CONTENTS

EDITOR'S NOTES: TENSE INTERACTIONS IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

This thematic issue sheds light on navigations of otherness and relations of mistrust during times of uncertainty and insecurity. These often-tense interactions take many shapes and occur within, as well as across, boundaries set in terms of ethnicity, religion, kinship, gender, political ideology, citizenship status, health risk, and contagion. As the articles in this issue demonstrate, during such uncertain times, people search for ways to negotiate tensions surrounding the relationship between sameness and otherness (Bauman 2001). This involves navigating various challenges, especially when crossing borders or symbolic boundaries, while carefully following the processes involved in creating and maintaining them. Additionally, individuals may have to face inequalities, structural violence, xenophobia, and rising extremism. Furthermore, they may need to negotiate issues of mistrust and risk in contexts of contagion, illness, and (mis)information. And, sadly, many people are forced to navigate the effects of critical events (Das 1995) on their everyday life and social relationships in contexts of conflict and crisis.

In their edited volume *A World of Insecurity: Anthropological Perspectives on Human Security* (2010), Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Ellen Bal, and Oscar Salemink explore the concept of human security, highlighting, through rich ethnographic data, how people around the globe strive to navigate various experiences of insecurity – whether political, economic, environmental, existential, or physical – and to create or maintain a sense of safety, however fragile it may be. Reflecting on the recent socio-political developments and sense of risk, uncertainty, and mistrust that permeate everyday life, in light of the pandemic and of ongoing conflicts, we invited our authors to explore strategies that people employ to negotiate such tense and often risky interactions – whether momentary, everyday, or extraordinary – that cross the boundary between the public and the private, as well as the everyday realities of these adverse and uncertain times from a range of ethnographic urban contexts.

This thematic issue brings together six authors – respectively from the United States, France, Slovakia, Poland, India, and the United Kingdom – who examine various forms of such tense interactions and ways that people negotiate their sense of (in)security during times of heightened uncertainty. Susan Rasmussen invites us to explore attitudes and practices surrounding masking

(or not) in coping with the Covid-19 pandemic from the perspective of the Tuareg in Niger and Texans in the United States, while highlighting the politicization of face coverings and issues of danger, pollution, and contagion. Camilla Salvatore takes us on an investigation of how stereotypes concerning Bulgarian Roma were employed within the official discourse during the Covid-19 pandemic to legitimize antigypsyism, emphasizing their "otherness" and contributing to their further isolation – both physical and social. Viktória Kováčová examines alternative spirituality within a community in the High Tatras mountains of central Slovakia, and how its members negotiated issues of risk and contagion during the pandemic. Likewise exploring different types of uncertainties and insecurities, Marta Kluszczyńska's article describes the everyday lives of young Sahrawi migrants living in Spain and the choices and decisions they make to navigate the constant sense of uncertainty and temporariness, while trying to support their families. Sruti Manjula Devaprakash then takes us on a journey examining three texts written by authors who came to experience insecurity and othering for their writing about their respective communities, while bringing to light issues of caste, social inequalities, and politics of kinship.

Accompanying these articles is also a photographic essay by Tami Dončić which explores everyday negotiations of conflict and critical events, and their repercussions, among the young adults in Smederevo, Serbia, showing the effects of such negotiations on their lives and relationships in light of socio-political changes and their day-to-day realities. Lastly, there is a report from the workshop on studying religion in central-eastern Europe, funded by the Visegrad Fund, that took place at the Comenius University in Bratislava earlier this year, written by Viktória Kováčová.

As a guest editor of this thematic issue, I would like to thank everyone involved – the authors, reviewers, our language editor, members of the Editorial Board, and the journal's staff – who contributed in one way or another to this issue. My special thanks go to the executive editor, Dr. Oldřich Poděbradský, who embarked on the editing journey with me. I would like to also invite you, our dear readers, to explore the ethnographic material and ideas presented in this issue and ponder how these various uncertainties and insecurities permeate our everyday lives and affect how we think about the past, the present, and the possible future.

Katarína Očková
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COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS ON MASKING (OR NOT) IN COPING WITH COVID-19: CUSTOMARY TUAREG COVERING IN NIGER, CONTROVERSIAL COVERING IN THE UNITED STATES, AND THEIR BROADER IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORIES OF DANGER, POLLUTION, AND CONTAGION

Susan Rasmussen
(University of Houston)

Abstract: ***This article explores attitudes and practices regarding covering in comparative perspective, focusing on the mask and masking and their promotion in two very different cultural settings that nonetheless also share some broad similarities: Niger, with particular emphasis on the Tuareg case and the mediating roles of smith/artisans in dissemination of cultural knowledge and health education, and the United States, with particular emphasis on politicians as mediators and Texas in these processes. There is analysis of the cultural-symbolic and socio-political re-workings of meanings and uses of masking in relation to these settings' prevalent, widely-held mores concerning facial covering and their wider significance for understanding theories of danger, pollution, and contagion in anthropology.***

Keywords: ***COVID-19; Tuareg; Africa; United States; pollution; symbolism; politics***

Introduction: Preliminary Cross-Cultural Comparison and Argument

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a particular object came to the forefront of concerns, debates: the face mask. The question arising in the present analysis is, how can anthropologists gain insights from cross-cultural comparative

perspectives on attitudes toward facial coverings during the pandemic, as of this writing (2023) still very much with us even in the wake of vaccinations? Consider the following vignettes:

> Fatima, a woman who fled Mali's civil war and settled in Niamey, the capital of Niger, belongs to the smith/artisan social and occupational group, very prominent and important among the Tamajaq-speaking, Muslim, traditionally ranked, and semi-nomadic Tuareg people. She now re-directs her older skills in a new medium: making masks to protect against COVID-19 along with other refugee women there, and promotes the importance of wearing masks to prevent catching the virus. https://www.unhcrunhcr.org/en-us/news/stories/202015/5eabd6674/malien-refugees-niger-face-covers-prevent-coronavirus-spread.html
>
> In a contrasting situation, but under surprisingly similar broader pandemic-related and other political tensions and violence in the United States, a group of prominent Democratic legislators fled Austin, the capital of Texas, not wearing masks on the airplane, in a conflict over voting rights measures they felt would adversely affect voting equity in their markedly unequal society. They became "stuck" in Washington DC, however, when many of them caught the COVID-19 virus en route there while not wearing masks on their airplane flight. (New Yorker 2021:48).

In Fatima's as well as other Tuareg communities, covering the face and/or head area is already a widespread custom of both sexes, more extensively over part of the face among men, signifying mores of reserve, respect, and cultural belonging within Tuareg society. But its meanings and uses are also changing. And in some other contexts, these meanings and uses now convey social distance in outside encounters. In Niger more generally, modest dress for both sexes, even beyond Tuareg society, features at least a modicum of head-covering, though not as elaborated or as extensive as the Tuareg men's face-veil or the still-rare veiling of some more devout Muslim women from diverse cultural backgrounds.

By contrast, in the United States, particularly in the South, many head and especially face-coverings are usually viewed with much greater ambivalence, if not outright xenophobia, signifying more "exotic" "otherness" and stigma. The Texas Democratic legislators, while predominantly opposed to policies of then-president Donald Trump, felt uncomfortable with coverings about the head and/or face, like many others in the US South. Also in the United States, many listen more to politicians they tend to agree with and less to biomedical physicians and scientists, though the latter are not unanimous regarding

whether to mask or not to mask. In Niger, even in cases of less enthusiasm about COVID-related masks, many listen to and take seriously social mediators, such as smith/artisans, whose longstanding expertise in verbal and visual arts and ritual and social intermediary roles confers much informal power. Hence some contradictions, but also prevalent trends in each society. During the height of COVID-19, how did these play out in attitudes and practices concerning protection against the pandemic in each society? In the pandemic crisis, both Fatima and the legislators from Austin had a similar role, each as a kind of unofficial mediator outside official biomedical science and authority in their respective countries.

While covering, in particular of the entire or part of the face, is more acceptable among the Tuareg in Niger than among some Americans, here I focus on less obvious but important changes and contradictions in each cultural setting. These changes and contradictions offer critical insights into this practice in relation to more general anthropological interest in social and medical hierarchies, cultural/symbolic pollution/contagion beliefs, and experience of and responses to danger.

This article explores insights offered by Tuareg covering and reserve/respect/distance among the different social categories in their predominantly Muslim, traditionally-ranked and semi-nomadic society into American controversies over masking, ambivalence toward covering, and also, more broadly, how the ethnographic and comparative data enhance anthropological understanding of concepts of danger, protection, pollution, and contagion, in contexts of inequality of access to cultural and medical knowledge. There is analysis of attitudes and practices concerning covering, health and illness awareness, and roles of mediators and commentators in disseminating evidence-based knowledge (or misinformation). Notwithstanding marked differences between these two cultural and national settings, they share some broad political and economic similarities, and contrasts and similarities between them illuminate wider issues brought to light by the pandemic era. Although a few conspiracy theories circulated in both the US (Bodner et. al. 2021) and in Niamey, Niger's capital city (Youngstedt, verbal communication American Anthropological Association, Seattle, Nov. 2022) concerning the means of protection from danger and the reasons for promotion of pandemic awareness, their respective responses to COVID-19 differed in other respects.

Several insightful pioneering analyses of covering and masking in relation to the pandemic have emerged. Some studies involve brief cross-cultural

comparison, for example, with India (Mohan and Bora 2020), and others focus more on a single cultural setting, for example, Norway (Tateo 2020, 131–151) and Ghana (Braimah 2020). As Tateo and Marsico (2019) point out, we need a way to create semiotic devices to escalate and de-escalate the meaning of objects from ordinary to extraordinary and vice versa. These authors constructively identify several semiotic devices through which this is done. One such process (Tateo 2021, 135) is that the contact/proximity between ordinary to extraordinary things can lead to an escalation by contact, but also to its deterioration by perceived "contamination". As Douglas (1966, 1992), Martin (1995), and Masquelier (2006) have shown, protection and dangers such as dirt and disease are culturally, socially, and politically constructed, often related to gender and class stratification, as well as symbolic classifications.

Approach and Analytical Framework

These interesting studies tend to frame masks and masking in immediate, individual dramaturgical, Goffmanesque terms (Mohan and Bora 2020) or in social psychological terms (Tateo 2021). The present article analyzes acceptance of masks, masking, and covering and/or controversies, even resistance over them in relation to broader social practices of covering and cultural meanings of modesty, reserve/respect, and pollution/contagion concepts in dynamic interplay with cultural mores and sociopolitical hierarchies. I juxtapose, compare and contrast two very different social/cultural settings of COVID-19 in terms of attitudes and practices regarding covering, analyzing their connections to wider cultural mores and political practices and more broadly, to pollution and contagion cultural translation issues in anthropology (Douglas 1966, 1992; Masquelier 2006) as well as theories of mediators between binary, opposed structural forces in polarization and hierarchy (Levi-Strauss 1966), for example, smith/artisans in Tuareg and some other societies (Rasmussen 2013). Also key here, I argue, are gendered ideologies and practices concerning covering, in particular, concepts of masculinity, revealed through contrasting attitudes toward covering in Niger and in the United States. I am not arguing that masking is universally accepted in Niger or that masking is universally resisted in the United States; rather, I focus on cultural contradictions within each society as well as widely-held, though not unanimous, ideas and practices in each.

Masking is indeed an interactive practice and a semiotic signifying process, but also a social and political construct, and can convey concepts of danger and

protection. Both similarities and contrasts between the Tuareg case in Niger and the southern (particularly Texan) case in the United States reveal much about attitudes and practices regarding danger, protection, reserve, distance, pollution, and contagion, and in the United States, racism, as part of social hierarchies and polarization of mental logics. In both these settings—though geographically and culturally distant, the "poetics" and politics of covering or not covering, as well as attitudes underlying them such as concepts of pollution, contagion, and stigma—come into play in ways that are amenable to some comparative analysis. Here I also hope to contribute to and enlarge the analytical framing of masks and masking by approaching this phenomenon during the era of COVID-19 in comparative terms as both a symbolic (iconic) construct and more: a social sign with meanings emergent in subsequent contextual responses (Barthes 1965; Peirce 1991; Silverstein 1976).

In Niger, as well as in some other African settings, partial or entire coverings for many, particularly of the head and neck for many Tuareg women and facial areas for many Tuareg men, are part of ordinary daily life, rather than extraordinary practice. Yet as in any cultural setting, there is meaning re-making in modifying the face through some sort of covering as "marked" in some way, depending on changes across time and variations across context.

In Tuareg communities, it is customary for many mature adult men to wear the turban/faceveil and for many married women to at least modestly cover the nape of the neck and hair (Loughran and Seligman 2006). In the United States, particularly much of the South including Texas, face coverings in everyday life outside contexts of familiar rituals and celebrations such as the longstanding wedding bridal wedding veil and the popular Mardi Gras and Halloween masquerades are widely considered somewhat "exotic", even stigmatized. Facial coverings beyond these formalized contexts are most often associated with marginalized groups—sadly, prompting fear, suspicion, even hate and violence in xenophobic bigotry, racism, and scapegoating as for example, some hoodies and headscarves worn closely about the face. These prevalent negative attitudes toward face-veiling beyond widely-practiced rituals or celebrations, I show, constitute national pollution/contagion beliefs)—toward persons perceived as different and "dangerous". Recall, for example, misunderstandings and controversies swirling around so-called "Islamic dress" (Abu Lughod 2002), often based on misinformation and Islamophobia. These negative attitudes tend to persist concerning covering the face, but interestingly, not always the head (for example, the ubiquitous baseball cap is notably not stigmatized, though its

color and the way it is worn can be politically symbolic, as are, for example, the red MAGA baseball caps widely worn at Trump rallies). What is not familiar is often seen as ambiguous and therefore "polluting", (not literal "dirt", but dangerous). Mediators in myth and life are necessary in order to reconcile or "bridge" polar opposites and other perceived oppositions (Levi-Strauss 1966). Thus this essay hopes to offer nuanced insights on contagion, pollution, and bodily and personal boundaries in relation to the body politic (Douglas 1966; Masquelier 2006; Renne 2013), in Niger (with special focus on the Tuareg) and in the US (with special focus on Texas) respectively, which shed light on cultural acceptance or rejection of masking and covering during pandemic outbreak(s). The Tuareg case, I show, is useful analytically as a "foil' to the American case.

The data are drawn from this anthropologist's many years of longitudinal "on the ground" field research in Niger in rural and urban Tuareg communities in the northern Air Mountain region and in Niamey the capital, and from public-domain news media and secondary sources (Internet in both Niger and the United States) and "hard-copy" newspapers and popular magazines, as well as scholarly sources on the United States.[1]

Fatima the Tuareg smith/artisan's mask-making in Niamey, the capital of Niger, is part of a meaningful and powerful response to COVID-19 there. Even before the first cases in 2020, the Niger government had swiftly adopted preventive measures to halt the spread of the virus: a curfew, complete isolation of Niamey, and compulsory wearing of face-coverings in the city. In the United States, much public health policy was left to the states. In Texas most recently, where this anthropologist, author of this article, resides and works, the emphasis by Governor Abbott was on "individual responsibility" (ignoring effects on the collectivity). In some other states, similarly, some residents' defiance and anger targeted even health-care workers, rather than the pandemic itself, as their "enemy". In Niamey, Niger, opposition to COVID-19 policies have targeted not masks, but rather other social distancing rules against mass gatherings because these rules threaten important collective gatherings at mosques on Islamic holy days and rites of passage. Masking, despite some

[1] In field research projects between 1983 and 2017 in Niger and Mali on medico-ritual healing and specialists, gender, the life course and aging, youth cultures, verbal art performance, and on rural and urban smith/artisans in these countries as well as in France and the United States, this anthropologist is grateful for support from Fulbright-Hays, C.I.E.S, Wenner-Gren Foundation, Social Science Research Council, National Geographic Exploration and Research, Indiana University, and University of Houston.

ambivalence, is not "strange" or novel there, given that customary dress for Tuareg and other Nigeriens involves some form of head covering for modesty. The Tuareg men's turban/faceveil is distinctive because, in contrast to most women's headscarves, it is more extensive and covers not solely the head, but also part of the face.

How does the cultural/symbolic marking of face-covering work in the meaning-making of concepts of safety versus not safety (danger) , and what exactly is protected in I-Other relationships in relation to masks or no masks? In the Tuareg case, also relevant here is the mediating role, importantly noted by Levi-Strauss to mitigate structural polarities in myth (Levi-Strauss 1966) of Fatima as a member of the social category of traditional artisans called in Tamajaq inaden (approximately denoting smiths, artisans, or craftspersons) in these processes. This occurs through her continuing (albeit in modified form) some longstanding roles of smith/artisans. These include visual art production and journalistic-like media communication as traditional go-betweens for local chiefs, which, I show, can mitigate social polarization in ways similar to, and perhaps more effectively than health-care mediators. For in the United States, health-care spokespersons have become politicized, polarizing public figures, rather than mediators in knowledge construction. Americans who oppose masks tend to evaluate knowledge solely on the basis of whether or not they "like" and agree with a public spokesperson in other ways and on other issues. Indeed, artists, physicians, and scientists have varying expertise on COVID-19, and some (for example, a few American physicians) themselves spread misinformation on cures, (Lena Sun, *PBS Television News* Tues. Aug. 8, 2023).

Although *inaden* among the Tuareg are not necessarily apolitical, they usually reach a broader audience (Rasmussen 2013) because of their arts, and in Fatima's case, also the artistic mask advertisement via the UNHCR Internet site. In other words, even with the spiraling resurgence of the pandemic driven by the Lamba, Omicron and other new variants in the U.S., many Americans tended to listen to politicians with whom they agreed on other controversial issues. In Niger, as well, there is political conflict: most recently, the coup-d'etat led by soldiers in Niamey. But the junta's primary motive was not dissatisfaction with state policies on the pandemic, but rather, with the state's handling, under President Bazoum, of fighting militants affiliated with Boko Haram, ISIS, and AQIM in the Sahara and Sahel (Mednick, *Houston Chronicle/Associated Press* 2023: A33), The junta also opposed lingering colonialism in the presence of French troops there.

The point here is that, in contrast to the discourse of smith/artisans in Niger, the discourses of artists, physicians, and scientists in the US, though not all the same, reflected and intensified factionalism during the COVID crisis, rather than mediation during that crisis. Indeed, there were threats of violence against public health advocates and "official" public health and medical specialists (for example, Dr, Anthony Fauci) and others promoting masks and/or other health mandates. Among some Americans, I show, more hostile attitudes toward, and negative representations of head and face-coverings and their promoters, especially masks during the pandemic, reveal not solely concepts of literal contagion and sanitation, but also more symbolic pollution, expressed in politization, xenophobia, racism, and other stigmatizing, and also suggest the problematic construction of knowledge when politicians, more than scientists or artists become mediators in the dissemination of healthcare-related knowledge.

The Tuareg case in Niger does not completely exclude politics or inequality—given the remnants of pre-colonial ranked social statuses, sporadic post-colonial tensions between Tuareg dissidents and the state over regional and cultural autonomy, and more militant Islamist piety groups' 21st century pressures—resisted by many Tuareg—to implement *sha'ria* law, including more extensive coverings (Bourgeot 1994; Claudot-Hawad 1993; Hawad 2021; LeCocq 2010; Rasmussen 2019). But the American case, I contend, revolves around more exclusionary xenophobic projects of conferring negative connotations, even abject status symbolized by face-coverings and more broadly, what is perceived as different, ambiguous, and threatening.

In Tuareg communities, social distancing and hierarchy originated historically in pre-colonial social hierarchies of inherited, endogamous occupational groups based on descent, monopolization of resources, and some local pollution beliefs. But tensions, while not absent, are mitigated by accompanying expectations of reciprocal rights and obligations in longstanding though changing client-patron social relations. These include roles of smith/artisans as go-betweens or "ambassadors" in delicate matters: for example, negotiating noble marriages and interceding in chiefly and factional rivalries and battles (Rasmussen 2013). The situations in both countries, as in any cultural crisis, are evolving and inconclusive. I am not arguing here for "perfect closure" or complete efficacy of masking advocacy during COVID-19 in either setting. I am arguing that both the Niger/Tuareg and US/Texan cases suggest the importance, more broadly, of comparative analyses of mediating processes between polarized social categories and of cultural contradictions in concepts of pollution/contagion in health crises.

Notwithstanding historic, cultural, political, and economic differences, a number of factors at play in perception of danger are similar in both cultural settings. Even prior to the pandemic, many Americans, like many Nigeriens, have been experiencing social upheavals, tensions, and changes: namely, ecological crises and climate change, for example, weather extremes, especially heat, droughts, and floods, and persisting though changing sources of inequality in regional, rural/urban, ethnic, and class tensions; inflation; widespread unemployment; increased gaps in wealth in both countries; and political violence, as in the Washington DC riots after the 2020 elections in the United States and the most recent coup d'etat in Niger.

Relevant History and Ethnography of the Tuareg

Many Tuareg, Tamajaq-speaking, predominantly Muslim, traditionally ranked and semi-nomadic, reside in the Central Sahara and its Sahelian fringes. Occupations include oasis gardening, herding, artisan work, Qur'anic scholarship, local and itinerant trading, and migrant labor. Many remain rural and semi-nomadic, but some have settled in agro-pastoral oases, large market towns such as Agadez, and Niamey, the capital city on the Niger River. Major occupations no longer correspond exactly to inherited stratified social statuses (of nobles, tributary, smith/artisan, and descendants of former clients and enslaved peoples). Aristocratic elites no longer militarily dominate the subordinates. There are intermarriages and emergent new socioeconomic classes (Kohl and Fischer 2010; Rasmussen 2021a; Rossi 2016). Most modern leaders encourage identity on the basis of the Tamajaq language, not the old social hierarchies. Older ideals of "noble purity" were reconfigured into goals of regional cultural autonomy during the recent Tuareg armed rebellions. Yet some concepts of purity/pollution remain salient, though modified in encounters with biomedical concepts of contagion (Rasmussen 2017).

Since the mid 1980's, the IMF and World Bank-mandated monetarized and neoliberal privatized economy have impoverished many in Niger, propelling Nigeriens, including many Tuareg of all social backgrounds, into refugee flight, itinerant trade, and labor migration (Kohl and Fischer 2010). Recently, other Africans have also entered Niger in two-directional migrant and refugee flows across the Sahara: many seek to cross the Mediterranean and enter Europe or to return back home.

Amid these changes, some longstanding Tuareg cultural mores and social relations persist that are relevant to covering and masking. Many persons of diverse social backgrounds still appeal to what were traditionally noble (*imajeghen)* elite ideals to judging or critically commenting on personal conduct, in particular, positively valuing reserve, dignity, and modesty.

Both sexes value head-coverings and voluminous clothing from not solely cultural interpretations of Islamic religious devotion, but also mores of reserve/respect/modesty and aesthetic style preference (Loughran and Seligman 2006). In general, mature, marriageable and married men, not women, should cover the mouth and nose with the face-veil/turban (*tagelmust*). Most Tuareg women are not forcibly secluded or fully veiled. Married women should cover the hair and nape of neck with either a headscarf (*diko)* or a more enveloping scarf/shawl (*tesoghelnet)*, depending on social context. Smith/artisan women tend to wear the same headscarf covering as do other Tuareg women, but the former tend to allow this to fall more loosely, and go bare-headed occasionally.

Coverings for both sexes, as noted, traditionally have several meanings and purposes: first, for modesty, reserve, and respect; and also for protection from evil spirits who enter through the bodily orifices (Claudot-Hawad 1993; Murphy 1964; Nicolaisen 1961). Men and women of aristocratic social background, as well as women who are more religiously pious or married into maraboutique clans or Arabic-speaking families, tend to observe these practices most strictly. Thus both sexes vary in degree and styles of coverings about the head, though the upper classes, as elsewhere, tend to dress more conservatively, and modesty/reserve/respect is ideally central to their practices. But this value can be "tweaked" on occasion.

On the one hand, traditionally-noble elite ideals of respect and modesty are widely held, but on the other, there are also some variations and counterdiscourses surfacing in subtle resistance by subordinates. I saw mothers discipline small children who urinated in the wrong place, (e.g. inside a compound or near cooking materials or a water-container) and always rebuked them by chiding, "*Wur ge takarakit*" ("there is no shame/reserve/respect").

Some rebellious urban youths, still unmarried because of unemployment, wear the men's faceveil only on formal occasions, instead opting for baseball caps which, marabouts lament, prevent proper praying postures.

In an urban household of a family of servile descent, one young man raised his face-veil, usually a sign of respect and reserve, exaggeratedly high when an older guest of noble descent entered who was perceived as important, but

also a bit arrogant. In this hyperbolic action, the former also subtly mocked the latter, and everyone laughed. The foregoing incidents reminded everyone of officially immature and subordinate youths' and descendants of enslaved peoples' informal power over reputations, which counterbalanced some lingering social prestige of parents, elders, marabouts, and noble elites. Such license, in the older social order, limited elites' transgressions and abuses of power (Nicolaisen and Nicolaisen 1997).

Most smith/artisan men wear the men's turban/veil, but less strictly: at a lower, less modest level (not covering the entire nose and mouth, as many men of aristocratic background still wear it). The more "relaxed" style of many smith men signifies their lack of or lesser reserve , explained to me as necessary in order to mediate between warring and/or marrying factions.

The reason smith/artisans are less constrained by reserve/respect and modesty and are less strict about covering is to express their non-alignment, necessary in their mediating between families; for example, in negotiating of bridewealths and presiding over official events where tensions might arise between the state and local communities: namely, immunizations, tax-collection, school enrollments, aid distributions, and news dissemination.

