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# International Sociological Association

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## *e-bulletin*

### **From the Editor**

The ISA E-Bulletin is now in its third year and seventh issue and continues to receive good support from members. In this issue of the E-Bulletin, I am excited to place before you engaging and insightful voices ranging from established sociologists to those of young sociologists just embarking on their research and academic careers, in keeping with the spirit of diversity and inclusion of this publication. In the general articles section, three pieces by Riaz Hassan and Afe Adogame take us from “Anti-Semitism and the Arabs” to “The 419 Code as Business Unusual: Youth and the Unfolding of the Advance Fee Fraud Online Discourse”. The interview segment features a conversation between Professor Chua Beng-Huat, an eminent Singapore sociologist and Sarbeswar Sahoo, a PhD student from India based in the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore. The final section of the E-Bulletin carries voices of three graduate students, Thakur Sai Arun, Vinita Ramani and David Radford.

In this issue I am also pleased to introduce a new segment “Reporting Conference/Workshop” which I conceptualize as a forum for acquainting readers with important Sociology conferences and workshop held in different parts of the world. This is meant to be a segment that does not merely report and describe the conference proceedings but also connects intellectually and in a scholarly mode with the themes and agendas of the conference and serves as a platform for the writer to pen his/her thoughts about a related subject. I hope this segment will receive strong contributions and support from readers. I am grateful to fellow sociologists who have supported the ISA E-Bulletin as contributors and readers. I look forward to more suggestions, feedback and, of course, contributions.

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# International Sociological Association

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## *e-bulletin*

### **The 419 Code as Business Unusual: Youth and the Unfolding of the Advance Fee Fraud Online Discourse**

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#### **Introduction**

One of the most controversial issues that has catapulted Nigeria into international limelight and public ignominy, especially in the last decade, is the “Advance Fee Fraud” (a.k.a. “419”), a code which refers originally to the section of the Nigerian Penal Law that deals with specific fraud schemes.<sup>1</sup> The 419 Penal Law was revised and expanded with the issuance in April

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The first draft of this paper was originally presented at the African Studies Association 46<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting, Boston Sheraton Hotel, Boston, Massachusetts, USA 30 October–2 November 2003. A variant of this paper “Locating African Migrant Religions and Organized Crime within Local/Global Theatres” was presented at the Harvard Africa Seminar, Harvard University, 10 February 2004. The author acknowledges his debt to the Harvard University Committee on African Studies, most particularly Emmanuel Akyeampong and Rita Breen, for inviting me to share my research thoughts at the Center. Emmanuel Akyeampong’s invaluable insights towards the fine-tuning of this paper are well appreciated. My gratitude also goes to the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University for granting me a Senior Fellowship for the academic year 2003/2004; and the Humanities Collaborative Research Centre (SFB/FK 560) of the University of Bayreuth (Germany) for granting me research leave and funds for the entire duration of stay in the US.

<sup>1</sup> The anxiety, suspicion and trepidation that the number “419” attracts within the Nigerian public has reached high proportions that even managements of Nigerian hotels or Guest Houses consciously refuse to list any hotel guest rooms with the number “419”. Except for foreigners, no right-thinking Nigerian would consciously lodge in a room with that number. Any association with the number draws public suspicion and stigma. This

1995, of Presidential Decree No. 13 entitled Advance Fee Fraud (AFF) and other Fraud Offences Decree 1995. The AFF commercial scam took an alarming, unprecedented dimension with its target audience on both individuals and corporate bodies within domestic and international frontiers. The impact, import and dimension of these knavish solicitations and schemes shows how and to what extent it has assumed global significance, thus necessitating a relentless “war” against the clandestine fraudsters locally (i.e. by the Nigerian Government, the Central Bank of Nigeria) and internationally (i.e. the United States Secret Service, the Metropolitan Fraud Squad in Scotland Yard). One incentive that has facilitated the proliferation of the scheme worldwide is the new communication technology and its characteristic free flow of information. The access and appropriation of the Internet and electronic mail technology as new public spaces is still largely a luxury afforded the upwardly mobile youths, educated elites and students. The paper examines the advent and consolidation of the AFF in the mid-1980s, and demonstrates with the evolution of the AFF online, how a cross-section of the youth increasingly engages the new media as a gate-way to the world and as conduits for information-enhancement, economic empowerment or to achieve their own ends. As new media technologies are increasingly assuming a new public space, it is important to understand the dynamics of reception, its varied uses and meanings for particular social objects, in particular socio-cultural contexts. Through a careful analysis of over 150 scam letters documented, the paper highlights the emerging variations of a theme and argues that the nature and extent of the phenomenon can only be better grasped when located within both a local and global framework.

### **The Globalization of Fraud: AFF as a Transnational Organized Crime**

The ruse (AFF) has been used throughout history whereby enterprising, unscrupulous individuals devise new ways of tricking gullible people into parting with their money and properties. Kid Weill, an infamous Chicago scam artist, best encapsulates the “Statement of Purpose” for advance fee fraudsters as he puts it: “We promise to offer nothing for something to people who want something for nothing.” Prospective victims are tricked into parting with funds by persuading them that they will receive a substantial benefit in return for providing some modest payment in advance. For instance, in Sydney (Australia) in the 1840s, the aptly named and wealthy Mr. Monies provided funds to one Mick Bell, described as “one of the most cool, impudent vagabonds in Sydney”, to finance the smuggling of a mythical £20,000

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“numerical sacralization” is engendered by public perception as a result of “fraud mysteries” that pervade contemporary Nigerian socio-economic milieu.

worth of goods out of the colony on a phantom ship in Port Hacking. Mr. Monies gave Bell money and clothes on account and then, realizing that the scheme was fraudulent, reported the matter to the police. Bell was convicted and sentenced to two months` imprisonment.<sup>2</sup> In the 1920s, a variant of AFF (the original advance fee scam) that became known as “The Spanish Prisoner” con flourished.<sup>3</sup> It was so clichéd that it was made into a pretty good movie written by David Mamet.<sup>4</sup> Today, there is a global coterie of fraud initiatives and networks including the High Yield Investment (HYI) or “prime bank” fraud, financial institution fraud (FIF). Others are the third party, access device, money laundering, computer, telecommunication, counterfeit, identity theft and forgery, and credit card frauds. Most recently, there are other innovations such as Internet Auction Fraud, dubious lotteries, pornography and clairvoyant scams.<sup>5</sup> What has been stereotyped “Nigeria Advance Fee Fraud” or “West African Advance Fee Fraud” must be located within the framework of this transnational organized crime rather than being treated in isolation.

This endemic form of AFF has involved a group of expatriate Nigerians who are believed to operate from cells in the United States, Europe, Canada, Hong Kong, Japan and other African countries with the assistance of confederates within West Africa.<sup>6</sup> The authors of the circular letters or e-mails who bear Nigerian names are part of an international syndicate of fraudsters who are out to dupe gullible overseas recipients (individuals, companies and public institutions) who are themselves both villains and victims in the bogus “business” deals. The term “Nigerian Advance Fee Fraud” is, therefore, only partially accurate and the problem is truly one of international dimensions, with victims and offenders being located across the globe.

The global dimension can be better comprehended not just by the public attention and attraction that it garners, but also by the tremendous and relentless efforts of local and

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<sup>2</sup> See R. Hall, “Sydney’s Original Sins”, *Good Weekend*, 20 November 1993, pp. 72-5; and Russell G. Smith, Michael N. Holmes and Philip Kaufmann, “Nigeria Advance Fee Fraud”, in *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, No. 121, Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology, July 1999.

<sup>3</sup> In the Spanish Prisoner con, businessmen were contacted by someone trying to smuggle the child of a wealthy family out of a prison in Spain. But of course the wealthy family would richly reward anyone who helped secure the release of the boy. Those who were suckered into this paid for one failed rescue attempt after another, with the fictitious prisoner continuing to languish in his non-existent dungeon, always just one more bribe, one more scheme, one more try, away from being released.

<sup>4</sup> See details of David Mamet’s plays and films at: <http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc31p.html> ; cf. David Mamet, *The Spanish Prisoner: The Winslow Boy. Two Screenplays* (Vintage, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> For details see the UK Metropolitan Fraud Squad website at [www.met.police.uk/fraudalert](http://www.met.police.uk/fraudalert) and the United States Secret Service Financial Crimes Division at [http://www.treas.gov/usss/financial\\_crimes.shtm](http://www.treas.gov/usss/financial_crimes.shtm)

<sup>6</sup> B. E. Gup, *Targeting Fraud: Uncovering and Deterring Fraud in Financial Institutions*, Chicago: Probus Publishing Company, 1995.

international security agencies at mitigating its impact if not totally curbing its operation. A number of reasons can be canvassed why the so-called NAFF is perceived to be rife in spite of the universality of this and other related schemes. First, the rapidity and sophistication with which it has been carried out. Nigerians are known to perfect whatever they are engaged in. In common parlance, the adage renders that “If you drive or chase a goat up to a brick wall barrier, it will turn back and face you, realizing that there is no escape route.” This adage has been rephrased in the case of Nigerians. When trapped in this brick wall barrier, they will bore a hole through the wall and escape rather than give up on their fate. This eulogizes the aggressiveness and determination with which many Nigerians are identified, especially in times of crisis.

Secondly, the usual exoticization and sensationalization of news from Africa by western media is another factor responsible for the popularity of the scam. Western propaganda machinery sometimes blows such news out of proportion. The only “credible” news from Africa that often sells pretty well in the Western Hemisphere is bad news of crisis, war, corruption, AIDS, hunger and starvation. Nigeria is indisputably the largest black African nation in the world. Although it has been described as a “crippled giant”, its natural endowment with human and material resources has attracted many Africans to it.<sup>7</sup> Owing to its fame and reputation in a myriad of ways, other Africans may have entered the crime theatre disguised as Nigerians. This is sometimes done to curry legitimacy in business, political and social circles. Ethnic formations such as the Yoruba, Hausa traverse the West African sub-region. Due to linguistic and cultural affinities, it may sometimes be difficult to link names of fraud e-mail scribes to specific countries. But today Nigeria as a geo-political entity has become synonymous with fraud to such a degree that virtually all such AFF dimensions are slammed on the country.

### **From Oil Boom to Oil Doom: The Evolution of AFF and Nigeria’s Socio-Economic Milieu**

The complex geo-ethnic entity that came to represent the nation-state Nigeria was born in 1960. With its huge deposits of mineral resources, it soon shot into international limelight as petroleum products became its main source of export income representing over 90%. The country witnessed an “oil boom” barely two decades after its inception, leading its then Head of State, Yakubu Gowon, to remark that “the problem of Nigeria is not money but how to

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<sup>7</sup> See Eghosa, E. Osaghae, *Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence* (London: Hurst, 1998).

spend it”. The lackadaisical display of the national wealth became visible in social and political spheres. However, this public affray of affluence seems to have been short-lived with the decline in world oil prices, a development that visited devastating consequences on national wealth. This debacle coupled with sharp practices of increasingly corrupt elites, the insensitivity and lack of vision of successive military and civilian regimes, and their collaboration with foreign captains of industries and multinationals led to an unprecedented nosedive in standards of living. This precarious socio-economic state in Nigeria attracted world financial institutions (International Monetary Fund). By recommending “deregulation exercises”, “austerity measures” or “structural adjustment programmes as the only panacea to economic resurrection, these financial giants appeared to have trapped the country into an unending subservience with varied “cosmetic loans and conditionality”. The gross misappropriation of these loans, coupled with the vicious insensitivity of the Nigerian leadership further helped to strangle and impoverish its citizens.

Reeling from the harsh realities of economic deregulation and the politics of subsidies, some Nigerians quested for new ways of cushioning this unprecedented “dehumanizing” process. One avenue was to raise funds by devising various fraudulent schemes, often with the assistance of expatriate nationals in the United States and other western countries. The economic and socio-political upheavals which had taken place in the country provided leverage and created a scenario in which unsuspecting individuals could be persuaded that funds located in Nigeria needed to be moved to Western countries in order to prevent them from being either confiscated or further devalued. In another vein, a “patriotic” argument was canvassed in some circles to procure legitimacy for such a trend. Those who evoke this line of reasoning claim that the initiative was an “unofficial” and indirect strategy to recover from the West much of the country’s wealth and resources stolen in the heydays of colonialism. Of course, this economic rape of the nation is seen to continue in this era of neocolonialism. This sentiment is partly eulogized by Bayart who remarks that, “Informal and illicit trade, financial fraud, the systematic evasion of rules and international agreements could turn out to be a means, among others, by which certain Africans manage to survive and to stake their place in the maelstrom of globalization.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Jean-Francois Bayart, Stephen Ellis and Beatrice Hibou (ed.), *The Criminalization of the State in Africa* (Oxford: James Currey & Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press & The International African Institute, 1999), p. 116.

## The Mechanics of the AFF Scheme

The evolution of fraudulent schemes from its earliest traces in the late 1970s and early 80s, has taken a variety of forms and dimensions. The first noticeable feature, particularly in Nigerian urban centers, was physical encounter between the fraudsters and potential victims. It was common in the streets of Lagos to be confronted with a barrage of inquiries from a smartly dressed youth. The ingenuity and sophistication with which these local “conmen” operates is significantly scandalous. From afar, they could already access the psychological and social profile of the “potential prey”. This enables them to quickly determine the manner of approach as well as the queries to be proffered. It was even common to hear them speak in “corrupted English language” with such phrases as: *“Sir, excuse mua. Me na sailor, me just come from Farance and me no speak good English. Me bring goods like TV, fridges, air conditioners, computers, and clothes by ship to wharf. Me sell to a good customer and me go back to Farance. Me do good business and me look for a reliable partner”*. Literally translated, it means: “Sir, excuse me. I am a sailor who has just arrived from France. I do not speak good English. I bring goods like TV, refrigerators, air conditioners, computers and clothes by ship to the wharf (seaport). I sell these items to a good customer and then return to France. I do good business and I am therefore searching for a reliable partner”. This is usually how the conversation flags off. There are other introductory genres and alternative strategies depending on who is been addressed. The topic under discussion may change abruptly to a related topic of a “money-cleaning scheme” depending on the interest of the potential prey.<sup>9</sup> However, the fraudsters operate usually in a team. Just as you meet a gang member unfolding his “invented” story, an “unsuspecting eavesdropper” quickly joins him with a sudden interest in the conversation. Passersby who are instantly carried away by these “get-rich quick” narratives fall prey before any self-realization. Consequently, a whole process of material extortion and manipulation unfolds. When the swindlers have derived substantial sums of money or become skeptical about their culprits’ continued loyalty, they disappear suddenly into thin air leaving the culprit to brood over his misfortune.

However, this strategy soon became unpopular as the conmen were easily betrayed by the similarity in story genres, language preferences and strategies. While waging “fraud war” at the local level through personal encounters, it assumed a totally different tone and stamina at the global level. Written letters with carefully crafted messages were sent by postal service or fax to potential victims – individuals, companies and public institutions. It was reported by

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<sup>9</sup> For details on the “money-cleaning scheme”, see the section on the anatomy of scam letters.

various western security agencies that millions of such correspondences with counterfeit postage stamps were impounded, destroyed or withdrawn from the postal system of various countries from the late 1980s onwards. The postal letter scam characterized by bulk mail-shots, courier mails and fax deliveries were to be gradually supplanted by telephone and newer, more sophisticated mediums.

The new media revolution that brought the Internet and electronic mail technology largely changed the face, pace and fate of AFF. Findlay underscored the impact of the new media in the global transformation of crime that:

The globalization of capital from money to the electronic transfer of credit, of transactions of wealth from the exchange of property to info-technology, and the seemingly limitless expanse of immediate and instantaneous global markets, have enabled the transformation of crime beyond people, places and even identifiable victims. Crime is now as much a feature of the emergent globalized culture as is every other aspect of its consumerism.<sup>10</sup>

The Internet and e-mail letter scheme is not a totally new dimension; rather it is a continuity of the traditional scheme though with a different approach and its attendant sophistication. There is an increasing trend for AFF correspondence to be received via e-mail, thus rendering the traditional methods obsolete and moribund. The boom in Internet fraud has also been accompanied by a subtle change in tactics. While fraud practitioners were once content in stealing cash, they are now increasingly prepared to steal identities as well. The Internet provides ample opportunities for nameless and faceless fraudsters to thrive. It affords individuals and companies the opportunity to launch out to thousands of internet users not only by sending e-mails, but also posting items on auction sales, posting messages on bulletin boards, entering chat rooms, and even building websites. The perpetrators know that they can better communicate under complete anonymity with large crowds with minimal effort required in the use of the Internet. This makes discovery more difficult and leads to an increase in the number of gullible people being defrauded. The appropriation of e-mails and the Internet has provided the ideal opportunity to expand the business on an international scale. These e-mails have become so pervasive that even “Google” web search engine makes mention of them in their webmaster information section. While no specific Internet domains

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<sup>10</sup> Mark Findlay, *The Globalisation of Crime: Understanding Transitional Relationships in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 2.

are being targeted, this new scheme encompasses practically all domains such as aol.com, yahoo.com, west.net, onetel.uk.

### **Anatomy of Scam Letters**

Ostensibly, the author is on the circle of targeted victims as the unending e-mails received are a sure evidence of this. As a Nigerian national residing temporarily in Germany, I have consistently received an average of fifteen and twenty scam mails weekly at the ratio of three per day. Their rapidity is quite alarming as they often welcome me when I log on to read incoming e-mails daily. What intrigues me as a Nigerian is that not even my name could betray my “Nigerianness” or identity and thus serve as a deterrent. Without any thoughts about a possible wrong target victim, the e-mail aggressors would always write “We want you to help transfer the money or diamonds in a secret fault to your country...”. Ironically, they would have realized that the imaginary booty is already in my home country, although I would not dare to communicate this to them for obvious reasons. Any response would confirm the validity of my e-mail address and thus open avenues for further communication. Moreover, there are also many cases where “unfriendly” replies have led to e-mail viruses being delivered to an unyielding target victim. I had opted for a more modest approach rather than engage in any “e-mail terrorist device”. My first strategy was to forward these mails to a colleague who served on the editorial board of a Nigerian tabloid, the *Comet*. We both thought that publishing these letters unedited would make some impact at least on the originators or potential fraudsters. In another vein, I decided on an analysis of these mails with the intention of unraveling what lies behind this e-mail fraud shrouded in mystery.

Between January 2002 and October 2003, I gathered over a thousand e-mails of this nature. One hundred and fifty scam e-letters were selected randomly from the huge bank of mails and this formed the basis of my present hermeneutics and analysis. The random selection was not informed by any specific criteria. However, a studious perusal of these texts immediately reveal a complex pattern of similarities and differences in terms of geographical origin of the mails, text structure, language style, narratives, themes and variations. This variegation enables us to propose a few broad categories. The scheme mechanics extend from the barely plausible to the unlikely, and some have actually met with varying degrees of success. Various genres derive from the emerging themes in the scam texts and cuts across economy (business), religion, politics, sports, war, coups, death and wills, lottery, prostitution, and topical issues.

The understudied mails could be further characterized under some distinctive rubrics.

A huge chunk of the mails concerns “over-invoicing of contracts” and other related issues. Perpetrators camouflage as bank chiefs or officers, contract award department employees, remittance department officials, or former government officials who claim to have siphoned money from public treasury, or discover inactive or delinquent accounts that hold vast amounts of money (usually millions of dollars) ready to be claimed. Most of the letters would offer the potential victim between 15% and 30% of the money for rendering assistance. A second trajectory is “death and last wills” narratives weaved around surviving relatives and siblings of former (late) military and civilian heads of states or Presidents, of individuals killed in plane crashes, assassinations, natural disasters and so on. In virtually all cases, the deceased had been very wealthy and the fraudsters require assistance in transferring funds to an overseas bank account. Fraudulent wills of deceased foreign nationals from bogus firms of solicitors and bank executives have been brought into the discourse. Other genres that characterize the repertoire are the sample method; money-cleaning scheme; award of contract to foreign companies; lottery – electronic sampling method; claims to religious conversion and revelation; and the rhetoric of transnational sexual labour trafficking.

