence, sharing often does not occur where moral discourses demand it. In fact, the latter can cover up cases where little sharing takes place. Moreover, as the ethnography of hunter-gatherers shows, there are many cases where sharing takes place without a morality of charity or altruistic conviction. Here, strikingly, the motives of those who are involved are understated or not stated at all and may even be considered to be unknowable or oblique (see Laws 2021; Widlok 2021).

In this contribution, I have argued that moral discourse – as distinct from ethical practice – of prescribed giving is typically found in cases that are best described as 'commoning' or pooling resources (also called 'club economics'). These require a more or less clearly delimited 'pool' and 'commons' for which membership criteria and group boundaries and a morally prescribed solidarity within these boundaries have to be defined. The explanations of Løgstrup have proven useful in this regard since they allow us to differentiate the 'generalising' of moral rules in pooling practices from the 'universalising' taking place in sharing practices. Whilst generalising produces moral rules and principles for 'the many' (many participants and many situations), universalising can be reconciled with context-sensitivity since it only requires that a role reversal between giver and taker is accepted in its dependency on the actual circumstances. A universalising type of ethics matches what we find in sharing practices, specifically with regard to presence and distance. Whilst generalising requires measuring distance (between ego and other), universalising requires the ability to ex-centre one's position (to take distance from oneself).

The relation between presence/distance and sharing is intricate, as I have shown in this contribution. Earlier theories assumed that there is a tight linear correlation between increasing nearness and increasing sharing. On the basis of hunter-gatherer ethnography such a unilinear correlation is not warranted. Embodied presence is indeed an important ingredient of sharing practices. At the same time, hiding as an attempt to avoid sharing can occur between close relatives just as rather distant non-kin who are present can be drawn near through sharing practices. Closeness in the sense of 'being in the circle' (and keeping others out) may be appropriate to describe as a precondition for pooling or commons arrangements. Sharing, by contrast, always safeguards a degree of autonomy, which in turn means that participants can, through their acts, enlarge the circle of who is granted access or decide not to. This zone of non-violation is integral to the way in which sharing works, namely that it begins with an ethical demand (often a silent demand) to which those who have need to react. The need to respond to the needs of others is the ethical space of sharing. This space has its specific design. Above all, it recognises the right to demand a fair share, it comprises institutionalised waves of sharing in which providers and receivers can (and often do) exchange their roles, and it puts the onus on the provider to deal with the many forms of demands made, be they explicit or simply in terms of being present as a fellow person in need. If sharing was only possible in close relationships, or if it was the only possible response when being in close relations, then there would hardly be any acts of hiding and avoiding sharing to be observed across the spectrum. In other words, by placing sharing conceptually in an ethical space that is characterised by a degree of presence but also by a degree of minimal distance in terms of non-violating the autonomy of individuals, we can explain why hiding regularly occurs in social systems that are otherwise characterised by sharing.

### Acknowledgements

For the last three decades I have benefitted from numerous †Akhoe Haillom in northern Namibia who shared their lives with me. Without their patience and openness I would not have been able to reach my insights on sharing. I am also grateful to the sharing research group at the Department of Anthropology of Aarhus University, in particular for inviting me to their writing retreat to Klitgaarden in Skagen. Thanks also go to the anonymous reviewers.

## References

- Belk, Russel (2010) Sharing. *Journal of Consumer Research* 36 (5): pp. 715-34. <https://doi.org/10.1086/612649>
- Berman, Elise (2020) Avoiding Sharing: How People Help Each Other Get Out of Giving. *Current Anthropology* 61(2): pp. 229-239. <https://doi.org/10.1086/708068>
- Buchanan, James (1965) An Economic Theory of Clubs. *Economica* 32 (125): pp. 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2552442>
- Busby, Cecilia (1997) Permeable and Partible Persons: A Comparative Analysis of Gender and Body in South India and Melanesia. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 3 (2): pp. 261-278.
- Eriksen, Cecilie (2020) Contextual Ethics: Taking the Lead from Wittgenstein and Løgstrup on Ethical Meaning and Normativity. *SATS* 21 (2): pp. 141-158. <https://doi.org/10.1515/sats-2020-2009>
- Fowler, Chris (2004) *The Archaeology of Personhood. An Anthropological Approach*. London: Routledge.
- Jaeggi, Adrian and Michael Gurven (2013) Natural Cooperators: Food Sharing in Humans and Other Primates. *Evolutionary Anthropology* 22 (4): pp. 186-195. <https://doi.org/10.1002/evan.21364>
- John, Nicholas (2016) *The Age of Sharing*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Laws, Megan (2021) Demanding from Others: How Ancestors and Shamans Govern Opacity in the Kalahari. *Ethnos* 88 (4): pp. 702-723. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2021.2007156>
- Leacock, Eleanor and Richard Lee (1982) *Politics and History in Band Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Levinson, Stephen (2020) On 'Technologies of the Intellect'. Goody Lecture. Halle: Max Plank Institute for Social Anthropology.
- Løgstrup, Knud ([1956] 1997) *The Ethical Demand*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Løgstrup, Knud ([1972] 1989) *Norm und Spontaneität*. Tübingen: Mohr.
- Marlowe, Frank (2004) What Explains Hadza Food Sharing? In: Michael S. Alvard (ed.) *Socioeconomic Aspects of Human Behavioral Ecology*. Bingley: Emerald: pp. 69-88.
- Marshall, Lorna (1961) Sharing, Talking, and Giving: Relief of Social Tensions among !Kung Bushmen. *Journal of the International African Institute* 31 (3): pp. 231-49. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1157263>
- Mauss, Marcel (2002) *Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques. Edition électronique*.
- Myers, Fred (1988) Burning the Truck and Holding the Country: Property, Time, and the Negotiation Identity among Pintupi Aborigines. In: Tim Ingold, David Riches, and James Woodburn (eds.) *Hunters and Gatherers. Volume 2: Property, Power and Ideology*. Oxford: Berg: pp. 52-94.

- Peterson, Nicolas (1993) Demand Sharing: Reciprocity and the Pressure for Generosity among Foragers. *American Anthropologist* 95 (4): pp. 860-874. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1993.95.4.02a00050>
- Peterson, Nicolas (2013) On the Persistence of Sharing: Personhood, Asymmetrical Reciprocity, and Demand Sharing in the Indigenous Australian Domestic Moral Economy. *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 24 (2): pp. 166-176. <https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.12036>
- Plessner, Helmuth (1980) Grenzen der Gemeinschaft: Eine Kritik des sozialen Radikalismus. In: Helmuth Plessner, *Gesammelte Werke V*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp: pp. 7-133.
- Pryor, Frederic and Nelson Graburn (1980) The Myth of Reciprocity. In: Kenneth Gergen, Martin Greenberg, and Richard Willis (eds.) *Social Change. Advances in Theory and Research*. New York: Plenum Press: pp. 215-237.
- Sahlins, Marshall (1988). *Stone Age Economics*. London: Tavistock.
- Silberbauer, George (1982) Political Process in G!wi Bands. In: Eleanor Leacock and Richard Lee (eds.) *Politics and History in Band Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: pp. 223-235.
- Stutzriemer, Manja (2019) Nicht nur Opfer der Umstände: Zum Transfer von Kindern zwischen !Xun und Kwangali in Nkurenkuru (Namibia). *Paideuma* 65: pp. 173-189.
- Voland, Eckart (2007) *Die Natur des Menschen. Grundkurs Soziobiologie*. München: Beck.
- Widlok, Thomas (1999) *Living on Mangetti. 'Bushman' Autonomy and Namibian Independence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Widlok, Thomas (2000) Names that Escape the State: Haillom Naming Practices against Domination and Isolation. In: Peter Schweitzer, Megan Biesele, and Robert Hitchcock (eds.) *Hunters and Gatherers in the Modern Context. Conflict, Resistance and Self-Determination*. New York: Berghahn: pp. 361-379.
- Widlok, Thomas (2004) Sharing by Default? Outline of an Anthropology of Virtue. *Anthropological Theory* 4 (1): pp. 53-70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499604040847>
- Widlok, Thomas (2009) Norm and Spontaneity: Elicitation with Moral Dilemma Scenarios. In: Monica Heintz (ed.) *The Anthropology of Moralities*. Oxford: Berghahn: pp. 20-45.
- Widlok, Thomas (2013) Sharing: Allowing Others to Take What is Valued. *HAU* 3 (2): pp. 11-31. <https://doi.org/10.14318/hau3.2.003>
- Widlok, Thomas (2017) *Anthropology and the Economy of Sharing*. London: Routledge.

- Widlok, Thomas (2019) Extending and Limiting Selves: A Processual Theory of Sharing. In: Noa Lavi and David E. Friesem (eds.) *Towards a Broader View of Hunter-Gatherer Sharing*. Cambridge: McDonald Institute: pp. 25-38.
- Widlok, Thomas (2021) Original Power Pointing: Legibility and Opacity in the Deictic Field. *Ethnos* 88 (4): 819-836. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2021.1981971>
- Widlok, Thomas (2022a) When Secondary is Primary: On Halbzeug and Other Objects of Continual Re-Evaluation. In: Hans Peter Hahn, Anja Klöckner, and Dirk Wicke (eds.) *Values and Revaluations. The Transformation and Genesis of 'Values in Things'*. Oxford: Oxbow: pp. 251-265.
- Widlok, Thomas (2022b) Näher dran oder mit genügend Abstand? Ethnologie in die Praxis getrieben. In: Roland Hardenberg, Thomas Widlok, and Josephus Platenkamp (eds.) *Ethnologie als angewandte Wissenschaft. Das Zusammenspiel von Theorie und Praxis*. Berlin: Reimer: pp. 45-60.
- Woodburn, James (1998) 'Sharing Is Not a Form of Exchange': An Analysis of Property-Sharing in Immediate-Return Hunter-Gatherer Societies. In: Chris Hann (ed.) *Property Relations. Renewing the Anthropological Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: pp. 48-63.

---

Thomas Widlok was awarded his MSc and PhD degrees in Anthropology at the London School of Economics and Political Science and worked at a number of universities and research institutions in Europe (including the United Kingdom). He is Professor for the Anthropology of Africa at the University of Cologne and life member of the Nordrhein-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Künste (Northrhine-Westphalian Academy of Sciences, Humanities and Arts). He is a specialist for comparative hunter-gatherer research with extensive ethnographic field research experience, but he is increasingly also working on social processes in the large-scale societies of the Global North. His recent (co-)edited books include *Scale Matters. The Quality of Quantity in Human Culture and Sociality* (2022), *The Situationality of Human-Animal Relations* (2018) and *Ethnologie als angewandte Wissenschaft* (2022). He also authored the entries on 'sharing' and on 'hunting and gathering' in the *Open Encyclopedia of Anthropology*.

## Sharing Being: Alterity and Sharing as an Existential Question amongst Kyrgyz Christian Converts

Maria Louw

### Blood and stones

I begin with Amir's story.<sup>1</sup> I had asked Aidina, a Kyrgyz woman in her late twenties, to meet up with me to hear her reflections on what it was like to be Christian in a Muslim-majority context, but she started elsewhere, with the story of her father, Amir. So this is where I begin.