Smith/artisans remain predominantly endogamous, and continue to dominate most artisan work, which was formerly rigorously guarded from others' practice by special taboos and sanctions (Rasmussen 2013). Male smiths work with metals, stone, and wood. Female smiths work with leather, style women's hair, circulate announcing important events, and apply henna to brides and new mothers during weddings and namedays. Smiths' forges are important centers of gatherings, sociability, and news. In the countryside, these specialists manufacture jewelry for gifts to women on marriage, make tools for housework, herding, and gardening, and serve food and sing praise-songs at their (formerly inherited but now freely-chosen) noble patrons' rites of passage. Smith's praise-songs often also contain critical/comical social commentary, thereby exerting much power over nobles' reputations. Some persons of smith/artisan backgrounds have become journalists and *animateurs* (emcees/hosts) at urban festivals, thereby re-working their longstanding social intermediary, artistic, and ritual roles flexibly to suit contemporary social needs. The point is that traditionally and currently, smith/artisans are important mediating figures in bringing disparate, often contentious parties together, in negotiating between leaders and followers, and in their critical social commentaries.

Until a series of droughts, noble elite patrons ordered items from smith/artisans. Until the decline in travelers from sporadic political and religious violence and the outbreak of COVID-19, African civil servants, European expatriate workers, and tourists ordered silver and gold jewelry from urban male smith/artisans and leather purses and pillow-cases from female smith/artisans, providing them with lucrative income. But these income sources have diminished. For some, such as Fatima, economic precarity and political violence uprooted them from longstanding important roles and close client-patron relations in their home communities. Yet for smith/artisans, it is often easier to adapt to new settings and encounters without abandoning completely their artisan, oral history, and critical social commentary roles.

Fatima, around 43, learned how to cut, dye, and embroider leatherwork as an adolescent near Menaka in eastern Mali, specializing in goat-hide travel sacks, women's leather hair ornaments, containers for perfumes and jewelry, and cradle/slings for babies.

After migrating to Niger to escape drought and violence, Fatima resided in a traditional Tuareg tent on the outskirts of Niamey, Niger's capital. At the height of the pandemic, she received a UNHCR-sponsored electric sewing machine for her needlework and mask business. She commented: "The outbreak of the coronavirus has heavily impacted my artisan business. When I cannot sell my artifacts, I don't have money to eat. Nowadays people are scared to leave their houses. Nobody comes to buy my (traditional) products"[2]

Thus, Fatima and some other refugees could maintain and re-fashion some connections with their "home" cultures by bringing their skills into a UNHCR mask-making project. This practice compensated Fatima for her loss of support from her impoverished and uprooted noble patrons in rural Mali, and enabled her to practice remunerative employment and integrate into a new community beyond local client-patron relationships. In effect, Fatima transposed smith/artisans' longstanding non-aligned and mediating role and skill onto disseminating health knowledge on the Internet and in person, through the NGO reporting of her mask-making and selling: the factions here were not descent groups, but those in Niamey who took the pandemic seriously versus those who did not and/or were tired of prioritizing social distance over other economic and religious needs.

[2] https://www.uhcr.org/en-us/news/stories/2020/5/eabd6674/malian-refugees-niger-face-covers-prevent-coronavirus-spread. Marlies Cardoen UNHCR USA: May 1, 2020 html.

Moreover, smith women have generally closer association to women's bodies (in hair-dressing and applying henna to brides and new mothers). Most Nigeriens from other ethnic/cultural groups also assign a similar special status to smith/artisans, and still depend on smiths for many goods, services, and information.

Smiths' lesser reserve (*takarakit*) enables them to pronounce what others cannot. These roles can "bridge" local and national interests, as for example, in disseminating news, invitations of important events, and advice. The Tamajaq term *takarakit* is difficult to translate precisely, but approximately denotes reserve, avoidance, or social distance in most contexts (Casajus 1987), the opposite of what anthropologists call familiar joking relationships. In other contexts, it is used synonymously with "respect". This complex attitude varies, not solely rigidly by social class, but also more dynamically and indexically according to interaction. It is absent in relaxed relationships between age-mates and cousins and during conversations between persons of aristocratic background and smith/artisans. Smith/artisans tend to joke lasciviously, recite normally taboo names in genealogies, and include sexual innuendos in their songs.

In addition to reserve, respect, and modesty, also important to most Tuareg are dignity (*imojagh*) and honor/decency (*echechek)*. Proverbs expressing these mores include "if in the shade, dress like the shade", and "the (men's) veil and trousers are brothers", and above all, refer to respect for women, reminding men of Tuareg women's socially prominent position as "pillars of society" (Kohl 2009:76).

Around puberty, young men should start to wear the men's turban/faceveil, *tagelmust*, which conveys a man's increasing reserve/respect/modesty toward women, elders, chiefs, and potential parents-in-law, his economic stability, and readiness to marry. The turban is wrapped around the head in diverse styles, and the top of the veil usually rests on bridge of nose and the bottom falls across the face to the upper part of the chest. At its highest level, this covers a man's forehead so that when the veil is at its highest, there is only a narrow slit around the eyes. At its lowest level, it may fall below the mouth and chin, thus exposing the entire face. It is adjustable. Its styles vary according to social context and social status (Claudot-Hawad 1993; Murphy 1964), often elevated high before foreigners, elders, parents-in-law, and women.

With the passage to the status of *amangad* (cultural definition of a mature man), once associated with owning herds and managing caravans, a man could go to war, attend meetings, visit women in courtship, become engaged to marry,

and carry weapons. In advanced age, most drape the veil more modestly, hood-like over the sides of the head (Rasmussen 1997).

There is occasional politicization of the men's faceveil. Dissident fighters in armed rebellions wore green fabric in their veils. A few Tamajaq-speaking men have dropped this head-covering temporarily in multi-ethnic towns to avoid being scapegoated by state and army forces as "radical" Islamists or as dissident "rebel" fighters, especially following violence and negative stereotyping portrayals by some media of Tuareg men as "bandit-like", veiled "terrorists". In Niamey, for example, some non-Tuareg scapegoated veiled ethnic Tuareg men following a bomb explosion at Nigelec, the electric power station, which prompted Tamajaq-speaking men in Niamey to temporarily drop their turban/faceveil) to avoid being targeted and attacked unjustly as suspected "terrorists". Indeed, it has been others beyond Tuareg culture—both inside Niger and beyond, in Europe and the United States—who more often politicize these and other face-covering accessories. Tuareg men must remove their veils for national I.D. photos and at security and customs posts during international airplane travel.

In other words, although some tense political meanings can be communicated through wearing or not wearing the Tuareg turban/veil in some contexts, these head-coverings do not usually, within Niger, signify either subordination or resistance, but rather, protection, and between most Tamajaq-speakers, belonging and respect.

Women, like men, start to cover their hair and nape of neck on marriage, and tend to cover more closely about their mouth when elderly. Most Tuareg women's head-coverings are less enveloping than men's (Kohl and Fischer 2010; Loughran and Seligman 2006), though as noted, this varies according to one's religious devotion and influences of piety groups. Most women, like men, emphasize reserve and modesty in specific social contexts, but even their more enveloping *tesoghelnet*, a long, elegant, flowing cloth wrapped around the head and body, like the men's *tagelmust,* consists of different parts, all named and adjustable (Loughran and Seligman 2006), but does not usually cover a woman's entire face. The upper section, for example, is draped more closely about the head when in the presence of respected chiefs, Islamic scholars, or parents-in law. As observed, women of smith/artisan and precolonial servile or client backgrounds tend to wear more abbreviated head-coverings except at rites of passage or when visiting marabouts.

The point is that in Niger, most head and facial coverings still usually signify positive gender, age, and cultural constructs among many, important

nowadays for not solely those of noble elite background, but also for many Tamajaq-speaking prominent, respected, and successful men.

In sum, men's veil and women's headscarf/shawl among Tuareg are therefore counterparts rather than opposites of each other in their meanings. Also, the wearers themselves are not usually symbolically polluted, marginalized or stigmatized in most contexts; rather, their social distance in interactions among Tuareg implies belonging and protection. Both are first taken up in gendered rites of passage, emphasizing the process of protective blessing/benediction (*al baraka*), the attainment of social adulthood, (readiness to marry), and protection from both literal bodily and symbolic dangers. Most generally, therefore, wearing coverings about the head conveys positive social and economic belonging to others sharing Tuareg cultural understandings, the latter by men in the past expressing ownership of the camel, sword, and nowadays, expressing access to jobs, motorcycles, and cars, and the former by women, expressing engagement to marry or married status.

Both head-coverings are also associated with literal protection from some diseases: some fabrics' indigo, for example, prevents sunburn and other skin infections, but also protects from pollution from non-organic illnesses caused by evil spirits and from malevolent powers of anti-social humans. Thus, coverings and their meanings are related to widely-held local attitudes toward danger, fear, and pollution/contagion. As soon shown, these attitudes and concepts take different directions among Tuareg in Niger accustomed to covering the face and among Americans not accustomed to covering and/or who attribute very different, ambivalent meanings to it, in the U.S.

POWERS AND DANGERS

Pollution, Contagion, and Protection: The Tuareg Case

In Tuareg society, reserve, dignity, and decency, closely related to covering and veiling, are by extension also important in concepts of protection against pollution, contagion. Whereas human, spiritual, and physical dangers are distinctive in western biomedicine, these forces are not always separate in Tuareg conceptualization, often glossed in Tamajaq as "dangerous" (*wa labasen*).

Positive protective and negative destructive powers are dispersed, ambiguous, and not always predictable, not immutable or static. They can be inverted or reversed, thereby encouraging constant attention to protection from danger, which, as shown, is one important meaning of covering the orifices

among Tuareg. For example, there are widespread fears, elaborate theories of causation, and efforts to protect against anomalous births. Negative gossip, "evil eye/mouth" *(togerchet)* from political rivals of a parent also may cause certain birth defects, as was suspected in a case of a local chief's deaf-mute son.

Organic bodily contagion approximating western biomedical contagion is also recognized: some illnesses, for example, measles and diarrhea/dysentery, require the sick person to be isolated, resting on a mat or blanket or in a shelter outside villages and camps. One can catch a cold (or more precisely, a cold "catches" the person) from aromas, such as perfume.

Although widely-held Tuareg fears of danger do not rigidly separate pollution and contagion, many illnesses that are not microbe-based but socially, morally, or spiritually-based can become manifested by physical bodily afflictions, and prompt sufferers to seek additional (supplementary and complementary) medical treatments. The important point is that in Tuareg society, the boundaries between what are termed in English as "pollution" and "contagion" and "inorganic" and "organic" are hazy and fluid. Many rural, more nomadic Tuareg in the past feared hospitals and biomedically-trained staff at clinics and in mobile immunization programs because of political tensions with the state and perceived discrimination (Rasmussen 2001)). But nowadays, most go to hospitals when local healers recommend this, though many patients cannot afford the medicines prescribed (Rasmussen 2021b).

Relevant here are vaccinations. Tuareg are not unfamiliar with vaccinations since herders have much experience with inoculating livestock animals, and consequently there is somewhat less fear these days of human immunizations or vaccinations among most Tuareg than among Hausa in southern Niger and northern Nigeria. The latter, more sedentary agriculturalists, are less familiar with inoculating livestock, and are more influenced than Tuareg by some Islamist militant religious warnings against vaccinations: for example, rumors that polio vaccinations cause infertility, or during the pandemic, "conspiracy theories" in Niamey that COVID-19 was a "white man's racist plot against black Africans" (verbal communication, Scott Youngstedt, American Anthropological Association, Seattle, WA., Nov. 2022).

The infertility rumors, as well as some reports of conspiracy theories in Niamey that COVID-19 vaccinations were a racist "plot" to kill Africans, approximate the fears of some American "anti-vaxxers" who shun being vaccinated against COVID-19 from dread of alleged side-effects, and who politicize this simply because of the "push" toward vaccinations by public health researchers

and scientists perceived as "elitist" and/or as aligned with the Democratic party. But importantly, many American anti-vaxxers tend to conflate vaccinations with masking, as I elaborate on in the next section. Many American anti-vaxxers and anti-maskers (often the same people) take seriously which politician says it, rather than the message itself, though on the other hand, as Bodner et. al. (2021) point out, some "conspiracy theories" have a basis in fact: as noted, some minorities historically experienced trauma from past medical atrocities. By contrast, for cultural reasons, Tuareg tend not to conflate vaccinations with masking.

In Niger, who says what is also important, given the historic ambivalence toward biomedical physicians and nurses (particularly in Niger's North), control over reputations by smith/artisans, griots, and journalists through their verbal arts, and allegations of harmful side-effects by some Islamist piety-groups' leaders (particularly in Niger's South). But masking, especially of the face, tends to be less opposed in Niger than other social distancing that prevents people from assembling together since the latter limit religious and social gatherings; bringing people together is very important culturally. Overall, however, the main problems for Tuareg as for others in Niger are shortages of vaccines and other medicines, their deteriorating from harsh climate conditions during transport, and unequal access to privatized health-care. An additional problem arose in July 2023: the closures of borders and airspaces by the coup d'etat junta, which prevented medicines and foods from entering the country.

Covering, Danger, and Pollution/Contagion/Xenophobia: The American Case

I now analyze American data suggesting pollution beliefs from secondary academic and popular sources. These include media reports on pandemic masks and controversies over them and other protections (for example, vaccinations), as well as my informal observations in my over thirty years of residence, teaching, and public-domain newspaper- and Internet sources in Texas, in terms of their political and cultural bases and implications for the dissemination of knowledge.

Juxtaposed against the foregoing Tuareg data from Niger, these data reveal cultural contradictions, ways of experiencing and responding to dangers, problems of inequalities more generally in each society, and ambiguous, disputed, and changing meanings of coverings, pollution/contagion concepts, gender relations, and mediators' roles in the dissemination of medical and other

knowledge—whether evidence-based knowledge or opinion-based, for example, conspiracy theories that arise in times of trouble whose content, like myths and legends, is more important than their context, style, or evidence (Bodner et. al. 2021). As Bodner et. al. (2021) point out, however, some conspiracy theories have a "kernel" of a basis in some other "truth," such as vaccine hesitancy stemming from fear among African-Americans of medical atrocities such as the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study (Bodner et. al. 2021). In Niger, similarly, a few conspiracy theories alleging racist plots in Niamey surrounding COVID=19 precautions also had a "kernel" of truth to them in historic experiences of French colonialism and racism. However, in Niamey, Niger, importantly, the difference is that masking is not coupled with vaccinations and reactions to them, whether supportive or not, tend to also be disentangled. While masking is more acceptable as customary than vaccinations, the latter, as shown, are of difficult access and subject to some political and historic tensions.

In the United States during and following the Trump administration, social factionalism and polarization blazed on, as well as racist and other violence, anti-immigrant xenophobia, Islamophobia, and what I term general social "atomism" (hyper-individualism) emphasizing individual "freedoms' but also, paradoxically, conformity (Bellah 2007; Bernard-Levy 2006; Putnam 2001; Varenne 2006). Yet this cultural contradiction—of hyper-individualism, even social isolation, combined with uniformity— does not ensure social connections or mutual care, as for example, expressed in language and practice: the proliferation of "self-help" manuals, "do-it-yourself" requirements on and off-line, "selfie" photos, and the Internet platform (formerly) named "Facebook".

"Individual responsibility" in Texas, in particular, as articulated by Governor Abbott of Texas, is not connected to state-initiated collective or infrastructural support. For example, in 2021 during a resurging of the pandemic with variants, Abbott still insisted on relying on personal responsibility without connecting this to structural causes or effects beyond the individual—in effect, a Utilitarian theory of society, earlier expressed by the late British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who in the 1980s proclaimed: "There is no (such thing as) society, ... (there are) only individuals and families".

Prevalent (though not universally-held) individualist mores in the US do not translate into acceptance of difference, non-conformity, or policies promoting inclusive wellbeing. Some head-coverings, in particular those obscuring the face partically or entirely, beyond certain customary festival contexts, are associated with demonized religious or ethnic "others", such as "bandits", "terrorists",

and so-called "Islamic dress" (a misleading gloss or cover-term for the actual wide variety of culturally-elaborated coverings in different Muslim and other societies) (Abu-Lughod 2002; Renne 2013)). As in Niger, there is politization of some head-coverings in specific contexts, though specific meanings are not identical. So-called "Islamic dress" is not a stigmatized gloss in predominantly-Muslim Niger, though as noted, Tuareg men's head-coverings can be stigmatized and glossed as "terrorist dress" during political tensions. Again as in Niger, some coverings in mainstream American culture may express, on the part of the wearer, modesty or respect, but this often does not signify the same thing to other Americans who fear cultural differences and thereby create subsequent re-definitions of not solely religious, but also cultural meanings: as when this anthropologist heard many in Houston observe that "masking is not part of our culture".

Anti-masking rhetoric in the United States, as in Niger, also has some strongly- gendered meanings. But in contrast to the predominantly positive gendered meanings of Tuareg men's partial facial-covering, in American contexts there was gendered symbolic violence in denigration of mask-wearers during the Trump administration as "not real men". Perhaps more than any other force, at the height of the pandemic in the United States, the image of the maskless then-President Trump spoke to people, especially his base, appearing "defiant, masculine, invulnerable" (Wright 2021, 48). He knew the virus was dangerous, yet he dared the virus to touch him, "like Lear raging against the storm" (Wright 2021 ibid.). Millions of Americans emulated the then-President's bravado, and the unchecked virus prolonged unemployment, upended efforts to reopen the economy, and caused many more hospitalizations and fatalities (Medina and Gabriel 2020; Wright 2021). Some (including men wearing, ironically, the ubiquitous base-ball cap at rallies) called wearing a mask "buying into a hype", implying weakness, thereby suggesting some insecurity concerning masculinities in uncertain economic conditions.

Despite his germaphobia, Trump was over-confident in, and proud of his immune system, boasting on multiple occasions that he never gets (even) the flu. Yet eventually, COVID hit him hard. After his cutting-edge therapies, including monoclonal anti-bodies—importantly, a privilege not available to most Americans at that time in the prevailing American for-profit health-care system—he recovered (though did not "cover").

In the privatized health-care system imposed with mandatory restructuring in the 1980s, (Heller 2019; Keough and Youngstedt 2019), the Niger

case broadly resembles the American system's marked inequality in access to health care, for both similar and different reasons and effects. Vaccinations exist in both places, but are of unequal access, with challenges in distribution and uncertain reception. In Niger as well as the United States, as already noted, some persons shun inoculations—in rural northern Niger, recall, many Tuareg feared hospitals and mobile clinics until recently, from perceived contempt toward Tuareg patients by some staffs and from fear of authorities' using patients' treatment-seeking to take censuses and control nomads (Rasmussen 2001). Others in Niger (primarily in the South and in Niamey) based fears on some Islamist religious leaders' warnings against alleged negative side-effects such as infertility.

In the United States, gender is also significant. Facial covering among some Americans opposing it is associated with inadequate masculinity; whereas facial covering among most Tuareg is associated with just the opposite: successful masculinity. Why? Responses to adversity and inequality are distinctive among the Tuareg: men should be "tough", stoical, and successful economically, though also, ideally, modest, respectful, and reserved socially. In uncertain times, men should display fortitude and endurance. Interestingly, despite some changing uses, meanings and styles of some rebellious youths' and other subordinates' turban/veil, these mores do not translate exactly into overall disdain for facial covering on all occasions, since, recall, those persons still revert to the face-veil in more formal contexts. In other words, the Tuareg men's veil still generally signifies a respectful attitude and respected status.

When Trump was ready to return to the White House after three days in the hospital with treatment from the virus then not widely available to most other Americans, can "he considered hobbling out of the hospital and then yanking open his shirt to reveal a Superman logo" (Wright 2021, 53). Notably, his masculine imagery (of ideal, respected—though not respectful—male here was not being covered, but rather being uncovered. Strength and fortitude were not, in Trump's idiom, signified by the face-mask.

Facial masking in the United States can operate as a sign differently, however, according to context; for example, masks are worn without resistance in New Orleans, Louisiana and Galveston, Texas during Mardi Gras celebrations, recognized positively on those occasions as artistic and cultural heritage. But in contrast to the Tuareg case of positive gendered meanings of much traditional coverings and mores of modesty, respect, and reserve, where Fatima's mask artistry is chosen as a way to promote protection from COVID-19 in health

education in Niamey, in the U.S., the meanings of masks have become reconfigured negatively by some American politicians, who have expropriated their meanings by associating wearing protective masks during the pandemic with the denigrating of masculinity, and sometimes also with misogynistic tones. During the 2020 presidential campaign, for example, after (then- candidate) now-President Joe Biden described former President Donald Trump's reluctant attitude toward masks as "macho", Tomi Lahren, a conservative commentator and Fox Nation news host, remarked that Joe Biden "might as well carry a purse with that mask" (*Houston Chronicle* Sunday October 11, 2020, A38), thereby feminizing him. By contrast, one could say that "real men" among Tuareg should ideally cover the nose and mouth, as shown, for reasons of dignity, reserve, respect, and avoidance of pollution and/or leaving the low status as immature male (traditionally, enslaved and client persons were stereotyped as "like children") and transitioning to high status as mature adult male (formerly, also aristocratic elite).

Moreover, the Trump White House staff denigrated and mocked those there who wore masks. Later, a number of staff members—including members of the Secret Service—were diagnosed with the virus. Indeed, in contrast to the meaning of masculine veiling in Tuareg society, which usually signifies respect for leaders and elders, in the United States under Donald Trump it was from "fear of the boss in the West Wing" (i.e., then-president Trump) that aides did NOT wear masks to cover the nose and mouth, even as the pandemic surged. Those rare officials who did so were "ridiculed by colleagues as alarmist" (Karni and Haberman and Media and Gabriel 2020, 1-8). Some Americans continued to hold anti-masking parties, despite continuing cautionary warnings to return to gatherings gradually, given the new variants and low vaccination rates in some US regions, particularly the South.

In early April 2020, studies showed substantial reductions in transmission when masks were worn. On April 3rd, 2020, the C.D.C. finally proclaimed that masks were "vital weapons"[3], using a military trope widespread in western biomedical imagery of protection from disease (Martin 1995). Yet it was admitted that "when you have to change the message, the second message does not always stick" (Wright 2021, 48). Then-President Donald Trump stressed that

[3] https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/03/826219824/resident-trump-says-cdc-now-recommends-americans-weare-cloth-masks-in-public https://Chicago.suntimes.com/columnists/2023/2/8/23591132/ced-exaggerated-evidence-supporting-mask-mandates-column-jacob-sullum

masking was voluntary, adding "I don't think I'm going to be doing it". Yet recall that Trump is a notorious germophobe. He hates shaking hands, and recoils when anyone near him sneezes. He once chastised Mick Mulvaney on camera in the Oval Office of the White House: "If you're going to cough, please leave the room" (Ibid.:48). Years earlier, Trump told "shock jock" Howard Stern that he had a hand-washing obsession.

How could such a man refuse to wear a mask in a pandemic? He has a horror of contamination from germs, but this horror from biomedical contagion, I contend, merges with symbolic pollution beliefs in xenophobic, class, gendered, and racist attitudes, and while not shared by all Americans, is widespread among extremists, for example, in the recent hate-crimes. Trump used contamination/pollution imagery in several of his speeches advocating "walling" out immigrants, during his 2021 trip with Governor Abbott to the Texas/Mexico border, in asserting dangers of "rapists" entering the United States and in using such expressions as "sh---hole countries", symbols of penetration, (organic) dirt, and pollution to designate some poorer nation-states. While pollution imagery also sometimes occurred in the pre-colonial ranked Tuareg society, its virulence, as noted, could be curbed and counterbalanced by subordinates' mediating roles and some influence over elites' reputations. Moreover, pollution/contagion ideas can become merged in a different direction—toward health-care rather than xenophobia.

In this light, pollution beliefs are not so "exotic" or exclusively found in places beyond the United States when one considers that in the United States, anti-maskers and "anti-vaxxers" also hold pollution beliefs that are unconfirmed by biomedical research. Health information is limited in both Niger and the United States, albeit for both similar and different reasons. In Niger, even though the privatization policies of structural adjustment have fallen out of favor, their negative effects remain: by 2016, for example, almost half the population lived on less than US$2 a day, economic opportunities beyond traditional subsistence farming and herding are uncertain and few, (Heller 2019) and preventative care is of more difficult access for most people. In the United States, preventative care exams diminished during the pandemic from fears of contagion, and healthcare and medications are generally of difficult and unequal access based on the profit-driven health-care system, and additionally, also by fewer opportunities to interact directly with people outside intimate information circles. In both countries, communication often takes place between like-minded friends and kinspersons or in selective social media, in an "echo-chamber" of opinions.

There were others in addition to Trump who participated in this discourse. Many people around him while he was President tended to follow his example: then-Vice President Pence visited the Mayo Clinic without a mask, violating hospital policy. Many Republican legislators shunned masks, even after members of their caucus became infected with COVID-19 (Wright 2021, 48).

Although Democrats were more likely to say that masks should always be worn, anti-masking and pro-masking have not fallen consistently along rigid party lines. Yet if a Democrat advocated this practice, this was more resisted by the anti-maskers. Only later did some Republican politicians begun to publicly advocate wearing masks. Yet most prominent Republicans, even those who wore masks, did not publicly exhort anti-maskers to mask up during the pandemic. Inexplicably, the Democratic legislators from Texas introduced earlier did not wear their masks while flying to Washington DC.