Other common parallels in the scam letters include manifest country of origin and recurring names of sender, preferred medium of response, language style and structure, and the topical issues dealt with. There is ample indication that a significant percentage of the letters originated from Nigeria (mainly Lagos). Others cut across Africa (Togo, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Congo-Zaire, Kenya, South Africa, and Zimbabwe) and beyond Africa, from the USA, Canada, the Netherlands, and the UK. This geographical spread also indicates the transnational dimension of the scam. Some of the most recurring sender names and e-mail addresses includes: Mariam Abacha, Isa Mustapha, Eunice Savimbi, Oliver Kabila, Tonye Green, Jay Jay Okocha, Taribo West, Shaw Petterson, David Cole, Rasaan Hussein, etc. There is the probability of impersonation as it is always easy to create e-mail addresses with any chosen name. The preferred method of response is via e-mail or fax. Prospective clients are often requested to include their own telephone and fax numbers, complete addresses, and bank account information in their responses. They are enjoined to keep the transactions “very secret and confidential”.

The language structure and style of most letters bear remarkable semblance. This raises the possibility of the same source for multiple mails, some of which arrive

simultaneously or within the same period. Most letters do not demonstrate any high level of English language and they are often characterized by grammatical errors. This suggests that such letters were never edited but were perhaps hurriedly drafted and dispatched. The tone sometimes gives away and depicts the origin or ethnic background of the writer. Another significant feature is the variety of narratives that are constructed. Most letters address topical issues of the day or refer to recent tragic events such as the Iraqi-US war, the Liberian crisis, the face-off between Robert Mugabe and the expatriate farmers in Zimbabwe, religious conflicts in Northern Nigeria, and a host of other topical issues. This suggests that the sources are very conversant with current affairs as well as historical happenings around the world.

### **The Globalization of Organized Crime**

The AFF problem has drawn considerable global attention and publicity. In spite of this growing international awareness, AFF, as with other forms of transnational organized crime, seems to have defied all regulatory and preventive action adopted at both local and international levels. Offences of this nature continue to take place, fuelled by vulnerable and gullible victims and increasingly sophisticated and violent criminals. The changing anatomy and the elasticity of criminal networks from the 1980s are better understood within local-global contexts and wider operational frameworks. What began as a relatively simple adaptation of a traditional advance fee ploy has developed into an extensive organized criminal operation with links to other major crimes internationally. Those involved in perpetrating these acts appear also to be involved in other criminal activities such as credit card, false identity, forgery and immigration fraud involving counterfeit passports and visas. They also seem to have connections with other organized crime groups including international drug traffickers.<sup>11</sup> Funds illegally obtained in the scheme have also been used in money-laundering operations carried out in conjunction with drug-trafficking operations. Some of the reasons why the AFF has been difficult both to detect and to prosecute are not farfetched.

Findlay has demonstrated in a very interesting way that “crime is much a force for globalization as globalization is a force for crime”. His book answers the often oversimplified, stereotyped and partial representations of crime and causation. As a social phenomenon involving people, places and institutions, crime he argued, can neither exist nor make sense without its particular social context.<sup>12</sup> Understandings of crime, and efforts for its control,

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<sup>11</sup> See Gup, *Targeting Fraud: Uncovering and Deterring Fraud in Financial Institutions*, pp. 120-125.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Findlay, *The Globalisation of Crime*, p. 6.

mean little beyond their social context. Context is viewed here as “physical space, institutional process, patterns of relationships and individual variation” on the one hand, and as “a transitional state within which crime influences, and is influenced by, a variety of social, cultural, political and economic determinants”. Thus, in order to appreciate crime beyond its localized manifestations, a contextual analysis needs to be comparative at many levels.

The interaction between globalization as a dynamic and transitional phenomenon, and crime, choice and control transcends a web of simple casual links. As Findlay further argued:

While crime on the streets might be viewed as a local issue and crime in the multinational boardroom as more global, there remain important contextual themes common in both and inextricably essential to an understanding of either. This is where an interactive appreciation of crime in context is important to an understanding and analysis of crime as a force for globalization and vice versa, rather than being restricted to representations of crime as criminals, offences or victims – aliens in the global village.<sup>13</sup>

Bayart, Ellis and Hibou also dealt extensively with the relativity of processes of criminalization in their analysis of the criminalization of economies and of states in Africa.<sup>14</sup> As they asserted, the very definition of what is and what is not criminal is, to be sure, eminently relative and varies over time even within a given society. Africa has witnessed particularly rapid changes in the normative conception of what is and is not criminal. The book argues that:

The problem of the criminalization of the state and economies of sub-Saharan Africa has its own historical specificity. It is not that the societies or the political systems of the sub-continent are more corrupt than others, as is so often believed ... in Africa, the interaction between the practice of power, war, economic accumulation and illicit activities of various types forms a particular political trajectory which can be fully appreciated only if it is addressed in historical depth. One of the characteristics of this trajectory is the exploitation by dominant social groups, or by the dominant

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<sup>13</sup> Mark Findlay, *The Globalisation of Crime*, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> See Bayart et. al, “From Kleptocracy to the Felonius State?” in J. Bayart, S. Ellis and B. Hibou (ed.) *The Criminalization of the State in Africa*, pp. 1-31.

actors of the moment, of a whole series of rents generated by Africa's insertion in the international economy in a mode of dependence.<sup>15</sup>

Although the book succeeded in highlighting the historical trajectory of African states and economies, it hardly balances this with the external factor. The criminalization of the state and economies in Africa must also be located within the purview of corrupt African leadership and their external collaborators. The concurrences with foreign governments, multinationals and international organizations like the World Bank (International Monetary Fund) are visible players in this subversion. The *Financial Times* recently carried an interesting report to the effect that bribery has long been used and continues to be used to land international contracts. The US Commerce Department estimated that between May 1994 and April 2002, the outcome of 474 contracts worth \$237 billion may have been affected by bribery. It claims that US firms lost 110 of these contracts, worth a total of \$36 billion.<sup>16</sup>

The "419" scam has even assumed a wider meaning and connotation among Nigerians. It is not only a term referring to those involved in this AFF scam; its meaning and appropriation is now widened to include any individual, government, private and public firms, and most importantly multinational corporations perceived by the public to be involved in all sorts of exaction, exploitation and thievery. The example of multinationals will suffice here. In 2000, Nigeria was the fifth-largest supplier of crude oil to the US. Some of the major American energy companies operating in Nigeria include Andarko (Houston, Texas), Chevron-Texaco, Conoco-Philips, Exxon-Mobil, Shell, TotalFinaElf, and Western Geophysical (Houston, Texas).<sup>17</sup> Some or all of these companies are involved in Oil and Gas production and exploration, Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) development. A joint venture team – TSKJ – including Halliburton unit, Kellogg Brown and Root (KBR) was awarded a contract worth more than \$1.7 billion to expand a liquefied natural gas plant in Nigeria.<sup>18</sup> The financial crimes squad in Paris believes a French Oil and Gas Engineering firm, Technip, and

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<sup>15</sup> J. Bayart, S. Ellis and B. Hibou (ed.) *The Criminalization of the State in Africa*, p. xvi.

<sup>16</sup> The *Financial Times*, Thursday, May 8, 2003. p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> Western Geophysical is parent company of Halliburton Geophysical Services and a division of Western atlas International, Inc. See Bob Aldridge, *Understanding the "War on Terrorism": The Oil and Gas Interests – Part 2 (Africa)*, Santa Clara, California: Pacific Life Research Center (PLRC – 030201), p. 16. This article is a comprehensive treatment of how indigenous people are repressed in order to further US energy industry interests.

<sup>18</sup> The joint venture, known as TSKJ, includes France's Technip-Coflexip, Italy's Snamprogetti, Japan's JGC Corp. and KBR, the engineering and construction unit of Dallas-based Halliburton Co. See Halliburton 2000 Press Releases at: [http://www.halliburton.com/news/archive/2000/kbrnws\\_030100a.jsp](http://www.halliburton.com/news/archive/2000/kbrnws_030100a.jsp) or "Halliburton KBR venture gets \$1.7B Nigeria Contract" in *Dallas Business Journal*, March 22, 2002. (Available at: <http://dallas.bizjournals.com/dallas/stories/2002/03/18/daily48.html?>

particularly the Halliburton subsidiary KBR were jointly involved during the 1990s in the payment of up to \$200m (£120m) of under-the-counter “commissions” in relation to this huge gas contract in Nigeria.<sup>19</sup>

In a US Securities and Exchange Commission regulatory filing in May 2003, KBR, the Halliburton unit that won a controversial no-bid contract to extinguish Iraqi oil wells fires, admitted to have “made improper payments of approximately \$2.4 million to an entity owned by a Nigerian national who held himself out as a tax consultant when in fact he was an employee of a local tax authority”.<sup>20</sup> This sum was paid in bribes to “obtain favourable tax treatment” in the country where it is building a liquefied natural gas plant and an off-shore oil and gas facility. In a bid to launder its image, Haliburton said: “...This clearly violated our code of business conduct and our internal control procedures ...Based on the findings of the investigation, we have terminated several employees ... We plan to take further action to ensure that our foreign subsidiary pays all taxes owed in Nigeria, which may be as much as an additional \$US5 million (\$A7.8 million), which has been fully accrued”.<sup>21</sup> KBR’s complicity in the aiding and abetting of bribery in Nigeria is quite ironic. Comparing the incident to a 419 scam, Emmanuel Ogebe aptly remarked:

A situation where a US company pays money to a public official under the pretext that he is a private tax consultant sounds dangerously close to the definition of 419 under the law ... in this case it would appear the individual in question did engage in 419 with the collusion and knowledge of the company. The twist here is that this was done to evade tax and induce a favour for the company from a foreign government ... this scandal raises a lot of triable issues under both Nigerian law and the US Foreign Corrupt Practices Act ... Nigerians are not less competent or more corrupt than the expatriates who currently dominate the industry.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> TSKJ, in which KBR was the leading player, allegedly paid a second off-shore company at least \$180m in commissions – most of which was transferred to a score of different off-shore bank accounts – for “mediating” with the Nigerian authorities. It is alleged that much of that money wound up in the pockets of public officials. See Jon Henley (In Paris) “French sleaze inquiry targets US oil subsidiary”, *The Guardian*, Saturday 11 October 2003. (Also available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,4772307-103681,00.html>).

<sup>20</sup> Cited in “US Oil Co. defrauds Nigeria in \$2.5m tax evasion scandal” (by Laolu Akande), *Nigeriaworld* Friday 9 May 2003, at <http://odili.net/news/source/2003/may/9/63.html> and “Haliburton firm bribed Nigeria” at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/05/10/1052280472817.html>

<sup>21</sup> Cf. with recent controversy regarding Iraqi contracts. See for instance Joel Brinkley and Eric Schmitt “Military Contracts: Halliburton Will Repay U.S. Excess Charges for Troops’ Meals”, *The New York Times*, 3 February 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in “US Oil Co. defrauds Nigeria in \$2.5m tax evasion scandal” (by Laolu Akande), *Nigeriaworld* Friday 9 May 2003, at <http://odili.net/news/source/2003/may/9/63.html> . Emmanuel Ogede is a Nigerian-American

At the global level, environmental concerns are largely centred around the impact on the West to the detriment and dismal neglect of effects in Africa and other less industrialized countries. The “economic logic” behind the global transportation of pollution and the dangerous practice of dumping toxic waste in Africa (i.e. toxic waste dump in Koko-Niger Delta of Nigeria) as spelled out in a World Bank internal memorandum of 1991 states that such a heinous act is “impeccable”. Lawrence Summers (one-time chief economist at the World Bank) suggested: “the under-populated countries of Africa are vastly under-polluted since even a significant increase would be associated with only relatively small increases in terms of health and other consequences”. He further remarked that there was also likely to be more demand for a clean environment in countries with higher income levels. Such a sickening display of double standards was more evident in his outrageous conclusion that “the export of pollution would be welfare-enhancing, improving the position both for the exporters (in wealthy countries) who would benefit environmentally, and for the importers (in poor countries) who would benefit financially”.<sup>23</sup> On the whole, the unjust, indiscriminate dumping of toxic waste is clearly a complex one that will continue to provoke strong feelings and reactions to the perceived uncertainties and risks associated with this form of pollution in Africa.<sup>24</sup>

Human Rights Watch reported, “Multinational oil companies are complicit in abuses committed by the Nigerian military and police.” They cite examples of oil companies using tactics to divide protesters, helping the government to arrest and educate key opposition leaders, and even oil companies providing helicopters from which Nigerian military personnel fire on protesters. According to Human Rights Watch:

While the story told to consumers of Nigerian crude in the [US and EU]...is that oil companies are a positive force in Nigeria, providing much needed economic development resources, ... [o]ur delegates observed almost every large multinational oil company operating in the Niger Delta employing inadequate environmental standards, public health standards, and relations with the affected communities ... Far from being as positive force, these oil companies’ acts as a destabilizing, pitting

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Attorney based in Washington DC. He is also the Director of the privately held Nigerian Trade Information Center (NITRADE) in Washington DC.

<sup>23</sup> See D. Harvey, “The environment of justice” in A. Merrifield and E. Swyngedouw, *The Urbanization of Injustice* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995), p. 65.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Allan Cochrane and Kathy Pain, “A globalizing society” in David Held (ed.), *A Globalizing World? Culture, Economics and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 20.

one community against another, and acting as a catalyst – together with the military with whom they work closely – to some of the violence wracking the region today.<sup>25</sup>

In 1997, while Dick Cheney was chief executive of Halliburton, KBR was alleged by Environmental Rights Action to have collaborated with Nigeria's Mobile Police Unit who shot and killed a protestor, playing a similar role to Shell and Chevron in the mobilization of this "kill and go" unit to protect company property.<sup>26</sup> These and other actions of multinationals and their collaborative Nigerian "mis-rulers" are considered by many Nigerians as sophisticated levels of 419.

Globalization gives rise to a web of contradictions, tensions and anxieties in the African context. The systemic interlocking of the local and the global in the process creates a number of new dynamics that are better appreciated with the hindsight of African historico-cultural experiences. From a critical stance, globalization both increases opportunities for cooperation and participation on the one level, but also aggrandizes marginalization and exclusion on the other level. It leads to the concentration of power, knowledge and wealth in institutions controlled or at least influenced by transnational corporations. Obsessed with rising revenues in their economic exploits, these corporations become blind to their destructive social and ecological consequences on the immediate host communities. One fall-out of this development is that it has exacerbated organized protests and rejection against this perceived viciousness and vicissitudes. This has generated a decentralizing dynamic as people and communities struggle to regain control over the forces that threaten their very existence.

In the midst of changes and severe pressure on their livelihoods and cultures, people want to affirm their cultural and religious identities. The gruesome experiences of Ken Saro-Wiwa and his Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MOSOP), their ordeal with oil conglomerates in the Niger Delta, and the connivance of draconian military dictatorship of Nigeria's Ibrahim Babangida and Sanni Abacha in the 1990s is only an instance of how communal cooperation and organized protests against the recklessness of multinationals and

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<sup>25</sup> Cited in "Nigeria and Oil", *Conflicts in Africa*, (by Anup Shah) 23 July 2000, at <http://www.globalissues.org/Geopolitics/Africa/Nigeria.asp>. Cf. *Assassins in Foreign Lands: A CorpWatch Radio Interview with Nigerian Human Rights Activist Oronto Douglas*, at: [http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Africa/Oronto\\_Douglas\\_Nigeria/](http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Africa/Oronto_Douglas_Nigeria/)

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Jason Leopold, "Cheney's Old Company Continues to Break Law's While Profiting from Terror", Center for Research on Globalization, 11 May 2003. (Available at: <http://globalresearch.ca/articles/LEO305A.html>).

their quisling (in this case Abacha's regime) have also helped in both fighting and raising eyebrows to the negative aspects of globalization.

### **“If it sounds too good to be true, then it is!” – Global War against Transnational Organized Crime**

The increasing complexity and sophistication of the AFF as a transnational organized crime has brought global security attention, perhaps next to global terrorism. The escalation of these activities resulting sometimes in threats and acts of physical violence, extortion, intimidation and repeat victimization has drawn to it more global attention. The energy, finances and preventive measures generated by various government and security agencies suggest the transnational dimension of AFF as organized crime. The activities usually assume more complications when victims are persuaded to travel to other locations to undertake further steps to complete the transaction, or when defrauded victims take bold steps to seek out and confront the defrauders in an attempt to recover their monies. There are also cases in recent times involving victims themselves carrying out fraudulent activities in order to obtain further funds to complete transactions.

At the local level, the Nigerian government has embarked upon a range of preventive measures, including education of the local and international community as to the risks involved in replying to AFF letters.<sup>27</sup> Various laws proscribe the conduct involved in advance fee schemes, including those relating to obtaining property by deception, theft and forgery.<sup>28</sup> The Decree provides for severe penalties of up to 10-year imprisonment without the alternative option of a fine. For over a decade, the Central Bank of Nigeria has mounted a publicity campaign designed to alert the local and international communities to the problem of AFF.<sup>29</sup> Recently, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) set up by the Nigerian government is reportedly baring its fangs effectively on fraudsters, thus making many of them to gradually go under. The Nigerian government (through the Embassy in Washington in conjunction with a New York-based business development agency – The Business Council for the Development of Nigeria) took its anti-419 campaign to international frontiers by convening an international conference on “Advance Fee Fraud and related offences” in New York on 24 September 2002.

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<sup>27</sup> See the official website of the Federal Government of Nigeria at: <http://www.nigeria.gov.ng/index1.htm> and [http://nopa.net/Useful\\_Information/419/cbn.html](http://nopa.net/Useful_Information/419/cbn.html).

<sup>28</sup> See Section 419 of the NCC and Decree 13 of 1995.

<sup>29</sup> See Central Bank of Nigeria website at: [www.expdisc.com/cbn.htm](http://www.expdisc.com/cbn.htm).

Many countries such as the US, the UK and Australia have also taken action to curtail this trend mainly because their citizens have been victimized. In the US, the Secret Service has primary responsibility for dealing with AFF. Arrests have been made and international publicity campaigns have been undertaken to alert potential victims to the problem. The Serious Fraud Office's West African Fraud Desk has continued to take action and in 1997 prosecuted 111 individuals in the UK. The British postal service acquired new powers to intercept and destroy advance fee letters. Foreign secret intelligence agencies have also collaborated with Nigerian authorities leading to joint operations. In May 1998, the Nigerian AFF Prevention Bill was introduced into the US Senate to highlight the problem, to inform the public of the risks and to enable government action to be taken to prevent AFF.<sup>30</sup> The Office of International Criminal Justice within the US Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs has also established an Inter-Agency Working Group on Nigerian Crime, which coordinates activities by law enforcement, diplomatic and business organizations.<sup>31</sup> Launched in May 2000, the Internet Fraud Complaint Center is a resource established for law enforcement by law enforcement. Its website provides a mechanism for consumers and businesses nationwide to report incidents of Internet crime and other forms of fraud.<sup>32</sup>

Another spate of responses to the scam is evident through the proliferation of Internet sites by individuals and organizations with information and advice for victims of AFF and for the general public.<sup>33</sup> International Investigation Services (IIS) operates a paid service in which actual advance fee letters and other documents are available for inspection. In addition, IIS maintains an extensive list of known advance fee offenders, along with bank account details, which have been used. They also render advice on how to recognize a fraudulent proposal.<sup>34</sup> The 419 Coalition is another organization that maintains a site with extensive

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<sup>30</sup> See <http://www.house.gov/markey/nigpr.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> Smith et. al, "Nigeria Advance Fee Fraud" in *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, p. 5. Having no investigative authority of its own, the National White Collar Crime Centre is a non-profit organization funded by Congress that provides support services to state and local law enforcement agencies and other organizations with an active interest in the prevention, investigation, and prosecution of economic and high-tech crime. Since 1980, the organization has existed to support enforcement agencies in these endeavours. The NW3C's actions and projects are guided by members' resource and support needs. In addition, they serve as an effective gateway to state and local agencies, as well as some private-sector groups, for other entities and model projects.