Amir's story took us back in time to Kyrgyzstan in the 1990s, the years right after the collapse of the Soviet Union. During this turbulent period, when the world as people used to know it was replaced by something yet to come into being and when all sorts of hopes and fears for the future proliferated, missionaries from various Protestant churches settled in this country in which most people consider themselves to be Muslim. At some point – Aidina did not specify when – Amir met a German Baptist missionary who told him about the gospel and presented him with a Bible. Amir decided to read the Bible and its words eventually persuaded him to become a Christian.

Amir's parents had passed away young and Amir and his siblings grew up in an orphanage. But Amir remembered the name of the village in which he had been born, where his great-grandfathers had been imams at the mosque and where he still had relatives. Amongst the Kyrgyz, agnatic bloodlines play a central role in people's sense of, and claims to, identity and belonging (Ismaïlbekova 2017; Light 2018) and Aidina suspected that it was the blood ties that drew her father back to his place of birth. In any case, as a married adult man, Amir decided to move there together with his wife and two children to share the gospel with his kinsmen. But people in the village did not welcome him and did not appreciate his talking about Jesus. Orthodox Christianity has a long history in Kyrgyzstan, one that goes back to the incorporation of Central Asia into the Russian empire in the nineteenth century, and is generally accepted as the faith of Kyrgyzstanis of Russian background.<sup>2</sup> Yet, other Christian denominations and their evangelising efforts are commonly perceived as a threat to the community and the values that hold it together. They are referred to as 'sects', a concept most often used in binary opposition to 'church' or 'religion' and with connotations of something covert and sinister.

---

1 Amir and all other names in this article are pseudonyms.

2 According to the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, in 2021 there were 341.351 ethnic Russians in Kyrgyzstan out of a population of 6636.803 (NSC n.d.).



Christian converts are commonly understood to have betrayed their Muslim faith, community, and ancestors. Stories circulate about Christians who have been ostracised, beaten up, and even murdered and who, upon their death, were refused burial in the communal graveyards.

What Aidina remembered most vividly from the family's time in her father's village of birth was the sound of stones being thrown at their windows when she had gone to sleep and the image of the sink outside their house stained with blood: not a day passed when her father was not beaten up and had to wash blood off his face. One day, as Amir was feeding the family's animals and using a pitchfork, some people passed by, one of them leading a horse. Suddenly, the horse reared and jumped, scared by the pitchfork. This made the owner furious and he accused Amir of wanting to kill the horse. The men grabbed Amir, tied him to the horse by his legs, and made the horse run, dragging him along the stony road – as if they were playing *kok boru*, a traditional game where players on horseback chase a goat carcass. The family found him 300 metres from the house, alive but in great pain and the sink, once again, was stained with his blood.

### Sharing being

My concern in this article is the sharing of being: it is the existential question of what a person shares with others by virtue of her very thrownness. I understand 'thrownness' in the phenomenological sense as the circumstance of finding oneself being born as human in a particular place, into a particular family, and in a particular moment in history (Heidegger [1927] 1996). 'Thrownness' captures circumstances which may shape a person to the core, but which may also remain a mystery she may spend a lifetime trying to understand and name (cf. Meinert and Grøn 2020). When Aidina was asked to talk about herself, she felt she had to begin her story with the fact that she was born as Amir's daughter, weaving the story of her life together with the story of her father's life. She grounded her own being in what were open questions for her: Why did he have to move back to the village? Why was he drawn there by blood ties that, in the end, did not really seem to matter? And what did all of this have to do with what it meant to be Christian and Kyrgyz, to share a faith, or to share family bonds?

I had asked Aidina to meet up with me to hear her story. But not only did her story start with her father, she kept returning to it and to her own early childhood memories from the village. She spoke about her later experiences growing up in Bishkek in bits and pieces and only because I kept asking about them. Here, sitting at a table in a noisy café in the Dordoi shopping centre in Bishkek where crowds of people were passing by and where most of them, as she reasoned, did not really care whether she was Christian or Muslim, it was still the sound of stones thrown at the windows of her family's house and the

image of blood in the sink that animated her stories about being Christian. ‘Believers are not promised an easy life. You will go through difficult moments. This was what Jesus said in the Bible,’ she reasoned, recalling what her father had told her one evening when she and her brother had once again been told to stay in the room furthest from the front door so that whoever might come to the house would not find the children first. But in Bishkek, she said, life *was* relatively easy, also for a Christian: there were quite a lot of churches and many Christians. And yet she was often haunted by a feeling that she did not really belong amongst them.

*During my father’s time, people evangelised through stories, but nowadays people evangelise the younger generation through different training programmes: how to be rich; how to be successful; how to get abroad; how to study foreign languages. This is what [young people] are interested in. But in my father’s time it was different: they evangelised through stories or just talked about the Bible. That was enough.*

Questions about what we share with others by virtue of our very being often confront us with urgency – become existentially salient – in liminal situations where we are faced with alterity amidst the familiar, when the world becomes porous and mouldable where we thought it was most solid. For Amir, the agnatic bonds that, as Aidina reasoned, drew him back to his birth village lost their grounding potency and he ended up leaving again, together with his wife and children. Now, at the café in Bishkek, Aidina also seemed to be haunted by the feeling that what grounded her being was less solid than she had thought. She was born and raised in a Christian family and community, but what did she share with her fellow Christians if they were seeking Christianity as a way of gaining worldly wealth and success rather than for love of the gospel? Could she be Christian in a world where Christianity, so it seemed, had become tied to dreams about global networks and career opportunities, when her Christian world was marked by blood in the sink and stones thrown at the window? What did she share with the Christians she admired for standing up for their faith in the face of persecution and suffering when the people to whom she talked about her faith here in Bishkek most often reacted with an indifferent shrug?

What do we share as human beings, what can we possibly share, and what are the limits of sharing? What do we share when we share a faith? When we share family bonds? When we belong to the same generation? Or the same nation? Questions like these permeated the reflections of Kyrgyz evangelical Christians of Muslim background and the children of Christian converts whom I interviewed and had conversations with over the last couple of years. My project focused on the experiences of being Christian and Kyrgyz in a context where understandings of Islam are very closely tied to

understandings of Kyrgyznes. In this context, the act of adopting another faith is often seen, by others, as a rejection of one's family, community, and ancestors; that is, of what, in the Kyrgyz context, is commonly seen as grounding one's very being.<sup>3</sup>

This article pursues two aims: first, to offer a phenomenologically oriented approach to religious 'conversion' that stays with the ambiguity, trouble, and doubt so central to many Christians in this context; and, second, to contribute to the anthropology of sharing by understanding sharing as an existential theme which may be central to conversion experiences. Sharing often came up in conversations with my interlocutors, all members of evangelical Christian communities in Bishkek and Karakol, when they spoke about their efforts to find a place of belonging in the liminal spaces between worlds that were marked by concepts that appeared solid and self-evident: 'Christian', 'Kyrgyz', and 'Muslim'.

Anthropologists have long been critical of the concept of 'conversion' and the way it suggests an absolute crossing of religious boundaries and a complete personal transformation. Instead, they have pointed out that processes where people are drawn to, and embrace, other faiths and/or denominations are often much more complex, less absolute, and often reversible (see, for example, Buckser and Glazier 2003; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; Pelkmans 2009, 2010). In the introduction to the anthology *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion* (Buckser and Glazier 2003), Diane Austin-Broos, building on Victor Turner's ideas about liminality, suggested that we approach conversion as a 'form of passage' that is not an absolute breach, but which does usually imply a consistent course and orientation (Austin-Broos 2003). Whilst I am more reluctant than Austin-Broos to see the course and orientation of 'conversion' as 'consistent' (as I explain below), I do find the term 'passage' to be illuminating for the cases I discuss here and, more generally, for a phenomenologically oriented approach to 'conversion'. The term 'passage', Austin-Broos argued, is a suggestion to think of the quest for human belonging as a central dimension of conversion, conversion being 'a type of passage that negotiates a place in the world': a world experienced as turbulent or constraining or, in some way, as wanting in value (Austin-Broos 2003: 2). If there was one thing my interlocutors seemed to share, it was indeed a sense of disorientation and a longing for belonging. They yearned for their being to be 'integrated with and integral to a wider field of Being' (Jackson 2002: 12)

---

3 The project formed part of the larger interdisciplinary research project entitled 'Ethics after Individualism: Phenomenological Explorations of Moral Community'. The project was supported by the Independent Research Fund Denmark. I conducted fieldwork amongst members of evangelical Christian communities in Bishkek and Karakol during several research stints in the period from 2020 to 2022. This article draws on this fieldwork and several stints of long-term fieldwork conducted in Kyrgyzstan between 2006 and 2018 that focused on everyday religion, secularism, and atheism.

that was welcoming to them and the values and virtues they saw as central to who they were (cf. Odgaard 2022). I wish to add an aspect that is not apparent in Austin-Broos's approach, maybe because of her debt to Victor Turner whose ideas about liminality imply a relatively stable world into which those undergoing a liminal state are eventually reintegrated (Turner 1967). It is the aspect that the 'passage' of conversion sometimes gives rise to experiences of alterity that are not easily contained within the horizons of possibility provided by such a world. In other words, a 'passage' may be an opening to a place whose contours are not clear; and sometimes those undergoing it may be unsure of what kind of world they are moving in and where the 'passage' is leading them to. Aidana was born into a Christian family but still saw herself as being on a 'passage' to Christianity, figuring out what it means to share a Christian faith.

Engaging with insights from the phenomenological tradition, I explore encounters with alterity as central to the efforts of Kyrgyz Christians on their passage of finding a place of belonging in the world and, in the larger perspective, as central to the experience of sharing as an existential theme. For this I draw, first, on Bernhard Waldenfels's (2011) responsive phenomenology, in which alterity plays a central role, and, second, on Cheryl Mattingly's (2018) use of Waldenfels to conceptualise ordinary life as a privileged site for exploring ethical possibility. Their theories allow me to emphasise how experiences of alterity draw us in, emplacing us in openings to worlds that we need to find our orientation in before the experiences are made the object of reflection and conceptualisation. Furthermore, their theories will help me to emphasise how, in reflections on such experiences, ontological and ethical questions are often intimately intertwined. For Amir, for example, the question of what he shared with his relatives was not an abstract question he pondered over through distanced reflection; it concerned his very existence and its relation to the existence of others, namely the sharing of being. In anthropology, liminal experiences are often understood as temporary and thus as prompting the urge to repair, to find solid ground, to return to a world where things are in their proper place. But sometimes one may want to hold on to possibility, caring for alterity in the shadows of one's being. I argue that this is what my interlocutors often did and that such caring for alterity found its way into their stories through images (Stevenson 2014 and 2020), which allowed ambiguity and doubt to linger. Finally, I argue that a phenomenological approach to conversion suggests that we may experience the sharing of being most intensively when alterity draws us in, emplacing us in horizons of possibility whose contours are not yet clear, before they are conceptualised, and whilst indeterminacy still reigns. Before I develop this argument, let me describe the context of Kyrgyzstan to provide a better understanding of why being Kyrgyz is intimately bound up for many with being Muslim and why so

many consider a passage away from Islam and towards Christianity to be so controversial.