In the United States, with some exceptions, many rural people have tended to be more averse to mask-wearing than urban people, a direct inversion/contrast to the Tuareg case in Niger, where rural older and more conservative persons tend to wear head and bodily coverings more. Yet masks and other bodily and facial coverings are not exactly equivalent in their meanings, notwithstanding some local cultural familiarity with covering. Thus, the UNHCR hoped that Fatima as a skilled Tuareg smith/artisan and her mask-making and promotion would mediate between ambivalent forces by her re-directing of sociopolitical danger and pollution toward pandemic contagion through her artistry and generally positive responses to her mask products, and in effect, her re-defining of coverings' meanings conveying reserve/respect and protection from danger toward masking as protection from COVID-19. There was some efficacy in this strategy, at least in Niamey, the capital city, where a number of persons began to wear masks promoted by Niger's health ministry until around 2021, when "pandemic fatigue" and the need to pursue work for survival brought resistance to other forms of social distancing, in markets, mosques, and homes. Americans, similarly, were also understandably concerned about jobs and the economy, but more adamant than Nigeriens about resisting mask coverings, except for the ubiquitous baseball caps American men wear which, notably, do not cover the face.

Despite some successful efforts by artists in the US to promote masking through decorative cloth designs, many Americans still tend to listen to politicians they agree with, rather than to artists, physicians, or scientists. Why? Again, instructive here are conspiracy theories, as narratives/stories which

circulate in times of limited information, uncertainty, and fear (Bodner et. al. 2021; Stewart and Strathern 2004; West and Moore 2004). Some American anti-maskers (as well as anti-vaxxers) have called the Coronavirus "a hoax". There have been rumors, unsubstantiated, that masks thwart facial recognition (Telford 2020: B2), and fears that masks can inhibit classroom communication as schools reopen. Others have asserted that the "government" pushes masks in order to inflate pandemic fear and, more generally, to control Americans' personal liberties in times of crisis. Others believed that COVID-19 and its variants were not all that dangerous, and spread rumors that masks actually caused disease, debunked by specialists who caution that this may occur only if one does not wash or disinfect masks.

In the United States, in fact, wearing a mask encountered less resistance than self-isolation or quarantining. This reflected the more individualistic orientation of many despite the popularity of online social media, and also, often, a lack of choice: many people could not afford to stay at home and self-isolate because they needed to go out, and as in Niger, survive economically. In the US case, this confirms another cultural contradiction: the co-existence of both individualist mores and socioeconomic inequalities. There have emerged a few exceptions, however: one leader, the Governor of West Virginia, Jim Justice, issued a mask mandate, in press briefings read out the names of West Virginians who had died of COVID-19, and appealed to more collective mores in urging residents to "be great, loving neighbors" and wear the mask.

During re-surging of the pandemic variants later, Governor Abbott still refused to mandate masking. Political divisiveness did not produce a coordinated, collaborative response against the disease/enemy. Anti-maskers and anti-vaxxers who protested against mask mandate plans in Missouri, in fact, hurled racist insults at a public health official and threatened him with physical violence. Dr. Anthony Fauci received death threats, and a right-wing organization proposed to try him in a "court". Four men opposed to public health policies were tried for a plot to abduct the governor of Michigan. Rather than targeting the disease itself, protesters targeted and stigmatized proponents of masking, social distancing, lockdowns of indefinite duration, and vaccinating.

Some leaders and other Americans therefore politicize the meanings of social distancing protection against COVID-19 differently from the politics and meanings of that practice in much of Niger.

There are suggestions of changing attitudes in the offing, for example, creative aesthetic variations on masks (Popescu 2020, pp. A-14 and B-23),

recalling the artistry of Fatima the Tuareg smith/artisan in Niger, but in 2021 in the United States, when hospitalizations began to climb in the surging variants, many still did not wear masks at crowded events, and some "mask rage"-related physical violence occurred. In Houston, a waiter at a bar/café was violently attacked by a customer when the waiter reminded the customer that masks were required by the café owner in order to enter that establishment.

Conclusions

In all societies, fear can be used as a weapon for ideological domination, but in different ways. Among Tuareg in Niger, as in the United States, fear of exposure to danger can also be politicized, for example, in traditional scapegoating of subordinates in sorcery and witchcraft accusations and in some tensions between different regions, ethnic groups, and social classes. In both countries and elsewhere, heated debates and scapegoating over risk, uncertainty, and misfortune often occur in wider upheavals, debates, and ambiguities over danger, inequality, and power.

In the United States, as in Niger, there have been climate disasters, disruptions of balance of political powers, increasing social, economic, and regional inequalities, and increased violence. In the U.S., as shown, some groups are demonized for political reasons, as in the racist comments by Donald Trump such as his designating of certain immigrants as "rapists" (in effect, as sexually polluting), and his designation of some countries as "sh---hole" countries during his first campaign. Those designated as marginal or not depends, among other factors, upon the political regime (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Douglas 1992). In the U.S. recently, there is an alarming rise of hate groups and racism incited by some politicians. Thus, the rise of racism-related hatred is related to politicians' ideological agendas that appeal to fears of increasing polarization of wealth in the United States. In Niger, some groups are similarly demonized during times of trouble, as in, for example, the negative stereotyping and scapegoating of Tamajaq-speaking men wearing the *tagelmust* by some non-Tuareg residents of Niamey after the Nigelec bombing.

Latent stereotyped beliefs emerge regularly in specific crises. These enable a community to restructure itself by absolution from certain specified moral obligations, as in Mary Douglas's examples of elders in the Congo and lepers in medieval Europe (Douglas 1992, 90). Context is important. As Rasmussen (2013) argued in an analysis of rural Tuareg witchcraft-like beliefs concerning

rural smith/artisans' alleged ritual powers, such accusations vary across spaces and change over time, and some tensions can be mitigated with non-aligned intermediaries.

During the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, Fatima benefited from easily-adaptable artisan skills, a socially interstitial or intersectional position in Niger's capital city where smiths/artisans experience less accusations of malevolent ritual powers than in the countryside, and the timing of her refugee flight from Mali to Niger, during an acute need to protect from virus contagion. There, she was less vulnerable to accusations of smiths' traditional ritual polluting danger, which still sometimes occur in the countryside upon others' misfortunes. In other words, her urban protective mediating role against contagion in healthcare "overrode" the negative "downside" of accusations of malevolent powers causing the disease.

The socially hierarchical and economically unequal profit-driven health care policies in the United States were not consciously or explicitly connected to "pollution beliefs". However, the imagery and signifying practices of Trump's health-related discourse came close to doing so. The point is that his discourse had consequences: of intensifying polarization of Americans and implied pollution beliefs in fear, transposed into xenophobia and racism, culminating in hate crime increases and ultimately, the post-election violence in Washington DC. Anthropologists must therefore consider commonalities and variations in danger/pollution and unequal access to healthcare over time and space. Globally and nationally, socioeconomic inequities between the global north and the global south, between wealthy and poor, and rural and urban populations in the distribution of medical resources recall Ginsburg's and Rapps' analysis, in another context, of stratified medicine in the politics of reproduction (Ginsburg, Rapp 1991). In Niger and some other African countries during the COVID period, there were delays and unequal economic and medical access to vaccinations, despite the extra, still-unused supplies of vaccines in the United States, though later efforts were made toward wider vaccine distributions to poorer countries. In Niger, for example, AstraZeneca and Sino vaccines became available in mid-2021.

Thus my findings suggest some approximate parallels between these cultural and national settings in degrees of politicization of covering, though the bases, meanings, and effects of politicization of covering in each setting differ. The foregoing findings also suggest that class and gender—in particular, masculinities--play a prominent role in both communities' cultural mores, symbolic

imagery, and political relations surrounding coverings, though in contrasting ways in each setting.

The making of masks in Niger by Fatima, the smith/artisan, also reveals new interactions, re-purposings, and re-arrangements of meaningful signs, shaped by longstanding social contextual meanings and cultural mores, as shown in transferring skills in Tuareg art to health projects. Fatima's art became focused on covering already familiar to many residents of Niger in ordinary daily life. Less familiar and more resisted for some in southern Niger and the capital city, was the Niger health ministry's focus on preventing gatherings for social distancing—hence some contradictions and mixed reactions there.

These processes recall the insights of Roland Barthes (1964) on the contextual elaboration, and motivated "performances" of signs and the insights of Michael Silverstein (1976) and Charles Peirce (1991) in social semiotics and the indexicality of signs as more nuanced in meanings, as manipulated in practice with re-constructed meanings subsequent to initial meanings. People make meanings of a face mask as an object related both to self (because it is something worn on the face) and to others (as exhibited in public) (Tateo 2021, 132). As a modification of bodies, masking reveals complex semiotic layers of meaning (Valsiner 2018). As Tateo (2021, 131) points out, meaning-making deals with the ambivalence of human existence, as signified in the mask, which evokes safety and fear and mediates in the auto-dialogue between "I" and "Me" through the "Other". This hetero-dialogue is characterized by some ambivalence in both Niger and the United States, albeit for distinct reasons and with different meanings.

Thus masking, not universally accepted, is a powerful sign that not only re-defines, but also draws on pre-existing cultural meanings of covering: in Niger among many Tuareg especially, as modesty and respect, thereby modifying and adding on new emergent meanings, but not completely transforming them. This is in contrast to the more extreme, polarizing "shock-wave" of facial covering's cultural novelty and association with racialized perceived cultural "outsiders" in the United States. Although persons of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds tend to cover modestly in Niger, among the Tuareg cultural familiarity with covering about the head and (among men) face, notwithstanding some changes and variations, translates more easily into masking against the pandemic.

As the pandemic and other events tragically play out in Niger, what the future holds is difficult to predict. As one of the poorest countries in the world,

the need for additional medicines is now even more urgent in the wake of the July 2023 military coup d'etat against the then-President Mohammed Bazoum and subsequent announcing, by some countries to Niger of withdrawal of aid to Niger unless the military junta agreed to re-instate the president. As of this writing, (August 2023), some lingering COVID rates have become obscured from media attention by the July 2023 coup d'etat; national and international focus is on the military junta, whose energies began moving toward ejecting French troops (Mednick, *Houston Chronicle* Aug. 6, 2023, A33). In the ensuing turmoil, healthcare will undoubtedly suffer from both withdrawal of some international aid and a likely increase in political violence. Fatima's continuing support by the United Nations agency UNHCR cannot be confirmed yet.

What is important in the present analysis is that, regardless of future results of political upheaval in Niger, the point still stands that insights from a comparison of covering's cultural meanings in Niger and the United States reveal how the mask and masking can convey fear, respect, reserve, and protection, or danger, and can cultivate or incite them. Prominent in the United States, despite its diversity and vastness, was a rigid binary opposition used in the language of health educators and popular media promoting masking: between science and "anti-science" (in effect, "contagion versus pollution") regarding the pandemic. Indeed, this "slippage" into binaries is difficult to avoid even in scholarly analyses of "pollution" and "contagion", reminding anthropologists of the need for quotation marks and caution with these and related epistemological labels and categories, such as "religion", "magic", "science", of longstanding concern in anthropology. Some "slippage", while hopefully minimized here, prompts critical awareness not simply that (already a truism in anthropology), but how these boundaries blur and shift across and within cultural settings. In other words, the broader value of the foregoing analysis is that we need to be critically reflexive and sensitive concerning the power of language and politics to frame understandings of danger.

More broadly, this analysis draws attention to the challenge of minimizing cultural bias in labeling or classifying systems of thought, whether "pollution", "contagion", that anthropology has long grappled with. Perhaps it is not possible to completely escape the limits of language or politics. What is possible is to show how there are both similarities and differences between cultural attitudes toward danger, as revealed by the symbolism and politics of promoting covering or rejecting covering, the danger and fear-related imagery used in doing so, and the importance, in analyzing these processes across cultural settings, of

grounding this imagery in social, political, and economic contexts. The foregoing data and analysis alert scholars to the need to be aware of the politically constructed, shifting boundaries between epistemological categories assumed to be immutable or mutually-exclusive.

American mask-wearers have tended to recognize health concerns more than non-masked persons, and for some time, at least, wore their masks for these reasons. Yet even some mask-wearers, like many anti-masking persons, have also politicized masks and masking. In contrast to Tuareg head and face coverings, American masks in effect signify not belonging, prompting ambivalence and ambiguity in the fragmented and polarized society.

The meanings of face-covering, whether among Tuareg in Niger or Americans in the United States, is also about much more than prevention of (biomedical) literal organic contagion in individual interactions. In contrast to the US, however, where "pollution", "contagion", and "anti-science" and "science" categories tend to be opposed and ranked, in Tuareg society, concepts approximating the western categories of symbolic pollution and organic contagion are neither rigidly hierarchical evolutionary "phases" nor mutually-exclusive, bounded categories (Rasmussen 2006). In effect if not conscious intention, Tuareg smith/artisan's mask-making foregrounds an additional form of purification, becoming a protection against not solely danger in the local idiom of "pollution", but also against biomedical danger approximating the western idiom of organic "contagion". In the United States, the reverse has occurred: anti-masking discourses of some politicians and others show a counter-discourse, from biomedical organic "contagion" concern to symbolic and political "pollution" concern with danger: in xenophobia and regional, class, and gendered discord. Here my intent was not to valorize or judge one cultural setting's categories of danger and protection as "more or less logical" over those of the other cultural setting; rather, I have sought to explore how symbolism and power articulate in tension in contexts of fear of danger in each cultural setting.

Thus, cultural and social responses to COVID-19, immediate and long term, can yield nuanced meanings of responses to affliction, fear, and danger.

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STOPPING THE "VIRUS OF THE GYPSY EMPTINESS": RACIALIZATION OF THE BULGARIAN ROMA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN BULGARIA

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Abstract: ***In Bulgaria, such as in many other European countries, the so-called "Gypsy/Roma" are the target of the rhetoric of extreme right parties who are pointing at them as the main responsible for a situation of crisis and fueling hate between groups. With the beginning of the COVID-19 epidemic, the already existing tension between the majority of Bulgarians with non Roma origin and the so-called Tsigani has intensified and been fueled by political discourses that urge to "close the ghettos everywhere" (A. Dzhambaski, 18.03.2020) which have been translated into safety measures – such as closure, disinfection and introduction of a system of control access to the neighborhoods where the "population of Roma origin"1 is supposed to live. By analyzing an official discourse of this kind and comments and reactions to it, we will see how the stereotypes concerning Bulgarian Roma are legitimated by institutional voices that are alimenting antigypsism (Wippermann, 2005; Knudsen, 2005, Nicolae, 2006, Piasere, 2010; 2011).We will try to see these attitude as consisting in a semiotic process of categorization and enregistrement (Agha, 2007) through which particular features of individuals are identified as typical of the group they are supposed to belong to.***

Keywords: ***antigypsism; racialization; enregistrement; categorization; pandemic***

[1] This is the expression mostly used in official and scientific discourses and considered as not offensive.

Introduction

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic affected our lives and mentalities in an irreversible way. In March 2020 we found ourselves from one day to the other locked in our houses and separated from the loved ones from a physical distance that video-calls could not repair. Someone of us even lost them forever. As a matter of fact, the suggestion to "stay at home" in order to avoid spreading the virus soon became a mandatory measure whose transgression could be severely punished by the law. In this way, we lost all opportunity for sociability and sharing and we started to become suspicious towards others, viewing them increasingly as possible vehicles for transmitting the virus. These "others" could be our friends, our neighbors but also individuals belonging – or supposed to belong- to groups or communities that are considered as "outsiders" (Elias & Scotson, 1965) and thus not fully participating in the society we live. As a matter of fact, it is well known that in a period of crisis – being it economic, political or in health care – the members of a given society tend to search for an escape goat to pin the blame on. However, before a certain group is scapegoated, they have to be recognized by making reference to a set of "signs" (Irvine & Gal, 2019) that are considered typical of the group they are supposed to belong to. This could happen through a variety of semiotic and discursive processes such as that of essentialization, categorization (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova, 2016), typification (Irvine & Gal, 2019) and enregistrement (Agha, 2005; 2006; 2007) that identify individuals as typical examples of a Bakhtian (1970) *personae* by choosing some of their characteristic as typical of a given category. This category is referred to by employing a specific name or by pointing to a particular place. Thus, during the pandemic, individuals living in marginalized urban areas that in everyday interactions are called "ghettos" were held responsible for spreading the infection. This idea was spread by institutional voices – such as politicians and state actors – whose discourses, referring implicitly to the category of "race/ethnicity", have been reported in the media and in social networks as an authoritarian source to explain how the virus spread in these areas. Not considering that there are social and environmental reasons why it is more difficult to observe quarantine and hygiene in overpopulated neighborhoods, the arguments used by extreme rights politicians which then circulated in the public arena were tended to point to the "culture of origin", the "way of life" and the absence of "education" of their inhabitants as an explanation to justify the critical situation in which they live. Thus, the already "marginalized groups"

found themselves even more isolated – physically and socially – from the rest of the population, as well as far from any kind of institutional support.

This is what happened in Bulgaria, one of the countries, according to Piasere (2006) of the "first Gypsy Europe" because of the large percentage of Roma population living there and also one of the countries with "the lower social capital and higher social mistrust level" (Balcik et al. 2013, 131). Here, a real phenomenon of "ethnicization of the pandemic" (ERRC report 2020, 9) followed that of the "ethnicization – or racialization – of poverty" (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova, 2016; Van Baar, 2017) which had already started after the fall of socialism. As a matter of fact, from the moment when the state of emergency has been declared (13th March 2020) "the Bulgarian politicians, particularly those belonging to the far-right party VMRO which is a governing coalition partner, without a shared of evidence, singled out Romani neighborhoods as nests of contagion to be quarantined" (ERRC report 2020, 9).

In this article, we are going to consider how far the category of the so-called *Tsigani* (litt."Gypsies") or *Romi* (litt. "Roma")[2] is mobilized by Bulgarians politicians in order to satisfy public expectancies for explaining a critical event (Daas, 2005) such as the pandemic. We are thus exploring, from a socio-linguistic point of view (Heller, 2010; Canut et al. 2018), how this category inscribed itself in public and official discourses which employ uncritically the concepts of "culture" and "ethnicity" in order to justify social inequalities and discrimination. These discourses have not been circulating only in the last years but are actually the result of the socio-historical transformation which happened in Bulgaria after the fall of socialism. For this reason, we will firstly explain how the social category of the "Roma/Gypsy" has been verbalized in the light of historical and political transformations in Bulgaria in two opposite ways and with two opposite goals : on one side, the European Union and local NGOs – whose goal is to "integrate" the Roma – speak about them as a "transnational minority" who need to gain political visibility, on the other side, the extreme right parties are pointing at the *Tsigani* and accusing them of being responsible for a situation of crisis (being it economic, political, health) with the goal of fueling hate among the population and directing resentment – due mainly to the

[2] In this article we will use alternatively the two appellations taking into account that institutional voices of whom we are reporting a speech are also using them in such a way. Especially, in the discourse we will analyze the appellation "Roma" is used more frequently (and sometimes ironically) in order to respect the "politically correct" while the term *Tsigani* – is rather employed in order to better address a public who use the term in common speech and every day life.

dysfunctioning of state apparatus – towards a specific group. We could see that in most of the cases, both discourses are conveying stereotypical representations of the Roma by portraying them as people who need to be "educated" and to "adapt" to modern society or as people who don't want to adapt because they are "criminals", "thieves" and "parasites" who just want to take advantage of the society they live in. We will focus in particular on the second type of discourses by analyzing an official speech made during the pandemic whose aim is to urge to "close the ghettos everywhere" (Dzhambashki, 18.03.2020) in order to prevent the spread of the infection. We will see how the speaker is using the concept of race as a "discursive practice" (Lemon, 2002) for expressing "Antigypsysm" (Wippermann, 2005; Knudsen, 2005, Nicolae, 2006) or "Antitsiganism" (Piasere, 2010; 2015), a form of racism which is directed at the Roma in particular.

Methodology

In our analysis we will employ the approach of the critical and political socio-linguistic (Heller, 2012; Canut et al., 2018) insofar as they are paying attention not only to the linguistic content of speeches but also to the socio-political context where they happen. This will allow us to see how language in use can reinforce existing social inequalities. At this regard, we have to remind that:

> *toute activite langagiere est avant tout social au sens ou elle est indissociable de ce qui se dit et se fait avant et autour de nous, et au sens ou elle fabrique des positionnements, des configurations, des relations, des categorisations, des hierarchisations, des inegalites, des institutions et des assujettisements qui bien souvent la construisent egalement en retour sous diverses forms*[3] (Canut et al. 2018, 345).

In analyzing an official discourse pronounced by a politician from an extreme right party during the period of the COVID 19 pandemic, we will observe that, from his authoritative standpoint (Bourdieu, 1982), the speaker is using particular words or expressions for pointing at a group of people considered as "others"

[3] "Every linguistic activity is above all social in the sense that it cannot be dissociate from what it is said and done in front and around us and in the sense that it creates some positioning, configurations, relationships, categorizations, hierarchization, inequalities, institutions and subjectivation which often construct it in turn under different forms" (translation mine).

by the majority of the population. In doing that he is not only conveying some given for granted but also legitimating them and expressing his adherence to hegemonic ideologies. We will try to recognize in this proceeding the linguistic processes of generalization, essentialization, homogeization (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova, 2016) and the semiotic ones of indexicalization (Silverstein, 1992)[4], typification (Irvine and Gal, 2019) and enregisterment (Agha, 2005; 2006; 2007)[5] in order to see how it is possible to construct linguistically a *social persona* in the Bakhtian (1970) sense of the term[6]. We will have to remind that this construction is based not only on contemporary ideologies but also on social beliefs that, coming from past ideologies, are already there (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova, 2016). This analysis will help us at "investigating 'Roma' as a construction, asking for whom it is important, when, why and where, is a useful way to investigate claims and positions taken by public (politicised) discourses, moving the question from 'who is Roma'? To 'who defines who is Roma, why and what for?'" (Tremlett, 2009, quoted in Kóczé A., Messing V. and Tremlett A., 2017, 6). The issue will be thus to link the effects of the linguistic processes quoted above with social processes such as racialization (Van Baar, 2017; Mazouz, 2020) marginalization and ghettoization (Powell and Level, 2015) that can be seen both as practical consequences of public discourses or as social phenomena that need to be justified by them. Finally, we will ask ourselves how the circulation of these discourses affect individuals in their everyday life alimenting hate and social tensions between supposed "ethnic groups".

Part 1: Historical background:

Before analyzing some processes of enregistrement (Agha, 2005, 2006, 2007) concerning the so-called *Tsigani* or *Romi* in Bulgaria, it is important to understand the socio-historical events that brought about the emergence

[4] Defined as "the property of signs (no matter which one) to enter in contact with its context (Silverstein, 2003; 2006).

[5] Enregisterment is defined as a "process, namely a social regularity of recognition whereby linguistic (and accompanying nonlinguistic) signs come to be recognized as indexing pragmatic features of interpersonal role (persona) and relationship (Agha 2005, 57).

[6] "For Bakhtine (1981) a persona is an imagionary speaker who is supposed to speak and act in a specific way in an heterogloxique world made of differebt speakers. This personae, and social attributes that are associated to them, are indexed in a conventional way by social voices, meaning typified linguistic forms associated to some specific styles which are socially perceived as ditinguished from others opposite to them." (Telep 2019, 54).

of this figure. First of all, we have to remind that the Roma have been living in Bulgaria since the period of the Ottoman rule (XIV-XX century) when they occupied a liminal position (Piasere, 2015) in society. As a matter of fact, at that time the Roma, known under the name of *Çingené,* used to fill economic niches (Marushiakova and Popov, 2013) by doing jobs that not appealed to the rest of the population, such as horse-traders, musicians, blacksmiths and iron mongers. As the rest of the population, they were separated among those who converted to Islam and those who remain Christian, who had to pay the tax like any other "non-believers". Moreover, they were also separated among nomads (doing mainly trading activities) and settled. The latter used to live in specific *mahalle*[7], administrative units organized on the principle of ethnic separation of groups (similarly, there was for example the Armenian, the Jewish, the Greek neighborhoods and so on). With the beginning of the "National Revival" period (1762-1878), many Roma took part to the revolutionary movement and started to fight for a recognition of their rights as citizens. Moreover, in some urban centers such as Sliven a true new Roma working class started to take shape and to be employed in the local textile industry. However, it was during the socialist time (1948-1989) that, with the rapid urbanization of the country, the majority of the Roma settled in towns and abandoned their "nomadic way of life". It is also in this period that state authorities started to take specific measures towards this "section of the population" and that common representations and stereotypes regarding them were reinforced. As a matter of fact, during the first period of the regime (1948-1956) the Roma were regarded by state authorities as a nationality (*nationalnost*) with a specific language and traditions which needed to be preserved and in the second period (1956-1989) as an "indistinguishable part of the Bulgarian population" (Todor Zhivko quoted in Marushiakova and Popov, 2004) that needed to be "civilized" by means of drastic measures such as forced sedentarization, changing of Turkish names[8] into Bulgarians one and prohibition from speaking their "mother tongue" in public.

After 1989, the fall of socialism and the "transition" from state economy to a free market economy meant that social differences and inequalities reappeared again or – more precisely – became more visible. As Sabkova (2014) observed "former communist[...] redistributed the country's economic resources for their

[7] Turkish word meaning literally "neighborhood" but today often used for pointing more specifically to the Roma neighborhoods.

[8] Many Roma during the Ottoman Empire adopted, together with Islam religion, Muslim traditions and names.

own private gain, causing the social ghettoisation of a significance segment of the population" (ibid., 96). As a matter of fact, the closure of state factories and agricultural cooperatives left low skilled workers and farmers (most of Roma origin) who were working there unemployed and without realistic opportunities in a competitive labor market requiring qualifications and specialization. They were thus obliged to find other sources of income such as the informal economy, social benefits and migration, especially to Western European countries.