<sup>32</sup> The IFCC allows for the sharing of fraud data by all law enforcement and regulatory authorities. In immediate support of national security, NW3C transformed IFCC into a terrorist tip portal shortly after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Over 303,000 terrorist tips were reported through the IFCC web portal and provided the FBI with significant leads that enabled them to pre-empt certain terrorist activities subsequent to 11 September. The IFCC is online at <http://www.ifccfbi.gov/>.

<sup>33</sup> See a list of fighters' sites of the 419 scam at: <http://home.rica.net/alphae/419coal/fighters.htm>.

<sup>34</sup> See <http://www.superhighways.is/iis/access.html>.

information on AFFs that is updated regularly and has links to other fraud prevention agencies.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, the resilience of AFF has even generated jobs and opportunities for others. Consultancy firms have emerged to tackle this problem, too. The UK Professional Investigators Network is ostensibly a beneficiary of this. The Bayhall Associates (in association with Moore and Associates) describes itself as the world's premier AFF investigations agency. Claiming to be experts in advanced global investigations, the Bayhall Associates focuses on the detection and investigation of suspected and known frauds involving employees, business associates, suppliers, vendors, licensees, customers, competitors and governments.<sup>36</sup> It is unclear whether such agencies are not themselves disguised AFF agencies or whether, in fact, they have not been infiltrated by members of the transnational crime organizations. There are also Internet sites that appear somewhat humorous. At least half a dozen web scam bait sites poke fun at these get-rich-quick schemes, and engage in often-hilarious dialogues with the "scamsters".

## **Conclusion**

The use of electronic messaging to disseminate advance fee letters represents a particular problem, as it enables offenders to disguise their identity and to canvass considerably larger numbers of potential victims more easily. With letters now being sent electronically, the possibility also arises that messages may be sent through anonymous re-mailing services. The use of telecommunications may also create additional legal problems in identifying where the illegal conduct took place and where the victimization occurred. In a recent article, Jan Libbenga aptly retorted:

So you think those wacky Nigerians who promise you compensation for assistance in moving funds from foreign countries to banks in Europe, are operating from scruffy cyber-cafes in Lagos? Think again. When the police last year raided a flat in the Amsterdam suburb of Bijlmer as part of an investigation, they couldn't believe their eyes: faxes and phone lines everywhere. Mobile phone cards abound. And in one of the bedrooms a fully operational PBX telephone system, programmed to be The Anglo American Bank or The City Express Finance & Trust. Companies, you guessed it, formed solely with the purpose to rake in victims.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See <http://home.rica.net/alphae/419coal/>.

<sup>36</sup> See details at their website: <http://www.bayhallassociates.com/advancefees.htm>.

<sup>37</sup> Jan Libbenga, "How to beat the 419 scammers", *The Register* (a UK news site), 22 October 2003.

The problem is no longer one for Nigeria or West Africa alone to deal with as it has definitely taken on a truly international character. As with most schemes directed at unsuspecting consumers, effective education as to the risks involved represents one of the more appropriate responses than embarking upon trans-jurisdictional criminal proceedings.<sup>38</sup> Most importantly, I think this problem will not go away soon so long as victims who come forward to testify of their ordeals are not themselves arrested and made to face the full brunt of the law. For instance, the 2002 New York confab on 419 was well attended by top US and Nigerian government officials, diplomats, security executives, business magnates. Also attracted were some American victims of the 419 scam.<sup>39</sup> The various governments and security agencies may just be chasing shadows if they fail to cope with the question of what happens to the culprits too. Are they not themselves criminals that need to be arrested at least for further interrogation? In my view, it is mostly criminals or gullible citizens that fall prey simply by reading such invitation letters to partake in fraudulent activities. In this way, they never remember that “If it sounds too good to be true, then it is”. If they are often left to go with their tales, complaints and testimonies, then it is most unlikely that we are anywhere near the end of the problem.

In actual fact, the criminalization of Nigeria and its citizens by the US and other western countries might only help to aggravate but not mitigate this cankerworm. For instance, “Travel Warnings” about safety and security conditions in Nigeria, and “Tips for Business Travelers to Nigeria” emanating from the US Department of State (Bureau of Consular Affairs) and the US Embassy in Nigeria are in the least alarming and very derogatory.<sup>40</sup> In such publications, Nigeria is maliciously painted to US citizens and the outside world as a “very dangerous” country. In a spate of irony, one wonders how this “dangerous, crisis and crime-ridden country” could harbour “the happiest people in the world”. In a recent publication in the UK’s *New Scientist* magazine, Nigeria tops happiness survey in a new study of more than 65 countries. The study not only suggested that the happiest people in the world live in Nigeria, but that it has the highest percentage of happy

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<sup>38</sup> Smith et. al, “Nigeria Advance Fee Fraud” in *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice*, p. 6.

<sup>39</sup> A couple, Mr. and Mrs. Ghasemi, were 419 victims who told the conference of the loss of about \$400,000. Their story is a compelling one. See some details cited in “Fighting back at 419 scam” (by Laolu Akande) *Nigeriaworld* at, <http://nigeriaworld.com/columnist/laoluakande/0925202news.html>.

<sup>40</sup> See details at [http://travel.state.gov/nigeria\\_warning.html](http://travel.state.gov/nigeria_warning.html), <http://travel.state.gov/nigeria.html>, <http://usembassy.state.gov/nigeria/wwwwho419.html>, and <http://usembassy.state.gov/nigeria/wwwhp123003a.html>.

people.<sup>41</sup> It is interesting to see what criteria have been used in the survey to reach this conclusion.

In the US travel warning for Nigeria issued on 7 April 2000 and updated on 8 August 2002, the State department cautioned that conditions in Nigeria pose considerable risk to travelers. It warned: “Violent crime, committed by ordinary criminals, as well as by persons in police and military uniforms, can occur throughout the country. Kidnapping for ransom of persons associated with the petroleum sector, including US citizens, remains common in the Niger Delta area ...”. Public outcry and criticism of this official US orchestrated campaign of calumny against Nigeria led the US Embassy in Nigeria to issue a press release on 13 August 2002, titled “US Travel Warning Not Intended to Stop Visitors or Malign Nigeria”. Ostensibly, the Press Release was paradoxical, hypocritical and ambiguous in content. It stated, inter alia:

There have been inaccurate reports about the US travel warning for Nigeria issued April 7, 2000 and updated August 8, 2002. The State Department issues many travel warnings about safety and security conditions in countries worldwide. Currently, there are valid travel warnings for 25 countries worldwide. Nigeria is not being singled out. The travel warning for Nigeria does not prevent travelers from visiting Nigeria, nor does it tell them not to visit the country. The travel warning certainly does not attempt to denigrate Nigeria’s standing in the international community, particularly given the excellent relations that exist between Nigeria and the United States. The updated August 8 travel warning was intended to alert Americans who may be considering travel to Nigeria to the potential hazards of such travel, sensitizing them to conditions that exist on the ground. The US Government does, in fact, remain committed to enhancing trade and investment between our two countries and is encouraging Americans to do business in and visit Nigeria. We will continue to do so.<sup>42</sup>

The process of criminalization, according to Findlay, “is an inherently political exercise, reliant on legislative prohibitions and being activated through administrative practice.”<sup>43</sup> This often makes the interpretation of crime a selective process. Transnational crime is new only for the manner in which law enforcement and international agencies have recently identified it

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<sup>41</sup> See BBC News at: <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/>.

<sup>42</sup> See <http://usembassy.state.gov/nigeria/wwwhp081302a.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Mark Findlay, *The Globalisation of Crime*, p. 48.

as a priority.<sup>44</sup> The selective criminalization of certain forms of fraud (AFF) has been a recent feature of crime control policy worldwide. Strategies have been developed to prosecute certain kinds of fraud, as well as fight against self-defined acts of terrorism. Nevertheless, an international approach to crimes against the environment, especially by the multinationals in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, is yet to be convincingly settled. The public understanding of crime is also heavily reliant on the selective reporting of the media and it is not surprising that interpretations of crime are hardly universal or value-free. However, the selective interpretation, criminalization and reporting of certain sharp practices (AFF) may lead to increases in other forms of crime, as well as the development of new crime control strategies.

Finally, a large cross-section of youths in African countries where AFF syndrome is rife, have totally lost faith and confidence in their national governments and leaders in the face of unabated economic, political and social crises. With the disappearance of a middle-class level in virtually all African countries, the gulf between the rich, upper class and the poor, lower class continues to widen at a rate that is in the least scandalous. This total disillusionment with the so-called elite class has given them legitimacy to further their vices. In a feat of desperation and frustration, the AFF serves as one viable channel towards the attainment of social mobility. Whether it is the perpetrators or the victims alike, the general tendency is the “get rich quick syndrome”. In common parlance, “People want to make it somehow, anyhow, by hook or crook”. A common conjecture among fraudsters is that if the climb on the social ladder appears unattainable through “legitimate” means, then they could easily emulate their corrupt leaders and elites who have attained social apex through questionable, sharp practices. In this case, the end justifies the means either through “business usual” or as “business unusual”. While tremendous internal factors and local problems are undeniable, the inability and failure to bring such countries out of lingering socio-economic and political crisis is mostly traceable to the connivance with foreign business partners and multinationals to defraud their own countries. It is public knowledge that treasures and ill-gotten monies are safely kept in banks in western countries. Sharp practices are clearly visible in governments’ negotiation and award of contracts to both local firms and multinational corporations. In sounding a note of pessimism for the continent, Bayart remarked:

There is a strong possibility that sub-Saharan Africa is returning to the “heart of darkness”...not synonymous with “tradition” or “primitiveness”, but is related to the manner in which Africa is inserted in the International system through economies of

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<sup>44</sup> Mark Findlay, *The Globalisation of Crime*, p. 51.

extraction or predation in which many of the leading operators are foreigners, whose local African partners have to a considerable degree based their careers on the use of armed force.<sup>45</sup>

So long as these countries remain submerged in unending socio-economic and political crises; so long as the tempo of corruption and fraud in public and multinational circles are not mitigated; and so long as international hypocrisy on who bears responsibility is not erased, then we may just yet be waiting to witness more sophistication in this global, transnational organized crime.

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<sup>45</sup> Jean-Francois Bayart, "Conclusion" in J. Bayart, S. Ellis and B. Hibou (ed.) *The Criminalization of the State in Africa*, p. 114.

# International Sociological Association

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## *e-bulletin*

Anti-

### **Semitism and the Arabs**

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#### **Arab Media and Anti-Semitism**

Two widely watched television series broadcasted in the past four years provide compelling examples of anti-Semitism in the Arab Muslim world in general and its prominence in the ideologies of Islamist groups like Hezbollah, Hamas and Al-Qaeda. In November 2002 Egyptian state television and some other television stations in the neighbouring Arab countries began broadcasting a 41-part serial called “Knight Without a Horse”. The series was based on the notorious “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” document. It claimed authenticity for the Protocols. One episode showed Jews meeting in a dark room decorated with Jewish symbols discussing the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. They are seen arguing that Britain has an interest in establishing such a state to fracture Arab and Muslim unity.

By and large the reaction of Egyptian media was in favour of the series. The media also claimed that those who cast doubts upon the authenticity of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion by arguing that it was the Russian Czar Nikolai 11’s secret service who compiled them to blame the Jews for Russia’s suffering during his rule were lying. The media added that even if the Protocols were fabricated, the fact is that in practice Zionism seeks to take over the world with money, murder, sex, and the other most despicable of means (Memri 2002).

A year later during the month of Ramadan, Hezbollah's Al-Manar satellite television channel with a worldwide audience of millions, broadcast 30 parts of a Syrian-produced anti-Semitic series titled "Al-Shatat" ("Diaspora"). The series purports to tell the story of Zionism from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the establishment of the state of Israel. Like the Egyptian series, "Al-Shatat" also depicted a secret global Jewish conspiracy similar to the one described in the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. Jews are accused of bringing death and destruction upon humanity, unleashing both world wars, discovering chemical weapons and destroying Hiroshima and Nagasaki with nuclear weapons. It showed Jews cutting the throat of a gentile child with blood spurting from the wound into a metal basin which is used for the unleavened bread for the Passover feast, a scene depicting an enduring European anti-Semitic belief.

### **Islamist Groups and Anti-Semitism**

Al-Manar sees itself as the global voice of Islamism. It is popular among the millions of its viewers because of its countless video clips which use inspiring graphics and uplifting music to promote suicide bombing. The satellite channel not only pushes for terrorist acts against Israel but inspires, justifies and acclaims them (Memri 2003; Kuntzel 2005; Jorisch 2004). In general the Arab media dismisses Western accusations that programs like "Al-Shatat" and "A Knight Without a Horse" are vehicles of anti-Semitism. Most Arab leaders and intellectuals have claimed that these accusations are merely an attempt by the "Zionist lobby" in the US and Jewish organizations in Europe to silence legitimate criticism of Israel and Zionism. A less frequent response of Arab intellectuals, including one from Osama Al-Baz, political advisor to the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, to these accusations has been that anti-Semitic myths and canards published in the Arab media are false (Memri 2003).

Beside Hezbollah, Hamas and Al-Qaeda are regarded as the most anti-Jewish Islamist groups. The Hamas "Charter of Allah" is grounded in the superiority of Islamic ideological tradition and regards capitalism, communism, the West, Zionism and Jewry as components of a multi-faceted onslaught acting in concert to destroy Islam and eliminate the Palestinian people from their homeland. It advocates the establishment of an Islamic state. The Hamas Charter approvingly cites the spurious and notorious Protocols of the Elders of Zion and holds the Zionist movement and Jews in general responsible for every real or perceived ill that has afflicted the modern world, including capitalism, communism, both world wars, the UN Security Council and the drug trade (Article 22). According to Article 11, the whole of

Palestine is “an Islamic waqf” held in eternal trust for the future generations and can only be liberated by jihad. The peaceful solutions are seen as incapable of restoring Palestinian rights which can only be achieved through armed struggle (Article 13). The Charter propounds an ideology saturated with anti-Semitism that flows directly from 19<sup>th</sup> century, right wing European thought superimposed on a flawed reading of the Prophet Mohammad’s antagonistic relationship with the Jewish community of the Arabian peninsula (Budeiri 1995; ICG 2004).

Anti-Semitic rhetoric is a significant part of Al-Qaeda’s ideology and motivation. Jews are seen as the eternal enemies of Islam. While the battles currently being fought are targeting the US and the secular Arab/ Muslim regimes, Al-Qaeda considers Jews to be the true evil. According to some commentators, several of the terrorists involved in the 9/11 attacks were motivated by their hatred toward Jews (ADL 2007; Lawrence 2005).

### **The Puzzle of Anti-Semitism in the Arab-Islamic World**

The intriguing aspect of the account of anti-Semitism of Islamist groups given above is that it is qualitatively different from the reflective jurisprudence associated with the treatises of classical Islam. There is little evidence of any deep-rooted anti-Semitism in the classical Islamic world. According to one of the leading Western scholars of Islamic history, Bernard Lewis, in contrast to Christian anti-Semitism, Muslim attitudes toward Jews were not historically ones of hate and fear but rather ones inspired by the contempt which Muslims had towards all non-believers. Unlike many European philosophers of the enlightenment era who at one time or another gave vent to anti-Semitism, nothing comparable can be found in the writings of great philosophers in classical Islam.

Lewis attributes the absence of anti-Semitism in Islamic tradition to a rejection of deicide. “In Islam, the Gospels have no place in education, and Muslim children are not brought up on stories of Jewish deicide. Indeed the very notion of deicide is rejected by the Qur’an as ‘blasphemous absurdity’” (Lewis 1986, p. 117). After reviewing the history of Jewish-Muslim relations, Lewis concludes that in general Jewish and Muslim theology are far closer to each other than is either to Christianity. Jews have lived under Islamic rule for 14 centuries and in many lands and, while it is difficult to generalize about their experience, they were never free from discrimination but were rarely subjected to persecution as they were in Christendom.

Most of the characteristic and distinctive features of Christian anti-Semitism were absent. There were no fears of Jewish conspiracy and domination, no charges of diabolic evil. Jews were not accused of poisoning wells or spreading the plague and the blood libel. In modern times under the influence of external factors which are easily recognizable, Mohammad's conflict with the Jews has been portrayed as a central theme in his career, and their enmity given cosmic significance (Lewis 1986, pp. 121–129).

### **Arrival of Anti-Semitism in the Arab World**

#### *Arabic Translation of European Anti-Semitic Literature*

The penetration of modern-style anti-Semitism in the Islamic movements which were the precursors of modern Islamism can be traced back to the Christian Arab minorities which had close contacts with the West in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Anti-Semitism was actively encouraged by the visits of a variety of European emissaries. Christian minorities had good practical reasons to oppose Jews because they were their main economic competitors. It was aided by the translation into Arabic by Christian Arabs of European anti-Semitic writings. A good example of this was the Arabic translation of a lengthy French book by Georges Corneilhan, first published in Paris in 1889, about the Jews in Egypt and Syria. It portrayed the French anti-Semitic literature of the times, denouncing the Jews as the source of all corruption that was destroying France and the world. Another book was Christian author Habib Faris's *Surakh al-Bari fi Buq al-Hurriyya (The call of the Innocent with the Trumpet of Freedom)*. This book was a compilation of anti-Semitic myths, largely of European origin, accusing Jews of ritual sacrifice like the one depicted in Hezbollah's series "Al-Shatat" and ascribing this to talmudic teachings. These early attempts to spread anti-Semitism in Arabic met disapproval in the Ottoman lands and, from time to time, newspapers involved in anti-Jewish incitement were seen as a threat to public order and were closed down by the Ottoman authorities (Lewis 1986).

#### *The Wartime Anti-Semitic German Propaganda*

Some scholars have examined the role of wartime German propaganda to the Arab-Muslim world in the rise of Arab anti-Semitism. Seth Arsenian, a former British intelligence officer turned academic, shows in his analysis that the German propagandists in the Second World War successfully exploited the anti-Jewish sentiments in the Middle East, since it was in harmony with the practices and professed ideas of Hitler's Germany. Arsenian shows that

from 1938 until the end of the war, the Berlin radio station located at Zeesen near Berlin dominated the Arab scene. Utilizing the services of well-known Arab exiles and academics in Germany, the Berlin radio produced the most vigorous and widely listened to Arabic programs.

The major line of the radio broadcasts was that the interest of the Allies in the Middle East was motivated entirely by their “greedy imperialism” which was bound to “rob the Arab of his wealth and enslave him forever”. The Allies were represented as “Jewish controlled” and were often referred to as “United Jewish nations”. The Allied leaders were portrayed as “untrustworthy, perfidious, and decadent individuals” and the German leaders were portrayed as very sympathetic to Arab-Muslim aspirations. The German propaganda was relentlessly anti-Semitic. The Arabs were told that the Jews were tools of British imperialism and bent on expelling the Palestinians from their homeland and creating a Jewish state in Palestine and, through that, controlling the whole of the Middle East and its oil. They extolled Arab culture and that God had sent Germany, the just and great nation, to punish the imperialists and save the Arabs. A major aim of German propaganda was to create disturbances and, if possible, armed rebellion in the Arab world against the British (Arsenian 1948).

Matthias Kuntzel, a German political scientist, agrees with Lewis that anti-Semitism based on the notion of Jewish world conspiracy is not rooted in Islamic tradition, but in European ideological models. In a paper published in 2005, building on the work of Arsenian, Kuntzel shows that the decisive transfer of anti-Semitic ideology to the Muslim Arab world took place between 1937 and 1945 under the impact of Nazi propaganda. Important to this process was the Arabic language service broadcast by the German radio in Zeesen between 1939 and 1945, which skillfully mingled anti-Semitic propaganda with quotations from the Qur’an and Arabic music. These broadcasts enjoyed great popularity in the Arab countries and were heard in squares, cafes and bazaars. The Allies were presented as lackeys of the Jews who were attacked as the enemy of Islam. These broadcasts were dubbed as “our long-range gun in the ether” by Goebbels.