### Evangelical Christianity in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan

The years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Kyrgyzstan's independence in 1991 saw an influx of missionaries from a variety of Protestant Christian denominations. They benefitted from what was initially a relatively liberal policy of non-interference by the state in religious matters (McBrien and Pelkmans 2008; Radford 2015). Yet, the ease with which the missionaries entered Kyrgyzstan did not mean that the people they strove to evangelise approved of their activities or that conversion to Christianity was easily accepted by the families, relatives, and neighbours of the new converts. During Soviet rule, anti-religious policies and measures meant that, for many Kyrgyz Muslims, the practice of Islam became largely confined to the private sphere. Islam came to be associated, notably, with the performance of lifecycle rituals such as weddings, circumcisions, and funerals, all central to community life and often congruent with what was perceived to be markers of ethnic identity, promoted by Soviet nationalities policies (Khalid 2007; McBrien 2009; McBrien and Pelkmans 2008; Tett 1994). On the one hand, as Mathijs Pelkmans (2017: 128) pointed out, 'the resulting "cultural Islam" was largely devoid of Islamic knowledge and religious effervescence, and therefore vulnerable to subsequent post-Soviet challenges'. On the other hand, it may be exactly because Islam, in local understandings, was closely entangled with notions of ethnicity and community that religious conversion caused such a great uproar amongst families and communities: participating in Muslim ritual life is seen as a way of paying respect to one's family, community, and ancestors (Borbieva 2012: 51; Louw 2022; Privratsky 2001). Embracing a different faith would, therefore, be perceived by many as an act of betrayal, not merely of Islam but of those, in the present and in the past, to whom one owes one's life and existence. Christian evangelists who proselytised tended to be perceived as sinister people who lured the younger generations into such acts of betrayal through promises of salvation and worldly success (Borbieva 2012; McBrien and Pelkmans 2008; Radford 2015: 25). Indeed, in the years following independence it became common amongst Kyrgyz people to explain the relative popularity of Christian churches with reference to the economic and social opportunities and hopes for a better future they seemed to offer in particular the younger generations through the provisioning of English classes and various social clubs, through scholarships and job opportunities, and through their connections to global networks (Borbieva 2012).<sup>4</sup> As Aidina's reflections indicate, such explanations are not entirely unfound-

4 In 2007, Mathijs Pelkmans estimated that there were around 20,000 Kyrgyz converts to Christianity (Pelkmans 2007). Numbers are difficult to estimate, however, as census data do not exist.



ed and resonate even amongst Christians, who may be concerned that the access to opportunities provided by Christian organisations may lead people to embrace Christianity for the ‘wrong’ reasons (cf. also Borbieva 2012).

Some of the more conspicuous reactions to evangelical Christian proselytising and conversion – beatings, killings, attacks on church buildings, the refusal of burial in community cemeteries (cf. also Peyrouse 2007; Radford 2015: 34) – have been the subject of media coverage in Kyrgyzstan. Most do not reach the news, however. My interlocutors spoke about rumours that claimed they had organised rituals in which they drank human blood and ate babies; some converts related how their mothers had had a nervous breakdown or how their fathers had thrown them out of the house or had burnt their Bibles when told about their conversions; others gave accounts of how they were rejected by their families; and yet others about how they were ‘kidnapped’ and kept hostage by their families or taken to the *moldos* (local Muslim authorities) to free them from Christian ‘brainwashing’. The converts experienced these as acts of persecution and repression but those carrying them out considered these measures necessary as acts of care to protect the families and communities. Some of my interlocutors emphasised how they were continuously and persistently engaged in efforts to disentangle the perceived close link between Kyrgyzness and Muslimness, trying to persuade families and community members that practices that are associated with Islam in local culture are, rather, expressions of Kyrgyz culture and custom and could thus be fully compatible with Christianity (cf. Pelkmans 2007).<sup>5</sup> Others rather continued to participate in the ritual life of their communities, doing what they could to accommodate local conceptions of Muslimness whilst silently praying in their own way and to their own God as not to create problems for their families.

As Aidina’s reflections suggest, Christian converts tend to experience more freedom and tolerance in a big city like Bishkek, which is characterised by a much larger diversity of culture, religion, and lifestyle than many of the village communities from which converts originate. And yet Aidina’s reflections also indicate that a passage to Christianity may be everything but consistent in Bishkek and that it can be replete with experiences of alterity.

### Alterity and the opening to indeterminate horizons of possibility

Questions about alterity and questions about whether we, by mere virtue of being human, share the world or not have recently come to occupy many an-

5 The concept of *musulmanchiliq* (Muslimness) is commonly used in Kyrgyzstan to refer to Muslim virtue and what it means to be a good Muslim. Sometimes the concept is used in order to distinguish local ways of understanding and practicing Islam from those of pietistic Muslim movements, which became increasingly visible and influential in the years after independence.



thropologists, not least in discussions around the so-called ontological turn. In a discussion of the ontological turn (Venkatesan et al. 2010), Martin Holbraad argued that anthropology as a discipline is primarily distinguished by ‘its peculiar investment in [...] “alterity”’ (Venkatesan et al. 2010: 180). What Holbraad and other proponents of the ‘ontological’ approach have argued for is an anthropology that reckons with profound human difference: an anthropology that does not try to explain away alterity by containing it within an already existing analytical approach but that allows alterity to ‘dictate the terms of its own analysis’ (Henare et al. 2007; Venkatesan et al. 2010: 180; Holbraad et al. 2014). This has led to several thought-provoking studies that have pushed the boundary between ethnography and theory in inspiring ways (see, for example, Holbraad 2012; Kohn 2013; Pedersen 2011).

Being confronted with alterity, however, is not peculiar to anthropologists. It is at the heart of the human experience, as has been emphasised in the phenomenological tradition in philosophy and in anthropology (Waldenfels 2011; Meinert and Grøn 2020; Mattingly 2018; Wentzer and Dyring 2021). As Thomas Schwarz Wentzer and Rasmus Dyring formulated it in a discussion of the difference between how alterity is understood in the ontological turn and in the phenomenological tradition,

*truly taking alterity seriously as a starting point for anthropological analysis would have to entail taking seriously that there are aspects of living a life that simply defy conceptualization and that such aspects – their radical ‘imponderability’ notwithstanding, or perhaps exactly due to this ‘imponderability’ – encroach with a certain unsettling force in the lived experience of being with others. Hence, to take alterity seriously would mean to take seriously not just the more or less well-formed ideas that people might hold, but equally to trace those elements of life in community with others that due to certain experienced formlessness elude conceptual formation all together. (Wentzer and Dyring 2021: 66)*

My interlocutors’ stories about their ‘passages’ to Christianity were indeed often interrupted by moments where such ‘formless’ experiences struck them and drew them in and made them reorient. Although these moments had become part of life stories and, as such, had been conceptualised to some degree, there was often a sense that they were still somewhat undetermined; they still came with a sense of wonder and excess that kept possibility open. Aidana’s sense of alienation amongst other Christians, for example, lingered in her narratives, undetermined. Other interlocutors shared stories about dreams of ancestor spirits and other spectral beings that were dismissed as meaningless by fellow Christians, but which kept haunting them and connected them in uncanny ways with the worlds and worldviews of their ances-

tors.<sup>6</sup> Others again told about the urge, similar to that experienced by Amir, of returning to their ancestral lands and being buried in ancestral ground. These were experiences which did not fit neatly into their conversion narratives and that they struggled to understand and find words for.

Reflecting on those aspects of living that defy conceptualisation, Wentzer and Dyring refer to philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels, in whose responsive phenomenology alterity plays a central role. According to Waldenfels (2011: 8–20), any kind of order is, per definition, partial and selective and always surrounded by the shadows of the extraordinary. This makes what he terms ‘the alien’ an omnipresent phenomenon to be found in all spheres of life and in various grades, ranging from the ‘everyday alien’ to the ‘radically alien’ (cf. Leistle 2014: 64). Alterity, it should be emphasised, should not be seen as a peculiar domain of experience set aside from the ordinary or the everyday. Indeed, we are constantly responding to phenomena and events we cannot fully grasp. Quite often it is phenomena which, at first sight, seem unremarkable and ordinary that, in certain situations, suddenly appear as alien and perplexing. The phenomena are familiar and alien at the same time: we get it, but we also do not. Lone Grøn (2002: 86) described it thus: ‘We fall into sleep, into dream; we find ourselves engulfed in a childhood memory; somebody we know very well may suddenly seem like a stranger.’ Such familiar yet perplexing phenomena reveal ‘how the everyday lifeworld [...] is rife with destabilizing potential’ (Grøn and Mattingly 2022: 8). Returning to Aidana’s experiences in Bishkek, an indifferent shrug, for example, is not a response that is out of the ordinary as such. But when it appears as a response to a cautious confession about being Christian by a young woman who grew up where such confessions were most often met with violence, it may appear as familiar and perplexing at the same time.

Just like questions about alterity are at the heart of anthropologists’ discussions about whether there are many ‘worlds’ or one, so experiences of alterity can give rise to reflections about sharing among humans more generally: reflections about what they share or do not share with others and about the limits of their worlds and of the concepts they use to describe their worlds. The reflections often waver ambiguously: between, on the one hand, an impulse to explain away alterity, containing and domesticating it within already existing concepts and, on the other, dwelling on alterity, going with it, letting it ‘dictate the terms of its own analysis’, letting it be an opening to other possibilities for being and sharing being. Even when experiences of alterity are quickly contained and explained away within pre-existing norma-

6 In Kyrgyzstan, dreams are seen as borderlands between the manifest and hidden dimensions of reality. Dreaming is a potential gateway to spatial or temporal realms other than the waking one and thus to establishing relations that cross temporal and spatial boundaries. For many Kyrgyz Muslims, dreams are gateways to the *qayip duino* – the otherwise hidden world of the past, the future, God, or the ancestor spirits (Louw 2019, 2023).

tive frameworks – as in ‘that was just a dream’ – a sense of other possibilities often hovers in the shadows. We cannot dream and be awake at the same time and our attempts to order and contain are always ‘separated from the “alien call” by a time lag’ (Grøn 2022: 86).

In her article ‘Ordinary Possibility, Transcendent Immanence, and Responsive Ethics: A Philosophical Anthropology of the Small Event’, Cheryl Mattingly (2018) suggested that Waldenfels’s responsive phenomenology may be useful for thinking about ethics. More particularly, she argued it could help us see and conceptualise how ordinary life, far from being a site for the unthinking reproduction of moral order, is indeed a privileged space in which to explore ethical possibility. Building on Waldenfels, Mattingly (2018: 174) explored ethical possibility ‘as related to structures of experience that disclose the unsettledness of the ethical, including the culturally inherited categories and practices that specify a certain range of norms and virtues’. Thus possibility, as revealed in encounters with alterity, can take on ethical importance in the context of projects of moral change, or what I formulated above as a concern to find a place for belonging that is welcoming to the values and virtues one sees as central to who one is. In other words, the ontological and the ethical are intimately intertwined in attempts to order and contain alterity. We are not merely confronted with questions about what kind of world we live in but also about how we wish to live our lives within it, with whom we wish to do so, and the possibilities it provides us for doing so.