It is exactly at this moment that the discourse on "Gypsies" and "Gypsiness" started to circulate and their "inscription [...] in the new capitalistic rhetoric according to which human beings are valued for their profitability and productivity" (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova, 2016, 179, translation mine) allowed general attitudes towards them to change from indifference to resentment. This discourse inscribe itself in the "ethnicisation – or racialization – of poverty" (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova, 2016; Van Baar, 2017), a process through which social phenomena, such as poverty and marginalization, are explained through the lent of a supposed "race" or "ethnicity". In many Bulgarian towns all those who remained (or returned) living in the downtown neighborhoods where previously factory workers of supposed different "ethnic origin" such as Roma, Turkish and Bulgarians, etc. lived together were directly labeled as *Tsigani* and the places where they lived as *Tsiganski geta* ("Gypsy ghettos"). This appellation is often contested and avoided by the inhabitants who continue to speak about their neighborhood as *mahala* or *kvartala* and who, in some cases, do not to identify themselves as *Tsigani* choosing a «preferred identity" (Marushiakova-Popov, 2006) which is considered less offensive. This is the case of many inhabitants of Stolipinovo, a neighborhood on the outskirt of Plovdiv which has become famous as "the largest ghetto in Europe" (Peseckas & Kuntz, 2009). If the neighborhood represented "a vivid example of a social engineering project during the socialist regime in the Socialist Republic of Bulgaria" (Panchev 2020, 4) where Roma, Turks and Bulgarians working in the state factories nearby, were living together according to the principle of *komşuluk*[9], in 1990 with the beginning of the *demokratsiya* (litt. democrary), it was subjected to a gradual removal and relocations of many of the inhabitants (ibid., 4), mainly of the so-called "ethnic" Bulgarians. Those who stayed where mainly Turkish and Roma families that found themselves in such a poverty that they couldn't afford to move somewhere else.

[9] Turkish word meaning "good neighborhood".

By taking into account the social transformations that happened after the fall of socialism, many local sociologists and anthropologists (Ilieva & co, 2019; Panchev, 2020; Pamporov, 2023; Venkov, 2022) have pointed out that Stoilipinovo as well as many other neighborhoods – such as Nadezhda in Sliven, Karmen in Kazanlak, Rayna Knyaginya in Yambol, Fakulteta and Filipovtsi in Sofia – are not exactly "ghettos" in the sense of Wacquant[10] because the social exclusion of their inhabitants is not due to their supposed "ethnicity" but rather to to their social position, profession and income. It is not because they are considered as *Tsigani* that they leave there but rather it is because they leave there that, according to the process that in the socio-linguistic and semiotic analysis is called indexicality (Silverstein, 1998; 2003; 2006), they are automatically labeled as *Tsigani*. It would thus be better to describe these neighborhoods as "ghettoized urban structures characterized by deteriorated housing, poor technical and social infrastructure, poor public transport access, chaotic planning of housing units and so forth" (Ilieva & co, 2019, 120) and to use the concept of ghetto as a "cultural and cognitive constellation (values, mindset or mentality)" (Wacquant, 2012) that explain the dynamic process through which stigmatization and social exclusion of their inhabitants is taking shape. For example, if we take again into account the situation in Stolipinovo, we have to observe that "it is not a ghetto and not at all Roma" (Pamporov, 2019, personal conversation). Its inhabitants, a great number of whom in the last years have adopted Islam – even if not always the "orthodox" version (see Pamporov, 2006) – speak Turkish and call themselves Turks, are not at all belonging to an homogeneous group but rather marked and perceived as that from the outside. Not considering the point of view of individual subjects, there but simply relying in the homogenizing and stereotyping images given by the media, the Bulgarian of non Roma origin would say that those living in Stolipinovo are not *istinksi Turtsi* (i.e. "real Turkish") but they are simply "passing" (Goffmann, 1973) as that and will continue to label this neighborhood as *Tsigansko geto*. The complexity and heterogeneity of a social space which is physically organized in different areas and where the inhabitants use different names and languages for presenting themselves to strangers – sometime also switching to one from the other according to the person their interacting with – is thus totally erased

[10] The author conceived the "ghetto" as an "ethnically homogeneous enclave that contains all the members of a subordinate category and their institutions and prevents them from fanning into the city" (Wacquant, 2008, 114).

(Irvine and Gal, 2019) and individuals voices silenced in order to give sense to a unifying representation and comforting socially established beliefs and expectancies.

Part 2: The sensationalization of the *Tsiganski geta:*

Media play a big role in this process. As a matter of fact, in the last twenty years the "Gypsy question" has become a mainstream subject in the medias and in the political campaign of extreme right parties all around Europe. In Bulgaria, the supposed 'problem' of the presence of the Roma has become a focus of the media especially since extreme right coalition such as *Ataka* (litt. Attack)[11], have obtained access to the legislative elections (see Canut, Getchev and Nikolova, 2016). Since then journalistic reports are more and more frequently showing pictures and videos where the so-called "Gypsy neighborhoods" are "invaded" by garbage but the inhabitants seems not to care. Other reports show how in these neighborhoods "children are giving birth to children" (Dikoff, 29.03.2015)[12], other focus on the lack of infrastructures, hygiene and presence of criminality. In these kind of reports, rather than investigating the structural reasons of the critical situation in which the inhabitants live[13], the journalists blame – directly

11 "A coalition [..] formed by four political organization: the national- patriotic party (*Balgarksa natsionalno-patriotichna partiya*) of Petar Manolov, the national Mouvement national for the Salvation of the Fatherland (*Natsionalno dvizhenie za spasenie na otchestvoto*) guided by Ilija Petrov – two microscopic formations- the political Circle *Zora* [Dawn] guided by Mincho Minchev and the Union of the patriotic and military reserved forces *Zaštita* [Defebd] guided by general Jordan Velichkov. After an internal agreement enregistered on 11 may 2005, only one month and a half after the electoral consultation, Volen Siderov has been authorized to represent the coalition. (Ragaru 2006, 10, translation mine).

12 For a deep socio-linguistic analysis of it see Canut, Getchev and Nikolova (2015).

13 For a detailed account of the issue in Stolipinovo see Venkov (2022) available at Столипиново: боклук, медии, власти и расиализация – Seminar_BG (seminar-bg.eu). Here is a quotation from it regarding the process of enregistrement (Agha, 2007) and racialization: "A British social geographer shows that the racialization of given human groups does not depend on skin color, but on a diverse set of characteristics that cling to these groups to separate them from the majority's unnoticed and "correct" default bodies – mostly through the perception of bodies that are undisciplined and threatening (Swanton, 2008, 2010). The assemblage (set, combination) of characteristics is never precisely defined and changes over time, and the color of the skin can occupy a significant place in it, but not necessarily. Let us remember that there are enough "Bulgarians" (i.e. members of the majority) with dark skin, but only in rare cases this puts them under suspicion that they are from the racialized minority. Often the combination of some other characteristics produces the notion of "dark" subjects – [..] If race is not a clearly identifiable biological category but a cultural construct, then racialization is the unceasing work of constructing and keeping it up to date" (ibid., translation mine).

or not – the inhabitants, whose perspective is not taken into account and whose individual voices are totally silenced (Canut, 2016). Let's now look more closely at these reportages by analyzing how and when they are showed in the main Bulgarian TV channels. A report founded by INTEGRO association and the Open Society Institute in Budapest[14], has analyzed the frequency and modalities of Roma representation in the media by analyzing reportages from the national television BNT (*Balgarska natsionalna televisiya*), private televisions such as BTV (*Balgarska televisiya*), NOVA TV and TV 7 and far right parties private channels such as SKAT and ALFA TV. The report has showed up that these two latter channels usually report facts when the Roma – as well as immigrants from Syria, Afghanistan and other Middle Eastern countries – are identified as perpetrators of crimes and violence, BTV and NOVA TV have the tendency to report facts that make the Roma appear as ridiculous, ingenuous and stupid and only BNT seems to be respecting the journalistic ethic of not mentioning the ethnic origin of the people concerned in its reports. A similar picture appears if we look at the main Bulgarian newspapers. Here, as noted by Tomova (2006), the majority of articles concerning the Roma use an ironic register (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova, 2016) to make fun of them or they use of pejorative adjectives to attribute blame on them. Moreover, in their titles, they evoke sensational facts and deeds, a technique which, giving a subjective point of view of the situation (Van Dijk, 1996; 2006 quoted in Tomova, 2006) is used to capture the attention and interest of potential readers.

As noted by many scholars (Tomova, 2006; Pamporov, 2012; Canut, Getchev and Nikolova 2016) from these reports and discourses it is possible to identify a sample of archetypes of "Gypsiness" which reflect the representations and projections that most of the Bulgarians of non-Roma origin share: the so-called *Tsigani* are seen as *mrazni* (litt. dirties), they are supposed to live in overpopulated neighborhoods because they have chosen to isolate themselves from the rest of the society, they are seen as *kradtsi* (litt. thieves) and *prestapnitsi* (litt. criminals) involved in illegal activities such as human or drug trafficking and prostitution, they are described as *ne kulturni* (litt. illiterates) because they not want to send their children to school or, if they do it, it is only to obtain social benefits. All these stereotypes are the result of a reiteration of discourses that originated after the socio-economic changes in 1990 and that,

[14] See the article "*Roma ot televizora*" Deutsche Welle 10-04-2005 as well as a synthesis of it in Canut, Getchev and Nikolova (2016).

in so far as they are constantly evoked by speakers, are still actual today. As a result, we can observe that in Bulgaria:

> The category of Rom/Ciganin [..] is the name that links together a set of indexical stereotypes (naturalized as essences) and purports to denote a particular referent: a community, an ethnicity, and the individuals who, by being so labeled, are said to belong to it (Canut 2019, 401).

Here, we will focus our attention on one of these characteristics, that of "dirtiness". As noted by Venkov (2022) one of the main narratives in Bulgaria concerning the Roma is that they are *po mrazni* (litt. more dirty) because they collect garbage in order to make a living and finally they "get used" living surrounded by it. In this regard, we could observe that portraying the dirtiness of one person or community as something ''naturally'' belonging to their "culture", is a working strategy for justifying their physical and social exclusion and for hiding the structural reasons and political interests which lie underneath. The inhabitants of these neighborhoods are thus automatically ascribed to the very lowest level of the social scale: not only they are not socially recognized as "full citizens" (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova 2016) of the Bulgarian nation but also as not or "sub human". It is very common to see words such as *boklutsi* (litt. "garbage") in online comments (we will see some examples of that in the following pages) where non-Roma complain about Roma as if they are what is thrown aside by society such as people throw aside their garbage. Here speakers are enacting a process of deshumanization (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova 2016) of the individuals they are speaking about and towards whom they are directing their hanger and resentment. Again, it is an effect of the application of pre-existing category and hierarchies according to which Roma are the last grade of the social scale or even out of it. These processes could become a tool for political campaign aiming at hiding the structural causes of social existing inequalities by fueling hate and social tensions among the supposed "groups" and by pointing at some of them in particular as responsible for a situation of crisis. As a matter of fact, Roma in Bulgaria are the focus of public discourses pronounced by politicians from extreme right parties such as *Ataka*, the "National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria" and VMNRO[15] whose rhetoric

[15] *VMNRO (Bulgarian National Mouvement*) is a nationalist and conservative party founded by Krasimir Karakachianov and led by Angel Dzhambaski, Aleksandar Sidi and Iskrev Veselinov. Relying

is focused on the opposition between "true" and "false" Bulgarians (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova 2016), between defenders of the country and the "internal strangers" that threaten its security from the inside. It is especially during electoral campaigns that far right parties rely on the narrative that "the drunken swarthy offenders live in illegal ghettos houses and do not pay their utility bills. They live in large family clans that fight each other depending on the interest of big bosses" (Pamporov, 2012 cit. in Balcik et al. 2013). The aim of these discourses is to put blame on the supposed "false" Bulgarians and thus satisfy the expectations of their electorate. Moreover, from march 2020 when quarantine measures were adopted, the supposed "ghettos" where pointed as true "*nest of contagion"*[16] (Kirilova et al., 2022). Official declarations of such a type lead the municipalities of many town to adopt special measures in the so-called "Gypsy neighborhoods": checkpoints have been installed at the entrance in order to control the movements of the inhabitants in *Nadezhda* neighborhood in Sliven, the town of Yambol has been totally quarantined and *Carmen,* its "Gypsy neighborhood", has been disinfected with helicopters "as if insects live inside" (Kirilova et al. 2022, 80), in Sofia the neighborhoods of Filipovtsi and Fakulteta have been pointed by the members of the national crisis unit as those with the biggest number of infected (report ERRC, 2020). Moreover, the unwillingness and skepticism of the majority of the Roma population (as well as of the whole Bulgarian population) towards the vaccination[17] has improved the risk of contagion[18]. Thus appealing to "urgent measures" the discourses of some politicians have been using a commonly shared imaginary concerning the *Tsigani*- that they are *mrazni* (litt. dirties) and lack of sense of hygiene – as well as the tension provoked by the spreading of the virus[19] for justifying

on patriotism, they claim to be directly connected with the Revolutionary Macedonian Organization which had led to Bulgarian Independence from the Ottoman Empire at the end of the XIX century. His members also express a strong antigypsism claiming for a "solution to the problem of unsocialized Gypsies groups" as well as critical attitudes towards Bulgarians Turks and Islam religion. For further information see VMRO – Bulgarian National Movement – Wikipedia; National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria – Wikipedia Attack (political party) – Wikipedia

16 Джамбазки от ВМРО: Затворете гетата навсякъде (24chasa.bg)

17 Циганите у нас масово се страхуват да се ваксинират срещу COVID-19 – Новини от Fakti.bg – България | ФАКТИ.БГ

18 In their report members of SEGA foundation note that this idea – such as that of the dangerous consequences of vaccination (rumors said that their endanger fertility and were thus designed to eliminate the Roma population) has been spread mainly among evangelical Roma (Sechkova R., Todorova L.Y., Sechkov R., Vatembergska L.; Georgiev E. ; Kirilov N. 2022, 84).

19 "Accumulated negative stereotypes about the Roma are used combined with the fear of the virus

discriminatory actions that are expression of a true form of institutional racism. We will now look at an example of this type of discourse and analyzing – using the sociolinguistic approach (Heller 2012; Canut et al. 2018) its sociological consequences.

Part 3: Institutional voices and their effects:

In this section we are going to see how language in use (Heller, 2012) can tell us something about existing social inequalities and power relations (Canut et al. 2018). We will analyze an official discourse by a politician during the beginning of the pandemic who – from his authoritative standpoint (Bourdieu, 1982) – is legitimizing and justifying social exclusion. We will then report some commentaries we selected from social networks in order to see how individuals belonging to the so-called 'ethnic majority' adhere to the ideology conveyed in this discourse and appropriate its words in order to justify their racist attitudes. Finally, we will see how the individuals concerned – both individually or collectively organized – react to their isolation and stigmatization. This applies particularly to the inhabitants of those neighborhoods who are known as *Tsiganski geta* which are portrayed by the media as covered by waste and thus, during the pandemic, have been targeted as critical place that need to be isolated and controlled. Here is the official discourse reported on the newspaper *24chasa*: "Dzhambaski of VMNRO[20]:Close the ghettos everywhere[21]"

> One thing is not clear in the otherwise correct state conduct of the Headquarters and of the Government – the souls of the couple who died from COVID 19 in Pirogov have become the victims of the **virus of the Gypsies' emptiness** in a **ghettoised part** of Bulgaria. Peace for the souls of the buried![22]

and the fabricated lies, circulated in the media and social networks that in isolated neighborhoods almost everyone is affected with Covid" (Kirilova et al, 2022, 80)

20 A. Dzhambaski is the vice-chairman of the Bulgarian right wing party VMNRO (see note 5) and representative of Bulgaria at the European Parliament.

21 Dzhambaski ot VMNRO *Zatvorete getata na vsiyakade* (*https://www.24chasa.bg/novini/article/8320602*)

22 "Edno neshto ne stana yasno ot inache napalno darzhavnichevshkoto povedenie na Shtaba i na pravitelsvoto- pochinalite dvama dushi ot COVID 19 saprughi v Pirogov sa stanali zhertva na virusa na tsigansko praznensvo v edna getoizirana chast na Balgariya. Pokoi za dushite na pochinalite!".

The speech opens with a declaration of intention: using a typical modality of rhetorical discourse, the speakers says that something is not clear in the behavior of state authorities which have not investigated the death of two persons affected by COVID-19 in Pirogov, one of the hospitals in Sofia where special COVID-19 zones were created. In his statement he suggests that the fact has happened because of the ignorance of the Roma living there, especially in the so-called "ghettos". By using the word *zhertva* (line 2) the speaker is here presenting the two persons as victims and the so-called *Tsigani* as responsible for their deaths because of their "emptiness". We have to note here that at the beginning of the pandemic Bulgarian Roma, especially those living in marginalized urban areas, have been accused in public discourses of not observing quarantine and testing measures and of being responsible for the spread of the virus. The speaker is thus evoking already circulating discourses and reinforcing an opposition which is deeply rooted in common opinion and reproduced by the media. Moreover, by linking the word virus to the adjective ''Gypsy" he is dehumanizing the Roma to the level of subhuman and sub-animal, making reference to circulating discourses that depict them as "parasites". After reporting the opening of the speech and before introducing the second part, the journalist legitimates the source from which the discourse comes by underlining the official qualifications of the speaker :

> Here is what declares from his position Angel Dzhambaski- Bulgarian representative at the European Parliament and vice-president of VMNRO. Here what he says again: "No blame on Shtaba, no blame the doctors! For these there is no **ethnicity** and **color of the skin**. That is how it should be. But think if ghettos won't show up like the real nests of infection. Hundreds of people are living **there** in poor, weak knots, without the possibility of meeting basic hygiene standards, how do you call them, against the pandemic. A not small **part of the Bulgarians** who have come back from Italy and Spain live exactly there"[23].

[23] Tova zavaiyava ot svoiya pozitsiya Angel Dzhambaski- balgarski predstavitel v Evropeiskiya Parlament I zamestnik predstedatel na VMNRO. Eto kakvo zavaiyava oshte toi. «Ne viniya Shtaba, ne viniya lekarite! Za tiyah niyama etnos i tsviyat na kozhata. Taka i triyadva da bade. Obache zamizlite se dali getata niyama da se okazhat istinskite gnezda na zarasa. Tam zhiveiyat stotitsi hora v loshi vitovi uzloviya bez vashmozhnost da spasvat dori elementarni higienni normi, kamo li zavisheniete predvid pandemiata. Ne malka chast ot pribralite se pozledniti sedmitsi ot Italiya i Ispaniya Balgari zhiveiyat imenno tam".

Now the speaker says that the responsible are not state representatives or doctors because they should not distinguish people on the basis of their skin color or ethnicity. However, he warns the public by presenting the hypothetical (but actually felt as very close to reality) situation in which the so-called "ghettos" become "the real nest of infection" (line 4). He directly points at these neighborhoods as well as theirs inhabitants – which are commonly enregistered (Agha, 2007) by means of semiotic signs such as skin color – by making use of the deictic "there" (line 4) and of the expression "part of the Bulgarians" (line 6) which is rather ambiguous. In these statements, the speaker use the rhetorical strategy of negating what has previously been said by means of language tools (such as the "but" at the beginning of the phrase) that totally invert the sense of the discourse. This strategy – also employed in the common affirmation "I am not a racist but..." – has been defined by some scholars (Stollznow, 2020) as microagression (ibid.). The speaker is openly saying that he refuses to categorize Roma people according to their ethnicity or skin color but he is actually doing it by substituting the biological criteria (skin color) of distinction with a sociological one (the place where they live). The phenomenon of "ethnicization/racialization of poverty" (Canut, 2016; Van Baar, 2017) is thus happening when a variety of characteristic that are considered "essential" to some populations are used by speakers in order to explain their marginalization. The speaker goes on:

> I give you one more example – today the only one of the new cases is closed under quarantine with, as they say **delicately** in the media, "two of their friends from the **Roma community**". He has inadvertently come back from the *gurbet*[24] in England on that day and has been incessantly circulating around the city. In Burgas others returned *gastarbaiteri*[25] have stormed the hospital in order to be tested. In Sliven too the municipality has introduced a **system of controlled access** for the Gypsy ghetto[26].

[24] Turkish word used also in Bulgaria meaning litt. "foreign lands" and referring to the activity of working abroad.

[25] German word meaning literally "guest workers".

[26] "Davam vi oshte edin primer- dnez ediniyat ot novite sluchai e zatvoren pod karantina s, kakto pishat delikatno v medite, "dvama svoi priyateli ot romska proishod". Varnal se e inache onsi den ot gurbet v Angliya i nehaino obikolil grada. "V Burgas drughi pribrali se gastarbaiteri sa shurmuvali mestnata bolnitsa, za da badat testvani. V Sliven pak obshtinata e vavela propuskatelen rezhim sa tsigansko geto".

The speaker here provides an example in order to explain and reinforce his previous declaration : a man came back from a trip abroad and he is now in quarantine. He is also saying with irony that the media use the term "Roma" instead of the more commonly used *Tsigani*. Moreover, common words such as *gurbet* and *gastarbeiteri* make his discourse more familiar to his public. These terms are in fact used in everyday language to indicate the seasonal migration of workers to Western European countries in search of better job conditions, many of these workers are persons of Turkish and Roma origin and are those who are assumed to live in the so-called "ghettos". Here, such as in the neighborhood of Nadezhda in Sliven, the municipality has already taken action by introducing a system of controlled access. The speaker then continue with this statement:

> The situation is not underestimated and we from VMRO years before spoke about the **marginalized mass** who live in these places. Today the threat is no longer only "on picture". It is clear. For this reason we wanted the all **conception** but even today it is still collecting dust in the office of the administration.[27]

The author is here assuming not only his personal point of view but also that of his party of which he is one of the main representatives. He reminds the public that VMNRO had already targeted the "marginalized mass" (note here the use of the term "mass" which fully de-individualizes and de-humanizes the individuals concerned) living in the so-called "ghettos" by proposing the ''Conception for changing the integration policies of the Gypsy (Roma) ethnicity in the Republic of Bulgaria and measures for its realization'' with the aim of dealing more effectively with the so-called ''Gypsy question' in Bulgaria''[28]. The solutions proposed included implementing "voluntary" work among the Roma, introducing measures for their "socialization" and "alphabetization" as well as a system of birth control to "prevent unwanted pregnancies and reducing fertility tax among children, by giving particular attention to individuals of the Gypsy community". We can notice here a process of intertextuality (Baumann

[27] "Situatsiata ne e podtseniyavane i nie ot VMRO godini nared govorim za marginalizirane masi koito zhiveiyat po tezi mesta. Dnez zaplahata veche ne e prosto „na kartinka". Tiya e yavna. Za tova iskame i tsiyalota kontseptsiya no tiya taka i do dnez sabira prah v biurota na administratsiyata".

[28] For a precise analysis of this text (as well as a translation in French) see Canut and Getchev (2019) available at TRAVAIL FORCÉ ET CONTRÔLE DES NAISSANCES DANS LA CONCEPTION DU PIRE ? PERSPECTIVES DE RÉPRESSION POLITIQUE DES ROMS EN BULGARIE. | SOCIOLINGUISTIQUE POLITIQUE (hypotheses.org)

& Briggs, 1990; 1992) insofar as one text refers to another by a system of direct or indirect quotations. The speaker continues as follows:

> Yes, it is normal in these moments not to separate people according to their ethnicity and place of residence. Nor to pit one **part of the Bulgarian citizens** against the other. And you will not hear me speak this way. But I would like to remind you that it is matter of this **part of the population** about whom we from VMNRO warned years ago that hardly get used to assume any responsibilities. For this reason a special attention and restrictions are needed. Many mayors have started to adopt a control system in the ghettos by dividing them into "sections". Such an idea was born in the neighborhood of "Istochen" in Plovdiv and it is now time for it to become an "official measure" in the country.[29]

Again, the speaker declares his refusal of making use of racial/ethnic criteria of differentiation by reassuring his audience that he will not speak in these terms. However, the "but" (line 2) as the beginning of a new statement has the same effect of before: he is negating what he has just said by showing first what he is now using as criteria of differentiation: the ''ethnicity" and "living place". Thus, he is doing exactly the opposite of what he is declaring. Even the expression "part of the Bulgarian citizens'' (line 2) is highly ambiguous: from one hand, he recognize the Roma as Bulgarians but, on the other, he is separating them as a ''part'' that needs special attention and has to be regulated through special measures. He then shows us the pragmatic effects of speeches which, like his own, call for "closing the ghettos everywhere" : in the "Istochen" district in Plovdiv, the mayor has introduced a system of control at the entrance to the neighborhood and divided it into zones. He has thus put into practice the ideology conveyed in the discourse: dividing people according to arbitrary criteria of differentiation in order to better control them. It is now the turn of the journalist who close his article by reminding us of the titles of the speaker in order to stress the authoritative character of his declaration:

[29] „Da normalno e v takiva momenti da ne delim horata po etnos i mestozhiveene. Nito da nastroivame edna chast ot balgarskite grazhdani srezhdu druga. I nyama da me chuete da govoriya po tazi posoka. No iskam da zapomniya che tuka stava vaproz za onasi chast ot naselenieto za koyato nie ot VMNRO godini nared preduprezhdavame che na trudno svikva s otgovornostite. Zatova I tam tryadva spetsialno vnimanie I restriktsi. Mnogo kmentove zapochnaha da vavezhdat propuskatelen rezhim kam geta "na parche". Takava ideiya se zarodi v kvartal "Iztochen" v Plovdiv. Vreme e tova da stane ofitsialna miyarka na vsiyakade v stranata".

> That is why this vice president of VMNRO and representative of the organization of all Bulgarians at the European Parliament suggests the National Operational Headquarters introduce a **pass-system for the ghettos** as a national security measure. If the serious spread of the pandemic in a ski-resort is possible, imagine what would happen if the infection spread in the ghettos. And after Bansko is quarantined, what will stop the closure of the ghettos?[30]

Moreover, the journalist, not challenging at all the speaker, aims at proving that his declaration is verifiable by recalling an event that has just occurred (the quarantine measures adopted in the ski resort town of Bansko[31] because of the spreading of the infection) and then comparing that situation with a hypothetical similar one in the ghettoized neighborhoods. However, he invites us to make this comparison without any contextualization.