According to Kuntzel, although Islamism is an independent anti-Semitic and anti-modern ideology, Hajj Amin el-Husseini, the Mufti of Jerusalem, the Islamic Brotherhood and the Palestinian Qassamites played a critical role in translating the European anti-Semitism into an Islamic context and were supported financially and ideologically by the agencies of the German National Socialist government (Kuntzel 2005). The Mufti was instrumental in

coining the concept of *Muselgermanen* (Muslimo-German) because of the parallels between Muslim and German ideals such as:

1. monotheism and unity of leadership;
2. the ordering of power, obedience and discipline;
3. the struggle and the honour of those fallen in battle;
4. community;
5. family and offspring;
6. glorification of work and creativity;
7. attitudes towards the Jews.

According to the Mufti “in the struggle against Jewry, Islam and National Socialism come very close to one another”. According to Kuntzel, Mufti El-Husseini tirelessly used his office to Islamize anti-Zionism and provide the religious rationale for the hatred of Jews (Kuntzel 2005).

In these efforts, Mufti El-Husseini was aided by the radical Islamist imam Izz al Din Al-Qassam who, in 1931, set up a Salafi movement in Haifa that advocated return to the original Islam of the 7<sup>th</sup> century with a practice of militant jihad against the infidels (Porath 1977). He was killed in a military encounter with the British and his name is borne by Hamas’s suicide bombing unit. Following the recommendation of the British Peel Commission in 1936 for the partition of Palestine between Arab and Jewish states, the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt which was active in the Palestinian resistance movement against the increasing flow of Jewish immigration from Europe to Palestine, also joined the anti-Jewish agitation and received financial and ideological support from German government agencies and agents. Kuntzel maintains that the Zeesen transmitter appears to have been the interface that transferred the anti-Semitic ideology to the Arab world and linked early Islamism with late National Socialism. Although radio Zeesen ceased operation in April 1945, it was only after that date that its frequencies of hate began to reverberate in the Arab World (Kuntzel 2005).

### **Imperialism, Zionism, Arab Resistance and Anti-Semitism**

The above account provides persuasive insights into explaining the puzzle of why and how anti-Semitism, an unfamiliar ideology in much of Islamic history until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, became pervasive. I would argue that these accounts have one serious shortcoming. They invariably treat the Arabs as empty vessels, gullible and unreflective subjects devoid of all intellectual abilities to reflect and analyze the existential conditions of their social, political and economic predicaments. Any serious student of Arab and Islamic history would reject such characterizations. In fact all actors mentioned by Kuntzel – Mufti El-Husseini, the Islamic Brothers and imam Izz al Din Al Qassam of Haifa and his followers – had been in the forefront of political resistance to increasing Jewish immigration and the British plan to establish a new Jewish state in Palestine (Nicosia 1985; Muhammad El-Awaisi 1998; Hurewitz 1968; Kupferschmidt 1987; Porath 1977). The failure of their political resistance radicalized them to resort to the armed struggle against Zionists and their supporters. In a number of his books and especially in his book entitled *Question of Palestine* (1980), the late American Palestinian academic Edward Said shows how Zionism, a European imperialist idea, was imported to Palestine for which the native Palestinians were made to pay and suffer in very concrete ways, and why they protested and rebelled against it.

Zionism saw Palestine as did European imperialism, as an empty territory paradoxically filled with ignoble and even despicable natives. Said quotes Chaim Weismann, a leading Zionist and the first President of Israel, who had acknowledged that Zionism allied itself with imperial powers in carrying out the Zionist plans to establish a new Jewish state in Palestine. Zionism thought of “the natives” only negatively as a people who were expected to accept passively the plans made for their land. A number of Zionist historians including Yehoshua Porath (1977) and Neville Mandel (1976) have empirically shown that well before World War 1, the ideas of Zionist colonizers were fiercely resisted by Palestinians, not because the natives thought that Jews were evil, but because most natives do not take kindly to having their territory settled by foreigners.

### **The Victim of Victims: Zionism from the Perspective of its Victims**

In his book *The Question of Palestine* Edward Said shows that in formulating the concepts of a Jewish nation “reclaiming” its own territory, Zionism not only accepted the generic racial concepts of European culture, it also banked on the fact that Palestine was actually peopled by a backward people, over which it ought to be dominant. Thus this implicit assumption of domination led Zionism to ignore the natives who for the most part were not entitled to

serious consideration. It led Zionism to develop a consciousness of itself but not of the natives. Palestinians became the victim of victims

As noted by Maxime Rodinson (1973), Zionist indifference to the Palestinian natives was an indifference linked to European supremacy, which benefited even Europe's proletarians and oppressed minorities. In fact, if the ancestral homeland had been occupied by one of the well-established industrialized nations that ruled the world at the time, one that had thoroughly settled down in a territory it had infused with powerful national consciousness, then the problem of displacing, for example, German, French or English inhabitants and introducing a new, nationally coherent element into the middle of their homeland would have been in the forefront of the consciousness of even the most ignorant and destitute of Zionists.

The constitutive energies of Zionism were premised on the excluded presence, that is, the functional absence of "native people" in Palestine. A popular Zionist slogan was "A people without land for a land without people". Several Israeli leaders have denied the existence of Palestinian people. In a statement to *The Sunday Times* of 15 June 1969, a former Prime Minister of Israel Mrs Golda Meir declared: "There is no such thing as Palestinian people ... It is not as if we came and threw them out and took their country. They did not exist." Institutions were built deliberately shutting out the natives; laws were drafted when Israel came into being that made sure that natives would remain in their "non-place" and Jews in theirs. One thing that unites Israelis is the "problem" of Palestinians, whose negation is the most consistent thread running through Zionism. This aspect ties Zionism in the eyes of Palestinians to imperialism.

The exclusion of Palestinians from their own land was and is the root cause of their anti-Jewishness and paradoxically has led them to embrace the ideology of anti-Semitism. This narrative of exploitation, dispossession and humiliation is also the cause of the resentment and anger in other Muslim lands although understandably the details differ. Palestine and the plight of Palestinians in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the single most important factor in incorporation of anti-Semitism in the contemporary Arab-Muslim consciousness and in particular in the agenda of modern Islamist movements (Said 1980). What the situation in relation to Palestine shows that genesis and character of Palestinian and Arab anti-Semitism is grounded in existential conditions and Islamic sacred values are largely co-opted as a sacred motif for mass appeal and mobilization.

### **Muslim Diaspora and Islamism**

Another source of anti-Semitism in the modern world is racism and social and economic exclusion experienced by sections of Muslim Diaspora communities in the West. These experiences are becoming a magnet for radical Islamism. The starting point of individual Muslims' initiation into Islamism and its anti-West and anti-Semitic rhetoric is their real life experiences and not the impulses of Islamic theology. This is eloquently illustrated in the recent work of French Iranian sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar. He has interviewed convicted Islamists in French jails. One of his respondents was 40-year-old Algerian immigrant Ousamn who had become France's sworn enemy. The reasons he gives for this transformation are complex and above all a response to his failed attempt at assimilation into French society. It is a tale of unrequited love which, by virtue of its lack of reciprocation, is transformed into hate. The following is a verbatim account of part of Ousman's interview:

Earlier, France was my model – even if I also resented this. But my ideal was to be French, to act like the French: to have my wife, my kids, my car, my apartment, my house in the country, to become an average Frenchman and live in peace ... Even before I had French citizenship or I had work, in my mind, I wanted to conform to the image of the average French, to be like them, to make myself in their image. But at the same time I had the feeling that this was more or less impossible: they didn't want me, even if I had citizenship and all the rest. They looked down on me, they treated me like I was nothing, they despised me. This contempt was killing me. Were we really so despicable? .... I went back and forth between what I was and what I wanted to be: a little Frenchman. Whereas I was an Algerian. I was tortured by it. Some days, I couldn't fall asleep, I had the impression that my life had no meaning, that my part in life had been unjustly denied me. Islam was my salvation. I understood what I was: a Muslim. Someone with dignity, whom the French despised because they didn't fear me enough. Thanks to Islam, the West respects us in a certain way. They are scared of us. We're treated as fanatics, as holy madmen, as violent people who do not hesitate to die or to kill. But they don't despise us anymore. That is the achievement of Islamism. Now, we are respected. Hated, but respected. (Khosrokhavar 2006, pp. 135–136)

In the interview Ousman also blames the French policy towards Algeria as contributing to his transformation as an Islamist:

I understand that I was different, that I was not French, that I would never become French and that I had no business trying to become French either. I took it well. I was proud of my new Muslim identity. Not to be French, to be Muslim, just that: Algerian too, but above all, Muslim. That was my reconquest of myself, my burst of lucidity, my awakening. I was rid of my malaise from which I had suffered and all of sudden I felt good about myself: no more impossible dreams, no more desire to become part of this France that did not want me. And, above all, I started to nourish a tremendous hatred toward the fascist regime that had rejected the vote of the Algerian people for an Islamic state.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The growth of anti-Semitism in the Arab-Muslim world, an unfamiliar ideology during much of Muslim history, can be traced to a number of causes. As shown in the preceding discussion these include:

- the imperialist challenge and the nationalist response, the mingling of imported chauvinism and home-grown fanaticism,
- the rise, in a time of violent and painful change, of a new intolerance that exacerbated all hatreds and endangered all minorities;
- the rise of the Nazi ideology that elevated the extermination of the Jews and anti-Semitism to a national goal of the Nazi state; and the success of the Nazi propaganda effort to export it to the Arab Muslim lands by successfully exploiting their resentments;
- the Zionist settlement of Palestine leading to the establishment of Israel and the succession of Arab-Israeli wars.

The Israeli-Arab-Palestinian war, which is still continuing unabated, has also highlighted the Arab economic, political and military impotence that is generating an unprecedented sense of humiliation among the Arabs. It is now being fanned by the US-led “War on Terror” which is widely viewed in the Muslim world as “War on Islam” and also by the consequences of the “War on Terror” including the wars now raging in Iraq and Afghanistan. The causes of anti-Semitism within Islamism thus lie largely in the prevailing political, social, economic

conditions and the conflicts arising from them. Islamic symbols are co-opted as a sacred motif for the political mobilization of the resistance efforts.

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# International Sociological Association

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## e-bulletin

In

### Conversation with Professor Chua Beng-Huat

*Interviewed by Sarbeswar Sahoo*

Chua Beng-Huat, a Singaporean, obtained his MA and PhD from York University, Toronto, Canada. He is currently Professor in the Department of Sociology and the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. He has held visiting professorships at universities in the US, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Germany and Australia, including the Inaugural Distinguished Visiting Scholar Fellowship at Carolina Asia Centre, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. His publications include *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (Routledge, 1995), *Political Legitimacy and Housing: Stakeholding in Singapore* (Routledge, 1997), and *Life is Not Complete without Shopping* (Singapore University Press, 2003). He has edited *Singapore Studies II: Critical Survey of the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Singapore University Press, 1999), *Consumption in Asia: Lifestyles and Identities* (Routledge, 2000), *Communitarian Politics in Asia* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2004). He has co-edited (with Kuan-Hsing Chen) *The Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader* (Routledge, 2007) and his edited volume on *Elections as Popular Culture in Asia* is forthcoming in 2007 in the "Politics in Asia" series of Routledge. In addition to being on the editorial board of many international social science and cultural studies journals, he is founding co-executive editor of the journal *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge). His research interests include Social and Political Theory, Comparative Politics in Southeast Asia, Sociology of Housing and Urban Planning, Cultural Studies and Consumer Culture in Asia. He has widely published articles in these areas in many international refereed journals including *Theory, Culture and Society*, *Cultural Politics*, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, *Race & Class*, *American Sociologist*, *Sociological Inquiry*, *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, *Sociological Quarterly*, *Postcolonial Studies*, *Urban Studies*, *Catalyst*, *Housing Studies*, *Asian Studies Review*, *Asian Journal of Communication*, *The Responsive Community: Rights and Responsibilities*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *Social Semiotics*, *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*.

Sarbeswar Sahoo is currently pursuing his PhD in the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore. He received his Masters degree from Hyderabad Central University and M.Phil from Jawaharlal Nehru University (New Delhi) in Sociology. He is interested in the areas of political sociology, sociology of development, globalization studies and issues on governance and democracy. His articles and research papers have appeared in edited volumes and journals like *Indian Journal of Political Science*, *Social Action*, *Mainstream*, *Third Concept* and *Peoples Action*. He has also published book reviews in *Asian Journal of Social Sciences*, *Political Studies Review*, *Contemporary South Asia*, *Indian Anthropologist*, etc. He is co-editor (with Renu Vinod and Manish Tiwari) of the international conference souvenir

*Global Quest for Participatory Democracy* held at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi to celebrate the centennial birthday of Bharat Ratna Loknayak Jaya Prakash Narayan. He is now working on his doctoral thesis on *The Dynamics of Mobilization and the Politics of Democratization: Exploring the "Political" Role of Civil Society in Rajasthan (India)*.

Sarbeswar Sahoo (SS): Let me begin by asking you about the beginning of your academic career as a sociologist. Could you please tell me something about your undergraduate and graduate training?

Chua Beng-Huat (CBH): Actually, my undergraduate degree is not in sociology. It's in biology and chemistry. In my final year of undergrad I had applied and received a scholarship to do neurophysiology. I was then involved with a lot of student political activities during the time of my undergraduate years. By the time I was in my final year, I decided that I do not have the right personality to be a live scientist. So I quit. After that then I decided that I was finished with science. So I switched to, in 1970, doing one year of environmental studies and decided that I didn't want to do that either. In the meantime I had taken one or two graduate courses in Sociology. So I switched over to do my sociology from M.A and continued to PhD.

SS: Where did you do your undergraduate degrees?

CBH: In Nova Scotia, in Canada and then I moved to Toronto to do my environmental studies and sociology at York University.

SS: What made you decide not to take up Political Science?

CBH: Actually I decided that if I was not doing sociology, I probably would have done political science. But I thought sociology would probably be a lot more open-ended than political science because political science deals with fairly a very limited set of objects. Since I was starting out on a whole new field of study I decided to take sociology.

SS: What did you do in Masters? Was it purely coursework or research?

CBH: Yes, most of it was coursework because I had so much catching up to do. In a way it's ironic; the fact that I did not have an undergraduate degree in sociology; probably was a

blessing in disguise. I think if I had done undergraduate degrees in sociology I would have sort of glossed over lots of important theoretical readings, feeling that I already know them. Because I didn't, I read most of the classic texts during my first year in MA programme. That probably was foundationally the most important thing that happened. I find that with that kind of grounding then substantive fields are fairly easy to take up and put down. After 25 years I still think that is true.

SS: Did you feel any way handicapped in comparison to other students for not studying ... ?

CBH: I think I felt that way but it turned out not to be true. I think most of them, through their undergraduate years, had read snippets of Weber, Durkheim, Marx or Parsons or whoever they had to read. They kind of continued with those snippets rather than any kind of more comprehensive reading. And so, within about eight months, I was not at a disadvantage in any way. In fact, by the time I was a PhD student I was probably ahead of a lot in my cohort. I started publishing theoretical work before I finished my dissertation.

SS: What was the topic that you chose for your PhD?

CBH: Something completely, I was going to say, theoretical but actually it was not. At the time I was doing my PhD, it was like the beginning of an understanding of how reality is always socially constructed. My dissertation was actually on the textual construction of reality. It was about how government reports get written in such a way that is demonstrably democratic, that is, democracy must be visible in the text. And that visibility is achieved by a set of writing practices, methodologically speaking. So, it is a combination of phenomenological, ethno-methodological interpretive kind of work. Substantive matters were not that important because I could have used any government report for the purpose, but it turns out that I used the report of the bilingualism and bicultural Commission of Canada.

SS: So, you worked on the Canadian cultural system ...

CBH: No. That's what I am saying. I could have written on report on crime or whatever because the substance was not important. The really important issue is the production of democracy textually in government reports because government reports, in whatever field – urban planning or deviance or policing or whatever – must not be seen as biased in any particular way. It must be seen to have consulted a whole range of people and representations

for all have been made possible and, so on. It was the processes, procedures and practices – how to manage information that was coming in to the report – that was important to me. Specifically, I was not interested in anything substantive. I was only interested in the practices of how one actually uses the structure of the text so that it would appear to be unquestionably democratic.

SS: Why did the theory of phenomenology or ethno-methodology attract you the most?

CBH: One of the interesting things I think most people don't realize is that those kinds of ethno-methodological work can actually be used for social change. Knowing how reality is put together is to know, at the same time, how it can be deconstructed. In a sense, we are doing deconstructing work without knowing it. If you know how reality is constructed, then you know how it can be changed.

SS: What about the international academic atmosphere at that time? Because, if we see today, American Sociology is predominantly quantitative. What was it that time – qualitative or ...?

CBH: At that time there was the beginning of fairly sharp differentiation between people who did quantitative research and people who did other kinds of work, much more theoretically grounded, much more ideological in certain ways. People were clearly Marxists or non-Marxists. The Vietnam War was at its tail end and people, including sociologists, took a position very openly.

Political position becomes something that one owned up to, to be honest about rather than to pretend with any kind of neutrality, people beginning to believe that there was no such thing as an objective position. So, it was a time in which a lot of methodological issues and ideological commitments were being debated, and reflexivity about sociology's shortcomings were being investigated. It was a time when people wrote about sociology of sociology, which is now unheard of. It was also a time when the notion of radical sociology as a particular branch of sociology existed, one that now does not exist. I think it was probably a good time to be a sociologist. I think the consequence of that, over the long term, is what you see now: American Sociology has become increasingly quantitative and a lot of the people who are not doing quantitative sociology are doing increasingly what might be called "Cultural Studies", such that many people who are interested in the general issues of the "social" very often find themselves now in Cultural Studies.

SS: But the thing is that if we see Sociology as a science of studying social phenomena, how is it actually appropriate to quantify social phenomena and express them in a very objective and quantifying manner? Like I find it bit difficult reading the quantitative papers ...

CBH: That's because you are not trained in that field. There is good justification for quantitative research. For one thing, it erases a lot of idiosyncrasies. If you want to generate public opinion you cannot avoid it. If you want to know what the public opinion is rather than a particular person's opinion, then you don't have a choice. You might be tapping into a much more common denominator; it may not be very exciting finding but it is much more representative. As stability of a society is maintained very much by common feelings rather than exceptional feelings of individuals, it is very hard to make claims to what those common feelings are unless you have quantitative approaches.

SS: You come from Singapore and you studied in Canada. It's generally the tendency that people study their own societies. Why did you take up the Canadian society?

CBH: This is an interesting question. I actually did not study Canadian society, if you look at the work I was doing not only in graduate school but even while I was teaching. I taught in Trent University for about for about seven or eight years and during that time all my writings were highly theoretical writings. Even the empirical work was not substantively but theoretically or conceptually interested. I actually never studied Canadian society, maybe because I had no interest of becoming Canadian. In spite of the fact that I stayed there for 13–14 years, I had never wanted to be Canadian. When the opportunity to come back to Singapore came, I took it and since then, I have been doing Singapore studies; until I started doing cultural studies in Asia.

I think that is a kind of Sociology of Knowledge question. Once I came back to Singapore, to a certain extent, what happens locally politically gets personalized. I feel not just the responsibility but also the right to be critically analytical of a society to which my own life is embedded. In that sense, I kind of changed from being an academic to a more public intellectual; in Canada I was basically an academic whose concerns were of conceptual and theoretical questions of how to do sociology and that did not mean I studied Canadian society.

SS: So, when did you get back to Singapore?

CBH: 1984.

SS: I think, if I am not wrong, this was a time, even today, people were not supposed to or encouraged to speak about “politics”. So how did you manage to do that and become a public intellectual or vocal about the political atmosphere of Singapore?

CBH: I sometimes think that the reason why I did what I did had to do with my own political training during the undergraduate and graduate schools during the tail end of the sixties to the mid-seventies. More importantly, this period coincided with the most repressive period of Singapore politics and I wasn’t here. Other people who were here kept remembering what had happened to this or that person during this or that event. I had no experience of this because I was in Canada that whole time. So as far as I was concerned, I was doing what a sociologist should be doing, which is making critical commentary on society. For a period of time I actually wrote a column in *The Straits Times* every Sunday and I think that was probably the most critical column on socio-political commentary that *The Straits Times* ever published.