Sometimes, when we try to order and contain in the face of alterity, we deliberately try to keep possibility open – to allow space for the shadows of the extraordinary or maybe because we are dealing with ethical concerns that are not easily solved. Indeed, the experiences of alterity that were so central to my interlocutors’ stories about their ‘passages’ were rarely explained away; rather, they were allowed to linger in all their indeterminacy through what may be seen as images that played a central role in the stories. In my use of the term ‘image’ I am inspired by Lisa Stevenson who suggested that what is peculiar about images is that they, rather than being straightforward representations, express without formulating and drag the world along with them. They may capture uncertainty and contradiction without having to resolve it (Stevenson 2014: 10–13; Stevenson 2020). As such, they often appear as puzzles that leave us in doubt. On the other hand, unlike concepts which may have a tendency to ‘explain away’ and ‘freeze’ thought (Mattingly 2019), images may sometimes capture the richness and density of experience better. They may allow for other possibilities to still linger in the ways things are understood and conceptualised. When Aidina kept returning to the blood in the sink and the stones thrown at the window, I suggest that she was referring to images which, as such, dragged the world along with them: a shared Christian world predicated on suffering, perhaps; or a world that was ethically loaded and with a potential for moral transformation; or a world she still

struggled to understand even if it was in this world that her understanding of Christianity was grounded, a world she shared with her father.

Let me turn to another story to unfold these points about how the ontological and the ethical are intertwined in responses to alterity. Similarly to Aidina's story, it takes us back to the early 1990s and the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This story allows me to introduce my final reflections on how the sharing of being may be most intensively experienced when alterity draws us in and places us into horizons of possibility whose contours are not yet clear.

### Salty tea, smiles, and a very small bottle of vodka

When I asked Mirgul to tell me about her experiences of becoming and being Christian in Kyrgyzstan, she started with a story about smiles. It was a story that took us back to her childhood in a village in the region of Issyk Kul and her encounter with a group of American missionaries who had settled there in the early post-Soviet days. The first thing she noticed was that they smiled. They smiled to each other and they smiled to people they encountered, including random people they passed in the street. Those days, as she remembered, most people never smiled. If you walked the streets with a smile on your face, people would take you to be an idiot. And most people had no reason for smiling anyway: in the immediate post-Soviet years, Kyrgyzstan witnessed a severe economic decline which led to a drastic reduction of social services, high rates of unemployment, a growing inflation, and widespread poverty. There was no food to buy in the shops. Mirgul remembered being sent to the shop with a coupon that would supposedly enable her to buy a loaf of bread, but there was no bread in the shop. There were only empty shelves and an old babushka standing in the middle of the floor with her arms stretched out and shouting, 'Boga net!' (There is no God!). If, unexpectedly, there happened to be food in the shop, they had no money to buy it. People would add salt to their tea instead of sugar. For Mirgul, that was the taste of the early 1990s.

During these years, Mirgul's father started drinking heavily. The burden of providing for the family fell entirely on her mom, who would go to work in the morning and come home in the evening, only to start doing all the chores around the house. She would never talk with Mirgul. She would never ask her how she was feeling. She would never give her a hug. And, she would never smile. Then she fell ill, maybe because she had been overburdened, and Mirgul, who was about 15 years old at that time, had to take over most of the chores. She would cook, she would clean, she would do the laundry, and she would go to the bazaar to sell the milk from the family's cow, their only source of income for several months.

One day she was doing the laundry as she used to, by hand. And there, with her hands in the soapy water, she was suddenly overwhelmed by a feel-

ing of darkness. She could not shake it off; it was vague but insistent. 'And I was like, oh, let her be sick and [...] even die,' she recalled thinking, right there amidst the laundry, unsure whether she was thinking about herself or her mom. Times were dark and she felt a darkness growing inside herself. As she described it: 'I did not want to live, but because I was a living creature I still, like, wanted to live.'

It was in that period – whilst she went on living even though she was not sure whether she wanted to or not – that she first encountered the missionaries and noticed their smiles. They seemed to offer her an opening to a different world, which was not at all clear in its contours but maybe most of all rested on a mere feeling that something new was possible. 'Light came in,' she said, looking back at their first encounter. She started visiting the missionary couple, and later moved in with them, helping them take care of their children and increasingly taking part in the Bible reading groups they held. Thus started what she termed her 'journey' to become believer. A year passed when, as she visited her family, her parents suddenly asked her, 'Who are you?' Mirgul did not reply; indeed, she did not know what to reply. She just smiled. Her mom, then, asked her if she had converted to Christianity. Mirgul still kept quiet, but her mom, now furious, took a knife and threw it to the floor. Mirgul escaped to the missionaries' house and, for a long time, ignored her siblings who would call the couple and threaten to burn down their house and 'do something' to Mirgul. It was only when her brother called and said that their mom had become crazy and was wandering the streets that she packed her stuff and went back home. She found her mom lying on the couch with tears streaming down her face. After that, she stayed in her childhood home, although she did not really feel at home there.

But Mirgul did not always feel at home amongst the Christians, either. The luring sense of possibility had started to give way to an experience of Christian life as just as filled with conflict and hassle as the life she had come from and of Christians who often behaved rather differently from how Christians ought to be: gossiping about others behind each other's backs or causing others to suffer to advance their own career ambitions.

Whilst her mother and her brothers were furious when they heard about her conversion to Christianity, her father, as she recalled, remained silent. He did not say anything when she told the family she had become Christian. Maybe, she reasoned, it was because he had always read a lot, such as books by Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. These might have widened his world and taught him that there were other possibilities for being a decent person than those that were prevalent in the village. Even as he fell into a depression and drank heavily, he would continue to read, finding in literature a refuge from the darkness of the early 1990s. One day, Mirgul recalled, her father wanted to drink but did not have any money to buy alcohol. Mirgul, then, decided to propose to him that she would buy him a bottle of vodka on condition that



he read the Bible. Her father agreed and so she bought him a bottle of vodka – a very small bottle it was, she emphasised – and he started reading. Later she found him exhausted. It turned out that he had read the whole Epistle to the Romans and was now pondering the question of what would have happened had Jesus not died. She sat down and they had a conversation about the question. She recalled that it was deeper and more meaningful than any of the conversations she had had with her Christian friends. A space for being with, for sharing, had been built between them through the Letter of Paul to the Romans and a small bottle of vodka – an odd and indeterminate space, perhaps, but a generous one (cf. Grøn 2022: 94; Odgaard 2022) that was welcoming to who they were.

### When things fall together

Mirgul's story, too, was punctuated by images which 'drew the world with them'. Although she and the people around her made attempts to understand and contain these images, they allowed the images to keep their indeterminate quality. This indicated, perhaps, the ethical intensity or complexity of the worlds these images carried with them. The image of the salty tea and the babushka shouting 'there is no God!' – the recalling of which threw Mirgul back into the early 1990s and the taste and feeling of an epoch where the world as she had known it had been turned upside down, when she and her family were forced to find other, new ways of being in the world together. The image of the 'darkness' that had rolled over her – pointing to possibilities that felt dark and evil but were nevertheless hers. The image of the missionary smiles – promising openings to something new that stood in contrast to the darkness, a 'light' that 'came in'. 'Light' (like 'darkness') is a concept with a long history in Christianity and may seem like a trope, even a cliché. But in the way it was presented by Mirgul, it retained an openness, a mysterious quality, that she kept returning to even after becoming a practicing Christian and Christianity's enticing openness and sense of possibility had given way to the realisation that the Christian everyday could be disappointing. And then there was the moment when she was discussing Paul's Letter to the Romans with her intoxicated father – a sharing of being in an unexpected way – which, as she looked back, still filled her with wonder and gratitude.

What the images that animate the stories of Kyrgyz Christian converts point to is a fundamental ontological ungroundedness of experience (cf. Dyring 2022; Dyring and Grøn 2022; Grøn 2022). In her beautiful reflection on how life with dementia and the non-discursive modes of expression and communication that are central to life in a dementia ward reveal something fundamental about the human existence, Lone Grøn (2022: 85) argued that 'the lived experience of ungroundedness is accentuated in old age, where bodily functions, social worlds, and selves deteriorate or transform with a



heightened intensity. When things fall apart.’ To this point we might add: the lived experience of ungroundedness may also be accentuated when things fall together in unexpected ways, like they fell together between and around Mirgul and her father, the Letter to the Romans and a small bottle of vodka, creating a space for the sharing of being in a way that could hardly be understood and contained within existing frameworks for understanding. Sharing such openings where alterity draws us in – situations where ambiguity and doubt, or ontological indeterminacy, (still) reign, when it is not, say, religion, history, culture, or norms that we share but the contours of something yet unknown – then it may be that we experience the sharing of a world most intensely: the sharing of being as a sharing of possibility.

## Conclusion

Maybe, when we tell stories about ourselves, we tend to start with images, openings, that connect us to the worlds we take to be ours: a father or a smile, for example, that grounds our very being but that we may also spend a lifetime trying to understand. In this article, I argue that questions about what we share with others by virtue of our very ‘thrownness’ – being born as humans, being born as Kyrgyz, being born as Muslim or as Christian, for example – appear to us with a particular urgency in situations when we are confronted with alterity within the familiar; when the world appears as porous and mouldable where we thought it was most solid, offering new possibilities for being and sharing being. I propose that a phenomenological approach to ‘conversion’ may dwell on such experiences and show that encounters with alterity are indeed central to the experiences of converts to evangelical Christianity in Kyrgyzstan, moving, as they are, between worlds that are seen, by others, as incompatible. What these Christians’ reflections on their experiences suggest is that the ontological and the ethical are intimately intertwined in their attempts to order and contain in the face of alterity. We are not merely confronted with questions about what kind of world it is we live in but also about how we wish to live our lives in it, with whom we wish to do so, and the possibilities it provides us for doing so. In my interlocutors’ stories about their ‘passage’ to Christianity, alterity is often allowed to linger in images that point at the shadows of the extraordinary that accompanies their attempts to find a place for belonging in the world and to the ethical complexity involved in doing so. Finally, I argue that we may experience the sharing of being most intensively when alterity draws us in, emplacing us in horizons of possibility whose contours are not yet clear, before they are conceptualised, and whilst indeterminacy still reigns, laying bare a fundamental ungroundedness of being.

## Acknowledgements

For inspiring and constructive feedback at various stages during the writing process, I am grateful to Cheryl Mattingly, Lotte Meinert, Jeanette Lykkegård, Mikkel Rytter, and Anders Sybrandt Hansen.