After this analysis, we should consider briefly how this discourse and similar ones have influenced public opinion of the majority of the "ethnic" Bulgarians. We will do so by reporting some online comments which appeared on social networks as well as on the free space left for commentaries on journals or blog websites. We have selected these comments by using the keyword *Tsigani* and then according to the date of publication :

> — Anonymous: "Nobody can stop the virus of gypiszation, it is too late!" (Fakti, 2020)[32]
> — Anonymous: "The small *Tsig@*nin is not like a person!"(Fakti, 27.06.2021)[33].
> — Bai Grozdan: "What can you expect from some people that live on very low municipal rents in the block number 20 in Yambol and they don't even pay these rents, and they directly take out the windows and they almost break them (DW 10.05.2020) they have brought a horse to the 4th floor".[34]

[30] Eto sashto tazi zamestnik-predsedatel na VMNRO i predstavitel na orgnizatsiyata i na vischki balgari v Evropeiskiya parlament predlagam na Nazionalniya operativen shtab da vavede propuskatelem rezhim za getoto kato natsionalna miyarka. Sled kato e vazhmozhno seriozno razprostranenie na zarazata v ski kurort , pomislite samo kakvo shte stane, ako plamne zaraza v edno geto. I zled kato e blokirano Bansko, kakvo spira blokadata na getata?

[31] For more information regarding this fact as well as for a sociological and anthropological lecture of the event see Maeva and Erolova (2023) "Bulgarian Roma and the Dawn of the Covid 19 Pandemic" available at: https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/12/4/208/pdf?version=1680519415

[32] *„Nikoi ne mozhe da spre viruza na tsiganizatsiyata, kazno e veche!*

[33] *„Tsig@nino ne e kato chovek!*

[34] Bai Grozdan: *„Kakvo mozhe da ochakvate ot razni individi koito ghi nastaniha na nishozhni*

— Anonymous: "Not a *mangal*[35] died of covid. It's a pity!"[36](Fakti 27.06.2021)
— Hitler: "The dirty Gypsies to hell, come to gas chambers, you garbage."[37](Fakti, 27.06.2021)
— Vaccinated= Sterile: "But these Gypsy haven't died in this terrible covid fever. Apparently, the three D are strictly observed in their ghettos and neighborhoods, hein? Disinfection, distance and discipline in all the ghettos : D This is the only way for the Gypsies to survive covid!"[38] (Fakti, 27.06.2021)

In these commentaries the speakers are openly expressing their Antigypsism (Wippermann, 2005; Knudsen, 2005, Nicolae, 2006, Piasere, 2010; 2011), some of them are also adhering to a hygienistic discourse according to which the Roma has to be eliminated, if necessary, by employing the Nazi-style gas chambers. These statements show their adherence to a racist ideology which in the past has led to the extermination of population because of their supposed "ethnicity" by appropriating discourses circulating both in the past and in the present in which the Roma are totally de-humanized. The speakers in fact motivated their hate towards the Roma by referring to the stereotypical images in which they are all portrayed in the same way: living in overpopulated neighborhoods, not paying rents, not observing hygienic norms, etc. As we have seen, these stereotypes have been reemployed during the pandemic in order to better justify the specific measures which have been implemented in the so-called "Gypsy/Roma ghettos".

We will now look at the reactions of some of the individuals concerned by these discourses and who experience discrimination, stereotyping and exclusion in their daily lives. Some of the inhabitants of the so-called "ghettos" denounce quite overtly institutional and environmental racism (Dunajeva and Kostka 2022) blaming the municipality for the large amount of waste in their neighborhood and argue that they are totally left aside by institutions or rather

obshtinski naemi v blok 20 v Yambol, a te dori i tezi naemi ne plashtaha, a napravo izkartiha dogramata i pochti gho razryshiha https://webnews.bg/uploads/images/14/4214/104214/orig.jpg?_=1446798402 – kato na 4tya etazh dazhe byaha kachili kon! (DW 10.05.2020).

35 Litt. "coal stoves" highly offensive term used to point at the Roma by referring to the darkness of their skin.

36 XX: *"Niyama umriyal ot kovid m.ngal. Zhalko!"*

37 Hitler: „*Eghati strahlivite tsigani, aide v gazovata kamera izmekyari"*

38 Vaksiniran=Sterilen „*Ama ne izmryaha tiya tsigani ot tozi strashen kovidogrip. Yanvno b getata I mahalite im se spazvat striktno trite D, a? Desinfektsyia, Distantsiya et Discipline vav vsiyako geto : D Samo taka tsiganite otseliyavat ot koronkata!*

treated as scapegoats during times of crisis (such as that of the pandemic) and during the elections. This is what happened for example in the neighborhood of Stolipinovo in Plovdiv where the inhabitants have tried to organize themselves in the community for collecting garbage and also created an online space for discussion on Facebook. We will present here some comments that appeared on the Facebook page "*zhitelite na Stolipinovo*"[39] (litt. "residents of Stolipinovo") as well as a video – to which a reference is made on the page itself- where Dzhambaski launched bombs against protesters who had gathered in front of the VMNRO office in Sofia. We will also report two comments from the online blog *Filibilier.com*[40] as a response to Dzhambaski's reaction, in one of them his picture appear with this caption:

> underestimated "Racist" Dzhambaski into a s***er.[41]

Firstly, we have to say that the link to the comment- itself a reaction to the video[42]- has been blocked and it is thus unavailable. Most probably because of the very direct language used in the title. However, similar, but less direct comments, are available on the blog such as the one that follows:

> The racist statements of the fictional nationalist, racist and alcoholic who was caught driving drunk a few months ago are untouchables in Bulgaria. The prosecution and the authorities pretend not to hear, not to see. It is not right, it is not fair and it is not democratic for ordinary citizens to be sought out and threatened by the police for posts and comments on Facebook, and for the political elite to be free to express unconstitutional opinions.[43]

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[39] Сдружение Жители на Столипиново | Plovdiv | Facebook

[40] Filibeliler | Филибелии – Гласът на Столипиново – Filibeliler.com

[41] *" Nedosegaemiyat 'Rasist' Dzhambaski pat v izdanka"*

[42] https://filibeliler.com/2020/11/20/dzhambaski/fbclid=IwAR2JOZxDEsTM3F_Hxvd3nODotemEYF5-Jd0tHJOEbFVjnhc8L_kb25pd4xc

[43] *rasistkite izkazvaniya na ismislenia natsionalist, rasist i alkocholic, koito be khvanat da shofira piyan predi nyakolko mesetsa a nedosegaem v Balgariya. Procurature i vlastite se praviyat che ne chuvat, ne vizhdat, ne e redno, ne e spravedlivo ni demokratichno obiknovenite grazhdani da badat tarseni i zaplazvani ot politsiyata za postove i komentari vav Facebook a za politicheskiyat elite da e svonodno da izraziyavat protivoconstitutionni mneniya"* ЗАЩО ЛИПСВА СЛУЧАЙ НА ЗАРАЗА В ТУРСКО-РОМСКИЯ ПЛОВДИВСКИ КВАРТАЛ СТОЛИПИНОВО? – Filibeliler | Филибелии . The title of the article is also emblematic: why there are no cases of epidemic in the Turkish-Roma neighborhood of Stolipinovo?" However, the author doesn't give an answer to the question.

The author here openly denounces the statements made by the politician and attacks him personally by saying firstly that he is a fake nationalist and secondly by reporting the fact that one time he was driving his car after having made use of alcohol but was not punished by the law. With this example he lament the corruption of the Bulgarian government who do not punish politicians (portrayed as an "elite") even when they make "anti-constitutional" statements. In contrast, ordinary people are punished for much less such as their comments and posts on Facebook. He refers to a discourse about the use offensive language in the media and social networks which is now frequently discussed in the juridicial and sociological sphere. The video of the "bomb attack" made such a strong impression that a polemic started among the residents of Stolipinovo. Here is another comment:

> The European deputy explained today that the throwing of bombs from the VMRO building was to prevent an attack and invasion of the building, where it is generally forbidden to gather during the pandemic as the people there could also hold their meetings online, via video conferencing. Also, the people gathered in the building were not wearing masks, which also creates a risk of spreading the Chinese virus. The excuse for throwing explosive and incendiary substances through the window is so ridiculous, as well as punishable (not in Bulgaria for politicians), that he was defending himself, that I wonder if he were to enter the building tomorrow, would he also use nuclear bombs against the protesters?[44]

The author of the comment is drawing our attention to the fact that the members of VMNRO party had gathered without observing the Covid-19 restrictive measures which did not allow any form of gathering. Moreover, they were not wearing masks. He then moves from a critical to an ironic tone by saying that the use of explosive substances was ridiculous and motivated by the author as a defense and he asks himself if he would use it again if necessary. Looking at these comments,

44 *"evrodeputatceto seh opravdava dnes, che khvarlyaneto na bombi ot sgradata na vmro ae bilo sas tzel da predotvrati napadenie yi nakhluvane v zgradata, kadeto printsipno e zabraneno da se sabirat po vreme na pandemiata, tye kato litsata tam, biha moglah da provedat zreshchite si i online, prez video konferentsya vrazka. sashto taka, litsata sabraleni sa v zgradata togava sa bili bez maski koeto sashto sazdava risk za rasprostranenie na kitayskya virus. opravdanieto za mataneto prez prozoretsa na izbukhlivi i zapalitelny veshchestva a tolkova smezhno, kakto yi nacazuemo(na i v Balgariya za polititsya, che seh a samootbranaval, che seh chudya, dali, ako utre seh vleze vieu sgradata, nyama da izpolzwa yi yadreni bombi sreschu protestirashchite?" Филибелии Джамбазки с ядрено оръжие срещу протестиращи – Filibeliler* |

we have to say however that the strategy adopted here by the authors is very similar to the strategy used by the person they are attacking (a politician from a right wing party): a personal attack (by making reference to some events which are not related to the fact described), a moralist tone (by mentioning the fact that politicians are not punished correctly by the law) and irony (by making fun of him with rhetorical questions). It is thus furthering tension and transmitting to the Roma population the same sense of hate, dissatisfaction and frustration which is felt by the non Roma along with a general mistrust for the institutions.

Conclusion

By using the tools given by the socio linguistic (Heller, 2002; Canut and others, 2018) approach we have tried to examine how the use of the category Roma/Gypsies in official discourses serves as a tool to justify discriminatory measures during a critical event (Daas, 2005) such as that of the pandemic. As a matter of fact, the voices of some politicians expressing the urgency to "close the ghettos everywhere" (Dzambashki, 18.03.20202) have had the power of legitimizing the "extraordinary" measures taken during the pandemic which have led to the closure of the Roma neighborhoods in many Bulgarians towns, the intensification of police control and the introduction of a pass-system which regulated the access and exit of the inhabitants (permitted only for extraordinary needs). These measures have reinforced the already existing borders between the majority of the Bulgarian population and the so- called *Tsigani,* living in the *Tsiganski geta*. We have tried to argue that the mechanisms through which these persons are identified are the result of semiotic and linguistic processes – such as that of categorization (Canut, Getchev and Nikolova, 2016) and enregistrement (Agha, 2005) through which an individual is ascribed to a given category. This is done by selecting some characteristics (physical or otherwise) which are considered essential signs of their belonging to that category. Most of the time, however, these signs are selected without taking into account others signs who are not corresponding to a socially shared image of this supposed "essence" but rather contradict it and thus are simply put aside and erased (Irvine and Gal, 2019). By analyzing the discourse of a representative of one of the main far-right parties in Bulgaria, we have tried to show how the reference to some taken for granted regarding the idea of 'Gypsiness' has allowed the speakers (the politician and the journalist) to justify in the public arena not only the "extraordinary" character of the measures adopted to stop the virus from spreading but also

their asymmetric application. An important role here is played by the social position of the speaker (which is stressed two times by the journalist) because his voice, that of a member of a far right party and representative of Bulgaria at the European Parliament, is recognized as authoritative source (Bourdieu, 1982) by the majority of his public and this allows the discourse to become credible and trustworthy from their point of view. Moreover, he makes reference, by means of the intertextuality (Bauman & Briggs, 1990; 1992), to the text of a law that his party had previously proposed to the government. This mechanism allow his own voice to become even more trustful and respectable. As a result, many individuals who have listened or read this discourse justify the position of the speaker and strongly declare their hostility towards the so-called Roma/Gyspy. It is clear that institutional racism, even if not directly expressed, is at work here and that the concept of race, even if not openly expressed, is used as a "discursive category" (Lemon, 2002) which allow individuals to separate "us" from the "others" on the basis of some criteria which are taken for granted and which are used not only in everyday social interactions but also during a critical and "exceptional" moment such as the beginning of the pandemic. As a matter of fact, this category has been employed – directly or indirectly – for justify the implementation of "special measures" aiming at regulating and controlling the flux of people into the so-called "Gypsy neighborhoods. However, by listening to the voices of the individuals concerned, we have seen that they openly denounce the situation of isolation by the State and the discrimination they are facing everyday in social relations and interactions. They are fully aware of the fact that racism is one cause of the situation and that the utterly inefficient State authorities are not contrasting but rather legitimizing it. They are also becoming aware of the fact that words, even if not always openly offensive, can hurt (Butler, 1997) and that they have social consequences in reinforcing already existing borders.

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ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITY IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC

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Abstract: ***This work focuses on how members of the researched community – which practices alternative spirituality – live and think, for example in the field of health. The research was conducted in the Tatra Mountains in Liptov in central Slovakia. Qualitative data were obtained from the community, which is closely connected to this environment. The research sample consisted of 10 people (5 men and 5 women) who are part of the community.***

Most informants prefer alternative forms of medicine, such as Ayurveda, and rather reject the prevailing biomedical health system associated with the pharmaceutical industry. This inclination was also manifested during the COVID-19 pandemic, when most of them refused to be vaccinated and preferred instead to build their immunity through overcoming the given disease. They rarely, if ever, visit doctors. When they get sick, in most cases, they look for a deeper, spiritual cause and meaning of their health problems. They prefer natural nutritional supplements, herbs, and other forms of prevention.

The main goal of this research was to find out how members of this community were affected by the pandemic situation, how they coped with it, and how they perceived it. I was also interested in finding out what the main source of their information was and whom they considered to be the final authority. To this end, I researched the organization of their time and daily functioning. Through the main research methods, such as in-depth interviews and participant observations, I tried to find out what led the research sample to alternative spirituality and how it is currently reflected in their lives. I assumed that alternative spirituality helps the informants to find meaning in life, as well as to understand the situations they were confronted with. I expected that these situations and experiences led them to form certain alternative life philosophies and that the research sample

regarded persons who practice alternative spirituality, or hold life philosophies that they evaluate as similar to their own, as reliable sources of information.

Keywords: ***Slovakia; spirituality; religion; COVID-19; pandemic***

Introduction

For the requirements of my bachelor thesis, I conducted field research that focused on a community of people practicing alternative spirituality. These persons identify themselves as being *rather spiritual than religious*, or *spiritual but not religious*. In my work, I deal with their worldviews, philosophies[1], and ways of thinking, as well as various reasons that led them to spirituality and the search for new meaning in life. Among the most common reasons were especially challenging situations, such as serious health problems and illnesses, or divorces.

I agree with Paloutzian & Park (2005) that knowledge from different meaning-making processes and situations can be beneficial for research in the social sciences and humanities. I chose this topic because I consider the field of religion and spirituality, also within the scope of scientific research, to be very interesting. In this research, I dealt with how alternative spirituality is reflected in the lives of my informants – for example in the areas of health or sources of information, in which these persons may prefer holistic approaches. This topic was intensively discussed by the public in the times of the coronavirus pandemic, which is why I decided to investigate and analyze it more closely.

This work is divided into methodological and empirical parts. In the methodological part, I describe the research location and informants, as well as data-collection methods. The empirical part is devoted to the analysis of data obtained from the field research. Drawing on the literature cited below,

[1] Ann Taves et al. (2018) claim that alternative spirituality is inherently connected to certain worldviews, which can also be analyzed due to their connection with the meaning system. Worldviews have a cognitive character and are defined by the so-called "big questions" – 1.) ontology, 2.) epistemology, 3.) axiology, 4.) praxeology, and 5.) cosmology – that are related to meaning (Taves 2018, 2, 4). These individual categories include diverse opinions, thanks to which science also can work with them neutrally. For this reason, it is not possible to explore alternative spirituality as a separate domain, except in the context of the life philosophies of the informants (Taves et al. 2018, 1–14).

I discuss in detail the answers of informants, in which they pointed out, for example, their life stories, beliefs, and lifestyles. I also write about their attitude towards coronavirus government measures and biomedicine. Through their various answers, I state which kind of information or approaches they consider to be credible and meaningful. At the end of the work, I describe some conclusions that result from this research. This work aims to demonstrate how some persons who practice alternative spirituality coped with the coronavirus pandemic situation. Since alternative spirituality cannot be explored as a separate domain, in this research it was important to focus mainly on the context of the life philosophies of informants and work with them in the process of analysis (Taves et al. 2018, 1–14).

Methods and Participants

The research was made in the Slovak Tatra Mountains in Liptov. Because of the theme of alternative spirituality, it was important to find out which religion in this region was the most prevalent. As it turned out, religious belief in this locality is oriented towards traditional churches – mainly Catholic and Evangelical, but also various Protestant denominations. This suggests that there are not many people who practice alternative spirituality – at least not according to official and publicly accessible sources. Consequently, I will not include informants from my research sample to the majority. Equally important were the data regarding vaccination rate, which in the Liptov region – in February 2022 (and the number of vaccines 1, i.e., 1st allowance) – hovered around 52.91% (Únia miest Slovenska 2022). The above-mentioned data are important, especially concerning the understanding of the majority population of Liptov. The informants who participated in this research were not primarily located in cities, or overly frequented areas. Therefore, it is important to describe the geographical location in which they spend most of their free time.

The area surrounding the city is mainly made up of nature – meadows, and forests of the Tatra Mountains. Informants who do not live in nearby huts or wooden houses have built natural and alternative forms of dwellings in the forest, close to each other. The interiors are furnished only with what is deemed necessary. In these places, the environment is generous to tourists and other athletes. This is also the main reason why informants have decided to build their homes here – as sport is not only a hobby but also a path to

immunity and health, as well as a form of dynamic meditation and relaxation. Most informants are tourists; in the summer they're interested in rock climbing and cycling, while in the winter they ski. Equally interesting is the fact that the majority of male informants (4 out of 5) described themselves as mountain porters – regardless of whether they have done this activity in the past or are currently doing it.

Qualitative data were obtained from the community of people tightly bound to this environment. Their lifestyles, philosophies, and opinions are anchored in beliefs about the wealth and well-being hidden in nature. Apart from the fact that they are connected on a friendly level by a similar lifestyle connected with spiritual beliefs and convictions, the proximity of their dwellings is also what forms them as a community (the so-called "territorial basis of the community") (cited in Howarth 2001, 6). All members who consider themselves a part of this community gather at common events and spend their free time together, sometimes even in smaller groups (Gottdiener & Budd 2005). At the same time, it is the connection of a few neighbours, friends, and families that forms this community (Bell & Newby 1971). Last but not least, the rural, natural environment undoubtedly has a beneficial effect on building their community life (Howarth 2001, 6). These people are from different backgrounds. Some live and spend time in this environment year-round, while others come only seasonally or recreationally.

The research sample consisted of 10 people (5 men and 5 women) who are a part of this community. Their ages ranged from 16 to 61 years. When choosing informants, I had to ensure that they were permanent members of the community – that their time spent in this community was longer than 5 years. In the end, my interviews were made primarily with founding or primary members and their children. I conducted interviews not only with high school and university students, but also with various workers from the field of education or other social and generally beneficial services. The selection of informants rested on an initial meeting with one of the community members, who then encouraged and initiated my acquaintance with his other friends (the snowball method) (Spradley 1980). After several initial and spontaneous conversations about spirituality and attitudes towards the pandemic situation, I realized that I had found the right people for this research. The time I spent with them was connected with participant observation and formal or informal conversations. Their lifestyle was arguably different from most people who live in cities, for instance.

The attitudes of the research community towards biomedicine (i.e., " the dominant biomedical model of health care" connected with legislation) are not of outright rejection, but rather a preference for alternative approaches (Bužeková 2019, 413; Jerotijević and Hagovská 2020, 48). A positive relationship between them prevails, e.g., to Ayurvedic medicine, or to building natural immunity without using the available chemical pharmaceuticals – or within the framework of the pandemic and vaccinations. Furthermore, most of the information they deem credible does not come from the media or social media, as they do not have or use them; instead, important information is typically discussed within their community with each other. The same is true for their philosophies and expressions of spirituality. It would be hard to assign any member of the researched community to a certain religious direction or traditional church. According to their statements, they perceive traditionally religious places like churches more as *"peaceful places with good energy" (Oto)*, but mostly they do not feel the need to enter them. They do not even tend to need the traditional church services (e.g., Mass) that take place in them. Despite this, they declare that they have spiritual needs, such as meditations and prayers. According to the informants, their temples are located in mountains, meadows, and forests, in which they can connect to God in their hearts (through so-called "connections") or to another form of higher power or energy, and find the sacred, which "lies at the core of" spirituality (Paloutzian and Park 2005, 25–26, 36; Bloch 1998, 67). They call these places *"natural temples"* (e.g., Veronika).

In the various debates within their community, as well as in in-depth interviews, the informants expressed their agreement with various religious and spiritual figures or prophets, such as Osho, Buddha, and Jesus. They find in their statements a certain reflection or pieces of "the truth", which they often discuss among themselves, but generally, they do not belong to any particular religion (Paloutzian and Park 2005, 29). They consider themselves *rather spiritual than religious* persons, having adopted many spiritual currents, opinions, and philosophies that they believe in and with which they can relate in their lives (Bloch 1998, 59). Within the framework of values, the informants mostly emphasized the need for freedom and altruism, or "living in the present moment" (Jerotijević and Hagovská 2020, 44; Paloutzian and Park 2005, 300; Woodhead et al. 2002, 429). However, I will discuss this in more detail when analyzing data from the field.

Following the informants' descriptions, I will present them in more detail, using pseudonyms that I have assigned to them, as the framework of research ethics obliges me to maintain their complete anonymity:

- Informant no. 1: Patrícia – female, 16 years old – high school student
- Informant no. 2: Zuzana – female, 20 y.o. – university student
- Informant no. 3: Tomáš – male, 42 y.o. – building labour force
- Informant no. 4: Móric – male, 61 y.o. – receptionist
- Informant no. 5: Andrej – male, 40 y.o. – worker at a mountain hut and mountain porter
- Informant no. 6: Veronika – female, 48 y.o. – primary school teacher
- Informant no. 7: Belo – male, 43 y.o. – building labour force
- Informant no. 8: Oto – male, 42 y.o. – building labour force and mountain porter
- Informant no. 9: Ema – female, 26 y.o. – receptionist, currently on maternity leave
- Informant no. 10: Zita – female, 43 y.o. – (mainly) university teacher

The methods that I used in my research were mainly participant observations and in-depth, semi-structured interviews. I formulated a list of 29 main questions, some of which were developed in several sub-questions. General questions focused mainly on their origin, family background, and lives – about the events that shaped their decisions and brought them to the present location and in this community. I was also interested in their key life stages, which have a significant explanatory value in this research (e.g., whether or not the environment in which they grew up was religious). I didn't ask them direct questions but implicitly incorporated their meaning into simple questions. Larger parts of the questions were mainly focused on their values, health, faith, sources of information, or attitude towards the pandemic. As a researcher, I strove to create a safe space for informants and I conducted 10 different interviews.

Following the research, I analyzed all of their statements in the empirical part of the work, using coding, in the context of the topic and the literature cited below. When analyzing data, I was particularly interested in their alternative explanations and opinions. The main goal of the observations was to compare the interviews with real experiences and see if some ideals of informants are present in the everyday reality of their lives. Thanks to the natural environment, where they had built alternative dwellings, I could also observe their everyday

community life during the pandemic situation as credibly as possible. I documented, for example, activities such as painting, cooking, and dining together as a community, as well as collecting and cutting wood for heating their homes and cooking. They spend their time mostly in nearby forest shelters or by fireplaces, where they talk about everyday topics, but also about different philosophies in which they believe (e.g., the importance of meditation).

As part of my research ethics, before every interview or participant observation, I asked all members of the researched community if they agreed with the research and all related methods. If they did not understand any part of the described process, I explained it to them, and I also tried to answer all of their questions about it. At the same time, I assured all informants that the research was anonymous. I also introduced them to the context of anthropological research, which is not about moralizing, judging, or evaluating – but on the contrary is an effort to scientifically understand the investigated phenomenon, in which right or wrong answers do not exist. If the informants mentioned some sensitive or overly personal information in the conversation (e.g., names, titles, etc.) I deleted it in the transcript of our interviews, not using it in either my bachelor thesis or anywhere else. Before my interview with the minor, I requested a signature from her legal representative through the "informed consent" form, by which she agreed to this interview. I am also, in accordance with research ethics – and due to the lifestyle and environment of all informants, compelled to maintain their complete anonymity (e.g., names, specific residences, titles, etc.).

Operationalization of concepts

Alternative spirituality – The concept of spirituality is closely linked to the transcendent dimension and the search for the sacred and meaning, which can be reflected in identifiable values associated, for example, with altruism. It is mostly associated with faith in a supernatural being, such as God, or another form of energy or higher power. Spiritual persons often tend toward holistic worldviews and philosophies, which include physical, mental, and spiritual aspects, and may manifest in their lifestyle. As it is possible to examine *alternative spirituality*[2] only within the context of the life philosophies of the

[2] A growing phenomenon described by Paloutzian and Park (2005) are those who prefer to call themselves "spiritual" rather than "religious" persons. These are usually people who feel the need

informants, my research mainly measured it by the attitudes of the research sample towards the areas of health and the coronavirus pandemic, in which these persons may prefer holistic and natural approaches.