SS: How did the government react to your column?

CBH: I think one thinks too much of oneself if one keeps thinking that the government will take any notice or pay attention. The column did not generate any backlash or anything like that for me.

SS: If we see today, sociology has either remained as a “pure” academic discipline or extended to a “policy” science. But it has not been successful in becoming a “public” sociology which you said that you tried to do in terms of writing articles or critically seeing the society through newspapers or popular columns. That has actually not happened in general terms. How would you respond to it?

CBH: In general terms means where? In Singapore?

SS: No, I think in almost all parts of the world.

CBH: I wouldn’t say that. A lot of the NGO activists who are publishing public magazines like *Alirani* in Malaysia or in Indonesia were trained in political science or sociology. In Singapore, it is truer than elsewhere partly because the government does not really give

intellectuals much respect or space. For a long time, the University of Singapore was just to teach and produce educated or literate workers. The political history of this place makes that statement truer but I don't think it's true generally.

SS: If we see, I think, two years ago Prof. Michael Burawoy also talked about this in American Sociological Association conference. He said that sociology has remained more as an academic discipline – the exercise or the exchange of ideas among the intellectuals but it has not really reached the ground level to the common public and this is where sociology lacks/ fails.

CBH: I am not sure what that means. Singaporeans who graduated from sociology go into many different fields of work, including journalism, in television and local newspapers. They are also in advertising companies and teachers. I am sure they all carry the sociological training with them. I am sure they teach differently from someone who teaches mathematics or something else. I am sure their relationships with the students are different from teachers who never studied sociology. If the complaint is that we have not developed massive movement for social change, I don't think that is necessarily our role. I don't think the sociologist's position is to always lead the revolution from the front.

SS: But one of the roles of Sociologists or you may say the role of academics is to create public opinion...

CBH: Yes, and I think they give it all the time but you have to realize that you are giving an opinion. That does not mean that everybody has to listen or follow.

SS: What would you say about the recent trends in Sociology, especially global Sociology?

CBH: What do you mean?

SS: The recent status of global Sociology...

CBH: I actually can't say because I really don't know what it is. Most of the stuff that I read these days are analyses of trends of contemporary life in global capitalism whether in developed or developing societies, rather than specific studies of particular phenomenon. Increasingly I only do two or three areas of studies that I have some interests in and none of

those areas are in any way sociologically quantitatively sensible. I also find sociology fairly limited because, for example, sociology of culture has never been a big field, in fact I would say it barely exists. Similarly, sociology of aesthetics. The stuff I am doing now is taking me away from orthodox Sociology. So, I don't really know what the global trend of Sociology is.

SS: How do you see Singapore Sociology today? What are the issues Singapore Sociology is preoccupied with?

CBH: That is very hard question. First of all, we are really talking about one department, about ourselves. As a department for undergraduate training it provides a fairly wide range of training. In a way it might be too insular in the sense of studying ourselves too much. In terms of knowledge of Southeast Asia, the research work on Southeast Asia of the department is quite good. But as a general question, it is really a difficult to answer.

SS: If we see our department, sociology and anthropology are placed under one roof. Some people argue about the disciplinary distinctions, how do we say about it?

CBH: I think there is a distinction in terms of discipline. But anthropology is not like anthropology as it used to be. Part of the interesting thing is that anthropologists now study their own societies, thus the difference between them and sociologists narrows a lot; the difference is more methodological than fundamentally different interests. I think anthropologists are not as inclined to want to generalize from their studies while sociologists operate with quite a lot of pressure on generalization because many sociological questions are framed in terms of global trends, not local practices. This difference produces different kinds of results.

SS: You mentioned generalization in Sociology; the study of Sociology is about human society which is very subjective.

CBH: Why do you keep insisting that it is very subjective ?

SS: Because human opinions keep changing ... How do we actually bring objectivity and generalization into Sociology?

CBH: That's because you are continuously focusing on individual beings. You shouldn't be doing that as a sociologist. You should be looking at, for example, the logic of global capitalism. It has a determining effect whether you live in Africa, India, Singapore or America. You should be thinking in terms of the logic of how the "social" is organized and not in terms of what your opinion is. I think, unfortunately, there is a serious methodological and conceptual confusion. Because objectivity in absolute terms is impossible does not, therefore, mean the other of objectivity is subjective. Sociology clearly is not just opinions. If it is, somebody is doing something seriously wrong – students or the professors.

SS: It is also about the structures and institutions of society ...

CBH: Yes. In fact, it should always be about that.

SS: But it talks about studying sociology as studying social phenomena and social phenomena are always subjective and ... they keep changing from people to people

CBH: Not by that much, otherwise there would be no sociology, there would be no study of culture. In fact the interesting thing about a particular society is how stable it is, not how changing it is. How routinized everyday life is. Otherwise there will be no social science. Social sciences don't study single events. They study repetitions, study patterns of repetitions. So you should be looking at routines; it's against the routines that single events that are eventful achieve their meaning.

SS: But I think when Sociology emerged as a discipline, it emerged in response to change when industrialization was sweeping through ...

CBH: Yes, it was an attempt to understand change not at the individual level but at the level of social structure. I think an unfortunate development in sociology is that a lot of post-graduate students seem to either believe or are led to believe to give up talking of social structure and spend too much time talking about experience.

SS: Could you please tell us something about the difference between structure and agency?

CBH: I think it's a fairly straightforward formulation. There are no agencies without socialization. People are not born members of society; they are socialized into membership.

Socialization implies exactly that the social becomes incorporated by individuals as a way of reproducing their daily lives. However, there would always be a residual self that is never completely socialized. That's why people behave broadly the same way but not ever exactly the same way; they are not robots. Neither do they behave in completely erratic ways everyday. I mean the reproduction of society in the mundane manner requires everyone to reproduce a certain pattern; that is what we study. The individual variations add colour to it but do not fundamentally structure it.

SS: Considering the inter-disciplinary nature of research these days, would you agree or advocate for a single discipline of Social Sciences?

CBH: No, because then you will have to include history, to include economics. Each of these disciplines has very different objects to explain and very different methodological processes to investigate those objects.

SS: Do you think the classical Sociologists like Marx, Weber and Durkheim are still relevant in studying the present day societies?

CBH: Yes. I think they were in a very privileged position because they were at a time when the logic of industrial capitalism was becoming visible. They could see the expression of it during and were able to extrapolate it to the future. In a lot of ways we are kind of living out their observations. Apart from the working-class revolution that never happened, lot of things that were said – about commodity, about commodification, about fetishism, about alienation from work, about increasing concentration of wealth – are still developing. At one time everybody talks about the expanding middle class as evidence that Marx was wrong, but now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century inequality is getting worse and it is not going to get better. It may be that the middle class was not predicted but income disparity is happening.

SS: Recently I came across a newspiece which said that Singapore has the fastest growing millionaires in the world today ...

CBH: They are all in Asia – Japan, Singapore, India, China and Indonesia, three developing countries ...

SS: Is it that with the increasing number of millionaires, poverty is also increasing?

CBH: Not poverty necessarily but income inequality definitely is very high. I think it's probably wise to read theories of Durkheim, Weber and Marx.

SS: How are they relevant to Singapore society specifically?

CBH: It's fairly straightforward. As long as you look at Singapore society as a capitalist society, all of them will apply.

SS: Could you please say something about the communitarian politics that you have talked about in your books?

CBH: We start with Durkheim as the founding position. If you look at Durkheim's work on suicide and social division of labour, already there was a concern about community; the propensity to suicide is the absence of integration of individuals into social units. The question of community has always been central to sociologists. But in global political development, particularly after the Second World War, there has been a continuous expansion of liberalism in the name of democracy, with individualism at its ideological centre. The Europeans might emphasize individualism less in comparison to the American, who might be the most extreme in demands of the natural rights of individuals. Increasingly, when people talk about democracy they can't think out of liberalism, only liberal democracy as if there can be no other forms of democracy. If you ask an American political scientist, what a conservative democracy will look like, he/she will likely think that it is a contradiction in terms. The ascendancy of liberalism is now globally ideologically hegemonic, to the point that I sometimes think that there is now, particularly coming from the US, a kind of "liberal fundamentalism". Like all fundamentalism, it is pretty scary because it begins to evaluate all other people's beliefs and behaviours in its own term and always finding these short.

In Asia, with the exception of a few countries, nationhood is very new, basically a post-War phenomenon and throughout Asia liberalism has no deep historical roots. Liberalism is a transplant that usually gets trafficked in with the demand for democracy. The absence of liberalism does mean that Asian countries should not be democratic. The question is what values might actually be promoted instead of liberalism. There are intrinsically a lot of problems with truly liberal societies; in fact, a thoroughly liberal society will be a sociological nightmare. One way of rethinking what kind of values could go with democracy would be to think in terms of how to resurrect the "social" that has been marginalized in liberal

fundamentalism. And one way of resurrecting the concept of the “social” is to think in communitarian terms.

SS: I think that also distinguishes between the East and the West. The West always accuses the East of being primordial, traditional, unmodern or something like that and that’s why it is not a conducive place for modern forms of government like democracy.

CBH: I don’t think you should frame it in terms of East and West because there are a lot of people in America who are desperately articulating communitarian visions of the world, just as there are lots of Asians who are thinking of thoroughly liberal society because they don’t want to live in the kind of authoritarian state they have been living with. Intellectually it doesn’t help to use such heavily loaded ideological categories as East and West. There are differences in the communitarian logic; for example, some still want to have a liberal base that at least thinks the group is necessary, even essential, to the well-being of the individuals; thus reversing the emphasis but never giving up the individual, redressing the balance between the two. There are others who put more emphasis on the community and are willing to say that an individual will have to pay a price to be a member otherwise the community will continuously be unstable. As I said it is intellectually better to deal in conceptual terms we understand rather than in terms of these geo-political, ideological terms like “East” and “West”.

SS: Taking these cultural specificities of Asian societies, would you argue for an Asian Sociology?

CBH: No, I don’t think sociology should have a geographical qualification, especially for something called “Asian” because no one is Asian in a serious way. Sure, everybody is still embedded in very local networks but as I said earlier, it doesn’t matter where you are in the globe – you are subjected to the logic of capitalism. It is true that people in different geographical locations or cultural background might respond to the same capitalistic economic forces differently. Indeed, the development of capitalism in Asia since the 1960s shows very clearly that the way capital is organized in Asia is very different from the way it has been and is organized in Europe or America.

SS: Many people talk about the indigenization of sociology. What would you talk about that?

CBH: I don't know what that means.

SS: So you would rather talk about more global sociology or more general sociology?

CBH: I would rather talk about contemporary societies. Yes, there are concepts that a society uses that are not translatable into other languages and those concepts might be very important to that particular society in question. But I don't think that they necessarily add up to an indigenous theory.

SS: But I think if you look at Partha Chatterjee's contribution of "political society", he also talks about that because the western concept of civil society is not actually appropriate to explain the situation in Indian society.

CBH: I don't think it's just Indian society. Chatterjee himself would not just say the concept he develops only applies specifically to Indian society but that the Indian society better provides immediate examples for illustrative purposes. I don't think Chatterjee wants to be confined to an Indian Political Science. Any situation where you find large groups of citizens that are unrepresented by conventional civil society structures constitutes what he calls "political society". It does not have to be India. It could be America; say the native community or other marginalized people in America. That's why I find the word "indigenous" very tricky. I don't deny that there are specific concepts that particular societies have that are important to themselves but I don't think they add up to explaining a whole social society work.

SS: You have been heading the cultural cluster at the Asia Research Institute and are also one of the co-executive editors of *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. Could you please tell us something about the distinct discipline of Cultural Studies in Asia?

CBH: Until recently, the people who did cultural studies were not trained in anything called Cultural Studies. That's why it is difficult to give any kind of definition. In a certain sense Cultural Studies exists out of academics who find that the kinds of things they are looking at, they want to investigate, lies beyond traditional disciplinary concepts they have been equipped with. So they invent new ways of looking at emerging problems. To that extent, Cultural Studies is interdisciplinary by default. That's why so many people have difficulties with this term because they keep thinking there ought to be some kind of conceptual

specificity. If it has anything, its practitioners are very conscious of the limits of the disciplines because for what they wanted to do, the disciplines don't work. They started to borrow, use, in practical manners working out the logics of things and so on. They just practically carried on.

SS: So, how "cultural" is Cultural Studies then?

CBH: What do you mean how "cultural"? It studies new areas of cultural life in contemporary societies that are normally not taken up. For example, I have edited a book on *Political Elections as Popular Culture*. If you look at political science on elections, electioneering is a rational set of behaviour: candidates stake out their positions as clearly as possible, electors look at the policy promises and rationally vote on for their own interests. But they don't and the electioneering process is full of local practices. If you have to mobilize a population, you have to do it in a way that they understand, not necessarily in rational choice. Why people actually get moved, be mobilized and angry and willingly to spend a lot of their time in electioneering of their party is nothing to do with being irrational. They have their reasons to do what they do and all that are embedded in their everyday life. Now, if you want to find out that kind of stuff, none of the existing disciplines allows you to do that. Maybe, vaguely, you call it anthropology of elections. I don't mind if you call it that but anthropologists will probably quarrel with me. So what I am saying is that, in a way, Cultural Studies is an escape from disciplines and looking at contemporary phenomena that the disciplines can't really handle. It's not very different from film studies, feminist studies; all this new so-called "studies" are basically emerged out of frustrations working within disciplinary concepts.

SS: So, why there was the need to establish a distinct discipline?

CBH: I know no one in Cultural Studies ever calls it a discipline. It doesn't have specific methods; people use different methods for whatever they are doing and looking at, from large historical phenomena to very small contemporary cultural practices things that tell you a lot but that are not part of the concerns of any disciplines. For example, I have a friend who is studying how young girls in Taiwan buy small stationery objects. From the way they purchase, the way they use and the messages that are encoded in stationery items, a certain conception of girlhood emerges. In general, one is studying issues that are neglected and where disciplinary concepts don't apply and you have to be more inventive because you have

to offer and invent new words, new languages. But nobody I know ever calls Cultural Studies a discipline.

SS: What kinds of issues that you study in this?

CBH: For the past year, most of my work has been on East Asian pop culture, which could also be called East Asian media studies. I am looking at television drama, movies and pop music. It's easy to call them media studies or media culture studies. I am concerned with not just the media industry but the social organization of the consumption of the media culture.

SS: But when you talk about this pop culture and consumer culture, it is mostly influenced by the economic process of globalization or something like that ...

CBH: Yes, you could do that. Economists do. That's the point. I don't do the economics of industry. I do things like whether the watching of East Asian television drama engenders a pan-Asian identification. Things like that. So I am not going to track down how many billions of dollars is the size of the industry. Media economists do that. Again, to a certain extent, the people who call themselves Cultural Studies practitioners probably work in between disciplines or beyond disciplines.

SS: Does it include the global movement of culture also? Is it just the western culture into the Asian societies or ...

CBH: No. I have very little interest in western culture into Asian societies. I am interested in the regionalization of East Asia media. Not Hollywood. If you look from Japan to Singapore, if you watch TV in those locations, in one evening, if you channel-surf, you will see shows from Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, PRC, Korea and even, although less frequently, Singapore in an uneven mix of programmes. That's happening and very often, on TV, Hollywood is actually in the minority. I was in Shanghai recently. On the cable television in the hotel room I could watch more materials from East Asia than from the West, making it ideologically harder to be too casual about American cultural hegemony. Western imports in many locations are meaningless. On the ground there are a lot of East Asian exchanges. Along with a lot of people, we have been developing/generating work on East Asian pop culture. That's what interests me.

SS: What would you say about the Asian scholar in world academics today? Because if we see most of the Asian scholars or the students of sociology or those who are trained in Asian universities, they are often neglected; or they are not recognized by the people in the West. What would you say about that?

CBH: I actually don't know what that means. The way you asked the question tells a lot more about your anxiety. I know the people who work in India, for example, only work in India and really do not care about what the West thinks about them. Their audience is not the West but in India. At the same time they are not parochial enough to say that they are not going to agree with the West or are not going to use anything from the West and try to develop everything locally. That's silly. Besides, if you know intellectuals in different Asian countries, for example, many work with local languages and are quite established within their own countries. They don't necessarily care to get out.

The question that you asked, how do you respond to that? The issue is not between the West and Asia; the issue is that the discipline you are in. Sociology is increasingly disseminated in English. The issue is not Asian; if you talk to German scholars they will say the same thing – that their works don't get international recognition except those who write in English.

SS: But, today people see whether you have an American degree or not? If you don't, how good you are ...

CBH: I actually think that if you want to be a sociologist you would want to be trained in America ...

SS: Why?

CBH: Because I think it is still the best place to train in sociology.

SS: How do they do?

CBH: They have a lot of resources, such as huge data sets. Sociology is a very established discipline in America. It has the most established sociology schools anywhere in the world. I would go there. The wrong thing to do is to take geography as analytical problem. The issue is

not America analytically because you should think of deterritorizing the image of universities. That is to say you should go and study with specific individuals who are doing great work in the field of your interest; if you want to do industrial sociology why shouldn't you go and study with, say, Michael Burawoy. Who cares where he lives. There are differences in quality of training; there are differences in quality of scholars; there are differences in perspective – how parochial or how global. It is silly to essentialize by geographical locations, deterritorize. The kind of lumpy idea of American domination is silly. Finally, sociology is still underdeveloped in Asia, in many Asian universities there is no sociology.

SS: What are you presently working on?

CBH: As I said, I have been doing research for the last four or five years with a group of people on East Asia pop culture. We organize conferences and workshops on pop music, TV drama, films. “Asian” in that case is a very loose identity because you are talking about huge differences in history, in language, in culture, in politics and in level of economic development. One shouldn't take the term “Asia” too seriously. One should recognize that the term “Asia” is some kind of unit concept forged out of difference and similarity.

SS: What was the motive behind Inter-Asia Cultural Studies group?

CBH: To bring the work of intellectuals/scholars who are working in Asia, works written in Asian languages or in English into the global university; to expand the archive of the world with work that is generated in Asia. There are a lot of Asian students who are studying in the West working on topics on their own home countries who don't know much about the people working in their backyard. Thus, there is a need to expand the references of Cultural Studies to include Asian material. We are committed to translation of essays from Asian languages to English. The reason we publish in English is because English is the dominant language if we wish to be read globally.

SS: So, how did you become interested in Cultural Studies, basically pop culture from politics? Because, you started with politics and are now in pop culture ....

CBH: I don't think I have switched. There are three areas of work that I do and I continue to do all three areas, just in different emphasis in different points in time. One is comparative politics in Southeast Asia, particularly looking from Singapore in comparison to the rest of the

region; one is on urban planning and housing policy, again because of the uniqueness of the urban housing policy programme in Singapore; and the other is Cultural Studies in Asia. If you were studying consumption, consumerism, as I was, pop media culture is just another area of consumerism or consumer practices; and I still keep doing all these three. It's just different concentration.

# International Sociological Association

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## *e-bulletin*

### **Social Memory and Reconciliation in Post-Conflict Cambodia: Anticipating What Lies ahead**

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As an India-born Tamilian who has now established roots in Singapore, Vinita Ramani has devoted much of her academic pursuits and freelance writing towards issues of identity, difference and cultural pluralism. Ms Ramani did her BA (Hons) degree in Sociology and Cultural Studies and subsequently focused on issues pertaining to the South Asian diaspora and legal pluralism at the School of Oriental and African Studies for her MA degree. Since settling in Southeast Asia, she has written extensively on the region's vibrant and growing independent cinemas and has also worked with the Singapore International Film Festival. She is currently an Asia Fellow under the auspices of the Asian Scholarship Foundation and is doing her six-month research stint in Cambodia on social memory in a post-genocide context.