## References

- Austin-Broos, Diane (2003) *The Anthropology of Conversion: An Introduction*. In: Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier (eds.) *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlewood.
- Borbieva, Noor O'Neill (2012) Foreign Faiths and National Renewal: Christian Conversion among Kyrgyz Youth. *Culture and Religion* 13 (1): pp. 41-63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2012.658422>
- Buckser, Andrew and Stephen D. Glazier (2003) *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlewood.
- Comaroff, Jean and John Comaroff (1991) *Of Revelation and Revolution. Christianity, Colonialism, and Consumption in South Africa*. Illinois: University of Chicago Press.
- Dyring, Rasmus (2022) On the Silent Anarchy of Intimacy: Images of Alterity, Openness, and Sociality in Life with Dementia. In: Cheryl Mattingly and Lone Grøn (eds.) *Imagistic Care. Growing Old in a Precarious World*. New York: Fordham University Press: pp. 109-136.
- Dyring, Rasmus and Lone Grøn (2022) Ellen and the Little One: A Critical Phenomenology of Potentiality in Life with Dementia. *Anthropological Theory* 22 (1): pp. 3-25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14634996211010512>
- Grøn, Lone (2022) 'Yeah ... Yeah': Imagistic Signatures and Responsive Events in a Danish Dementia Ward. In: Cheryl Mattingly and Lone Grøn (eds.) *Imagistic Care. Growing Old in a Precarious World*. New York: Fordham University Press: pp. 83-100.
- Grøn, Lone and Cheryl Mattingly (2022) Introduction: Imagistic Inquiries: Old Age, Intimate Others, and Care. In: Cheryl Mattingly and Lone Grøn (eds.) *Imagistic Care. Growing Old in a Precarious World*. New York: Fordham University Press: pp. 1-28.
- Heidegger, Martin ([1927] 1996) *Being and Time*. 7th edition. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Henare, Emiria, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell (2007) *Thinking through Things. Theorizing Artifacts Ethnographically*. New York: Routledge.
- Holbraad, M. (2012) *Truth in Motion. The Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Holbraad, Martin, Morten Axel Pedersen, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2014) *The Politics of Ontology: Anthropological Positions*. Theorizing the Contemporary, Cultural Anthropology website. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/462-the-politics-of-ontology-anthropological-positions> [accessed: 13 March 2023].
- Ismailbekova, Aksana (2017) *Blood Ties and the Native Son. Poetics of Patronage in Kyrgyzstan*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Jackson, Michael (2002) *The Politics of Storytelling. Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press.
- Khalid, Adeb (2007) *Islam after Communism. Religion and Politics in Central Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kohn, Eduardo (2013) *How Forests Think. Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Leistle, Bernard (2014) From the Alien to the Other: Steps toward a Phenomenological Theory of Spirit Possession. *Anthropology of Consciousness* 25 (1): pp. 53-90. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anoc.12019>
- Light, Nathan (2018) Kyrgyz Genealogies and Lineages: Histories, Everyday Life and Patriarchal Institutions in Northwestern Kyrgyzstan. *Genealogy* 2 (4): pp. 53. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy2040053>
- Louw, Maria (2019) *Burdening Visions: The Haunting of the Unseen in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan*. *Contemporary Islam* 13 (1): pp. 33-47. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-017-0403-9>
- Louw, Maria (2022) *Atheist Endings: Imagining Having Been in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan*. In: Heidi Geismar, Ton Otto, and Cameron David Warner (eds.) *Impermanence. Exploring Continuous Change across Cultures*. London: UCL Press: pp. 47-64.
- Louw, Maria (2023) *The Art of Interpreting Visionary Dreams*. In: Jeanne Feaux de la Croix and Madeleine Reeves (eds.) *The Central Asian World*. London: Routledge.
- Mattingly, Cheryl (2018) Ordinary Possibility, Transcendent Immanence, and Responsive Ethics: A Philosophical Anthropology of the Small Event. *Hau* 8 (1/2): pp. 172-184. <https://doi.org/10.1086/698269>
- Mattingly, Cheryl (2019) Defrosting Concepts, Destabilizing Doxa: Critical Phenomenology and the Perplexing Particular. *Anthropological Theory* 19 (4): pp. 415-439. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499619828568>
- McBrien, Julie (2009) *Mukada's Struggle: Veils and Modernity in Kyrgyzstan*. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (S1): S127-S144. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2009.01546.x>
- McBrien, Julie and Mathijs Pelkmans (2008) *Turning Marx on His Head: Missionaries, 'Extremists' and Archaic Secularists in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan*. *Critique of Anthropology* 28 (1): pp. 87-103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X07086559>

- Meinert, Lotte and Lone Grøn (2020) 'It Runs in the Family': Exploring Contagious Kinship Connections. *Ethnos* 85 (4): pp. 581-594. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2019.1640759>
- NSC (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic) (n.d.) Total Population by Nationality. (<http://www.stat.kg/en/opendata/category/312/> [accessed: 13 March 2023]).
- Odgaard, Marie Rask Bjerre (2022) *A Staircase between the Sun and the Moon. The Arts of Living Queerly in Amman*. Dissertation, Aarhus University.
- Pedersen, Morten Axel (2011) *Not quite Shamans. Spirit Worlds and Political Lives in Northern Mongolia*. London: Cornell University Press.
- Pelkmans, Mathijs (2007) 'Culture' as a Tool and an Obstacle: Missionary Encounters in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13 (4): pp. 881-899. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2007.00462.x>
- Pelkmans, Mathijs (2009) Introduction: Post-Soviet Space and the Unexpected Turns of Religious Life. In: Mathijs Pelkmans (ed.) *Conversion after Socialism. Disruptions, Modernisms and Technologies of Faith in the Former Soviet Union*. Oxford: Berghahn, 1-16.
- Pelkmans, Mathijs (2010) Religious Crossings and Conversions on the Muslim-Christian Frontier in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 19 (2): pp. 109-128. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ajec.2010.190209>
- Pelkmans, Mathijs (2017) *Fragile Conviction. Changing Ideological Landscapes in Urban Kyrgyzstan*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Peyrouse, Sebastien (2007) Christians as the Main Religious Minority in Central Asia. In: Jeff Sahadeo and Russel Zanca (eds.) *Everyday Life in Central Asia. Past and Present*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press: pp. 371-384.
- Privratsky, Bruce (2001) *Muslim Turkistan. Kazak Religion and Collective Memory*. Richmond: Curzon.
- Radford, David (2015) *Religious Identity and Social Change. Explaining Christian Conversion in a Muslim World*. London: Routledge.
- Stevenson, Lisa (2014) *Life beside Itself. Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stevenson, Lisa (2020) What there Is to Fear: Scenes of Worldmaking and Unmaking in the Aftermaths of Violence. *Ethnos* 85 (4): pp. 647-664. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2019.1636843>
- Tett, Gillian (1994) 'Guardians of the Faith?' Gender and Religion in an (ex) Soviet Tajik Village. In: Camilla Fawsi El-Solh and Judy Mabro (eds.) *Muslim Women's Choices. Religious Belief and Social Reality*. Oxford: Berg: pp. 128-151.

- Turner, Victor (1967) *Between and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage*. In *The Forest of Symbols. Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press: pp. 93-111.
- Venkatesan, Soumhya, Michael Carrithers, Karen Sykes, Matei Candea, and Martin Holbraad (2010) *Ontology is Just Another Word for Culture: Motion Tabled at the 2008 Meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory, University of Manchester*. *Critique of Anthropology* 30 (2): pp. 152-200. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0308275X09364070>
- Waldenfels, Bernhard (2011) *Phenomenology of the Alien. Basic Concepts*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Wentzer, Thomas Schwarz and Rasmus Dyring (2021) *How Life Makes a Conversation of Us: Ontology, Ethics, and Responsive Anthropology*. In: Andrew Brandel and Marco Motta (eds.) *Living with Concepts. Anthropology in the Grip of Reality*. New York: Fordham University Press: pp. 50-72.

---

Maria Louw is Associate Professor in Anthropology and leader of the Centre for the Study of Ethics and Community at Aarhus University. Her research interests include ethics, care, religion and secularism, spectrality, phenomenology, intergenerational thriving, and imagistic anthropology. She has conducted extensive fieldwork in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

## Shared Finitude: Intergenerational Death Awareness

Alfred Sköld

### Introduction

*Alfred: Do you think more or differently about your own death following the death of Michael [Clara's life partner]?*

*Clara: Yes. And no. If I allowed myself to think of it, I would probably do so, since it would be a disaster, not because I am afraid of dying, but for my children it would be a disaster.*

Clara is a mother of three. Until the day her husband, Michael, died, these children had lived their lives in the loving yet perplexing light that is the perspective of *two* parents. The parental gaze comes as a paradigmatic example of how the borders between 'I' and 'we' are transgressed in the life of a family. In families with two parents, children are interchangeably seen by the unity of the parents and by each one of them. In this case, parenthood is singular *and* plural (Nancy 2000). For Clara and her children, the structure of this generational alternation between otherness and sameness was fundamentally altered by Michael's death. For her children, their mother's gaze is, from now on, identical with the parental gaze. Michael's death has made Clara into a single mother. At our first interview, she tells me that this situation has turned her entire life upside down – including her role as a parent. 'When Michael was alive, I could have said, "I have three children", without having to say, "We have three children." Now, "we" and "I" are different.'

Clara was the first of fifteen bereaved life partners that I interviewed as part of my PhD project, *Relationality and Finitude – A Social Ontology of Grief* (Sköld 2021a).<sup>1</sup> Clara is in her fifties and, as such, formed part of the middle-aged group of interviewees; the other two groups comprised men and women in their thirties and seventies, respectively, who had lost their life partners no longer than six months before the first interview. The study was conducted in Denmark and the cultural background reflects a European middle-class segment. Twelve of the informants were female and three were male. The informants had signed up voluntarily and had agreed to be interviewed on three occasions over the course of one year. With two exceptions, the interviews took place in the interviewees' own homes, which was meant to provide a secure environment where they could speak freely. Likewise, it

---

<sup>1</sup> The PhD was part of the interdisciplinary research project 'Sorgens kultur' (The culture of grief) (2017–2022) at Aalborg University ([www.sorg.aau.dk](http://www.sorg.aau.dk)). It studied the contemporary understandings of grief and suffering.



provided me with a welcome opportunity for a more embodied understanding of their lifeworlds and what had been the physical surroundings of their life previously shared with a partner. Before this study, I had anticipated that the death of a close loved one would encompass an intensified degree of reflection and relating to one's own death – hence the question that I posed to Clara as reflected in the quote above. In short, I expected that grief would be the primary route to death awareness (Sköld 2021b). This expectation proved to be only half true.

Even though the death of a loved one is necessarily related to finitude, the question of *which* death plays centre court is far from clear. When struggling with grief, death is often on one's mind all the time. Day and night, one struggles to fathom the fact that the person one loved the most is dead. Death – the ultimate humiliation of human reason (Bauman 1992: 15) – looks back at us like a 'pure question-mark', in Emmanuel Levinas's (2000: 14) words. 'What do we know of death? What is death?', he asked (Levinas 2000: 11). That these questions come without prospect for any clear answers – that the aporic structure of death (Derrida 1993) excludes any possible solution – does not, on the other hand, seem to make us speechless. Through grief, mourning, and commemoration, we do *respond* to the death of another in multitudes of ways and, in this article, I describe how the response of a bereaved life partner both separates and amalgamates different generations. The preoccupation with death following the death of a partner seems to be mediated partly by the imagined consequences that it would have for the ones still living – in particular one's children. In ways that I expand on further throughout this article, finitude seems to be a *shared* condition – and death less individualising than often presumed.

Since Plato in *Phaedo* defined philosophy as an art of dying (*melete thanatou*, what later became *Ars Moriendi*), death has played a significant role within this field. That there is no final *Aufklärung* (enlightenment, resolution) in the case of death only serves to prove that, paradoxically, it is precisely that which escapes and even humiliates thought that makes us think. The question one might ask in this context is: Which death are we talking about? In his deeply influential *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes toward Death over the Last One Thousand Years*, Phillipe Ariès (2008) points to how the contemporary Western focus on the bereaved is a relatively novel phenomenon, heavily intertwined with the process of secularisation. Where belief in an afterlife is widespread, the post-partum worrying seems rather to focus on destiny and on what is assumed to be the prolonged journey of the dead. Even though such beliefs tend to surge up in the confusing time of mourning, the reckoning with death that we find in contemporary Western societies, including Denmark, lies in the hands of the ones still living. 'Death', as Norbert Elias (2010: 3) writes, 'is a problem for the living. Dead people have no problems' – and the twenty-first

century might be aptly described as ‘the century of grief’ (Jacobsen, Lund and Petersen 2021: 161).