Meaning – In this work, I define *meaning* as the main motivating force that drives a person in life and that is closely linked to spirituality. I describe it as a part of a meaning system that consists of an individual's beliefs, goals, and subjective sense of meaningfulness. In this research, it specifically means that I asked informants about various challenging life situations that they were confronted with and that could have an impact on their meaning system, or the creation of new meaning, which is more associated with spirituality.

Pandemic – In this research we discuss the coronavirus pandemic in terms of the social and political sphere connected with government measures and strong recommendations for vaccination against this disease. From the government measures, it is important to mention the so-called "ROR", which in Slovak stands for "*ruky*, *odstup*, *rúška*" ("hands, distance, respirators/masks") and in reality was connected with disinfecting one's hands, keeping distances between persons, and covering the upper respiratory tract with a mask or respirator. Because of the rapid spread of the disease, the government of the Slovak Republic also introduced other measures, such as nationwide lockdowns, prohibiting or limiting transfers between cities, other kinds of movement, and public events. Some of these measures were also reflected in the relocation of school and work attendance to the online sphere. Specifically in this research, I therefore focused on the attitudes of the informants towards the coronavirus pandemic, namely towards government measures and recommended vaccination. I expected that their views and explanations may be unconventional, for example, symbolic and metaphorical.

to explain or interpret their more difficult, stressful, or traumatic life events. It can be an accident, an illness, the loss of a loved one, or various other circumstances that created a certain pressure on their meaning system and caused the already mentioned need to give them a deeper meaning, also on the spiritual level (299–335). According to various research, they perceive these events as personal challenges and do not need to define or limit them by different dogmas or moral principles. Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) also write about them in the context of the "spiritual revolution" of recent years, in which "change or various conversions are manifested in their increasing number. They are mostly persons who consider themselves believers but do not strictly believe in God and [mostly] are not members of traditional churches" (cited in Jerotijević and Hagovská 2020, 44–46).

Sources of information – The most common or traditional media, such as television, radio, newspapers, and magazines, are the primary sources from which people receive information. In addition, the Internet and social media, such as Facebook and Instagram, are extended sources of information. I argue that these sources can have a significant impact on the formation of beliefs and attitudes of those who follow them, even during the coronavirus pandemic. In the field, I analyzed the sources of information that informants consider trustworthy, or whom they trust and consider to be reliable and authoritative.

Life journeys towards alternative spirituality

Paloutzian and Park (2005) stated that pressure – in the form of negative or traumatic life events – for which there is a discrepancy between the perceived reality and belief system, can lead to spiritual transformations (334). The greater the pressure (created on a *meaning system* of the individual) and imbalance that is felt in their life, the bigger and more visible the change will be. Similar experiences were described by my informants, who felt, for example, a loss of safety or meaning in their lives. In these cases, when the global meaning is disturbed and transformed, it can be more compatible with the current life. What is changed is the *meaning system* and its components[3], which Paloutzian and Park (2005, 297) describe in more detail in the *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, in the *Model of life meaning*[4].

Most of the informants explicitly highlighted the abovementioned challenging situations and events that led them to change their opinions and lifestyles. This change in attitude also included reinterpretations of various life events, which they adapted into new, alternative spiritual explanations. Jerotijević and Hagovská (2020, 54–55) write about this kind of explanation in greater detail.

[3] Components of a meaning system include attitudes and beliefs, values, goals, overall meaning, self-image, and core interests (Paloutzian and Park 2005, 334). "The meaning system is a psychological construct of a dynamic set of mental processes whose operation cannot be understood as independent from some element of faith. The components of a meaning system dynamically interact with each other to affect an individual's whole character within the context of that faith" (Paloutzian and Park 2005, 335). When the beliefs and goals of individuals during their spiritual transformation are disrupted by the pressure of various stressors, they are consequently transformed and renewed by the new *meaning-making process*.

[4] The main part of this model is so-called *global meaning*, which consists of *beliefs, goals, and subjective sense of meaningfulness* that are directed at major life goals. "When something traumatic happens, global beliefs and goals are disrupted. This experience can be felt as a loss of meaning. The *process* of the change of global meaning is called *meaning-making*" (Paloutzian and Park 2005, 297–298).

Therefore, I argue that these events had a significant impact on the formation of their new *meaning system*. I was primarily interested in the causes that guided informants to practice alternative spirituality. In most cases, I encountered references to specific life events experienced by members of the researched community. These led them to change their environment and to more deeply reflect on questions to which they were able to find answers in the researched community – in various shared opinions and philosophies which fall within alternative spirituality. The most common situations described by the informants were serious illnesses, or separations and divorces (their own or of their parents) – unless they were brought to this new place by their family, by other contacts, or due to other reasons. So the question is: Why has alternative spirituality been able to provide them with so many answers?

As Clifford Geertz (1966) explains, religion and spirituality can provide people answers to questions that may arise in various existential issues, which appear to be beyond common understanding (e.g., suffering and death), as they point to a broader, transcendent pattern of order and meaning (cited in Paloutzian and Park 2005, 299). "Religion is [usually] associated with faith, doctrines, dogmas, ... or social control", and spirituality rather with certain "feelings or experiences of closeness with God or feelings of interconnectedness with the world and living things" (cited in Paloutzian and Park 2005, 26). Informants pointed to their spiritual needs, but in reality, they do not belong to any church – they describe themselves as "spiritual" rather than "religious" persons (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, cited in Jerotijević and Hagovská 2020, 44). This doesn't mean that they explicitly refuse Christian teachings, but their affiliation to a specific church or religion yes (Versteeg 2011, 5).

For example, as I mentioned above, one of the informants, after her divorce, switched from traditional religion (which she had shared with her previous partner) to alternative spirituality, along with her daughter and current partner. Various problems that she had felt before or during her divorce, or in the difficult period afterwards, led her to spirituality, which Jerotijević and Hagovská (2020) describe as more subjective, emphasizing the importance of freedom and the personal experiences of individuals (44–45). Her faith in God and the supernatural reality did not change; rather, according to her own words, her values and goals were transformed as she freed herself from certain customary conventions. This 43-year-old female expressed this to me:

> I don't go to church... I don't belong to any religion – I don't have that need. But to sit down every day and connect with God in some way – whether it's in meditation, in prayer, or just in thought – that's the kind of need I have... Spirituality is probably better than faith... I don't go to society to confess my spirituality... It's enough for me in private [Zita].

Alternative spirituality is rather subjective for the research sample, specifically in their way of coping with various problems. The individual faith they practice, using prayer or meditation, is an important form of "self-transcendence", as described by Viktor E. Frankl (2011, 94). This allows them to calm down, detach themselves from everyday problems or affairs, and focus their attention on their main spiritual values and goals. Baumeister (1991) states that the meaning system is significantly shaped by "surrounding culture (including parents, media and other cultural agents), and through [one's] accumulated personal experiences" (cited in Paloutzian and Park 2005, 298). For people whose global sense is disrupted, spirituality may be the key [to] the search for meaning and explanations because it can provide them with answers to various existential questions, even those of a transcendent nature (Paloutzian and Park 2005, 334–335). However, as I note below, my informants have not been following the media for years – they don't even have them. Based on these and similar findings, I focused on other questions – especially on the specific life philosophies of the informants, as well as on the relationship between these philosophies and their life experiences and life events. I argue that these philosophies arise from their life experiences.

The influence of alternative spirituality on the worldviews and philosophies of the research sample

In its essence, alternative spirituality is connected to systems of various worldviews and philosophies that impact the subjective attitudes of those who practice it (Taves et al. 2018, 1–14). Characteristic of spirituality are certain goals and types of behaviour that can help in their attainment (e.g., preferring kindness over indifference). Through interviews, I gained an understanding of the many philosophies that the informants found interesting, and at the same time were implemented in their lives, such as the importance of altruism, a key goal associated with spirituality. Wisdom and feelings of the heart, or so-called "connections" to the sacred, are other concepts that are characteristic

(Paloutzian and Park 2005, 300). I will explain these connections in the next answer, from a 42-year-old male informant:

> I mainly have my heart and that's what I follow when anything needs to be resolved. I'm trying to live in harmony with it and to develop wisdom throughout my life. Because in the wisdom of the heart is collected everything that is needed. And if a person lives in the present moment – that's the way of avoiding many unnecessary sufferings that we create ourselves [Oto].

The informant came to the practice of alternative spirituality mainly through his former health problems. In the interview, he mentioned that during high school, he was diagnosed with serious heart problems, as well as various allergies and food intolerances. Subsequently, he decided to leave the urban environment and got a job at a mountain cottage. The natural environment and new colleagues led him to alternative spirituality, which he still practices. After fourteen years, during which he was employed at the same cottage, he moved to the locality where this research was made. He belongs to the founders of the researched community. In addition to other forms of alternative spiritual practices and the search for the sacred, he actively devotes himself to mountain portering. In his words, he presently enjoys good health and tries to prevent various diseases in many ways – e.g., by bathing in an icy stream. In his answer, in addition to the need to develop the wisdom of the heart, he also mentions a philosophy that is focused on "living in the present moment" or "here-and-now". This philosophy is described in more detail by Woodhead et al. (2002, 429).

Persons practicing alternative spirituality often tend to create so-called "packages of meaning" that may contain syncretisms of various faiths and philosophies – mostly spiritual or religious teachings and traditions that are chosen freely and according to preference (Bloch 1998, 59; Bužeková 2019, 413). Consequently, I was interested in the other philosophies prevalent in this community. Informants often share their philosophies, especially during their meetings in the community – even though each member's "package" does not contain identical syncretisms of different views and beliefs. This is evident in the fact that some believe in God, while others believe in some higher force or cosmic energy. Some even believe in the existence of supernatural mythological beings (e.g., forest fairies, goblins, or angels who help people) and others don't. As a result, the importance of non-judgment is often emphasized and replaced with acceptance. Many informants stress the importance of freedom

and personal experience, and these philosophies need not be limited by various dogmas or moral principles (Fuller 2001, 5, cited in Jerotijević and Hagovská 2020, 44). In the context of personal and spiritual growth, they can have their own experiences that help them in the search for meaning and truth, or the formation of "packages of meaning" (Paloutzian and Park 2005, 309, 481; Frankl 2011, 103, 127). This importance of freedom and personal experiences is the other reason why some of these communities distance themselves from the Christian faith, or from the need to belong to a traditional church (Versteeg 2011, 5). Alternative spirituality can also be a form of liberation from certain customary conventions.

Areas of health and attitudes towards the coronavirus pandemic

People who practice alternative spirituality can often lean towards different unconventional approaches – e.g., in the areas of health or sources of information. The majority of the studied community (9 out of 10 informants) prefers alternative forms of medicine and has a sceptical, even dismissive attitude towards biomedicine and the pharmaceutical industry (Jerotijević and Hagovská 2019, 53; 2020, 48). Some of the informants expressed this opposition similarly, such as this 20-year-old female:

> Sometimes we also take natural nutritional supplements [note – Ayurvedic medicine]... but no chemistry... I haven't put a single medicine in my mouth for about five years [Zuzana].

The majority of female informants (4 out of 5) prefer Ayurvedic medicine and vegetarian or vegan diets. Their attitude toward health, as well as their way of eating, is an integral part of their lifestyle and holistic worldviews. This points to the fact that male informants also prefer holistic and natural approaches to health, such as Ayurvedic medicine, but they still eat meat. Informants do not visit doctors often, if at all. Their inclination toward alternative medicine is reflected in their preference for natural treatment methods, or the use of medicinal herbs or extracts. They usually treat their illnesses by staying in nature or resting in bed. In the following statement is important to note the reason why informants do not visit doctors. They perceive prevalent biomedicine as a health system that is – also in connection with the pharmaceutical industry

– mainly focused on the treatment of various symptoms of diseases and not their cause (Bužeková 2019, 413). Additionally, their holistic worldviews and philosophies arguably are lacking a certain spiritual dimension (Ward & Voas 2011, 103). Belief in the deeper cause of diseases was expressed, for example, in the following statement of the 16-year-old female informant:

> [My attitude towards doctors] is quite dismissive – if I don't have to, I don't go there... Every problem has some origin and for example, biomedicine simply does not solve problems, it rather suppresses them... That rapid change is exactly like white medicine... I am treated with Ayurveda – herbs, teas, rest, and thinking about it all – why did it happen to me [Patrícia].

A more serious illness that some informants have gone through in their lives gradually led them to the search for its spiritual cause and deeper meaning. They changed some of their opinions, beliefs, and lifestyle choices, within which they presently do not rely primarily on biomedicine. Their time spent in nature undoubtedly also has a significant influence on the formation of their opinions in the area of health and prevention, which most of them consider very important. For example, some of them regularly bathe in an icy stream that is located in the forest near their homes. One of the informants who years ago was diagnosed with severe asthma and tinnitus (a constant buzzing in the ears) claims that these health problems were one of the several reasons for his current practice of alternative spirituality. Also for these diseases, his priorities changed, as well as his overall lifestyle – he left the city to live in nature. As mentioned, his dwelling is built near a noisy stream, which he considers to be the main source of his good immunity (by bathing in it), as well as his peaceful sleep, because it can "*drown out the buzzing in his ears" (Belo)*.

Another reason he mentioned in the interview was his divorce. Additionally, he mentioned that he liked to visit this researched locality as a teenager during summer camps. All of these facts may be the driving force behind why he belongs among the founders of the researched community. He was the first one to move into the described location. Severe asthma and tinnitus were also repeated in the statements of other informants, who perceive this natural environment, their community, and the practice of alternative spirituality as significant forms of coping with their health problems. Other informants often pointed out various allergies and food intolerances, or their former heart problems, which they claim to have cured through this lifestyle.

The interviews also show that the majority of informants (8 out of 10) applied their attitudes and beliefs from the area of health also on the coronavirus pandemic – specifically on vaccination. To the question of whether they plan to get vaccinated, they answered, for example, in the following way:

> No, and I don't even plan to... I don't trust it... and I don't identify with it either. If someone else feels it, let them get vaccinated... It's everyone's free decision... More important is how I prevent myself from getting sick in the first place. And that way is to have a healthy and positive mind, joy from little things, diet, and especially sports and strengthening myself [Oto].

Everyone, they believe, should be vaccinated by free choice, while they themselves have rather a negative and dismissive attitude towards the vaccine. The majority of informants (8 out of 10) perceive vaccines as *"developed too rapidly"* and *"insufficiently tested in practice"* – that is why they consider it risky and are concerned about possible side effects. In our conversations, they also mentioned people they know and whose bodies – despite their relatively young age and good health or physical condition – reacted unfavourably to vaccination against the coronavirus. This means that some of their acquaintances have experienced an acute deterioration of mental health or a psychological condition that needed to be solved with professional help, partial or even complete paralysis, or death. These tragic or difficult events they considered to be causally connected to vaccination against the coronavirus because they occurred in these persons' lives approximately two weeks after they got vaccinated. As a result of this information, as well as their negative attitude towards biomedicine and the pharmaceutical industry, the majority of informants (8 out of 10) did not get vaccinated with any of the offered COVID-19 vaccines. These reasons are also associated with the fact that the research sample considers this community to be the most reliable source of their information and knowledge, which I discuss in more detail in the next subsection (Howarth 2001, 1). Most of the informants do not plan to get vaccinated against the coronavirus, even in the future. Several of them considered governmental measures to be sufficient protection against the spread of infection. During the pandemic, they had no problem with compliance – if they, so to speak, did not interfere too much with their freedom and lifestyle. During certain governmental measures, they could move freely in a natural environment. They found most measures and rules in the cities during the lockdowns excessive. Even during the pandemic, the majority of the

research sample (8 out of 10 informants) expressed a preference for building their immunity through overcoming the disease, not through vaccination. Based on the claims of Ward and Voas (2011) and the classifications of Barnes et al. (2008), I argue that the negative attitude of the research sample towards the COVID-19 vaccines is a consequence of their preference for alternative forms of medicine that are holistic (i.e., also including the spiritual side of a person) and thus are simultaneously more compatible with their spirituality and strong belief in the need for freedom and personal experiences, as written about by Jerotijević and Hagovská (2020, 44).

Sources of information

During meetings of the researched community, informants share their stories. They share their opinions and philosophies, as well as information related to the coronavirus pandemic or government measures. Some informants who have jobs and permanent residences in big cities claimed that they got their information about the pandemic only from verified websites online. However, the majority of the research sample (7 out of 10 informants) does not seek such information purposefully. According to their words *"they live with what is around them" (e.g. Móric)* – which means that information that they consider necessary and credible is drawn primarily from their friends in the researched community. The same is also the case with information about the pandemic – because according to them, they heard about the coronavirus and related situations *"everywhere they went" (e.g. Belo)*. This community considered the government's measures excessive and difficult to follow – they followed them and tried to prevent the spread of infection, especially in the city and restricted areas in which a larger number of people moved about. Based on these and other similar statements that I draw from various interviews and participant observations, this community is arguably the main source of informants' knowledge and ideas (Howarth 2001, 1). Their access to sources of information is also connected to their dismissive attitude towards social media, which they do not have or for which they cancelled their accounts in the past. They find information from social media confusing and overwhelming. This conclusion comes, for example, from the following statement from one of the female informants:

> I cancelled television, I try not to listen to the radio either... I needed to preserve one line, so I turned everything off and it helped me. I drew information about

> the pandemic from official pages and final statements... Facebook and all those debates are unacceptable to me. It's all overwhelming for me; I don't feel good about it [Zita].

Informants share their attitudes about the pandemic or vaccination exclusively with each other, or with other close people within personal contact. They mostly have a negative attitude toward social media – which at the same time excludes their possible positive attitude towards "alternative influencers" and their strong influence on the internet (Baker 2021, 19, 30; Ward and Voas 2011). For various theories about spirituality related especially to people belonging to alternative communities, I expected that my informants would also tend to believe in certain conspiracy theories (Baker 2021, 14–15, Parmigiani 2021, 1). Even if most of them are not interested in the general things happening in their home country or the world and do not use social media, I found certain similarities between them and some descriptions written by Ward and Voas (2011). These similarities are mainly related to their rejecting attitude towards publicly available media or other sources of information, which they have not followed for a long time. This attitude is also significantly related to their faith in conspiracy theories, which several informants mentioned during interviews. They include, for example, beliefs in certain powerful, manipulative, and controlling elites – within the framework of the weather and information presented in the media, even during the coronavirus pandemic – or belief in UFOs, etc. (Ward and Voas 2011, 107; Parmigiani 2021, 15). One of the male informants expressed this belief in the following statement:

> Airplanes that flew during quarantines and lockdowns released 'white tails' behind them, which were also supposed to help in purifying the air. Those who manage it know very well what they are doing and in what kind of state our planet is in [Oto].

These and other similar beliefs of some informants I also captured in various participant observations from the field. For example, during one of their walks in the forest, one of the informants pointed to the sky and noted that a few clouds looked like UFOs. Subsequently, he started taking pictures of these clouds and he began to talk to two female informants who were with him about his belief in extra-terrestrial civilizations. In their reactions, it was not entirely clear whether they identified with this belief or not, but they were not explicitly dismissive about the statement.

Discussion and conclusion

In this work, the publication I refer to the most is Paloutzian and Park (2005), whose central concept was the main framework in which I incorporated knowledge from other texts and research. In the following short passage, I mention facts that are also characteristic of the research sample, but I do not discuss them in the main part of the work.

In various discussions, I encounter opinions that the spiritual needs and explanations of informants – which concern, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic or political or other life events – may be related to their low level of education. One of the arguments by which claims of this kind can be refuted is the fact that the majority of the research sample (7 out of 10 informants) had attained a university degree. In other conversations that I had with some people, I also encountered opinions that certain philosophies of members of the researched community are "naive and idealized" or even "phantasmagorical". According to Tacey (2004), such views held by persons who practice alternative spirituality cannot be considered unusual. Based on an analysis of the research data, it can be argued that the life philosophies of the research sample are significantly connected to their holistic beliefs and worldviews, which are shaped by their community, as well as the natural environment, in which they spend a lot of time (Howarth 2001, 1; Ward and Voas 2011, 103; Taves et al. 2018, 1–14). Also, it cannot be forgotten that their spiritual, natural, and communal way of life is a consequence of their free choice. Many of the informants voluntarily exchanged the urban environment for a rural one, as they had not felt well in it, or it did not fit well with their values and meaning system (e.g., because it had a high degree of various stressors). Social isolation, which we can infer from some of their statements that they experience, is not inherently connected with their alternative spirituality. As mentioned, in-depth interviews show that many members of the researched community have experienced life in the city. If in some cases we can talk about social isolation, research has shown that it is a result of the coronavirus pandemic and related government measures, rather than the development of their meaning system. I claim that the possible social isolation of informants cannot be related to their community and alternative lifestyle. Their voluntary isolation from the perhaps more formal, institutional, and dogmatic direction of religion can be considered as a consequence of their practice of alternative spirituality (Versteeg 2011, 5).

Before entering the field, I expected that alternative spirituality and its practice could help informants to find meaning and to understand certain situations with which they are, or have been, confronted in life. This research deals specifically with situations that disrupted their quality and way of life – i.e., separations and divorces with partners, or serious health problems. These situations subsequently led them to search for new spiritual meanings. Based on the literature listed below, I expected that these circumstances led them to alternative life philosophies that can be reflected, for example, in the fields of health or sources of information.

It turned out that the research sample tends to be holistic in significant worldviews and philosophies that are characteristic of alternative spirituality. Most informants prefer alternative forms of medicine, such as Ayurveda, while they refuse the prevalent biomedical health system associated with the pharmaceutical industry. This approach was also significantly manifested during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic when most of them refused to be vaccinated and preferred instead to build their immunity – also through overcoming the given disease. They consider the coronavirus to be a lower risk than the vaccination against it. They don't visit doctors often, if at all. If they get sick, in most cases they try to look for a deeper, spiritual cause and meaning of their health problems. Instead, they cure themselves with natural nutritional supplements and herbs. They try to prevent diseases and health problems by, for example, bathing in the icy stream that flows near their dwellings in the forest. They perceive the natural environment in which they live and spend most of their time as very important and beneficial for their health. For this reason, the majority of the research sample moved there from an urban environment in the past or plans to move there permanently in the future (8 out of 10 informants). They consider cities, especially big cities, to be polluted and environmentally burdened, which according to their statements adversely affects their overall health. The identifiable values and goals associated with alternative spirituality are different in the research sample. Most informants consider it important to search for the sacred – God or another form of higher power or energy, which they perceive as healing, liberating, and strengthening – especially in nature. They connect their spiritual needs with the preference of individual faith, i.e., prayer or meditation. They also consider hiking and engaging in sports in nature to be a dynamic form of meditation, because these activities and the given environment connect with their spirituality and search for the sacred. Most of the male informants are also active in the sphere of mountain portering.

They perceive this activity as a manifestation of altruism, which belongs to their spiritual goals. Informants tend towards spiritual and developmental literature (i.e., they like to read books with spiritual themes), as well as altruistic values, goals, and behaviour – towards each other, towards others, and nature. As it turns out, the researched community, for informants, is the most important source of their information, social representations, and knowledge. Most of them do not have media or social media, as they perceive information from such sources as confusing or overwhelming. Those they trust the most are persons with whom they meet in personal contact and know well. Even during the pandemic, due to various government measures, this circle of close people narrowed down mainly to family, neighbours, and friends – especially those who belong to the researched community. Those they consider the most reliable are persons who also practice alternative spirituality and for whom the associated values are visible in their behaviour – or have life philosophies that informants evaluate as similar to their own. Research has also confirmed the inclination of some from the research sample to spirituality – to the belief in certain conspiracy theories that are connected with spirituality. Among the most important can be included, for example, belief in a certain powerful global elite that worldwide can manipulate not only the weather but also the information that is presented to the general public through the media. Also for this reason, some of the research subjects have refused to watch television, read newspapers, or listen to the radio for many years.

In conclusion, it should be added that more detailed field research of the given community would be needed for a longer time. Even with the growing number of research related to the issue of alternative spirituality, research data over time could arguably be subjected to a deeper analysis again.

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WHEN UNCERTAINTY IS THE ONLY CONSTANCY: THE AGENCY AND SERIOUS GAMES OF SAHRAWI MEN MIGRATING TO SPANISH CITIES

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Abstract: ***This article aims to describe the situation of young Sahrawi migrants who live in Spanish cities and work in precarious conditions. To analyze and describe this phenomenon, I will use Sherry Ortner's agency theory, focusing on the important aspects of values, social norms, and interdependent agency. The migration of Sahrawis from refugee camps in Tindouf (Algeria) is a consequence of the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the camps, diminishing international aid, and increasing inflation – a context in which migration to Europe is the best choice for supporting one's family. Nonetheless, the situation for young Sahrawis in Spain is often one of precarious work, temporary legal status, and frequent changes of residence. Within systemic constraints, however, the strategies (e.g., career strategies) of Sahrawis can be understood as agency-as-project – in which crucial cultural values make it more important to support one's family and loved ones living in the camps rather than to a mass financial capital. As a result, temporariness is the only constant characteristic of the life of this group of refugees, which is visible as a lack of long-term plans or opportunities related to migration.***

Keywords: ***agency; migration; masculinity; Sahrawis; Spain***

Bashir[1] never planned to live in Madrid. He knew Spain; he had spent summers there and spoke Spanish quite well. Despite this, he did not intend to come to Spain, neither to study nor to settle permanently. Bashir is Sahrawi[2]: he was born in a Sahrawi refugee camp in Algeria, near the town of Tindouf. In Spain, he is a migrant with a temporary residence permit. In the camps in Algeria, he was a refugee, although he was born there. His parents' homeland, Western Sahara (formerly Spanish Sahara), is a disputed territory that has been occupied by Morocco since 1975. Bashir's grandparents, however, were Spanish citizens – until 1975, Spanish Sahara was just one of Spain's provinces. The unfinished process of decolonization and the occupation of a substantial part of the Western Sahara territory by the Kingdom of Morocco, however, has left Bashir living in limbo between trying to build a life in Spain, wanting to return to his family in the camps, and dreaming of moving to an independent Western Sahara.