#### **Introduction**

Unlike the many eminent scholars that have theorized on the origins and ideological underpinnings of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia for several decades (Kiernan 1996, 1985; Short 2004; Chandler 1992, 2000; Cook (ed.) 2006; Heder 2005), I stumbled upon the country and upon the idea to devote research time to it quite by accident.

Working at one juncture as a newspaper journalist in Singapore and subsequently, as a researcher and copyeditor for a museum, I became woefully aware of two things: one, my own painfully poor knowledge of Southeast Asian history and two, how institutions go about putting into practice the theory of erasure that makes history so much about palimpsests and layers than about exhaustive facts.

Reflecting on how little I knew about relatively recent (ie 40 years) Singapore history made the Cambodia case stand out in even sharper relief. The acts committed from 1975 to 1979 in what was then known as Democratic Kampuchea are some of the most heinous crimes against humanity witnessed in the last century. An estimated 1.7 million people (or over 25% of the population) perished in those four years. Yet, while the issue of how Cambodians remember or forget their post-genocide trauma is theorized at great length, one

cannot help but feel that we, as researchers, are spinning circles around the issue and find ourselves unable as yet to see whether or how these theories of trauma, reconciliation, social memory and forgetting bear any significance to Cambodians themselves. This is one reason I feel compelled to devote my research to this subject.

Another compelling factor is, of course, to make a small but unique contribution to the existing literature on Cambodia. As any PhD candidate will readily admit, this is easier said than done. At the early juncture of proposing a possible research question to devote four years of research to, I thought it would be wise to take a short trip to Phnom Penh and start talking to observers and survivors on the ground about what issues seemed resonant.

In a casual conversation with the editor-in-chief of the *Phnom Penh Post*, I mentioned my research topic and was told that “reconciliation” is the buzzword and in a sense, research in this area is saturated.<sup>46</sup> On reflection, this is not a huge surprise. Scholars like Rosalind Shaw have acknowledged that it is ever-present in its “macro” form as “national reconciliation” – a 19<sup>th</sup> century legacy that nations still use as a barometer to test if “collective trauma” has been adequately addressed, but which says very little about sentiments and methods of healing at the local level.

To speak knowingly about “reconciliation” on the assumption that healing and forgiveness involves a universal vocabulary and one that can be easily applied is, of course, a huge fallacy, not to mention, it will yield nothing theoretically interesting to existing scholarly work in this area. Instead, fresh perspectives are required in terms of applying existing theories of trauma, reconciliation and cultural recovery. The challenge in the case of Cambodia is also to identify what vocabulary (discursive or otherwise) constitutes the local approach(es) or understanding(s) of these complex terms.

In yet another conversation with the director of the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, Youk Chhang, I was reminded that one experience unites all Cambodians and their social memory in that period, regardless of their age, ethnicity or religious affiliation: starvation. Describing the almost Pavlovian reaction of grief, pain and fear Cambodians have

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<sup>46</sup> Conversation with Michael Hayes in Phnom Penh: May 2007.

when they are reminded of the hunger they suffered, Youk unequivocally stated that this is an area that has been under-researched so far, because, he quipped, it isn't "sexy" enough.<sup>47</sup>

This observation was also revelatory. Cambodia is saturated with non-governmental organizations and researchers, keen to help heal, capitalize on, pry apart and scrutinize its figurative and literal wounds. Yet, both the government and NGO sector is deeply politicized and funding (as many academics will also attest to) hinges upon the perceived relevance of the topic.

While the social memory of hunger and of starvation was something I had simply not even thought of, Youk's observation has opened a possible avenue I now know I must stay open to as I embark on research in Cambodia.

With all that in mind, I'll be devoting an initial six months to doing research in Cambodia for the latter half of 2007.<sup>48</sup>

#### **(i) Issues – Social Memory, Reconciliation and Practical Considerations**

The concept of social memory posits that the social environment or processes which surround an individual influence how s/he (and, ultimately, how his/her community) remembers.

How an individual's memory is constituted, altered or omitted are important issues to examine because they not only reflect the past but, through an individual's rendition of that past, hold a mirror up to his/her individual or communal understanding of it. Further pursued, it is my view that these issues are also linked to the attendant one of how Cambodians seek to reconcile their past and heal their psyches.

In considering these issues, I have and will certainly continue to draw inspiration from the extensive research that has been done in this regard in the context of communities in the post-colonial Pacific (Mageo 2001) and in African nations (Werbner 1998). Social memory of the Asian diaspora in the West has also come under increasing scrutiny in fields as diverse as anthropology, history and law (Trimble & Fisher 2006; Ballard 1994, 1998, 2002; Sachdeva 1993; Deutsch 1991; Jones & Welhengama 2000; Menski 1993, 2002). In Southeast Asia,

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<sup>47</sup> Informal conversation with Youk Chhang at the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, May 2007. I will be partially based at the Centre during my research tenure in Cambodia.

<sup>48</sup> I applied to the Asian Scholarship Foundation for funding with that objective in mind and have since received a scholarship to carry out my research work. I will thus be doing my research as an Asian Fellow under the aegis of the ASF. Hopefully, this work will continue in the shape of a PhD thereafter.

these issues are also being examined in the context of Indonesia, Laos, Burma and East Timor (Zurbuchen 2002; Waas, van der Kwaak & Bloem 2003; Rosaldo 2003; Roosa, Ratih & Farid 2004, Volunteer Team for Humanity; Asian Human Rights Commission).

However, too few scholars have to date grappled with these issues and the powerful role of social memory in respect of Cambodia. I would like to address that *lacuna* in contemporary scholarly work. That is, in my view, important, not in the least because these issues have practical ramifications on post-genocide reconciliation and healing.

How is social memory constituted, influenced, altered, omitted and/or erased in an Asian country like Cambodia that has experienced systematic genocide? How do survivors of the genocide communicate or translate their experiences in a manner comprehensible to Cambodian youth who did not undergo the same experience? If these survivors have chosen to remain silent rather than articulate their trauma, why have they chosen to do so and how has this affected their progeny? Finally, is there a relationship between remembering or forgetting and healing? If so, what local rituals of healing or reconciliation have Cambodians, both young and old, undertaken to alleviate the trauma they have suffered at the hands of the Khmer Rouge?

I want to examine these questions and consider their relevance through the eyes of two separate generations of Cambodians: ie by comparing the responses of those who were children during the Khmer Rouge period (and who experienced its attendant horrors) with those who were born after the regime's rule.

The purpose of this inter-generational study is to ask what the concepts of social memory and reconciliation mean to each generation. Younger Cambodians (whom I shall term the "post-conflict generation"), for instance, form an important segment of Cambodia's demographic: nearly 40% of the country's 13.6 million population is under the age of 15 years. The post-conflict generation's questions, anxieties or sense of detachment from their recent history are areas that merit further scholastic exploration. Do they subconsciously or otherwise suffer from or inherit a sort of amnesia in respect of their personal histories? Does this amnesia represent a form of healing and reconciliation?

Although members of the post-conflict generation do not have personal or social memories of trauma, some of them have experienced the silence of family members who have survived the genocide. Alternately, many have heard the incomplete personal narratives of

those who do choose to speak about their trauma and thus, have a fractured sense of their personal history. In the circumstances, how does the post-conflict generation perceive what has happened to their country and to their families? What rituals of reconciliation have they participated in (collectively or otherwise) in order for them to confront the memories their parents and other relatives have faced?

I realized these questions could have more than philosophical or theoretical significance when I informally interviewed a family living in the town of Takhmao in Kandal province. They explained through their daughter, who acted as translator, that they have a great deal to share on the horrors they witnessed and suffered under the regime, but fear of being “caught” or “heard” by the wrong people prevented them from doing so. There is, therefore, a practical problem here of undoing the culture of silence by guaranteeing personal safety, which complicates the very idea of testimony and social memory.

On the “flipside”, I met a group of young Cambodian university students aged between 19 and 21 years, who volunteered to act as translators during my stay in Cambodia this year. When I asked them what motivated them to participate in this project, they said much of the sense of inner compulsion was moral and ethical: they wanted to support what they felt was the “right” kind of work. But they also admitted that they wanted to listen. Their own families had volunteered little information on what had happened under the regime. By acting as translators, they would be privy to knowledge they felt they had scant access to, at best.<sup>49</sup>

Local communities also find it difficult to make peace with the dead and establish proper burial sites whenever new mass burial sites are discovered. This is another practical issue, given that up to 81% of the population lives in rural Cambodia. Memories of genocide, which are buried deep in the Cambodian psyche, literally resurface with these newfound killing fields in the land (Cougill 2007).<sup>50</sup>

It’s noteworthy that the handful of survivors of the genocide who have committed their stories to print through their biographies and testimonials are often Cambodians who fled the country, migrating largely to the United States thereafter. Therefore, their understanding of testimonials, of the biography and of writing as a form of healing, is somewhat different

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<sup>49</sup> Informal conversation with Vidjia Phun, Tep Sokunvannary and Huong Sok En in Phnom Penh, May 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Article on Buddhist cremation rituals and the Cambodian genocide:  
[http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Maps/Buddhist\\_Cremation\\_Traditions.htm](http://www.dccam.org/Projects/Maps/Buddhist_Cremation_Traditions.htm).

from Cambodians who remained in the country (Theary Seng 2005; Loung Ung 2000; Dith Pran (ed.) 1997; Criddle and Mam Teeda Butt 1987; May Someth 1986; Ngor Haing and Warner 1988; Vek Huong 1980; Yathay Pin with John Man 1987). What happens to those who cannot and do not choose to write out their trauma? That, too, merits further exploration.

## **(ii) Objectives, Methodology and Limitations**

### *Rural vs. Urban*

A critical distinction which I believe needs to be made for the purposes of this research is between the rural and urban sectors of the Cambodian population. Studies indicate that some Cambodians from rural areas such as Battambang or Kratie may have different perceptions of the Khmer Rouge regime or social memories of what occurred during its rule compared to their urban counterparts from Phnom Penh. That is because the Khmer Rouge portrayed themselves as champions to the peasantry and lauded them for their inherent “purity”, but was deeply suspicious of the urban or educated elite amongst Cambodians (Kiernan 1996, 1985; Short 2004; Chandler 1992, 2000; Cook (ed.) 2006; Heder 2005). Experiences across the country, therefore, were dramatically different, depending on an individual’s class or family background.

Nonetheless, it goes without saying that I’ll have to take a cautionary approach to avoid generalizations regarding the distinctions between the rural and urban experience.

### **Methodological Strategy**

I believe that the sort of methodology that best suits the nature of my research is the case study. Case study is the presentation of detailed information about a particular participant or a small group of participants (Yin et al. 2003). As a type of “qualitative descriptive research”, this method looks closely at a small participant pool and may often include accounts of the subjects themselves.

A distinctive factor of case study is that it does not search for a “universal, generalizable truth” or for traditional conceptions of “cause” and “effect” in relation to a situation (Yin et al. 2003). It is more nuanced. It is sensitive to the vicissitudes of the research subject and is therefore well-suited to my proposed research which aims to raise questions about the ways in which social memory may continue to shift and change in meaning for survivors of the Khmer Rouge and their progeny.

Case study is inherently exploratory – using multiple sources of evidence such as documentation (official and unofficial), archival records, interviews, confessions, direct observation, participant observation and physical artefacts (Yin 2003) to substantiate conclusions. Much of this oral and documentary evidence is particularly relevant to Cambodia, given that the Khmer Rouge meticulously recorded details of its agrarian and development plans and kept comprehensive records of all those it believed to be opposed to them.

As a source of on-site evidence collection, interviews will be the mainstay of my proposed research. Subject to what subsequent research and preliminary fieldwork indicates, my interview subjects for my proposed research will be from Phnom Penh (undoubtedly seen as the prime location for the “educated elite” of Cambodia and, therefore, the first target of attack for the Khmer Rouge) and rural areas such as the provinces of Battambang (at one juncture a Khmer Rouge stronghold) and Kratie.

The age of the interviewees will range from 16 to 35 years. A good proportion of these persons will be members of the post-conflict generation who were born after the Khmer Rouge was officially overthrown on 7 January 1979. The remaining interviewees will be older and should have some experience or memory of the regime and its impact upon their family members. By compiling the data collected from these persons, I intend to arrive at a proper cross-section of views from Cambodians who have never experienced the genocide as well as those who may have anecdotal evidence of what transpired within their provincial or urban areas of residence.

### **Obstacles, Challenges and Responses**

In view of the nature of my proposed research on the trauma that is associated with the genocide and crimes against humanity which took place in Cambodia, there are challenges I am likely to encounter, including the following:

- (a) conflicting accounts of what happened to a family or what families perceive to be the acts of the Khmer Rouge;
- (b) reticence, evasiveness or silence on these issues on the part of the interviewees;
- (c) apathy or reluctance to speak with a female foreigner about something as deeply personal and traumatic as genocide and the death of close family members;

- (d) mistrust of a foreign interviewer who did not undergo similar experiences and her perceivably self-serving motives;
- (e) refusing to share their views about Cambodian politics or history; and
- (f) possibility that some nuance communicated by interviewers may be lost in translation despite the presence of competent translators.

In summary, a researcher must be prepared to tackle the social awkwardness of both facing his/her preconceptions and at the same time consider contingencies in his/her research (Hammersley 1990; Hume & Mulcock 2004; Kutsche 1998; Trimble & Fisher 2006).

In this regard, I will take some of my cues from recent methodology employed by leading ethnographers whose reflexive research practice is critical. How do I, for example, tackle contradictory or oblique responses? How do I proceed further when confronted with silence and reticence? As Kutsche has said, you cannot “confuse zero communications with the absence of communication”, and you must look for “zeroes” in the “dropped cues in non-verbal communication”, or in things that remain unsaid, even when an interviewee chooses to speak (Kutsche 1998: 10).

Instead of seeking “answers” to “questions”, I’m preparing myself to also meet with evasion, contradiction and competing accounts of social memory.

As scholars have noted, if not anything else, this tells us something about how people (we are included here) construct meaning and identity and how this forms our perception of the social world (Blain in Grills (ed.) 1998: 224).

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## e-bulletin

### Doing Fieldwork at “Home”: the Challenges of “Native” Anthropology

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An increasing number of disciplines are now going the anthropologist’s way (geography, psychology, history and education, to name a few). For an anthropologist, an extended ethnographic fieldwork remains the method “par excellence” and a necessary “rite of passage”. My first few field encounters which happened during the graduation and post-graduation studies were very brief, none of them extending beyond a month. These experiences, I thought, however, had prepared me for an ethnographic fieldwork. The naivety of these assumptions was soon questioned, thanks partly to my supervisor and partly to the fieldwork that was done for PhD. It was an arduous task, I soon realized and my naïve assumptions about it were replaced by a conviction that ethnography was not only the “rite of passage” but also should be a “way of life” for a sociologist/anthropologist.

I was surprised to discover that despite this “familiarity” with the difficulties involved in fieldwork, the very thought of doing it for the PhD dissertation threw me into repeated bouts of anxiety. This was when the community chosen for the study was my own community – the *agaris*<sup>51</sup> in northwest Maharashtra, a western state in India. It was, so to say, a familiar

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<sup>51</sup> *Agaris* are one of the Shudra castes, ritually low-ranking in the *varna* hierarchy, and are categorized under Other Backward Classes (OBCs). OBC is an official category so identified by the Indian government and is subject to affirmative action on account of the social and educational backwardness of its constituents. The caste-name *agari* is derived from their traditional occupation – salt-making – which is an important identity marker even today, although agriculture remains the chief occupation. The community is found in the northwestern part of Maharashtra including Mumbai. In Mumbai, the economic capital and largest metropolitan city of India, they were the original inhabitants and the majority community before the British colonization. However, the community was pushed to the periphery and reduced to a minority in the burgeoning city of Mumbai in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their agricultural land and ancestral houses were acquired by the British for the expansion of the

territory, amongst people with whom there were close social ties. Communication also was not to be much of an issue. I could speak Marathi, the regional language of the state, understood the *agari* dialect and was familiar with the customs, practices and history of the community. The rapport building, therefore, should not have been much of a problem. But that was not to be.

### **Preparing the Groundwork**

As early as six months after enrolment for the PhD, some knowledgeable people from the community had to be contacted. This was in order to prepare the groundwork ahead of the ethnographic fieldwork. Getting people to talk for these formal interviews was not easy. As the interviews progressed the initial anxiety subsided but did not completely disappear. But then it was relatively easy dealing with educated people. Some of them were teachers, researchers and journalists. They had some understanding of what a PhD meant. Also, these interviews did not require staying amongst the people. My real worry was how does one initiate a dialogue with the village folks and establish a consistent rapport? They hardly knew what PhD was. Some were literate but most of them, and especially the old women, had never been to school. That these doubts were not ill-founded is evident from following incidents.

As a part of the preparation I visited some villages in Raigad and Thane districts. On one such occasion, we (me and my cousin) landed in a weekly village market. We were moving around the market for some time, doing some purchases here and there. The market was full of *agari* and *koli*<sup>52</sup> women vendors who were selling local products – dry fish, locally grown pulses, dry chilies, garlic and onions, etc. – items which were to be bought and stocked for the approaching monsoon. The scene was lively and vibrant with women selling and buying the products. I wanted a photograph and was wondering whether permission was required from the women. And then thought, “Oh, it’s just a photograph of the market. Why would they mind?” As the camera flashed one of the women yelled at me. She was not very happy. It was evident that she found my behaviour indecent. We were ashamed and smiled apologetically. Fortunately, she did not drag the matter further. And I thought, “Would I have liked being clicked like that by some stranger?”

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city. In fact, the motivation to do an ethnographic history of *agari* community was drawn from a sense of loss and denial that characterizes the collective memory of the *agaris* of Mumbai.

<sup>52</sup> This is also a local community. They are a seafarer and fishing community.

Very soon also came the realization about how difficult it was to get people talking, when I made a naive attempt to record the life-history of my grandmother (my father's aunt) who has been in a village all her life. As I sat down in front of her with a paper, pen and a tape recorder and asked her about her life, somehow we could not go beyond a few words. She did not know what to say. On each question of mine she would answer in brief and then fall silent. Otherwise, she used to narrate stories, in her peculiar style, enacting the dialogues of people in their voices and tones. She would bring people and their interactions to life. What happened now? There were several lessons to be learnt – that nobody could be taken for granted, not even people who were so close, that a fieldwork by its very nature created social situations which were “artificial” and “objectifying”, that these “artificial” situations made people awkward. A researcher has to effectively deal with this “artificiality” and “objectification” to make people comfortable, but how? The preparatory fieldwork had given me an inkling of things to come. Apart from the “how” to do the fieldwork; the “what” to do in the fieldwork and the “where” to do it was also a source of anxiety.

#### **“Where” and “What”: Selection of the Fieldwork Site and Making the Research Plan**

My encounter with the field prompted my decisions and shaped the research questions, but initially at least there was much confusion, self-doubting and uneasiness about the whole process. This was also because a well-defined outline for the fieldwork was not in place, apart from the idea that it was a study of the *agari* community, within a framework of “caste” and “history”. Initially the idea was to do the fieldwork in Mumbai, the city which has witnessed the earliest instances of displacement of the community. The history of the city was fascinating, but my supervisor put me on guard. Majority of the community were in rural areas and they were still peasants. I was also toying with the idea of collecting data from across the districts for a “representative history” of the community! Through the initial meetings with the people and through discussions with my supervisor, a single village emerged as a better choice to place oneself and to do an in-depth historical ethnographic enquiry of the community in a particular region. Now looking back, I wonder whether the earlier ideas were pretexts to run away from the demands and challenges of a full-fledged ethnography. No doubt, moving across the districts and collecting bits and pieces would have given a general portrait of the community, but that would have been at the cost of depth and details.

When the time came for selecting a village and embarking on the more intensive part of the fieldwork, I was not so sure about how to select a village. A list of villages already visited was drawn and the characteristics of each village were put down on the paper. Chirner stood out for various reasons. My interest in this village had been aroused by a small booklet gifted by my aunt, who was married into this village. One of the articles in the book mentioned something called “Kharland<sup>53</sup> development” and that caught my attention. Some of the agricultural land in Chirner, it appeared, was Kharland. Later I discovered that almost all *agari* villages in the district had agricultural land reclaimed from the sea. The *agari* peasants specialized in the reclamation of Kharland and cultivation of paddy in it. This was nothing less than a discovery – I almost felt – “Eureka!!”