The existential tradition, however, has predominantly talked about *my death*. For Martin Heidegger (2008), it is through the confrontation with finitude, which he refers to as ‘being-towards-death’ (*Sein zum Tode*), that I truly become who I am (*Eigentlich*). Death is the key demarcation line which institutes an irreducible ‘mineness’ (*Jemeinigkeit*), separating Dasein from all the others – ‘The They’ (*Das Man*) where ‘everyone is the other and no one is himself’ (Heidegger 2008: 124). No matter how intensely I wish to take upon myself the death of the other – no matter if I sacrifice my own life for her – I cannot relieve the other from her death. When leaving the graveside, Søren Kierkegaard (2009a: 83) writes, we often do so with an ambivalent feeling of being very much alive – ‘This very day!’ In the existential perspective, then, all forms of sharing stop at death. Death cannot be shared. ‘If something radically impossible is to be conceived of – and everything derives its sense from this impossibility – it is indeed dying for the other in the sense of dying in place of the other’ (Derrida 2008: 43–44).

In the works of Levinas and Simon Critchley, we find a radically different route to finitude where death is, first and foremost, the death of the other. Finitude is *experienced* in the encounter with ‘the face of the other’, where her vulnerability is exhibited through an ethical demand of not taking this particular life. Just as ethics, for Levinas (1991), is ‘first philosophy’, the other’s death is always the ‘first death’. Death is both relational and mediated by an infinite otherness. Whilst death ‘is not the object or meaningful fulfilment of an intentional act’ (Critchley 1997: 26), we do *feel* the effects of death when people we love leave this world behind through death. Differing from the existential position briefly sketched above, death is not so much a possibility for mastering individuality as it is an experience of otherness, dependency, and the existential and ethical limitations implied herewith.

In this article, I begin with an analysis of the experience of ‘losing part of oneself’ and suggest a third reading that complicates the distinction between the two disparate readings sketched above. In various ways, the informants participating in my grief study testify to being shattered at a deep, personal level following their partner’s death, which evokes questions such as the following: How can we understand the relationship between selfhood, ethics, and sharing following the death of another? What notions of subjectivity and intersubjectivity are needed in order to conceptualise how the death of another can affect my very being? The argument developed in this article is heavily guided by the assumption that any understanding of what it means to *lose* presupposes an understanding of what it means to *have* (Butler 2006). The notion of shared finitude that conceives of our relation to death in a relational light thus presupposes a notion of shared life. Just as we fade into being through the relational strings that we are given over to and depend upon,

we fade out of life when these strings falter. Life is *ours*, which can be learnt through the painful prism of losing what we once had. I thus begin by outlining the necessary backdrop of what a shared life with a life partner comprises before developing the notion of shared finitude. In the last part of the article, I develop the notion of intergenerational death awareness more carefully, focusing specifically on the daily interactions between family members of different generations and the ethical quandaries arising in the wake of death.

### Losing part of oneself

*Clara: I have lost part of myself. It's like part of me has been ripped off.*

What does it mean to lose part of oneself following the death of another? Beginning with the 'part of' of this quotation, it is essential to note that the person with this experience – in this case, Clara – is still alive. Grief presupposes a griever. In fact, grief is often an experience of feeling extremely alive – of being so close to, and for that reason so far from, death. The world Clara wakes up to every day is an empty world, but she does wake up. There are days where the first brief moments after waking up are coloured by a belief that life is like it used to be before, like it's supposed to be. For the blink of an eye, she thinks that Michael is sleeping beside her, or has gone off to work – until she realises that things are not like that anymore, that Michael is dead, that she is left alone.

The bereaved has lost someone or something – be that another person, a loved object, or an ideal (Freud 2005). Although grief is increasingly perceived from an intrapsychological perspective (Granek 2010; Kofod and Brinkmann 2017), it is ontological in the sense of being necessarily related to what or whom one has lost. Despite the fact that grief affects me, it is the death of the other that lies at the origin of this experience. *Grief is defined by its object*. Since bereavement often encompasses the intense wish to be with the dead (which would amount to being dead), this experience of being alive following a loss comes as a two-edged sword. In her analysis of the responsive structure of grief, Line Ingerslev formulates the death of the other as 'a call':

*What calls is the death of the other, we might say: I myself am called into question by this death; why must I live on without you, why must I live at all, how can I go on? [...] Being called into question by the death of the other is a matter of being called by death oneself; how can I not not-die with you? (Ingerslev 2018: 350, emphasis added)*

In Ingerslev's perspective, grief turns what one took for granted into an open question that is both ethical and existential. With what right and in what way

can I go on existing in a world where you are not? The notion of shared finitude developed later proceeds from the relational nexus that lies at the heart of this experience. Despite the fact that grief actualises the most paradigmatic of all differences – the one between the living and the dead – and despite Clara’s first-person perspective remaining indisputably hers, she is likewise referring to an experience of being personally shattered following Michael’s demise. The threads of relationality that tied her to him do not wither into thin air the moment he stops breathing. How, then, can the experience of losing part of oneself shed further light on the notion of shared aspects of finitude?

To better comprehend the experience of losing part of oneself, we might begin by noticing how subjectivity is intimately related to a certain way of living. Grief, I argued above, always points to the loss of something. In the case of an adult person losing their life partner, what is lost – apart from the life of this person – is a mutual and shared life. Compared to friends, colleagues, and other family members apart from children, a life partner is someone who is very much around – they often constitute the backdrop against which the rest of one’s life is lived, the main character of what Irving Goffman (2008) called the backstage domain. What is lost when a life partner dies is not only another person but a certain form of living that was entirely dependent upon a shared life with this other person. A life partner is, as the name suggests, a partner in life. How could we describe this partnership-way-of-living? Whilst there most certainly is a very broad range of how monogamous partnership is orchestrated around the world, the following themes have evolved from the current study and one might suspect that similar experiences would be at least partly generalisable to cultural contexts similar to Denmark.<sup>2</sup>

First of all, the vast majority of partnership takes place in everyday life. Given that one lived together (which was the case for all informants in the current study), partnership constitutes the perpetual backdrop of most of one’s other endeavours. In a time where the backstage domain is continually shrinking due to technological developments in general and social media in particular, partnership still constitutes the place one returns to, thus the home. Although this home is a mental and spiritual entity, it does find its *space* somewhere, which is the domestic setting one cohabits together with a life partner. Theresa, an informant in the younger group who unexpectedly lost her husband in a motorcycle accident, says: ‘He [Daniel] is here, in the house that is ours. We bought this house sixteen, no, seventeen years ago, and this is where we have had everything, right? *This is our entire life.*’ The meaning of this home is co-constituted by the people living there and one’s life partner is, needless to say, a very important person in this regard (Jacobsen 2009).

---

2 This section can be read as a condensed version of the phenomenological reading of partnership provided in Sköld (2021a: 89–149; 2021c).

Partnership is further comprised by a loving gaze and a strong sense of well-being. The gaze of one's partner constitutes a source of safety and inspiration for courage and motivation to do things that one otherwise would have refrained from doing. When I ask my informants what they miss the most, they often mention the lack of this gaze as a constant source of sadness. When asked what Oscar's gaze did to her on a personal level, Nina – likewise a participant in the younger group – tells me that 'in his eyes, I could do anything'. The range of possibilities grew smaller following Oscar's death. On a different yet related note, Felicia speaks of having lost a life witness, 'someone you do not have to begin with Adam and Eve every time'.

The longevity of partnership further means that one often has the curious experience of not only sharing space but also time (Schutz 1967) and, thus, having a common history. A life partner has often witnessed one's life trajectory through a number of sometimes rather different periods of life from a distance closer than most others. Depending on one's age, the experience of growing (and not growing) older together is broadly shared by the informants in my study. At a young age – for the participants in their thirties – this aspect is primarily constituted by the sudden absence of potentiality. Overnight the dreams and plans for the future are turned into stardust. At an older age, depending on the duration of the relationship, much of this life has been lived and shared already. The pain of losing is then often accompanied by feelings of gratitude and thankfulness which, however, do not remedy the pain and existential bewilderment of having lost a person that has been part of one's life for decades.

Based on this brief picture of shared life in partnership, we return to the question posed: How can we understand the experience of 'losing part of oneself' along the lines of losing the possibilities for living a certain life (Sköld 2021c)? Certainly, other forms of life are still possible – in fact, one could even argue that a crucial aspect of grief is living on in light of what has been (Ingerslev 2018). That said, the particular life shared with *this* person is lost. More than most other phenomena, grief exhibits the singularity or numerical identity that characterises human relationships (Mammen and Mironenko 2015; Brinkmann 2018; Sköld and Brinkmann 2021). 'But I need Oscar, I need Oscar to be here,' Nina tells me. She is in her early thirties and had given birth to son Martin eight months before Oscar's death. Despite the fact that Nina's future will hopefully comprise love relations to other people, perhaps even by finding a new life partner, this will be a different form of shared life. 'It was *our* life,' she tells me, looking back at what she had together with Oscar:

*And it was difficult, I'm completely lost [...] Who am I? I was part of this family and we had a plan. This was how it was supposed to be. For the rest of our days. And now it suddenly isn't like that. What now? What now?*



Staying with Nina's bewilderment, we can conceive of grief as a boundary situation in the Jasperian sense (Jaspers 1970; Fuchs 2013). In short, boundary situations are situations where the toolbox we have for handling the challenges of life proves to be insufficient. Whilst many forms of suffering could be classified as boundary situations, the confrontation with death is paradigmatic: 'a wall we run into, a wall on which we founder' (Jaspers 1970: 178–179). Along a similar metaphor, Judith Butler (2016: 22) understands intense mourning as a situation where the most fundamental of human abilities, to stand straight, is heavily contested and 'one finds oneself fallen'. Part of grief is often characterised by the intense wish to be with the dead and the very act of standing up serves as an incontestable reminder that one is still amongst the living. Many accounts of the body in grief (Brinkmann 2019; Riley 2019) likewise paint a picture of the body lying horizontally with eyes turned away from the world of the living.

'What now?' A major part of grief might be characterised as the desperate attempt to come up with a liveable reply to the 'What now' question, as Nina poses it here. What to do and how to live on when the person one used to share life with is no longer around? This question can be tormenting in and of itself and can be further complicated by the fact that the very perspective from which it is posed is radically unknown. In grief, the 'what' question often coverts into a 'who' question. Who am I when you are no longer here? The lesson learnt from partner bereavement (and, in different ways, from other forms of loss) is that any radical distinction between being and doing becomes difficult to uphold. When asked about what she considered to be the very core of her relationship with Daniel, Theresa replies in almost scholastic tone: 'The substance of our relationship was all the minutes, hours, and days spent together.' What Theresa is indicating with her words is that human beings not only share time but that we *are* time (Arendt 1978: 42). When 'giving an account of ourselves' (Butler 2005), we necessarily do so with reference to the lives that we carry out – and these lives are, more often than not, carried out in company with significant others. To this extent, we are the lives that we live (Sköld 2021c). The logical consequence of this vitalist understanding of selfhood is that even a minimal alteration of one's way of living necessarily encompasses a subsequent alteration of who one is. Loss makes it indisputably true that 'I have lost "you" only to discover that "I" have gone missing as well' (Butler 2016: 22).