In the following text, I conduct a combined analysis of the care regimes and economic aspects of migration in the context of Sahrawi migration to Spanish cities.[3] To describe and analyze this phenomenon, I will use Sherry Ortner's (2006) agency theory. The main purpose of the article will therefore be to analyze the agential actions and practices of individuals within the constraints and opportunities of migration regimes in the Sahrawi/Spain context. This paper is structured as follows: First, I outline the theoretical background of agency and practice theory in the context of regimes of mobility. Second, I describe the methodological framework of the study. Third, I identify the basic features of Sahrawi migration, along with a brief description of the historical and political background of the current situation.

Agency in migration studies

The concept of agency has been applied to migration studies in several contexts. First, it lies at the heart of the division between forced and voluntary

[1] All names used in the article are pseudonyms. Quotes are annotated with the pseudonym and age range of my interviewee.

[2] The term *Sahrawi* is widely used in the literature to describe both an ethnic group and a nationality, which is also the approach I adopted in this article. As Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2018) points out, historically the inhabitants of Western Sahara were nomadic groups of mixed descent (both Arabic and Berber), who spoke a dialect of Arabic called Hassaniya, adhered to the Maliki school of Islam, and were united by certain cultural practices.

[3] The work was supported by the National Science Centre, Poland, under research project no 2020/37/N/HS3/01234. The article is planned to form part of a doctoral thesis.

migration – a division that has been criticized for its analytical inadequacy (Carling 2002; De Haas 2003; Turton 2003). Second, reflections on agency appear in refugee studies, where it is observed in the power of the powerless – migrant women and forced migrants, especially those of irregular status or those in refugee camps and detention centres (Puggioni 2014; Pasquetti 2015; Sigona 2015). Most research on the agency of refugees follows the pattern of understanding agency as an active effort to transform an existing situation (Kanal, and Rottmann 2021). As Kanal and Rottmann (2021) write, however, such analysis typically does not extend beyond the duality in which refugees are portrayed as either powerless victims or proactive individuals attempting to change their circumstances. Moreover, Karen O'Reilly (2014, 217) emphasizes that existing theories of agency are designed to outline the relationship between agency and structure; they tend to overlook the imaginative and creative elements of agency.

Kanal and Rottmann's (2021) analysis draws attention to two specific dimensions of agency. The first of these is psychologizing agency, the main purpose of which is to take care of the individuals' well-being and psychological health.[4] Actions performed for psychological health often involve responding to certain moral codes and normative structures, such as the "sacrifices" of mothers for the sake of their children. From an individualistic perspective, this is not necessarily understood as agency; it only becomes so when placed within the context of values that are important to a specific person. Second, when conduct in accordance with social norms translates into the improved psychological health of the individual, we can understand this as an interdependent agency. While some theories of agency may not recognize this, it is the primary and most firmly sanctioned form of agency in many cultural contexts (Kanal, and Rottmann 2021). Kanal and Rottmann (2021) also point out that independent and interdependent agency should be considered as existing along a scale rather than as a strong dichotomy. This transition from understanding agency as an individualistic (and rather Eurocentric) phenomenon appears to be particularly important in the context of feminist and postcolonial studies. As Saba Mahmood (2005) writes, it may also be especially relevant when analyzing the agency of groups with a strong Islamic cultural influence, which is relevant given that the Sahrawis are Sunni Muslims.

[4] In situations of limited control over one's life – as is the case for forced migrants – acceptance of one's powerlessness can also have an adaptive dimension (Nakamura and Orth 2005; Park 2010).

In my theoretical analysis, I follow Sherry Ortner (2006), for whom the dialectical link between structural constraints and people's practices as social actors is a means to acknowledge the human experience, enabling us to understand the constraints affecting actors, the transformation and creation of structures, and attempts to escape from or change the established order. Ortner (2006), however, sees structure at the micro, as well as the macro, level. As Federico Settler points out when discussing Ortner's concept, structures are "established, expressed, resisted, and reconfigured in the micro-level interactions between social actors" (2019, 97).

Ortner (2006) differentiates between two types of agency. The first, agency-as-power, refers to issues of control, domination, and resistance. The second, agency-as-project, deals with intentions and desires. As Ortner writes, agency can, therefore, also be "a form of intention and desire, as the pursuit of goals and the enactment of projects" (2006, 153). The first type unfolds in situations of unequal access to power; the second, however, is a feature not only of the privileged, but also of the disadvantaged. When analyzed in conjunction with intentionality and social norms, these forms of agency explain the apparent internal contradictions of structure and power while highlighting the cultural aspects of plans and strategies.

Ortner also emphasizes the emotional and sociocultural aspects of agency: "Agency is not some natural or originary will; it takes shape as specific desires and intentions within a matrix of subjectivity – of (culturally constituted) emotions, thoughts, and meanings" (2006, 110). This is evident through the analysis of practices as serious games, such as the shifting rules described by Bina Fernandez (2020) among Ethiopian migrant women. Fernandez (2020) draws on the analytical framework proposed by Ortner (2006), in which the agency of migrants can be seen within a framework of structural opportunities. Ethiopian women working in Lebanon, for example, sought better working conditions as part of a survival strategy in a difficult system of employer dependency, and their ability to navigate the system improved with their length of stay in the Middle East (Fernandez 2020). Interestingly, however, "women tended to view 'luck' or 'fate' or 'God,' rather than their own 'choice,' as the primary factor determining their working conditions" (Fernandez 2020, 63). This highlights the importance of the cultural aspects of agency.

As some researchers have shown, when analyzing agency in migration processes, an important role is played not only by the analysis of behaviours and practices, but by the analysis of hoping, imagining, and planning (Pessar,

and Mahler 2003). From this, Settler derives the idea that it is important to pay attention to "mindwork that emanates from the social and religious imaginaries of migrants" (2019, 102). The analysis of hopes, potentialities, and social imaginaries of a good life shows us the different dimensions of uncertainty that migrants face, but also the possibilities and hopes they see, and the meaning-making practices they perform (Kleist 2017).

In this article, I apply Ortner's (2005) theory of agency-as-power and agency-as-project in detail to the case of Sahrawis who migrate to Spain, focusing on culturally positioned agency by including aspects related to values, psychological well-being, and interdependent agency (Kanal, and Rottman 2021). The cultural aspects of agency are evident both in the practices of young Sahrawis men migrating to Spain, and in their hopes, imaginations, and planning (Pessar, and Mahler 2003). This perspective on agency will allow for a better understanding of the migrants' situation in Spain and the strategies they adopt.

Research methodology

This study is based on multi-sited ethnographic research (Marcus 1995), with an important component of interviews with Sahrawis from the camps who migrate to Spain, representatives of the Polisario administration in Spain,[5] and Sahrawis who live in the camps. Some of the latter have returned from Spain, some dream of leaving the camps, and others are unwilling or unable to depart. The interviews with migrants and non-migrants were biographical and semi-structured (60 interviews); those with Polisario representatives were semi-structured expert interviews (11 interviews). The research was carried out by myself, and the interviews and conversations were conducted in Spanish. The field research began in 2019 in several Spanish cities and regions (Catalonia, February 2019; Madrid, August 2021; Basque Country, May – June 2022; Valencia and the Canary Islands, November – December 2022), as well as in Sahrawi refugee camps located near Tindouf in southern Algeria (October – November 2022 and February 2023). Interviewees were selected using a snowball method, considering the diverse trajectories of migration and assuming the relevance of multi-sited ethnography, in which subsequent ethnographic sites resulted from interviews during earlier stages.

[5] Polisario Front is a Sahrawi national liberation movement that is considered to be a representative of Sahrawis by the UN, and that cooperates closely with the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic government.

In this article, I examine the situation of Sahrawi men who have migrated to Spain since 2010 and have worked in precarious conditions, and I do so by detailing the cases of four young Sahrawi men.[6] Because it is possible for these men to quickly enter the relatively well-paid labour market (e.g., construction, renovation, or production work in factories, and the seasonal hospitality industry), they choose one of two strategies: living in Spain (the scenario analyzed here) or working seasonally in Spain and living at least three or four months per year in the camps. The research questions focused on the cultural elements of agency, indicating the values relevant to Sahrawis that influenced their imaginaries of a good life, and their choices and strategies.

The theory of practice does not impose a specific method of analysis. Data were analyzed using open coding in NVIVO qualitative data analysis software, following the grounded theory method through a "constant comparative strategy" (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The data were analyzed cyclically: analysis and data collection happened alternately, making it possible to address emerging empirical gaps in subsequent stages of the study and to verify during the fieldwork if initial interpretive tropes had any merit.

Point of departure: Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria

Since 1976, Sahrawi refugee camps have existed in Algeria, and now a significant portion of the population are so-called born refugees (Bloch 2011), meaning they were born in the camps. In addition, a significant, perhaps even larger, number of Sahrawis live in areas occupied by Morocco, and the Sahrawi diaspora is spread across Mauritania, Morocco, Spain, France, and Italy (Wilson 2021).[7] According to the most reasonable calculations, around

[6] I have not conducted quantitative research, so I cannot conclusively determine the statistical correlations of the Sahrawi migrant population. However, comparing migration and work trajectories from the gender perspective, what emerges from the numerous interviews I have conducted is a picture of women who are less likely to choose seasonal work, and most of those who live in Spain have had the opportunity to learn and study there or to accompany their working husbands. In this article, I only analyze the stories of men who have close relatives in the camps, since their absence (which is a rare situation associated with the emigration of all close relatives to Spain or Mauritania), significantly affects the situation of migrants by changing the practices resulting from normative care regimes.

[7] As Tavakoli (2020) states, the Sahrawi diaspora is an important source not only of financial support, but also of networks for the sale of goods abroad, such as the export of *melfas* (traditional women's clothing) to Spain and France and employment opportunities in transport. For some families, one source of income, and also of economic and small-business growth, is cooperation with Spanish aid networks. This includes camp tourism in the form of families involved in the *Vacaciones en Paz* ("Holidays in

173,600 people were living in the camps as of March 2018 (UNHCR 2018). Importantly, the camps are located far from other Algerian cities or settlements; this distinguishes them from, for example, Palestinian camps in Lebanon, where the Palestinian and Lebanese communities have become more integrated over time.

The year 1991 brought not only a ceasefire but also social and economic changes, including greater openness to the movements of goods and people to and from the camps (Wilson 2021). This is sometimes even referred to as the Sahrawi Perestroika (Shelley 2004), due to the market economy, as an economic rule for a free Western Sahara, being written into the 1991 State Constitution (Wilson 2020). In addition to humanitarian aid, the incomes generated from small businesses, the salaries owed to state employees, administrators, and teachers, and the pensions owed to former Spanish administration employees, have been important sources of financial support over the past three decades (Tavakoli 2020; Wilson 2021). However, neither humanitarian aid nor the (extremely limited) income opportunities eliminate the hardships faced by Sahrawis living in the camps. Statistics show that humanitarian aid is responsible for 52% of the food provided, while for the poorest households, food accounts for as much as 60% of their expenditure (WFP 2017). However, aid has been declining in recent years, meeting less than 50% of the needs for permanent programs (UNHCR 2022). Following the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, rations issued by the World Food Program were reduced in Sahrawi camps, reflecting a worldwide trend (Krawczyk 2021). My informants also pointed out that with the outbreak of the Morocco-Sahrawi war in November 2020, possibilities for trade were considerably reduced; border traffic is now significantly restricted, forcing many people who had been importing goods from Mauritania to give up their work.

Despite the reopening of the economy, it is therefore impossible for refugees to self-sustain in the camps, and for some families the most important sources of financial income are remittances sent by relatives living abroad[8] (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2019; Tavakoli 2020). Although Malmberg (1997) points out that people are inclined to migrate internally rather than abroad, for those

Peace") project, but also athletes participating in the Sahara Marathon, and participants in the FiSahara film festival and the ARTifariti art and human rights festival (suspended from 2020, due to hostilities). These initiatives have been in place since 2000, 2003, and 2007, respectively (Tavakoli 2020).

[8] These data came from an interview conducted on 16.02.2023 in Madrid with a Polisario representative.

in the camps, this is not an option. Due to restrictions on freedom of movement and taking up employment in Algeria outside of Tindouf, Sahrawis have no prospect of benefiting from the local Algerian market. Thus, foreign migration has become one of the few options available to them.

There are no certain data indicating how many people have migrated from the camps to Spain and other countries. Migration began in the mid-1990s, initially consisting mostly of individuals, but over time the Sahrawi diasporas in some Spanish cities have grown (e.g., Vitoria-Gasteiz, Valencia, Zaragoza). There are currently around 17,000 Sahrawis living in Spain[9].

As Wilson points out, Sahrawis in the camps are "citizens-in-exile of a state-like administration of their own" (2018, 145). However, after almost 50 years of existence in temporariness, the camps are still places of waiting, which corresponds with the tradition of analyzing limbo spaces in refugee studies. This suspension in time and constant waiting makes some families settle in, despite the temporariness. When more cash arrives, they build bathrooms without running water or they tile their kitchens without constant electricity and gas. Behind this temporariness in Spain and in the camps, there are processes such as the externalization of European borders towards Maghreb countries (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and pre-war Libya or Mauritania) and the securitization of border regimes (Lorenzo 2014), the precarization of migrants, as well as the increasing difficulty of legalizing their stays. These are "neither new nor typical only of the region" (Sampedro Vizcaya 2019).

The everyday life of the Sahrawi people living in the camps is framed around *Khayma*, a word denoting a tent in Modern Standard Arabic, which in Hassaniya (a variety of Maghrebi Arabic spoken by Sahrawis) also means a house, a home, and a family (Isidoros 2015). *Khayma* is a key element of Sahrawi culture and is reflected in the importance of both close and extended family, with the figure of the mother as the founder of the family and from whose name the family is identified. For young men, it is therefore crucial to support (not only financially, but also through emotional care or assistance) his family of origin, including everyone living in the so-called "big house" (his mother, sisters, remaining brothers, cousins, aunts, etc.), but also – if he has managed to start his own family – his wife and children. This strong sense of attachment has resulted in three migration strategies. The first one is the departure of the

[9] Unlike in other migration contexts, remittances have extremely limited potential to contribute to the economic independence of the inhabitants of the Sahrawi camps.

whole close family and the establishment of a life in Spain; however, this strategy is very rarely chosen due to the limitations of the migration regime, as well as the reluctance of a large part of the elderly residents of the camps to move out. The second strategy is a circular migration to Spain to undertake seasonal work there, with stays of several months in the camps; this is the most commonly chosen strategy in recent years. Finally, some Sahrawis, often those who came to Spain as children under the *Vacaciones en Paz* ("Holidays in Peace") project and stayed there for health reasons, often choose to live permanently in Spain. However, this does not change their sense of attachment to the family living in the camps and the subsequent tasks associated with their well-being. It is the situation of these young men and their migration strategies that I will analyze further in this article.

Agency and serious games in the migration trajectories of young Sahrawis

Sidi was born in the camps in 1991. Unlike many older migrants, he hardly spoke Spanish when he arrived in Spain. The Spanish lessons at his camp's school were insufficient for him to be able to speak fluently; he only knew isolated words. He had the opportunity to travel to Spain four times as part of the *Vacaciones en Paz* project. After completing his basic education, he had to support his family, so he worked in the camps as a driver and helped with building houses. However, as he says: "You work one day and you earn three or four euros. And those three or four euros don't even give you enough to buy meat for your mother, or anything else. It gives you just enough for a minimum".

He arrived in Spain in 2017; with the economic crisis long past, he had expected to find work easily. Indeed, until 2020, most of the time he had the right to stay and to work. However, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly reduced the number of jobs available to him. He failed to meet the requirement to work legally for a minimum of six months in a year, so he lost his residency. The following year, his application was rejected because he failed to submit additional documents; unfortunately, the letter from the court arrived at one of his old addresses because, for financial reasons, Sidi had to move around a lot, often being put up in friends' flats. He is currently working, although without permits and papers, which is rather uncommon for Sahrawis. His employer has promised to help him legalize his situation soon.

As with many Sahrawis, his father also held Spanish citizenship. Unfortunately, the practice of granting family citizenship to Sahrawis had ended by the time he arrived in Spain. For some years now, the prevailing practice has been to grant Sahrawis stateless person status (*apatrida*), which is more convenient than a residence permit (*residencia*), from the Sahrawis' perspective. Baba, Sidi's younger cousin, directly addresses these pragmatic and temporarily profitable aspects of the legalization of stay:

> Now they all have only *apatrida*. *Apatrida* is different from a residence permit. With the *residencia* you get one year and you are obliged to work six months to be able to get the next year. The *apatrida* doesn't. You take it and that's it. So we prefer the *apatrida* because it's easier to stay legally [Baba, 25–30].

This significant change in the way residence is legalized is one element of the precarization of the situation of migrating Sahrawis. Despite Sahrawi colonial dependence, Spain is moving away from recognizing the Spanish ancestral documents of Sahrawi migrants. Starting in the 2000s, nationality has been granted with decreasing frequency, procedures have been prolonged, and applications have been increasingly refused. For individual migrants, the increasingly inaccessible status of Spanish nationality was replaced by the much more obtainable *apatrida*, which is characterized by greater uncertainty and precariousness. It does not give access to full citizenship rights and is granted only for a period of five years, after which one can apply for citizenship if one has continued living in Spain during this period, or for an extension of *apatrida* status. For young Sahrawis, for whom the foremost necessity when coming to Spain is to enter the labour market quickly, this shift towards a more quickly attained, albeit more precarious, status is seemingly a change for the better, especially when compared to a residence permit.

The precarious situation of migrants is also linked to their limited knowledge of the law. This is unsurprising, as the law changes quite frequently and the predominant source of information is conversations with family and friends. However, as Baba says, this ignorance of the details reflects a pragmatic approach to the law and the opportunities it provides:

> The majority of Sahrawis do not have knowledge of, for example, what is statelessness, what advantages do I have; nothing like that. What they are concerned about is that they have the papers to be legal in Spain and to be allowed to work. That is what

> concerns them. What stateless status means or the advantages that stateless status has, most of them don't care about and don't even have in mind [Baba, 25–30].

Young men arriving in Spain are aware that their chances of gaining citizenship are non-existent at this point. They have concrete needs, mainly economic (but set in the essential context of social norms and moral values), associated with providing financial security for themselves and their families in the camps. They therefore have a practical approach to any legal situation, seeking to acquire the right to stay and work as soon as possible.

However, for many Sahrawis, a long stay in Spain, legalization of residence, and even citizenship do not translate into a stable situation in the labour market. This precariousness may be partly due to some of the choices that Sahrawis make. Serious games that people play are, according to Ortner (2006), the intentional strategies they choose to achieve goals in the thicket of structural constraints and opportunities. As Mukerji points out, an "agent playing serious games is not a free agent, but rather someone who picks up a cultural script and then decides how to play it. This agent is neither a passive recipient of a predetermined role nor a mirror of societal rules. The agent is a strategic participant in social life" (2009, 562). These strategic actions, taken by people both in everyday life and in such key life events as migration, have the causal – and importantly, intentional – power to affect various kinds of constraints.

Many interviewees highlighted that, compared to Spanish citizens and even other migrants, Sahrawis have great ease in changing their place of residence. Linking the ease of migration to the tradition of a nomadic Sahrawi culture is a simplistic explanation for a multifaceted situation.[10] The fact is, however, that for Sahrawis, moving to another city is usually not too much of a problem. For Baba, it is clear that this ease has to do with a culture that does not place great value on putting down roots and attaching oneself to one place:

> For example, when I stay in a city for too long, I automatically get overwhelmed. It's something we have in our blood; I can't say no to that. Because we are nomads. After all, I like to travel to other places, to see other places. I think there are many Sahrawis who have it in their blood or in their mind [Baba, 25–30].

[10] For example, Daniel Williams and Norman McIntyre (2012) enumerated important markers of the quality of life in the context of lifestyle migration, such as climate, nature, facilities, employment, security, family ties, and tradition.

Even so, it is much easier for Sahrawis to diasporically settle more permanently in cities such as Vitoria-Gasteiz, Valencia, Alicante, Sevilla. or Zaragoza. These locations provide assistance and greater opportunities, for example in employment (mostly in construction, renovation, or production work in factories, and the seasonal hospitality industry). Choosing and sticking to a particular career path has allowed Baba, Sidi, and other Sahrawis to support their families in Spain, to give continual financial support[11] to their families in the camps. Importantly to them, it has also allowed them to live better lives by moving to a country offering better healthcare, a milder climate, and running water.

Imaginaries of a good life now and in the future as elements of the cultural dimensions of agency

Gianluca Gatta identifies time and the possibility of managing it as an important element of agency, which can be deprived by the appropriation of autonomous time (2012b after Fontanari 2018). Such appropriation, however, does not always reach into the future, giving space for aspirations, goals, and dreams (Fontanari 2018). Hein de Haas (de Haas 2010) has also discussed how aspirations for a better life are essential to migration and the formation of migration trajectories. For Sahrawis, the imagining, planning, and playing of serious games are aimed at enabling their families to *tener una vida mejor* ("have a better life"). Caring about the future of their loved ones' (and also of all Sahrawis') hopes and futures, alongside current financial and emotional care, form the main normative reference point of Sahrawis living in Spain.

The concept of a "better life" is a complex one that escapes simplistic, homogenizing definitions. It is not just about achieving a comfortable dream life in the West. In fact, it is much more about the climatic conditions in the camps than the European availability of material goods.

> It's a question of money, but it's also a question of the quality of life out there. We are talking about the climate, we are talking about the heat. We are talking about a land that is called hamada; it is a land that nobody can live in (Baba, 25–30].

[11] On the subject of nomadic culture in Sahrawi society within the context of a critical analysis of the literature on the subject, cf. Kluszczyńska (2021).

Baba came to Spain through the *Vacaciones en Paz* project as a child and managed to live for a few years with a host family in a large city in the south of Spain. His parents decided on this move because Baba's older sister lived nearby, so Baba was not left alone in the new country. His health was so bad that he could not return to the camps, and after a year he moved in with his sister, with whom he lived for several years until she left for Belgium. It was then that he decided to move to the Basque Country; he had distant relatives there and knew that he could count on their support in case of any problems. His parents and siblings, apart from his older sister, live in the camps. He realizes how privileged his family is to have two children living abroad, despite the daily difficulties they face:

> Of course they are suffering, of course they are still suffering. Of course they have a lot of difficulties in life, that's for sure... At the end of the day, they are the people who live with anything. Living with what they have. Now it has improved somewhat with people who have someone here, like me, like him. We can send them something; this makes it easier for them [Baba, 25–30].

An important element of Sahrawi masculinity is reflected in caring for and ensuring the good lives of relatives and friends. In migration studies, the picture of the subject of care is primarily a woman – a mother, daughter, or grandmother – involved in reproductive work, often as part of a global care chain or international transfer of caretaking (Parreñas 2001). During this research, however, it was clear that care, and the norms and values associated with caring, apply as much to Sahrawi men as to women. What differentiates them is only the roles assigned in a given situation and thus the opportunities and responsibilities.

When we look at the migration of Sahrawis not only from the perspective of the migrating individuals, but as a piece of a puzzle that also includes family members who remain in the camps, then – according to the assumptions of new economic labour migration theory – the migration of some is in fact a survival strategy for the broader household. This strategy allows access to additional financial resources and enables the diversification of the family income. As Anna Triandafyllidou (2015) writes, even when a departure is the result of an individual's decision – or, as in Baba's case, derives necessarily from a medical condition – it also has an impact on the material situation and emotional well-being of the entire family. Nevertheless, the decision to migrate or remain abroad can sometimes allow individuals to overcome difficult situations and can

become the moment when they begin to exercise decisiveness (understood as agency) over their own lives (Benson and O'Reilly 2009).

Sidi, who tries to visit the camps once a year, notes how the situation for those living there has deteriorated:

> Before, a lot of money was not necessary. But now it is. Everything is expensive now. Before we bought bread with 5 cents or 10 cents; now we buy it with 30 cents... Before they gave you a lot more things; now the level has gone down, but there is still rice, flour, and that's all. Before, you would have enough and you could have a little for the next month; now you have enough for 15 days. Those who don't have must make more effort or look for a different way [Sidi, 30–35].

For Ali, who has lived in Spain since 2010, living in the camps has a sense of meaninglessness. He decided to migrate to Spain because while in the camps there, he felt that he could neither notably help his family, nor could his activities support the Western Sahara struggle. As he said while describing his adult life in the camps: "It is becoming more and more frustrating. So you think to yourself, if I want to help my people, I don't think I can do anything from the camps" [Ali, 35–40]. Both Sidi and Baba also clearly indicated that they do not plan to return to the camps. In addition to feeling accustomed to the more comfortable life in Spain, they point out in particular the lack of usefulness they would feel living in the camps. As Sidi explains:

> When I'm with my family, I have nothing and neither do they. I don't have anything and neither do they. If I go with money, I'm going to spend it in three months. I'm not going to sit there with my family, not having enough money to buy bread [Sidi, 30–35].