As it emerged, the ecological peculiarities perhaps facilitated the development of a peculiar set of agricultural practices and the formation of identity of a community that specialized in it. This is how I set out to visit Chirner. I went to the fields to see the embankments and the sluice gates built to manage the inlet and outlet of creek water, met a few people and came to know about the history of reclamation of the land, and the tenant *agari* families brought in from other parts of the district in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to cultivate the land as they specialized in the cultivation of Kharland in their places of origin.<sup>54</sup> The vivacity of the historical details and the sense of the past that people of Chirner exemplified were impressive.

This is how I zeroed in on Chirner, but the final decision to choose it as a site for fieldwork came after much deliberation. Although this particular village stood out by its vibrancy and possibilities of historical ethnographic details, I was hesitant because my aunt did not allow me to stay on my own, either in Chirner or in any other village in the vicinity. For me it felt like putting too much of a burden on my aunt and her family by accepting her invitation. Yet, my father, who was well aware of the advantages of having a social location

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<sup>53</sup> Kharland is land reclaimed from the saline marshes and brought under cultivation by walling it. Its maintenance is a labour-intensive task and requires effective management of the labour force.

<sup>54</sup> Two *agari* peasants, later during the fieldwork corroborated independently of each other, the hunch about Kharland being at the center of *agari* history and identity. Both were respected among the general *agari* population, for their knowledge and articulation. One of them put it thus – “see, we *agaris* have not just *cultivated* this land, we have *made* it, *created* it from the sea” (implying thus that their claim over the land was more justified than anybody else’s claim. This was an emphatic assertion especially in the light of recent land acquisition drives initiated by various private agencies in the region for the establishment of Special Economic Zones).

within a community which so zealously maintains the kinship networks, insisted on staying with her family. My awkwardness apart, this posed several other problems. Hers is a joint family, one of the more illustrious families in the region with a flourishing construction business. Due to their elevated financial status, there are several restrictions on the movement of not only their daughters-in-law but also their granddaughters (my cousins). The family is also a bit distanced from their more humble caste fellows. I was worried how this would influence my interaction with the people. This was not all. I was then recently married, but because of my ideological leanings, did not wear the *mangalsutra* – a necklace which is the sacred marker of a Maharashtrian woman’s marital status. Is putting on the *mangalsutra* necessary during the fieldwork? These decisions were important because they were to decide the nature of my interactions with the people.

### **Going “Native”: How Easy Is It for a “Native” Anthropologist?**

As it turned out, the stay with the family gave me an instant social location, as an *agari* and as a “kin” of many of the informants. It also gave me an insider’s view of an upwardly mobile *agari* family. But a consequence was also that I inherited the pattern of relations, with the people of the village, set by my hosts. Concerted efforts were required to bridge the distance, especially with the humbler lot of people. My class, education, language, and urban upbringing and at times gender and age also created a distance. Kirin Narayan (1993) has rightly questioned the term “native” in “native anthropologist” used for the anthropologist who is studying one’s own society/community and the underlying assumption of ready acceptance. As an *agari*, related to one of the families from the village, I was considered one among the villagers, but the differences between us were made explicit by my informants repeatedly. The decision to not wear a *mangalsutra* added to these difficulties involved in rapport building.<sup>55</sup> This brings us to an important question. What scope is there for the researcher to overcome the constraints put by the immediate social settings in which the people and the researcher are located? The resolution of this dilemma depends on the reflexivity, agency and practice – to negotiate the asymmetries. I shall come to this at the end of this discussion.

Initially to build rapport and to get a general understanding of the region and community, I moved around interviewing people through a semi-structured open-ended

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<sup>55</sup> Many of the women expected me to wear a *mangalsutra*, as a Maharashtrian Hindu and specifically as an *agari*.

question schedule. My strategy was to ask people for references of men and women who would be able to tell me about the history of the region and community. Most of the elderly men were delighted to receive me – a young researcher studying “their”, “our” *agari* community. They gave me more contacts and thus I moved on. But to my frustration there were hardly any women that they named. In the meantime some of the festivals gave me an opportunity to familiarize myself with women. But that was it. I hardly got to talking to women and did not know how to do that. As a beginning I contacted the *agari* female priests, *dhavalarins*. Yet, the number of my female informants remained limited. Belonging to the same community and competence in the language did not guarantee instant rapport with the women. It took some time and some effort to break the ice. There were at least two instances of straightforward refusals both by men and by women. Half of these problems were solved as my stay progressed and as my day-to-day interaction with the people increased. Being there, among people was so important.

Queries about the *mangalsutra* during the first few months were emotionally draining and often pushed me towards the edges. My informants also took the liberty to pass some unwarranted remarks. On one occasion my acquaintance with a young man (a divorcee, also known for his flirtatious behaviour with women) from a neighbouring village had become some cause of concern for the villagers, more so due to the ambiguity created about my marital status by the absence of the *mangalsutra*.

When I returned for the second phase of fieldwork in the month of February, while attending the *guru dashmi* (the anniversary of initiation of a revered saint from the village) celebration in Khopata village I realized how important it was not to make any assumptions. On the last day of this celebration procession traverses through seven *padas* (sections of the village). My original plan was to follow the procession just through a single *pada*. But as the procession moved first through the *Bandh pada*, a large number of old women joined and started singing songs in a peculiar high pitch and rhythm. This pitch and rhythm varied from song to song and was called in the local parlance – *ghati*. One could not mess with the *ghati* while singing a song. It was an art and it was an integral part of the song, its tune and lyrics. The procession lasted for five hours and ladies incessantly sang songs, taking turns in leading the singing activity. This opened to me a completely new world of folksongs and their performance. This also boosted my confidence. Immediately after this I got two opportunities to attend public gatherings in which women were predominant in numbers. I requested the organizers to formally introduce me publicly; it worked wonders.

By this time I was a familiar face in the village and word had spread about me in the region. People knew about me even before I had met them. Through the village market, while waiting on the main road to catch the “six-sweater” rickshaw or bus, or while walking through the paddy fields between two villages, women and men had started exchanging friendly smiles. In fact some very interesting conversations took place during such long walks when we accidentally met on the way or when they offered to accompany me for specific reasons. Walking between villages was therefore preferred, as this offered an opportunity to observe closely, the geography of the village and surrounding paddy fields and also gave a chance to meet people – where they could be observed mending the bunds of fields, catching fish in the shallow creek water for hours in the scorching sun, carrying firewood. Additionally, it provided an opportunity to chat informally about anything and everything of interest, unobtrusively.

Nonetheless there were other instances where informants simply refused to grant me the credit for even the slightest bit of sanity. Towards the end of the fieldwork it was shocking and disturbing to know that at least in some parts of the village there were discussions about how the “weird” researcher was actually “going nuts”. One villager was audacious enough to inform me about how people in one of the *padas* thought I was “crazy”. It took some introspection to make sense of such a rude remark.

### **Bridging the Distance: the “Agency” of the Researcher**

Anthropological literature is abundant with the discussion of the effects of the multi-layered social self (education, political orientation, social and cultural capital) of the ethnographer, on her/his perceptions. These parts of the fieldworker’s personhood which affect the fieldwork are to be located not only in the outside world from where s/he or comes and the power relations therein (Thapan 1998: 6), but also in the community where s/he comes to stay. There is also a growing anthropological literature on the effects of the ethnographer’s personality and emotion on the ethnographic inquiry (Behar 1996). A personality is shaped by the social and cultural identities of the researcher mentioned above, yet it is in some ways independent of the social structure and power relations. It is in a sense the researcher’s agency. It influences the researcher’s ability to carry out an ethnographic fieldwork (this issue is variously addressed by such terms as “reflexivity” and “historicity” of the researcher (Stoeltje et al. 1999: 159)).

Reflexivity is the mode through which the researcher continuously reflects upon her/his position in the power relations, assumptions, biases about the social reality and how they shape his/her interactions (Kleinsasser 2000: 155). But I feel reflexivity in itself is not sufficient although it is an integral part of the ethnographic inquiry. Connecting with the people in a meaningful manner is a difficult task. Apart from a personal commitment and introspection, it requires some active emotional engagement of courage and patience. It requires a sustained genuine concern, respect and love for the people one is studying. This does not mean that one likes everything about the people that one is studying. Yet, if one has to overcome the distances that are somewhat inevitable in a fieldwork, where the researcher is generally from an educated, urban, upper-class background, s/he is in an advantageous position if s/he can establish a sustainable relation of love and respect which is of equals at the emotional level. This is not easy and has to be cultivated but every individual is capable of it. The researcher then may not necessarily have the knack to strike friendships instantly with strangers. It will only be an added advantage to have it.

The nature of the fieldwork is such that the researcher is, during a major portion of the time, in a receiving mode, where s/he observes, asks, records and so on. With her/his unique personalities and vulnerabilities, genuine love, concern and respect are perhaps the most humane returns that every researcher can offer. It may be expressed in the form of some offerings – material or non-material. But the feeling ought to be that of friendship and love and not that of exchange. During my fieldwork, efforts to establish meaningful relationships helped bridge the gap, although it must be admitted that the success in it was not instant, and I often fell short in the capacity to extend and sustain a hand of selfless friendship. Whatever shortcomings in my fieldwork I would like to attribute it to this incapacity of mine.

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## *e-bulletin*

### **The Challenges and Dilemmas of Starting Field Research**

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#### **Reflections from Kyrgyzstan**

I am living and doing research for my PhD in Sociology in the nation of Kyrgyzstan, a former republic of the Soviet Union, and have been here for the last 2–3 years. I have had an interest in the study of culture and religion. I am particularly interested in the way world-views affect and change people's lives and the lives of their communities. I heard about a new openness to religion in Kyrgyzstan since it became independent from the Soviet Union and as I investigated this more realized that it would be a great research topic, of interest to me, and relevant to world issues today. The focus of my work has been on religious and social change amongst the Kyrgyz people since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the resulting independence that took place in 1991. To do this I have chosen both qualitative and quantitative research methods. Initially I have been conducting in-depth interviews with respondents. My goal has been to interview as broad a group as possible, from various locations, ages, sexes, time since they embraced the Christian faith and different Church groups. I later plan to develop questionnaires from this material to administer to a much larger group. This article is based on conducting those in-depth interviews.

Starting my field research here in Kyrgyzstan has been an interesting and challenging experience. Of course I have suffered, enduring a land sometimes referred to as the "Switzerland of Asia", with 94% of the land covered in the beautiful mountains of the Tien Shan range. But through that "suffering" I have learned some valuable lessons in conducting field research. The following is a description of some of the challenges and dilemmas that I have encountered ... thus far. I have divided the article into four sections. The first section deals with the context in which my field research takes place. I then look at a number of

important themes that have been a challenge and these for the last three sections which I have entitled as “The Right Interviewer” – who I am as a researcher; “The Right Interviewee” – who are the people I want to research/interview; and “The Right Method, the Right Interview” – the challenge of the method itself.

## **The Context**

Having decided and clarified my research topic the first set of challenges I faced, before conducting the research itself (in-depth interviews), related to dealing with the physical/cultural/historical/political context in which it was to take place. I have lived for two decades in Asia, primarily in South Asia. While this has been very helpful, these regions have some common reference points, there have been a number of differences as well. Apart from food issues – I could go into the varied culinary differences between “curry versus sheep head” – there have been other things with which to contend.

One similarity with South Asia is that Kyrgyzstan, as is most of Central Asia, is a complex mix of varied nationalities (Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Russian, Kazakh, German, Korean, Dungan, Turk, etc), a long history that includes a concentrated period of “colonization” by a “foreign power” (Tsarist Russia and then Soviet Communist), and a complex religious/spiritual environment. These have included at least “pre-Muslim” (shamanistic, etc), Tsarist Russian, Soviet and post-Soviet eras. The challenge for my research is to attempt to understand the influences of each, the place they have had in past and present history and to recognize that individuals among the Kyrgyz people have been influenced to one degree or other by all three but in different ways. I have had to be careful about making assumptions in my reading and in my interviewing that may unwittingly influence or bias the way I question or approach the individuals I interview. I have sought to address this dilemma by intentionally seeking to draw out the thinking and experience of each individual and letting them speak for themselves where they fit or don’t fit into that mix. But without some realization of the diversity and factors mentioned above, there will be the potential to make some serious errors in my approach, and in my interpretation and analyzing of my respondents and their interviews.

Another immediate issue was to decide what language to use. In India, at least, many people speak English, and much written material was available in English, as well as local languages. Arriving in Bishkek, formerly known as Frunze, it became abundantly clear that this was not the case. I was arriving into the capital city of a former republic of the Soviet

Union and the language that was still dominant was Russian with very little English spoken or understood. Getting around or going to the market was not a simple thing anymore, let alone conducting field research.

My greater challenge was that I wanted to research Kyrgyz people specifically and the language issue became a little more complicated. I recognized that I needed to begin a language learning process but was confronted with a language question. Should I begin learning Russian, still widely spoken by all ethnic groups living in Kyrgyzstan or should I begin to learn Kyrgyz, the language belonging to the Kyrgyz people? Of course this is not so easy a question. I decided to begin to learn Kyrgyz because I felt that I wanted to invest time in the “heart language” of the people I wanted to research. But for some urban, educated Kyrgyz the language they know best is Russian. It is not uncommon to have an interviewee switch into both languages in the same interview. While some proudly speak the Kyrgyz language and can express their heart issues well, others still find that the Russian language best expresses what they want to communicate. I have continued to learn Kyrgyz because I have found that it builds an immediate *rapport* when Kyrgyz people hear a foreigner trying to learn their language even if they do not speak it fluently themselves.

For my purposes I have chosen to use a translator when conducting my interviews. This has been beneficial for two main reasons. Firstly, my own language ability is still limited, and I want to be able to get to deeper, personal issues/experiences and have an accurate understanding of the lives and thinking of Kyrgyz people. A competent translator will ensure that in a much greater way. Secondly, my Kyrgyz translators understand and speak both Russian and Kyrgyz. Interviewees can choose which language they would be most comfortable using and can mix the languages in the same interview when they feel one language expresses more of what they want to say.

Of course choosing the right translator has its own challenges! What do you need to look for in a helpful translator? For my purposes I had to think through a number of qualifications. My research topic focuses on Kyrgyz people who have been involved in “religious-switching” since independence in 1991. Changing religious affiliation or allegiance can be a sensitive topic and in this case it involves people from the majority and traditionally Muslim ethnic group, the Kyrgyz, to the protestant form (ie non-Russian Orthodox, non-Roman Catholic) of the Christian faith. The choice of translator will affect the outcome of the research. In order to maximize the possibility for greater validity I decided to use professional

translators, who are competent with Kyrgyz , Russian and English languages, who are Kyrgyz and who have been involved in religious switching themselves; in other words they are also “believers” (“followers of Jesus”). To use a non-Kyrgyz or one who is a Kyrgyz but not a “believer” themselves poses a potential obstacle for open sharing of my respondents who may be threatened by another nationality or by a fellow Kyrgyz who is not sympathetic or open to their new faith. I have used both male and female translators and have been careful, especially where the culture is more conservative, to use a gender-appropriate translator. This has been most helpful with female respondents who have felt more comfortable to openly share intimate personal stories that may not have occurred had I been using a male translator. Translators have an important role, and become useful informants and “gate-keepers” of both information and access to my respondents.

### **The Right Interviewer/The Right Researcher**

Another challenge that I have had to work through in starting my field research has been the desire to be the “right researcher or interviewer”. I have realized afresh the challenge and importance of myself and the role and influence I could have in the research process. Each part of my background could have an effect on my research and on my respondents that I interview. Some of these include the fact that I am a “foreigner”. I am neither Kyrgyz or from Kyrgyzstan. I am from Australia. Many people comment straight away, “Kangaroo and Kostya Tzu” (the famous Australian mammal and the famous “Australian” world champion boxer, who just happens to have been a former Soviet champion). I am off to a good start. The next question I am directly asked is: what is my age? This enables them to know how to speak to me in the correct honorific form. But some bigger personal questions arose that related directly to my research.

In every introduction I introduce myself as someone who is “pursuing a doctoral dissertation in sociology to understand some of the religious/social changes that have occurred in Kyrgyzstan.” While this is important for the university-related interview it is a very formal self-disclosure that could cause a stiffness in my respondents. Some become quite worried or concerned and I have come to realize that this necessary “formality” makes some uncomfortable as if it is now a test or an exam, or what happens if they answer wrongly. Overcoming the “uncomfortableness” to this formality has been a challenge. Once the interviews have got under way, the respondents usually become more relaxed but it has been necessary for me to recognize the effect this initial formality might have. In the past, during

Soviet-era research, it was always important to give the right ideological answers to researchers. I have worked hard at creating an environment that allows my respondents to not give me the “right answers”, be it what they think I want to hear or what they think their church doctrinally would want them to share, but rather to share with me their own story and thoughts out of their reflective experience.

Another important question relates to my personal faith or non-faith question. I have wrestled with the dilemma – how much of my own faith belief should I disclose and how this might affect the research process? As mentioned earlier, the topic of religious switching can be a sensitive issue and needs to be approached carefully. Whom I interview, whom I choose as my translator, and with whom I communicate will affect the openness and accuracy of the information I receive. I am male, and this has an impact in different ways on those I interview, whether male or female, especially in more conservative environments. Am I empathetic, antagonistic or just inquisitive? These attitudes will be reflected in who I am as a person and in my research. One of the first people I interviewed began the interview by cross-questioning me! He wanted to know what I was doing, what I was going to do with the information and who I was in relation to the Christian faith. Apparently he had already been interviewed by a number of people before (he is a Kyrgyz Christian leader) and some people had then used the material from the interview in a negative way in articles posted on the internet (amongst other places). I have decided to openly share that I consider myself a “Christian believer” as well as a person involved in university research. For me this has two primary benefits. Firstly, it puts my respondents at ease in that they see me as a relatively “safe” person to share with even though I am a foreigner and they may not know me well. Secondly, it has been very important to me in my own self-awareness as a researcher. I believe that a conscious and open acknowledgement and awareness of my faith in relationship to my particular research, gives me a clearer perspective as a researcher. It provides me with an “in” with the people I am researching, but it also makes me conscious of any bias or thinking that may affect the research. For example, even though I am aware of terms, phrases or experiences that respondents use I constantly ask them to explain for themselves what these are and mean, not what I think or assume they are and mean. My concern is that my respondents are empowered to express their thoughts, not what I think they should be saying or what should fit into my pre-conceived framework.

### **The Right People/The Right Interviewee**

Finding the right people to interview has been another challenge. Starting field research also involves locating the right people to interview. The question is: who do I start with and how do I find them? Taking the time to just settle and live in Kyrgyzstan for two years before I began to interview has been beneficial in this process. It has allowed me the time to build a network of relationships and trust in the wider community. It has also allowed me to understand what I am getting myself into with the research. It was one thing to plan all of this in Australia, it was quite another to step foot into the country and discover the realities “on the ground”. A significant challenge was the challenge of “relationship”. Without it I realized that I was going to face significant difficulties, especially as my topic is a potentially sensitive issue. I needed to win enough trust with enough people who are “in” the Christian community to be able to be referred to people who I could interview. This was not simply a matter of making friends with Kyrgyz believers and then asking if I could interview them. I wanted there also to be reasonable distance in my relationships so that I would not get too personally involved. The challenge is to know the balance. There does need to be relationship but not so close that the research itself maybe compromised. What has been most helpful is the referral from friends to other potential respondents or interviewees in a “snowball” affect. In order for trust to be built, I have decided that I will always try to be introduced to possible respondents through relationships that those people trust rather than me “thrusting” myself on people without a common reference. This all takes time and ... relationship.