It is important to point out that this reading does not presuppose a certain understanding of selfhood other than as a minimal form of relational being – encompassing that our lives take place in a social and collective space where others are not only distant observers but directly involved. The 'I' we are referring to here refers more to a form of living than an individual substance. That the experience of losing part of oneself relies upon a shared way of living does not, on the other hand, only imply that finitude enters the scene



preceding a particular loss. Relationality and finitude are, as I argue in the following section, dialectically intertwined. Not only is grief only conceivable in the light of a former sense of belonging. Equally, this belonging depends upon finitude as an ultimate horizon for shared lives. Finitude is a shared condition from the very beginning.

### Shared finitude

As mentioned in the introduction, Heidegger conceptualises our relationship to death as being-towards-death. Existentially, death cannot be understood exclusively with reference to mere ‘perishing’ (*Verenden*). That life might end at any moment is a risk we share with animals and all living beings, and this organic understanding of death is, according to Heidegger, insufficient when it comes to grasping human finitude. For Dasein, dying (*Sterben*) structures existence all the way through. Death becomes infused in the very movement of living: ‘As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die’ (Heidegger 2008: 277). Whilst it is undisputedly clear that, for Heidegger, this death is one’s very own and that this death cannot be taken over by anyone else, both Derrida (2006) and Ruin (2018) have argued that we might locate kernels that would allow a less individualising understanding of finitude in Heidegger’s famous death analysis in §47 of *Being and Time*:

*In such Being-with the dead [dem Toten], the deceased himself is no longer factually ‘there’. However, when we speak of ‘Being-with’, we always have in view Being with one another in the same world. The deceased has abandoned our ‘world’ and left it behind. But in terms of that world [aus ihr her] those who remain can still be with him. (Heidegger 2008: 282)*

What does it mean to be with the dead? Is not the line between the living and the dead the most paradigmatic of all demarcations, the point where we are everything but ‘with’? What Heidegger calls ‘being-with the dead’ can be fruitfully understood along the lines of continuing bonds (Klass et al. 1996), one of the more influential theories within contemporary grief research. The theory of continuing bonds has contributed to a widespread abandonment of earlier static and delineated understandings of grief, where it is seen as a successive process with a clear ending, often conceptualised as synonymous with parting (Sköld 2021d). In significant ways, the concept of continuing bonds has better accommodated the experiences of many of a continued relating to the dead – through internal and external dialogues, through rituals, and simply by living on. The important flipside of the mutual relationality and distributed subjectivity, which lies at the heart of experiences of losing part of oneself, seems to be that remnants of dead loved ones linger around in various ways. That our social world is full of traces of the generations living

before us, and our lost loved ones retains a form of ghost-like agency after death is conceptualised by Derrida (2006) along the lines of *hauntology*. The challenge and question that the bereaved person must respond to somehow is, then, ‘to learn to live with [these] ghosts’ (Derrida 2006: xvii-xviii).

The ethical predicaments of the situation that Clara, Nina, and Theresa find themselves in, where the social world is equally shared with past (and future) generations, comes with a great degree of undecidability. We weep ‘over what happens to us when everything is entrusted to the sole memory that is “in me” or “in us”’ (Derrida 1989: 34). The ongoing dialogue that many a bereaved person has with the deceased is more often than not of ethical character: ‘What is the right thing to do in this situation?’ What constitutes a good way of living in light of this loss? How to balance honouring what once was and grasping the possibilities of living on? Derrida’s (1989) concept of impossible mourning takes as its point of departure that a proper balance in this peculiar relationship to the dead cannot be found. As survivors, we are consistently torn between betrayal and forgetting. Even though one shared the majority of one’s life with the person who is now dead and knew this person better than anyone else, there is no guarantee that one’s understanding of what the other might have wished for is anywhere near correct. The sharedness characterising bereavement is one where otherness and unknowingness play an increasingly important role.

For Derrida, as for Heidegger, the prospect of death is always already there. The fact that I would mourn you if you die is part of what ties me to you in the first place. In this way, grief is not exclusively a casually determined ‘reaction’ to loss. Rather, the relational structure that ties us to each other is, from the very beginning, coloured by a vague anticipatory loss. The only thing we know for sure when encountering another human being is that one of us will die before the other (Derrida 1989). In the case where a relationship is being established, this implies that one of us will be left grief-stricken. Being included in the sphere of what Butler (2016) calls the ‘grievable’ can equally be seen as a precondition for love, solidarity, and care. In this way, our shared world is necessarily mortal; *your* mortality is *my* problem from the very beginning.

In a developmental perspective, it is important to point out that human infants are not innately equipped with an understanding of finitude – neither their own nor that of significant others (Sköld 2021b). At some point during early childhood, children’s play will often circle around and thematise death in various ways. Children also try to come to terms with the fact that everything we become attached to can and will be lost and the realisation of parents’ or care persons’ mortality is potentially ‘traumatic’ to any child. In his existential reading of the oedipal complex, Johan Eriksson (2017) argues that one of the central insights of the youngster is the fact that his or her care persons are mortal and might die at any moment. The aggressive and inces-

tuous wishes and impulses that are often predominant during this period are seen as defences against a deeper form of anxiety – the horror of being a separate and finite being, increasingly responsible for conducting life in a certain manner.

Needless to say, most aspects of this drama also go the other way, a point that is highly relevant for this article. Many a parent has tried to alleviate a child's worries by claiming immortality: 'Yes, other people might be dying, but I will be here for ever (or at least until 100).' Given that parenthood neither equips one with omnipotence nor immortality and that parents – like all of us – can do nothing but hope that they wake up the next morning, it would be equally ill-suited to demand that they shared this truth with their offspring at any given time. A certain degree of 'bad faith' seems to be part of the impossible art of parenthood. Jean Laplanche (1991) has masterfully analysed how adults, in their interactions with children – a situation he refers to as 'the fundamental anthropological situation' – necessarily transmit a great degree of insecurity through their otherwise rational discourse (enigmatic messages). Whilst parents always fall short in their attempt to explain who we are, why we are here, and what we ought to do with our lives, death strikes as the most difficult challenge. The pure question mark that is death seems ill-suited for omnipotent education. When a parent dies, however, this question *is* posed and must be responded to.

### Intergenerational death awareness

The death of a parent enforces a structural reorganisation of the remaining family. Whereas the most significant form of difference used to be the one between adults and children, it is now between the living and the dead. The surviving parent suddenly finds herself *on the same side* as the children and their attempt to reckon with the death of the other parent is, at least partly, a joint mission. Testimonies from the interview study suggest that the surviving parent and the children often continue to tell stories and recapture the memories of the deceased and that this functions as narrative glue for family life. The art of remembering and mourning the dead is, simultaneously, an individual and a mutual endeavour. Through sharing memories, thoughts, and feelings, the family tries to stand together, supporting each other through a very difficult time. On the other hand, losing a parent and a life partner are two very diverse forms of losses and even though the death of the same person lies at the root of their grief, the significance of this loss, as its consequences, are of radically different nature. Whilst grief does unite the living in various ways, it can equally be an experience of distance and alienation. In this section, I empirically approach the question of how these different forms of losses coexist in light of earlier discussions of shared life

and finitude. The guiding question is how intergenerationality and finitude are related to one another.

Sitting in a university lecture one day, Nina suddenly becomes aware of a strange-looking man who is sitting not far from her. Her immediate thought is: 'He has no business in here.'

*I thought: 'Shit, he's got a bomb! I have to leave, now!' Because who will pick up Martin at kindergarten? Or what if he gets an allergic reaction and they don't know what to do? It will take them like twenty minutes in an ambulance to get out of here (sighs).*

Nina is attending university lectures as part of her master's. As her reaction here shows, her thoughts are primarily with Martin – her son who is too young to have nothing but vague memories of his father. When I visit Nina for our third and final interview, Martin is about to turn three years old and has just started *børnehave* (nursery school). Nina tells me that her stories of how Oscar loved to play the guitar have turned into stories of Martin's father having been a rockstar.

As she is sitting in lectures this day, it is only a small jump from seeing a potentially dangerous man to the thought of Martin becoming an orphan. Just as *his life* is her problem, *her death* becomes his problem. The most important question for Nina is who would pick up Martin at kindergarten or treat his allergic reactions if she were blown to pieces following a terrorist attack. This thought is unbearable and only with a substantial degree of will-power does she manage to stay in the lecture hall until the class is finished. The thought of Martin being left alone often troubles Nina and she finds this 'really, really difficult to cope with':

*I've been thinking about writing it down, make some deals with people in case I would die. But people would think that I am crazy if I would ask, 'Do you want Martin if I die?' That is a strange question to ask.*

It is, indeed, a strange question to be asked whether one wants the responsibility of a child in case their parent would die. Yet it does not prevent Nina from spending a considerable amount of time worrying about what would happen and who would be responsible for Martin's wellbeing if she died. When Oscar was alive, these thoughts seldom bothered her. She misses what she, at our first interview, refers to as a 'feeling of immortality' that was an integral part of her life with him. Even though the *we-ness* characterising partnership is constitutively vulnerable and subject to both internal and external threats at any given time (Hägglund 2019), this way of life strikes Nina as *less mortal* than life as a single parent. There seems to be a life-affirming form of bad faith at the heart of human relationships in general and par-

enthood in particular where we, momentarily at least, manage to hide from the innumerable reminders of mortality that everyday life offers. The part of human subjectivity which is distributed to our being-with might be said to be less mortal than the Heideggerian ‘mineness’ that keeps me at an unbridgeable distance from others.

On the one hand, our only assured form of continued existence is the memories of others and the mark we have all made in the world. The sharedness that lies at the root of existence means we are carried onwards and remain present in history after our individual death. On the other hand, the same sharedness implies that my death will spread like rings on the water, causing irremediable wounds for the people close to me. Given that you and I were only minimally related, the coordinates of my life will be altered following your death – and, in light of the intimate relationship between life and death sketched above, so will the meaning of my death. In the case of Nina, we see how her death has acquired a whole new meaning after Oscar died. The ways in which she *feels* mortal are now increasingly intergenerationally anchored and mediated by her role as Martin’s only care person. When asked specifically about how she reflects upon her own death in light of her recent loss, she tells me that she does so ‘in relation to Martin’. If she dies, she tells me, ‘there will be nobody left. I’m not afraid of dying, but I am afraid of leaving Martin all by himself’.

For families with children older than Martin, the worries go in the other direction. Alicia’s son, Mark, has just turned nineteen – and after having lost his father at a young age, the risk of his mother dying is not foreign to him. Mark stands on the threshold to adulthood and the steps he must take during the years to come, he suspects, would be inhibited if he lost his mother as well. After having lost her life partner, Edward, to cancer, Alicia notices Mark’s increased worry and the close attention he pays to her physical health. She knows all too well that she ‘must be there’:

*I don’t say, ‘I have this little spot in my eye’. I would not say that without an explanation. It would just lead to a number of questions: ‘Have you seen the doctor?’, ‘What did the doctor say?’, and so on.*

Even though Alicia has lost two life partners at a relatively early age and is far from unfamiliar with the thought of death, she has been spared from more serious health issues, which allows her to downplay this risk in relation to her son. She considers that the best way of supporting Mark in his early adulthood is to downplay this risk and to give him a temporary impression of immortality.