There are differences between leaders and lay people in the community. While I certainly want to be able to meet with some of the Kyrgyz Christian leaders they are not the primary focus. Starting off I thought otherwise. Deciding who to interview is a challenge and having a good relationship with leaders in the community is important, to reduce a potential sense of threat. There are benefits and challenges when deciding to target leaders for interviews. The benefit is that they are initiators, they are deeply involved and they have history. In this case, some were the first involved in religious switching (15 or so years ago) and so their story is important for my research. The difficulty is that they are often very busy people, they find it difficult to turn their mobile phones off during interviews, and they are the most ideologically bent in their thinking and remembering. I even had one leader – while I was grateful that he gave me some of his valuable time – who actually got off his seat and began moving towards the door during the interview to let me “indirectly” know that he was busy and had other things he needed to do! The lay-believer becomes the “average” believer where the bulk of the “faithful” are located. It is from these that I will be best able to draw

conclusions that are more truly reflective of the group or community. And that is the heart of my research.

### **The Right Interview**

Now that I am aware of the “right context”, I know who I am – the “right researcher”, I know the “right people” to interview, I finally need to have the “right interview”. As with many things, this sounds so much easier than the practice. Where do I start? I have decided which are main themes I need to cover and have a series of questions for each to keep me on track. But how do I go about it? An interview method that has been useful for me in my context has been to draw out the interviewee through a narrative or biographical approach, that is, their journey. The challenge is that I want my respondents to share information with me about their life and experience in “religious-switching”. I want to draw out of them important elements that led up to and influenced their lives and decision-making towards this major life change. Before 1991, there were barely any known Kyrgyz Christian believers but today there are at least several thousand. How did this happen? What changes have occurred in their lives as a result? How did this affect their sense of ethnic identity? The dilemma is that this process has occurred over time and for some a number of years before. There is also the issue of people re-telling their religious change through interpreted lenses. How can I get the most accurate picture of their story, managing as far as possible the time factor as well as the doctrinal factor? Over time people begin to re-tell their story through the doctrinal perspectives of the religious group with which they have become affiliated.

Based on the experience of others I have chosen a narrative or biographical approach to my interviews. I guide the interview from a life-story perspective asking them not only about their personal biographical, “mundane” details but asking them to talk about their family, where they grew up and important events in their lives. All this before we negotiate the religious-switching narrative itself. This progression is a more normal one and one I trust gives me a more natural response to the issues related to my research. It has been interesting to observe how several respondents have a tendency to immediately jump into their “conversion” story as though it was already a prepared statement even though I have explained my approach. Re-directing them back to their “real life story” has been a developing learning curve.

While my ongoing reading into my chosen topic continues to influence my research I am approaching things from more of a *grounded theory* approach. I am careful not to bring

too many of my pre-conceived ideas, or those of others, into the process. I would like much of my thinking regarding the research to be derived *from* the data. My desire is that the information I gather will constantly refine my research process, such as my ongoing sampling, the questions and themes I use in my interviews and the theory that undergirds it. Clearly as I read and as I research ideas merge into a pattern that impact my research but my object is primarily to understand what has happened, not to impose my own ideas about I think should have happened.

Other challenges with the interviews have been working with what I call the “story-tellers” and the “one-liners”. The “story-teller”, usually one from a more village background, is off and away before you think you are ready to start and has a new story, a new theme, a new proverb. This is great as far as an interview goes. I want the stories, the natural flow from my interviewees. But as often as not it quickly takes a direction too far beyond the boundaries of my interview. This would not be a problem if I were going into an in-depth study of only a few people’s lives but with time constraints and the focus of my research this can be very distracting. The dilemma – how to “guide” the respondent into “story-telling” into the areas I want to cover without discouraging the person? The “one-liner” interviewee is another challenge. No matter how hard I try to be relationship-orientated in my approach and how hard I try to use open-ended questions I inevitably get one-line answers. I am learning to work with many different kinds of people!

## **Conclusion**

As I reflect on my own reflections in this article I have become acutely aware that while the research topic is interesting and the information gained useful, the biggest challenge perhaps, in the research process, has been the developing of *me* as a person. It was not what was at the forefront of my thinking as I started out. Knowing the right context, being the right researcher, finding the right people and doing the right interview (among many other things) have been rightly necessary, despite the challenges and dilemmas they brought with them. But getting out and starting, doing the research, is as much about me learning life skills – understanding my environment and that of others, understanding my context, building relationships, developing and using cross-cultural skills, learning how to interview, how to draw people out, working with different kinds of individuals, taking initiative and being self-motivated. These are, I believe, as important in starting field research as the actual information-gathering itself.

# International Sociological Association

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## e-bulletin

The

### Sociology of Religion in China

with reference to  
The 4<sup>th</sup> International Symposium of the  
Social Scientific Study of Religion,  
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In the 100 years since De Groot's monumental and hugely influential work, *The Religious System of China*, the study of religion in China has waxed and waned subjected to the influence of social and political events that envelop the country. The seed of social scientific research by local scholars had been sowed with the introduction of sociology and anthropology in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to China. However, its growth was subsequently curtailed in the 1950s by a communist regime whose ideological stance was that of religion's ultimate eradication in the new socialist society. While foreign interest in Chinese religions continued apace, for almost three decades the sociological study of religion by scholars in China was stymied as curricula in universities and research programmes underwent far-reaching restructuring. It was only with the start of the reforms in the early 1980s that the social scientific approach to the study of religion was revived, and is now entering a more mature phase of development.

A key contribution to the present development is the symposium series, the *International Symposium of the Social Scientific Study of Religion in China*. The latest symposium was held at the Shanghai University, 13–15 July 2007, jointly organized by university's Centre for the Study of Religion and Society, and Renmin University's Institute for the Study of Buddhism and Theories of Religion. This year's theme of "Religious Organizations and Religious Identity" attracted 68 papers and around 150 participants, and in terms of scale, it was the largest symposium since it started in 2004. Like in previous occasions, the organizers have invited eminent international scholars as keynote speakers for the three-day event, namely, Grace Davie (Exeter University) and Nancy Ammerman (Boston

University). The presence of foreign scholars as keynote speakers in all the symposia thus far is revealing in a number of ways. One is the conscious effort on the organizers' part to move beyond the narrow confines of China, and to introduce current sociological theories on religion to Chinese scholars and students. Another is perhaps the worry that the theoretical elaboration on religion by local scholars has not reached a stage whereby they are able to contribute to a more universally applicable sociological theory on religion. That said, however, there was a palpable confidence among the organizers that the Chinese case can indeed, with much further effort, be applied to a wider context, and this can be seen from the fact that the latest symposium dropped the phrase "in China" from its title.

As the organizers repeatedly emphasized, it is remarkable that an international conference on religion of such a scale has been organized in China at all. It is difficult to imagine that not too long ago, religion had been considered the "opium of the people" by a communist state whose hostility toward anything "religious" in the Cultural Revolution had resulted in the widespread destruction of religious sites and persecution of believers. The stalled development of the sociology of religion in China has to be considered in the wider context of the effort to abolish sociology in the local universities after the founding of the People's Republic. Before that, two schools of sociology, the Comtean and the Marxist, predominated in the Chinese academia. The former was considered a "reformist" school that eschewed social revolution as a solution to existing social problems, while the latter saw social revolution as capable of eradicating social ills. As commentators have pointed out, there was a conflation of Marxist sociology with historical materialism, so that when the communists captured power, there was an ardent endeavour on the part of the leadership to rid Chinese universities of the "bourgeois" Comtean sociology, while promoting a highly ideological historical materialism as the ultimate explanatory framework to analyze social issues (Zheng and Li 2003: 276-8).

Additionally, the effort to abolish sociology as an academic discipline was motivated by the belief that, since sociology was primarily a study of social problems, and that social problems no longer existed under socialism, the very *raison d'être* of sociology ceased to exist (ibid). Under such circumstances, sociologists and anthropologists (seen as belonging to a sister discipline related to Western imperialism) witnessed the closure of their departments and suffered the fate of being absorbed into other departments such as history, philosophy and ethnology. Some of these social scientists subsequently turned to more text-based studies, while those who were sent to the ethnology departments were able to put their professional

skills to use by helping the state in its nationality policies, especially its project of “nationality identification” (*minzu shibie*) to determine the number and boundaries of nationalities in the country.

For the next 30 years, the study of religion in China thus took on certain characteristics that were the results of these broader social and political developments. First, most of the studies conducted in this period were in the areas of literature (*wen*), philosophy (*zhe*) and history (*shi*). Second, published works tended to take on a strong ideological flavour so that religion was viewed negatively as a remnant of “old society” that would ultimately disappear under socialism. Third, the more “social scientific” research on religion pertained mainly to the ethnological surveys of the different “minority nationalities”, whose religious systems were often regarded as “ancient religion” (*yuanshi zongjiao*). By implication, these minority nationalities were thus “backward” (*luohou*) communities to be subjected to the civilization effort of the Han majority. Meanwhile, many Western scholars, unable to conduct fieldwork in mainland China, shifted their attention to Taiwan. For example, Stephan Feuchtwang’s work on Chinese popular religion, P. Steven Sangren’s classic ethnography, *History and Magical Power in a Chinese Community*, and Emily Ahern’s *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village*, were all based on research carried out in Taiwan. From the 1950s to late 1970s, when work such as Maurice Freedman’s *On the Sociological Study of Chinese Religion* appeared, scholars in mainland China were fighting a losing battle on the professional front, many of whom were crushed as it were by the political weight of the state.

The opportunity for the sociology of religion to raise its head again was provided by the start of the reform programmes in the early 1980s. Political leaders and scholars were surprised to see that despite almost three decades of state effort to expunge religion from society, religion had not only not disappeared, but actually shown signs of revival. At that time of relative loosening of ideological control, some mainland Chinese scholars once again turned their attention to religion. These pioneers faced certain limitations, such as the paucity of translated foreign work on the theories of religion, and the state’s persisting negative attitude towards religion (Gao 2006). For some years, empirical research was mainly on conducting fieldwork among various religious communities, without paying sufficient attention to theory. The beginning of the 1990s, however, saw the translation and introduction of classic Western sociological theories on religion to China, most notably Max Weber’s *Protestantism and the Spirit of Capitalism*, as well as Emile Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, thus providing stimulating more theoretical reflections and debates.

It must also be emphasized that the 1980s and 1990s was the time when some Western and Chinese scholars, and certain politicians in Asia, developed a keen interest in the applicability of Confucianism in modern times, more specifically to economic development. In this regard, Weber's work on the Protestant ethic was hugely influential in prompting some scholars and politicians to advocate the idea of a Confucian cultural sphere as an important factor behind the Asian "economic miracle". The interest in Confucianism – whether as a philosophy, ethical system, or religion – provided further impetus to the Chinese scholars' growing interest in understanding religion as a "cultural" phenomenon. Hence, many publications on religion of that period dealt with topics such as the "culture of Christianity", "Buddhist culture", "Daoist culture", and so on.

Li Xiangping, a prominent scholar of sociology of religion in China, and one of the key personnel behind the 4<sup>th</sup> Symposium, highlights three distinct periods in the development of sociology of religion in contemporary China (Li 2006a: 12-13). The first period was in the early 1980s when there was a general revival of interest in religion. Scholarship then was marked by a broad concern about state-religion relationship, as well as adopting a "cultural" approach to the study of religion (as discussed earlier). The mid-1980s to mid-1990s constitutes the second period, where scholars endeavoured to translate key works of sociology of religion and introduce them to China (eg Zhuo 1990). The third period, according to Li, is from the mid-1990s till the present, whereby there is an intensification effort in the introduction of various theories of religion and reflections over methodology, together with substantive study of the religious organizations and their relationship with other social structures.

In my view, the sociology of religion in China is currently entering a new, more mature phase. Over the last few years, religion has become an extremely popular topic among Chinese graduate students working for their Masters and PhD degrees (cf. Gao 2006). Further, local scholars are beginning to engage in theoretical reflections upon both the specific sociological features of religion in China, and to offer conceptual contribution to the general sociology of religion based upon the Chinese experience (eg Dai and Peng 2000; Liang 2004; Li 2006a, 2006b; Yang 2006). One need not look further than in the work of another key scholar behind the symposium series: Yang Fenggang's idea of the "triple religious markets" model to understand the religious situation in China, and his constructive critique of the "religious economy" approach propounded by Rodney Stark and Roger Finke. Yang's seminal article, "The Red, Black, and Gray Markets of Religion in China" (2006), seeks to

solve a puzzle: why is it that, despite a long period of state regulations and repressive actions in the past, religious activities still persist in China? Yang’s central argument is that heavy regulation of religion will not result in its demise (as predicted in the traditional religious economy model), but in the creation of a tripartite religious market, namely, the red, black and gray markets.

#### Yang’s (2006) Triple Religious Market Model

Red market	“all legal (officially permitted) religious organizations, believers, and religious activities”
Black market	“all illegal (officially banned) religious organizations, believers, and religious activities”
Gray market	“all religious and spiritual organizations, practitioners, and activities with ambiguous legal status”

Yang’s main contribution to the religious economy approach is his proposition of the existence of a gray market, which consists of two types of practices: “(1): illegal religious activities of legally existing religious groups, and (2) religious or spiritual practices that manifest in culture or science instead of religion” (2006: 97). The red, “open” market is the largest in a minimally regulated religious economy such as the United States, meeting most of the people’s religious needs. In contrast, a highly regulated market such as that in China means that “the high-cost of black market only draws a small number of virtuosos, and the red market is either inaccessible or unappealing to large number of people”. The result is a large gray market, which includes activities such as “political religion” (eg personality cult of Mao), *qigong*, magic, yoga, folk religion, and other quasi-religious practices. In this regard, the idea of a gray market offers great explanatory power that accounts for the existence of non-institutionalized religions and spiritual practices, which are largely ignored in the traditional religious economy framework. From the various discussion sessions in the 4<sup>th</sup> Symposium, Yang’s triple market model has become the dominant theoretical paradigm among many Chinese scholars. As one well-connected participant revealed, Yang’s model (rendered in Chinese as *sanse shichang*, or “Three-colour markets”) has even been discussed

by officials in the United Front Work Department (*tongzhan bu*). Yang's model is becoming so influential among Chinese scholars that one complained of "economics imperialism".

In his presentation at the symposium, Yang tackled the question whether there has been a "religious fever" in China. Citing the World Values Survey, he highlighted that only around 13% of the respondents in China claim adherence to religious faiths, against the world average of 67%. Furthermore, China also has 24% self-declared atheists, the highest percentage in all the countries surveyed. Based upon his religious market model, he argued that the apparent religious fervour that one sees in China these days might not be so much the result of a phenomenal rise in religiosity among the Chinese, but a consequence of recent expansion of the red market due to the increasingly tolerant attitude of the state towards religion. If Yang's argument is accepted, then a historically sensitive approach is needed to gain an adequate grasp of the religious situation in China, in particular the Communist regime's shifting attitude toward religion.

What is interesting about the state's attitude towards religion is that it changes according to the actual stage of socialist development that China is believed to have attained (Leung 1992). This is because, in Marxist-Leninism, the existence or extinction of religion is a product of particular stages of historical development. For example, during the Cultural Revolution when the Chinese leaders declared that the country had attained the stage of communism, China took a hard-line stance against religion, and various religious organizations and practices were suppressed. Religion was deemed "Public Enemy No. 1" from the perspective of class struggle, an ideological practice that perpetuates class domination.

However, as the moderates consolidated their power in the Chinese leadership in the early 1980s, the Chinese government has since adopted a more "pragmatic" approach to religion (Potter 2003; Chan 2005). The more "tolerant" view of religion is based upon a reinterpretation of China's societal development. These days the orthodox view in the party leadership is that China is still at an early stage of socialism, so that religion is still part of the "objective reality". Spiegel (2004) points out that since the 1980s the main thrust of the Chinese government's religious policy has been to "reintegrate religion into the socialist mainstream and to repress those who resist". Jiang Zemin, the former Chairman, has commented on this issue and is quoted in the United Front Work Department website:

In modern China, even though the class aspect of religion no longer exists, other factors that give rise to the phenomenon of religion still persist, such as natural, social, and cognitive factors ... Religion exists *objectively* in human societies, and not only in the past; it will also *last long into the future* (my translation and italics).

Since religion will be around for a long time to come, from the perspective of the Chinese Communist Party, it makes sense to manage and to regulate it. And one consistent approach of the Chinese government in the past two decades is to unite the various religions in its nation-building effort. In the current Hu Jintao era, one of the stated political goals for China's development is the building of a "harmonious society" (*hexie shehui*), and the leadership sees religion and its successful management as one of the key elements that can foster the attainment of this goal. It is noteworthy that two government officials concerned with religious affairs spoke during the welcoming session at the symposium. Both said they attended the event adopting a "learning attitude": one confessed that the government still has a lot to learn from the scholars "in order to avoid past mistakes", while the other spoke of how religion and the state could cultivate a "constructive relationship" (*liangxing hudong*) in the pursuit of a harmonious society. Such an attitude is a far cry from the government's militant stance towards religion in the 1950s and 1960s.

It is of no surprise then that the topic of religion, civil society and the state received significant attention in the symposium. For example, a paper by Susan McCarthy examined an ethnic Dai Buddhist organization in Yunnan that engages in the provision of social services, while Wu Xiaoqun presented a case study of religious processions and festivals at a famous temple near Beijing as an example of the increasing social role of religion at the "popular" (*minjian*) level. These, and other similar papers that analyzed religion's social role in contemporary Chinese civil society, highlight the mutually beneficial relationship that can exist between the state and religion. On the one hand, the state seeks to carefully manage religious groups to fulfill certain functions such as providing important social welfare services. On the other hand, these religious groups, some of them representing interests of particular minority nationalities, have to be careful not to overstep the officially prescribed parameters while pursuing their own agenda. Though the red religious market might have expanded, the state is still exercising an ever-watchful eye over religious activities. The heavy-handed treatment of Falun Gong and other heterodox groups serves as a constant

reminder of the state's ability to act oppressively against religious congregations deemed threatening to existing social and political order.

This brings us to the pertinent issue of the so-called “problem of religion” in China. A legal scholar, Liu Peng, reminded the audience that the “problem” should be seen as specifically about the relationship between state and religion, involving issues such as the self-interests of various religion organizations, the connection between religion and ethnicity, and the state's political concerns over Protestantism and Catholicism. According to Liu, the solutions to the state-religion “problem” comprise of the following: (1) the establishment of a comprehensive legal system and the promotion of a mature, free religious market; (2) the state should not provide financial subsidies to, or favour particular religions or congregations, and should forsake its present role as an arbiter of what constitutes “good” or “bad” religion; and (3) religions should be encouraged to play a positive role in society, such as the provision of social welfare services.

Given the still existing tension between the state and Christianity – especially the political sensitivity of Catholicism in China – it is interesting to note the large number of papers focusing on Christianity at the symposium. Most of these examined the issue of Christianity and identity based on participant observations among Christian communities and congregations. Another religion that received significant attention is Islam, with two panels devoted to it. Presentations on Islam cover topics such as Islamic and national education, regional differences among Muslim Hui, and the struggle between the “reformers” and the “traditionalists” in the reconstruction of Islamic identity. The number of papers on Christianity and Islam presents a stark contrast to that on Buddhism and Daoism. The paucity of papers dealing with the latter two religions reflects a persisting trend in the study of religion in China: scholars engaging in social scientific research on contemporary religions in China tend to focus more on Christianity, Islam and popular religion, while the study of Buddhism and Daoism is still largely historical and text-based. Finding and involving more scholars conducting social scientific research on Buddhism and Daoism will be a crucial task for the organizers of the next symposium, in order to avoid giving the impression that certain religions are marginalized or excluded in the event.

Such problems aside, judging from the scale of the symposium and quality of many of the papers presented, the sociology of religion in China seems to have entered a more mature phase of development. Not only are Chinese scholars engaged in high-quality research on

various religious phenomena richly contextualized in their social, political, and economic circumstance. Equally important, the ongoing research effort in China is not simply about “borrowing” theories from abroad, but is beginning to offer significant contribution to the theoretical advancement in the study of religion. Hopefully, the growing discipline will not be nipped in the bud again by political interference.

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