Theresa, who has two children, aged eighteen and fifteen, has chosen a distinctly more outspoken strategy and has set up a concrete plan about what should happen if she died. Importantly, the impetus for doing so did

not come from her. Unlike in Alicia's case, Theresa's children have repeatedly asked how they would deal with the situation were their mother to die, and after 'the kids asked for the hundred and third time what would happen if I died as well', Theresa sat down and made a plan for her two children, Felix and Caroline:

*Felix will adopt Caroline or be responsible for her. He is eighteen and they will stay in the house, which has been paid off. Grandma can move in and help if she wants to. Yep, that's the plan. They needed to know in case something would happen.*

This rather resolute way of approaching the risk of Therese dying has provided some solace in an otherwise difficult situation. Although Nina, Clara, Alicia, and Theresa have very different strategies when it comes to *how* to handle the worrying that they and their children experience, their ways of relating to death are mediated *through* their care for their children. Just as there is a feeling of absolute responsibility for *being there* – an imperative of staying alive shared by most care persons – they know all too well that this is something that cannot be taken for granted. There is, in other words, an intergenerational aspect of finitude that deserves more attention in the discussion of how we understand death and dying.

## Conclusion

Shared finitude rests upon the conjecture that our lives are intimately intertwined and that we must speak of subjectivity in the singular plural (Nancy 2000). Taking partnership as one example of how our lives collide, I have outlined one specific form of connectedness. *Being* a life partner means being given over to a certain form of living and *losing* one's life partner will inevitably encompass a partial loss of self. Experiences of 'losing part of oneself' was then utilised as a prism through which a notion of shared finitude could be extracted. Drawing on Heidegger and Derrida, I sought to show how experiences of being finite are often shared – not only with the person one has lost but, equally important, with the ones still living. For bereaved life partners, these others are often the children one used to co-parent together with the now dead partner. In the immediately preceding section, I developed the notion of intergenerational death awareness and argued that life partners who become single parents predominantly relate to their own death through the consequences that this death would have for their children. Simply surviving becomes a poignantly ethical endeavour. In concluding, I illuminate these ethical predicaments further.

Parenting is a confusing experience that shatters our normal understanding of what constitutes a subject (Baraister 2009). Pregnancy emblemises the experience of being two yet/in one. Whilst the physical bond



between mother and child is cut off shortly after birth, the symbolic bond between the child and its parents can only be broken with a significant amount of pain. The birth of a child constitutes an event in Alain Badiou's (2012) terms – an experience that installs a before and after in one's life narrative, an experience that alters the conditions and values of life itself. The birth of a child often encompasses an experience of having a life that is more important than one's own – the perpetual counterargument against Charles Taylor's (1982) proclamation, in *Ethics of Authenticity*, that modernity has left us with a world exempt of something worth dying for. Most parents would gladly give their lives for the survival of their children and the rupture of the generational order that a child's death comprises is tragic in ways that seem almost unbearable.

Parenthood can be seen as an ongoing and constitutively unfinished activity that demands the constant reorganisation of one's caring register. When it is assumed to be mastered once and for all, the child has moved beyond itself, old ways of relating and caring are outdated – and parents must renew themselves accordingly. In Kierkegaardian (2009b) terms, parental love can ideally be said to be the most genuine form of love – equally faithful, unselfish, and free. The responsibility that parenting comprises seems incompatible with leaving the child behind, which the different experiences of being a bereaved single parent, presented and discussed in this article, illustrate. 'Who would be there to take care of him?', Nina asked. Upon a pragmatic note, Nina's question can be responded to by pointing to her supporting family and – in the part of the world where she lives – a well-functioning societal system that cares for orphans. But mentioning this to Nina in an attempt of comforting her and soothing her worries would overlook the core meaning of her experience. In Nina's perspective, she must stay alive – she *cannot* die. Just as she needs Oscar and no one else, Martin needs her and no one else. Her worrying is intimately related to the singularity and irreplaceability that characterises human relationships and comes to the fore in grief (Sköld and Brinkmann 2021). Even though he would most likely survive and, if all goes well, grow up and thrive in many ways, Martin cannot find himself a new mother.

The finitude that Nina relates to through her role as primary care person for Martin is a finitude equally shared with Oscar. After and through *his* death, their life was no longer *their* life; as a consequence, *her* life has become something fundamentally different. Oscar took the key to what they had together when he left and, by doing so, he altered the meaning of Nina's life and death. Illusions of immortality are long gone and she now relates to death primarily through Martin's survival. In this way, finitude winds back and forth between the three people involved in this drama: Nina, Oscar, and Martin. The sharedness of their lives transplants into a sharedness of death. That no one can unburden another person from death does not mean that the

experience of death is isolated to one person only. In Nina's family, death is a shared enterprise.

Nina's experiences illustrate how human beings are relationally and generationally anchored. Human beings are given over to the world and others from the day we are born until the day we die. In this way, vulnerability lies at the very heart of the human condition. If there is a lesson to learn from grief, it is that everything can be taken away from us at any time. Grief also teaches us that it does happen, that death is real, and that loss is integral to survival. Most days, though, we are spared from losing. The sons or daughters we put to bed last night most often do wake up the next morning. The mother or father they expect to pick them up most often does turn up exactly where and when they are supposed to. Side by side with the worrying, which is a direct consequence of shared finitude and equally characterises what I have called intergenerational death awareness, lies a substantial portion of gratitude for one more day.

### Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Obel Family Foundation under Grant no. 28153.

### References

- Arendt, Hannah (1978) *The Life of the Mind*. San Diego: Harcourt.
- Ariès, Phillipe (2008) *The Hour of Our Death. The Classic History of Western Attitudes toward Death over the Last One Thousand Years*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Badiou, Alain (2012) *In Praise of Love*. London: New Press.
- Baraister, Lisa (2009) *Maternal Encounters – The Ethics of Interruption*. London: Routledge.
- Bauman, Zygmunt (1992) *Mortality, Immortality, and Other Life Strategies*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Brinkmann, Svend (2018) General Psychological Implications of the Human Capacity for Grief. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 52 (2): pp. 177-190. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12124-018-9421-2>
- Brinkmann, Svend (2019) The Body in Grief. *Mortality* 24 (3): pp. 290-303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2017.1413545>
- Butler, Judith (2005) *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Butler, Judith (2006) *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.
- Butler, Judith (2016) *Frames of War. When is Life Grievable*. New York: Verso.

- Critchley, Simon (1997) *Very Little ... Almost Nothing*. Death, Philosophy, Literature. London: Routledge.
- Derrida, Jacques. (1989) *Memories for Paul de Man*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1993) *Aporias*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (2006) *Specters of Marx*. New York: Routledge.
- Derrida, Jacques (2008) *The Gift of Death*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Elias, Norbert (2010) *The Loneliness of the Dying*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.
- Eriksson, Johan (2017) Att bli människa – om övervinnandet av oidipuskomplexet och etablerandet av det själsliga livets fundament. *Tidskriften Divan* 1-2.
- Freud, Sigmund (2005) *Mourning and Melancholia*. In: *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*. London: Penguin Books.
- Fuchs, Thomas (2013). Existential Vulnerability: Toward a Psychopathology of Limit Situations. *Psychopathology* 46 (5): pp. 301-308. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000351838>
- Goffman, Erving (2008) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Granek, Leat (2010) Grief as Pathology: The Evolution of Grief Theory in Psychology from Freud to the Present. *History of Psychology* 13 (1): pp. 46-73. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0016991>
- Hägglund, Martin (2019) *This Life. Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Heidegger, Martin (2008) *Being and Time*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Ingerslev, Line (2018) Ongoing: On Grief's Open-Ended Rehearsal. *Continental Philosophy Review* 51 (3): pp. 343-360. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-017-9423-7>
- Jacobsen, Kirsten (2009) A Developed Nature: A Phenomenological Account of the Experience of Home. *Continental Philosophy Review* 42 (3): pp. 355-373. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-009-9113-1>
- Jacobsen, Michael Hviid, Peter Clement Lund, and Anders Petersen (2021) Spectacular Grief: On Three Main Trends in the Way We Deal with Loss in Contemporary Society. In: Michael Hviid Jacobsen (ed.) *The Age of Spectacular Death*. London: Routledge: pp. 161-183.
- Jaspers, Karl (1970) *Philosophy Vol. II*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kierkegaard, Søren (2009a) At a Graveside. In: *Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions*. Princeton: Princeton University Press: pp. 69-102.
- Kierkegaard, Søren (2009b) *Works of Love*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Klass, Dennis, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven L. Nickman (1996) *Continuing Bonds*. New Understandings of Grief. London: Routledge.

- Kofod, Ester Holte and Svend Brinkmann (2017) Grief as a Normative Phenomenon: The Diffuse and Ambivalent Normativity of Infant Loss and Parental Grieving in Contemporary Western Culture. *Culture and Psychology* 23 (4): pp. 519-533. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X17692294>
- Laplanche, Jean (1991) *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*. New York: Basil Blackwell.
- Levinas, Emmanuel (1991) *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*. Boston: Kluwer Academic.
- Levinas, Emmanuel (2000) *God, Death, and Time*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Mammen, Jens and Irina Mironenko (2015) Activity Theories and the Ontology of Psychology: Learning from Danish and Russian Experiences. *Integrative Psychological Behavioural Science* 49: pp. 681-713. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12124-015-9313-7>
- Nancy, Jean-Luc (2000) *Being Singular Plural*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Riley, Denise (2019) *Time Lived without its Flow*. London: Pan Macmillan.
- Ruin, Hans (2018) *Being with the Dead. Burial, Ancestral Politics, and the Roots of Historical Consciousness*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Schutz, Alfred (1967) *The Phenomenology of the Social World*. Northwestern University Press.
- Sköld, Alfred (2021a) *Relationality and Finitude – A Social Ontology of Grief*. Aalborg: Aalborg University Press.
- Sköld, Alfred (2021b) Being-towards-Grief: Rethinking Death Awareness. *Mortality* 26 (3): pp. 284-298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2020.1779203>
- Sköld, Alfred (2021c) Hvem er jeg nu? – Om sorgen efter at miste en livspartner. In: Svend Brinkmann and Anders Petersen (eds.) *Menneskets sorg – et vilkår i forandring*. Aarhus: Klim: pp. 163-187.
- Sköld, Alfred (2021d) A Hopeless Search for the Hopeless: A Literature Review of Contemporary Qualitative Studies on Partner Bereavement. *Human Arenas* 4 (4): pp. 518-541. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222815612281>
- Sköld, Alfred and Svend Brinkmann (2021) The Oughtness of Grief: Ontological, Cultural and Existential Perspectives. In: Allan Køster and Ester Holte Kofod (eds.) *Grief Experience. Cultural, Existential and Phenomenological Perspectives*. London: Routledge: pp. 162-175.
- Taylor, Charles (1992) *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard.

---

Dr Alfred Sköld is Assistant Professor of Psychology at Aalborg University, Denmark, and currently a Research Fellow at the International Psychoanalytic University, Berlin. His PhD dissertation, 'Relationality and Finitude: A Social Ontology of Grief' (2021), focused on the existential and ethical aspects of grief and his current research project investigates the role of emotions in youth climate activism. He is also the editor of two anthologies in Danish: *The Struggle for Happiness* (2020) with Svend Brinkmann, and *The Register of Love* (2023). He has previously been a visiting researcher at Södertörn University and Yale University. Sköld is also the director of the research group 'Qualitative Studies' at Aalborg University and the chairperson of Kvale-konferencen (The Kvale Conference).