The care extends not only to the immediate family and friends but also to other Sahrawis. This community of care brings us closer to thinking about agentive norms and actions in a collective dimension (Madhok et al. 2013). Bashir, whose story was presented at the beginning of the article, points to a sense of community of care that is typical of Sahrawis, whereby newcomers to Spain are supported at the start of their path in a new country.

> I go to my cousin's house now. But my cousins, when they have nowhere to go, they come to my house. We are even doing it this way, where people come to

> my house, because they don't have papers or work and they stay in my house for months, without paying for anything – no food, no electricity, nothing – until they are able to. My parents offer them the house and everything. We are very united, we have a lot of unity [Bashir, 20–25].

Staying and working in Spain not only has the dimension of the possibility of supporting individuals, but also serves as a form of political support for the Sahrawi cause – an essential element of Sahrawi identity, in which the struggle for Western Sahara independence is understood not only through armed struggle, but also through awareness-raising activities in Spain, supporting the Sahrawi diaspora abroad, and attending demonstrations or cultural events. This type of political loyalty, which is one of the most important values of contemporary Sahrawi culture, and which is practiced through the norm of supporting the struggle for a free Western Sahara, was an important element for many of my interviewees, reinforcing their decision to leave the camps and to remain in Spain. Sidi and Baba send around €100 to €150 a month to the camps. This is a relatively large sum, considering that their salaries oscillate only slightly above the national average, and they have to pay room rent and all their bills:

> I can't tell you that we can help them very much. But we can help them with something. Because you know perfectly well that even here you are going to have difficulties in life. Because you go to work, you have to pay all the expenses: the electricity, the water, the house. And in the end you are in a way making an effort to make a living. Because you want to support your family, because at the end of the day it is also difficult for us. For them and for us it is difficult [Baba, 25–30].

The precarious nature of their work does not allow my interviewees to set aside any money or stabilize their housing situation; even less so because of the need to support their families back in the camps. Living in uncertainty is one of the constant characteristics of this group of refugees. It translates to a lack of long-term plans or high hopes related to migration. Among the interviewees, the dominant view was rather the need to think ahead to the most immediate future and to support relatives in need, as in the case of Ali, who after having obtained the status of a stateless person works in a café in the centre of a tourist city.

> Live in today and think about tomorrow. I can't make plans, because if I had a place to hold on to, I'd say yes, I'm going to do something in my homeland. But this is

> the saddest thing; we don't have this place. For me, this is so bitter for all of us. Because we live in refugee camps, we can't settle there either, because it's a refugee camp in an Algerian land [Ali, 35-40].

However, the plans combining the continuation of life and work in Spain, local social and political activism, and the ongoing support of family living in the camps in the face of all difficulties indicate how agentive they are within the possibilities they have. Agency-as-project is part of their actions through their daily choices of career strategy. I argue that, above all, this is a selection within a game in which crucial cultural values make it more important to support one's family and loved ones than to build financial capital. This essentiality of care, manifested in the choice to live and work in Spain, but with constant support and being part of the family in the camp, points to a strategy that can be understood as interdependent agency.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that one element linking the histories of Sahrawi men living in Spain is their strong connections with their relatives living in the refugee camps in Algeria. This link translates into support, primarily in the form of financial remittances, to enable their families to cope with decreasing humanitarian aid and rising inflation. And, as is the case with Bashir, an air of uncertainty is also present for other Sahrawis living in Spain. This manifests as a state of limbo, characterized by attempting to build a life in Spain, wanting to reunite with family in the camps, and dreaming of moving to an independent Western Sahara.

For migrants living in Spain, the desire and need to support those who remain in the camps determines their financial management practices. Giving away a significant portion of their income leaves them unable to improve their own financial situation in Spain, as they lack the capital to invest in themselves, improve their professional skills, study, or buy a flat. At the same time, the strong bond with the camps leads many to choose jobs that allow longer trips to the camps. Thus, many Sahrawis are not only forced to work in the secondary sector; they also choose to stay in it because of the flexibility of the work and the possibility of taking longer holidays, allowing them to see their families but also take a break from the fast and stressful life in Spanish cities. This strategy can be understood as agency-as-project – in which crucial cultural values make

it more important to support one's family and loved ones living in the camps than to build financial capital and stability in Spain. As a result, temporariness is the only constant characteristic of the life of this group of refugees, which is visible as a lack of long-term plans or opportunities related to migration.

At a time when the regulations of the migration regime tend to exclude and create precariousness for the situation of migrants while victimizing them, caring seems to be one way to overcome migratory hardships. However, care – which should be understood more broadly along with values and norms – should be analyzed not as a reflection of the heart, but as one of the sociocultural aspects of a given society. The above stories indicate that even the secondary labour market enables agentive moves according to the projects people have. However, the realization of these projects can have the effect of reinforcing precariousness in the labour market, including instability related to wages, employment, or financial security. I also argue that structural cultural conditions, including generosity and mutual support, as well as political circumstances involving the unresolved status of Western Sahara, prevent any prospects for substantial change in the situation of young Sahrawi man.

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WRITING THE FORBIDDEN: A STUDY OF THREE TEXTS, THREE GENRES, AND THREE COMMUNITIES

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Abstract: ***Three texts have been chosen for this study: Daya Pawar's life-narrative Baluta, Perumal Murugan's historical fiction One Part Woman, and Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's short story collection The Adivasi Will Not Dance. These writers hail from various subaltern groups of the Indian subcontinent, with diverse ethnicities. Besides subalternity, a significant thread connecting these texts is that the writers' respective communities took offence at the portrayal of their cultures. This study explores the self-representation of the community through a close reading of the texts, and theorizes the relationship between the writer, narrator, characters, and the community. The paper analyses how the writer employs the community in the narrative and the role this plays in the respective spatiotemporal contexts of the texts. Given the chosen texts are of different genres – a Dalit life-narrative, a historical novel, and short stories – the paper also explores the genre-ic/form-al differences in the representation/use of the community.***

Keywords: ***representation of community; freedom of expression; censorship; subalternity; postcolonial studies***

Three texts, the writers of which have come under attack for the particular portrayals of their respective communities, are chosen for this study. The texts are Perumal Murugan's Tamil-language novel *Mathorupaagan* (2010), translated into English as *One Part Woman* (2013); Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's short story collection *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015); and Daya Pawar's life-narrative *Baluta* (1978), translated from the Marathi language into English in 2015. Murugan belongs to the Kongu Vellala community, which falls under

the umbrella Gounder caste of the western Tamil Nadu state in India, and his text is situated within the same caste and locality set in the mid-20th century. Pawar belongs to the ex-untouchable Mahar caste from the state of Maharashtra in India, and he focuses on the broad and political identity 'Dalit'[1] in *Baluta*, so this study will explore the same. Shekhar belongs to the Santhal tribe of the Jharkhand state in India, and most of his stories explore the textures of life of the Santhal people. These ethnic groups – Gounder, Mahar, and Santhal – will be defined and explored in detail later in the study. Unlike the novel *One Part Woman* and the short story collection *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*, the life-narrative *Baluta* did not directly come under attack in civil society; however, the urban Dalit's displeasure at Pawar's portrayal of Mahar culture is drawn from within the text. Given that it is a life-narrative, a genre reflecting lived experience, the tendency of othering the writer/narrator from the community is legitimized by taking from the text.

Certain sections of the writers' communities took offence at the representations of their culture in the texts, thereby sidelining the authors, and this study is interested in the portrayal/representation of the respective communities. The portrayal of the community is revealed through the characters and the plot. A common feature in these texts is that all the characters have caste identities. The caste information of every character is blatant and does not require effort to dig out from within the text. This information is lucidly presented matter-of-factly; just as gender is an essential component of characterization, caste is also represented as a character trait by these writers. By uncovering the characterization, this study explores the representation of the community. In *One Part Woman* and in *Baluta*, the dynamics between the protagonists and the other characters will be studied, and in the short stories, the various Santhal characters are studied in relation to the non-Santhal characters. I will begin by separately exploring the community's role in the selected texts.

[1] Dalit, previously known as untouchables, is the lowest stratum of castes in the Indian subcontinent. Dalits were excluded from the four-fold varna system of graded inequality of Hinduism. In the late 1880s, the Marathi word *Dalit* was used by social reformer Jyotirao Phule for the outcasts and untouchables who were oppressed and broken in Hindu society.

One Part Woman, Or the Constant Prodding of the Community

Perumal Murugan's novel *One Part Woman* has two protagonists, Kali and Ponna; neither of them overpowers the narrative, and the point of view of the narrator shifts between these characters. The narrative is about a farming couple whose happiness is marred by their inability to have a child. The plot revolves around society's reactions towards them, how they are humiliated, and what happens in the end. Even the seed that Ponna planted soon after their wedding grows into a lush, large tree in twelve years "while not even a worm had crawled in [Kali's] womb," reads the text. Every wretched thing reminds Kali and Ponna of their lack of a child. Even while spending leisure time with his friends, Kali is made to endure the humiliation of childlessness. While Kali was teasing Murugesan about his work style, an angered Murugesan retorts by saying "'Work is not about this. Work is about *this*,' and he made a lewd gesture, lifting two fingers of his left hand and inserting the index finger of his right hand between them" referring to intercourse. While drinking Munia Nadar's arrack/toddy, Kali says "Oh, this is great stuff! As vital as water" and Subramani immediately replies, "It is not enough if the water you take in is great, the water you send out should be top-class too," referring to semen. The double entendres that men use towards Kali mock his masculinity and are meant to affirm their own. Unable to speak his mind and act freely because of such humiliating responses from friends and family, Kali retreats into isolation.

Seen by society as a "barren" woman, Ponna is insulted and excluded by the community. Starting with her mother, everyone mocks her inability to produce a lineage for the family. Ponna is attentive to all of Kali's moves, and she pays close attention to all his needs, about which her mother says "Let's see if you still run around taking care of your husband after a child is born..." To which Ponna, brimming with pride, says "Even if I give birth to ten children, he will always be my first child." Her mother quickly replies that it is all right to desire, but that Ponna is greedy, and maybe that is what has put off even the gods from giving her a child. Ponna is not even allowed to use common phrases like "ten children" to make a playful point; even that is used against her. The lack of a child is part of every conversation, every thought, every move, and every breath. When Ponna raises concerns to the parents of children in the neighbourhood, they reply, "Look at her, advising me like she has raised some seven or eight children." When Ponna turns up late for a gathering, Sarasa sarcastically tells

her "Despite my telling you to come early, you are arriving only now. Did you get delayed in getting your daughters ready?" At Chellamma's daughter's puberty ceremony, Chellamma's brother's wife tells Ponna, "You stay away" from the ritual. This makes Ponna wonder if a childless woman performing the ritual would make the girl barren, and if Ponna was so inauspicious. The constant prodding of the people in her community causes Ponna to doubt herself; she begins feeling worthless and inferior. Ponna even has to endure remarks such as: "Why don't you eat what you like? Whom are you buying so miserly for?" Even her sister-in-law says so once. Some of the insulting comments hurled at Ponna by members of the same community are: "What are you going to do by saving money? Eat well, wear good clothes, and be happy," "That barren woman ran up and down carrying seeds. How do you expect them to grow once she has touched them?", and "This childless woman smells a child's ass and squirms at the sight of a child's shit. How does she expect to be blessed with a child?"

People in the community had concluded that Ponna and Kali would never have children; it was in fact what some people desired. Convinced they would not have children, Kali's uncles would regularly send their own children to Kali's house, not out of love for Kali and Ponna, but rather, this idea of bonding regularly was a strategic move: "If it ever came to a property dispute later, the closer ones might get more, right?" The family members, who represent the wider community, were insensitive to the childless couple. Neither are Ponna and Kali's worldviews devoid of the community's expectations. The community considers procreation as an essential part of life, and so do Ponna and Kali. As such, they suffer the humiliation of not having a child from the community at every step of the story. Twelve years of childlessness are accompanied by thousands of temple visits, prayers, and offerings. Nothing yields results, and Kali is goaded into taking a second wife. After thinking long and hard about a second marriage, Kali abandons the idea; his mind simply could not envision any other woman in Ponna's place. Kali thinks that "if the only way to beat this reputation for impotence was to marry again," then he should find another woman; but, "what would happen if that failed too?" He would have then ruined the lives of two women.

The solution of adopting a child does not come from the community; to have one's own biological child is portrayed as essential. However, Ponna does consider adopting a child, when a lower caste family with many children is suggested, but the issue of caste acts as a barrier:

> "How can a Sanar child grow up in a Gounder household?" The mother of the children tells her husband, regarding the proposition, "Think before you speak! If they hear us, his relatives will come here to beat us to a pulp. Let a Gounder find a child from among his relatives."

The ex-untouchable community of Nadars was historically known as Sanars, a poor community of palmyra climbers and toddy tappers.

Kali and Ponna both attempt to run away from the crisis, physically isolating themselves from community rituals and celebrations. They are the primary sufferers. The crisis is their own and they cannot run away from themselves. The necessity to have children is internalized by them. This norm of life is socially conditioned and accepted by Ponna and Kali. Ponna wishes Kali could be like Nalluppayan, who is not concerned about the community's ways of life. He is totally devoid of the norms of society and not hesitant to offend the community and speak foully to the elders. Nallupayyan, who is forced to get married, tells his mother, "What did you accomplish by getting married? You spread your *pallu* (saree/clothing) for a worthless husband, gave birth to so many children, and you are suffering till today. Drop the matter. I don't need to go through the same hell." The character of Nallupayyan is important in the story. Besides Ponna and Kali, he is the only character described at length. He breaks the norms in the village. He cuts off his top-knot[2] and argues and wins the case in the panchayat. Nalluppayan kept a Chakkili (an ex-untouchable community, historically engaged in leather work) boy with him in the house who cooks for him. To those who take offence at that, he says, "Oh! You find a Chakkili woman fragrant and only a Chakkili boy stinks for you?" referring to dominant-caste men sexually abusing underprivileged women. After all, Nallupayyan did not care one bit what anyone thought. He wanted for nothing and that kept him happy. He tells Kali, "If you are always worried about what others are going to say, you will always be in trouble." Whenever Kali spends time with Uncle Nallupayyan, he forgets the pain of being childless. He would even feel convinced that it was good not to have children. However, soon a thought would come up and rekindle his yearning for a child. Besides Ponna and Kali themselves, the family is the immediate representation of the community. The role of the community seems

[2] Traditionally all Hindus were required to wear the top-knot; today it is seen mainly among Brahmins and temple priests. It is one of the few symbols of Hindus that has transcended caste, language, or regional barriers. Although there were variations of the style of top-knot amongst communities, it was obligatory for all males.

to be to pressure, to prod, and mock both Kali and Ponna; it does not play the role of comforting the distressed couple. Nalluppayan is the only supportive and comforting character. He does not humiliate them for not having children. Moreover, he accepts Kali as he is and prefers spending time with him. Ponna lacks even that, as she has no friend to comfort her.

For twelve years, Ponna and Kali must endure the humiliation of childlessness, but this does not affect their marriage, as they dearly love each other, are loyal to one another, and do not cross the lines of fidelity. They are even possessive of each other, respectful of one another, and very much emotionally co-dependant. They do not allow anybody to create a rift between them and hinder their relationship. The day Kali finds out that "his mother and his wife did not get along, he ask[s] his mother to cook her own food". While working in the cowshed, Chellapa Gounder, indirectly referring to Ponna, tells Kali, "This is how some cows are. No matter what you do, they never get pregnant. Just quietly change the cow. If you say yes, I can fetch you one right away". Ponna foul-mouths Chellapa Gounder to the extent that he does not return to Kali's farm. This way, both Kali and Ponna ensure that nobody comes between them, but the most trusted person, Muthu, Ponna's brother and Kali's close friend, creates the rupture. He lies about Kali's acceptance of Ponna's visit on the fourteenth day of the temple festival at the temple city Thiruchengode, where she can get a child from "God." For one night, the norms of society are relaxed: all men are deemed gods and women desiring children are permitted to have sex with strangers. As Ponna enters the temple, the novel reaches its climax.

Shifting our focus back to the real world, a woman trying to get pregnant at a controversial Hindu public fertility ritual created a stir in Western Tamil Nadu in 2015. The Kongu Vellala community, backed by local Hindu right-wingers, claimed that the novel *Madhorubhagan* (the Tamil title of *One Part Woman*) showed their religious practices and their women in a bad light. The book earned the author Perumal Murugan death threats. Copies of his books were burned, and the town of Tiruchengode, where the novel is set, held a one-day strike to protest the novel's publication in January 2015. Following calls for his prosecution, Murugan declared his writings "dead" and stopped writing. Backing away from the literary scene, he withdrew all of his Tamil writings from bookshops. The protests were coordinated by the president of Tiruchengode's Hindu extremist group Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The *Guardian* reported that the actions ran over 18 days in 2015 in Tamil Nadu. RSS members argued that the book was an offensive interpretation of Hindu scripture, and was

insulting to the Hindu deity honoured in the fertility ritual. A year later, Madras's high court defended Murugan's freedom to express himself and asked people to learn to accept it. Soon after, he declared "I will get up" and he resumed writing.

Baluta, or resistance from within the Dalit middle class

Daya Pawar writes that he and his family "lived like animals in the Maharwada," a settlement away from the village meant for untouchable communities to live physically segregated from people of other castes. He was filled with revulsion against the life he was leading and wanted to get away from it. Even after attaining some degree of education, Pawar continues to face the same humiliation in the village, as the Mahar identity is "a leech that would not let go." However, within the Maharwada, education raises his esteem; here he is treated with respect because he is studying in high school. Their socioeconomic conditions had improved slightly, and he observes that his behaviour had begun to stand out from that of other Maharwada children, since he moved to the hostel to pursue higher education. Udaya Kumar observes that Dalit life-narratives demonstrate a gradual distancing of protagonists from their community, and the emergence of new, more enlightened, and politically active conceptions of a collective through the acquisition of formal educational qualifications, employment, and social recognition (2013, 164). Migrating to the town, residing in a hostel, and attending high school are the first steps towards a dignified life for Pawar.

The hostel experience[3] in Dalit life-narratives are crucial turning points. The hostel is where they receive wholesome meals every day and where they befriend residents from other castes, which is not possible in the village. This gives them hope and the ability to dream that hunger, poverty, and caste-based exclusion can be overcome. This hope, however, can be a source of difficulty, as it can hinder the complete acceptance of one's community and socioeconomic background in their newfound social life, and this puts Pawar in a difficult situation. He recalls how his mother used to visit the hostel to sell her produce to the hostel residents, but Pawar would not acknowledge her in front of his fellow hostellers, instead running after her after she left. "I burn with shame as I tell you about how I would only speak to my mother in secret. For an education, I was willing to sever the umbilical cord," he writes.

[3] Found in other Dalit life-narratives, such as Aravind Malagatti's *Government Brahmana* and Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*.

Getting a job as soon as he arrived in Mumbai was not possible, so Pawar grows terribly ashamed that his mother was still scavenging. He studied a lot, but he is still living on his mother's earnings. The job that he is finally able to obtain is that of a lab assistant in a veterinary hospital, where he must work with the samples of the feces of sick animals all day long. As he writes, "On the first day I understood how I got the job. No upper-caste person would have taken it." The close connection between the caste profession[4] of the Mahar community, to which the protagonist belongs, and the profession that he was able to attain in the city reveals the reproduction of social relations, while the economic relations of his job have shifted from the agrarian/feudal/rural economy to a capitalist one. The ostracization association with Dalit communities followed him to the city, a space which Pawar believed was devoid of explicit caste experiences.

In this phase of his life, Daya Pawar marries Sayee, a poorly educated girl from his own community and his village. He loves her dearly, but he expresses his love only within the four walls of their house. He is embarrassed to introduce his village wife to his urban colleagues and so does not invite his friends to his house. He longs to see Sayee wearing the modern five-yard sari, instead of the traditional nine-yard in the Mahar style, but *Aai* (mother) does not approve of it. As he writes, "I wanted my wife to look like she belonged to the Brahmin or Baniya caste. But that never became a reality. I felt aggrieved, for many of my friends had wives who dressed in the latest fashions and I couldn't even get my wife the kind of sari I wanted her to wear." One day, when Pawar forgets to carry his lunch to the office, Sayee carries his lunch to his workplace out of concern that he would go hungry. Soon after she leaves, a colleague of his says, "You sly dog! You've got a hot one as a maid." Pawar does not correct him. Recalling this episode, Pawar writes that he was ashamed to acknowledge that the person who had brought his lunch was his wife, as he had been too concerned about how his colleagues would perceive him if they knew of his village wife. By separating references to his community, Pawar attempts to secure a specific economic, social, cultural, and spatial identity for himself among his colleagues, who had privileged backgrounds.

Pawar sees that the city is clearly divided based on class and caste lines, creating two worlds within Mumbai. We see this slowly unfolding through various episodes scattered across the text in *Baluta*. One such episode is when Baluta boards a first-class train compartment carrying some dry duck meat,

[4] Manual scavenging

prompting his fellow passengers to wonder what the source of the stench is. Embarrassed by this, Pawar de-boards the train at the next station and boards a third-class compartment filled with working-class people, where nobody feels/smells anything unusual. It becomes evident for Pawar that to be completely accepted in the city, he must change the ways of his life because his culture is not normative in an urban setting. Mahar culture, Dalit food, the lower-caste language, and their sensibilities are not socialized in the urban public domain.

Recalling a memory, Pawar writes what he told his father in his youth, "Baba, when you came to Mumbai, you were doing physical labour; I have an education. When I get a job, the basic pay will be three-four hundred rupees." Pawar thinks that he, unlike his *Baba*, could build a house because he is educated and would earn more than his uneducated relatives engaged in manual labour. Recalling this episode, Pawar expresses his disappointment, saying, "Now I know that I spoke from the shaky foundation of hope. Today I see how foolhardy my words were."

Despite the starker caste experience in the village, the protagonist writes about a sense of belonging and community, which is disrupted upon taking his first steps towards the city. The protagonist's physical and intellectual journey to the city, his entry into the modern, has resulted in a loss of an essential, unmediated self that is celebrated in the rustic. As Laura Brueck argues, the road to freedom and modernity is not without sacrifice (2014). The protagonist, having lived all his adult life in the city, both yearns for a sense of community and belonging and is concurrently repelled by the caste-ridden village life. Neither completely attaining what he dreamt of nor returning to the village as a possibility, the Dalit protagonist is trapped. His migration from the poverty-stricken, caste-ridden village to a liberated space is unfulfilled. The dream-self is not attained, so the protagonist is forced to conceptualize an identity for his present self, the self that is continuously searching for the dream. Writing his life story is an important step towards conceptualizing that identity. But his fellow Dalit brothers and sisters in the city do not want to acknowledge that the migration is incomplete.

The sense of heaviness at the end of these texts comes from the protagonist not having found a community that believes the migration is incomplete and that wants to challenge Indian modernity. Although cities being caste spaces is the primary disillusionment of this genre, the secondary and more close-hearted disappointment, along witha sense of betrayal, comes from within the community.

The urban-educated Dalit class, a social strata to which the protagonist also belongs, poses a challenge to the protagonist's perception of social mobility and caste in urban spaces.

In these narratives, those in proximity to the protagonist represent the urban-educated Dalit community, such as the spouse, children, extended family members, friends, and colleagues. The challenge that the community poses is subtle but visible, as though Pawar wrote consciously not to offend them. He does not write about his present wife and children, nor does he mention their names; the wife is referred to only a couple of times. However, Pawar writes elaborately about his marriage and domestic life with Sayee. Many Dalit protagonists do not engage in detail about their present marital life and their children, and the silences must be interpreted accordingly; it is likely because their families do not wish to be associated with the Dalit identity that the protagonist holds onto.

The Dalit middle class's "mindless pursuit of modernity" (Guru 2000) makes them believe that migration from an utter casteist setting to a caste-free one is complete. This is a rupture in the process towards dignity and liberation, and this bothers the Dalit protagonist. What is meant to release Dalit characters from the stigma of the "rural" and "backward" in fact feels oppressive – such as not using one's surname, only consuming food that is deemed civilized and speaking a certain type of language. Being surrounded by a socially and economically upwardly mobile class of urban Dalits, who stand in contrast to the protagonist's belief in acknowledging caste as a means to annihilate it, disturbs the protagonist. Udaya Kumar observes that Dalit life-narratives show a gradual distancing of protagonists from the community, and the emergence of new, more enlightened, and politically active conceptions of a collective through the acquisition of formal educational qualifications, employment, and social recognition.

The people whom the Dalit protagonist refers to as one's own are offended and angered by the protagonist's language of caste, which they wish to shed. As Daya Pawar writes:

> I have tried my best to forget my past. But the past is stubborn; it will not be erased so easily. Many Dalits may see what I am doing here as someone picking through a pile of garbage. A scavenger's account of his life. But he who does not know his past cannot direct his future.

By speaking of caste and by writing of caste experiences, the Dalit protagonist associates the upwardly mobile urban Dalits with the poor, urban, slum-dwelling Dalits, and reminds this class of Dalits about their rural pasts ridden with poverty and humiliation. The characters of this class are unwilling to acknowledge their incomplete migrations and their recent pasts of oppression and suffering. It is also undesirable for them to share a common past with the lower-class urban Dalits, whom the protagonist sympathizes with. The protagonist mourns the plight of the urban wage labourers for whom high-quality education and dignified jobs are unrealized. These brothers and sisters, the protagonist thinks, are essential to urbanity, yet simultaneously are socioeconomic outsiders. By emphasizing the common recent rural past of the urban Dalits, the protagonist inevitably brings these two types of urban Dalits together, which is unwelcome by the economically upwardly mobile Dalit class. In response to the protagonist's attempt to make these connections across class, space, and time, the urban Dalit middle class distances itself from the narrator and dreads belonging to the category that the protagonist has created (based on the common past of untouchability that continues to be found in refashioned form). This breaks the notion that Dalit life-narratives speak for the community at large. From within the narrative erupts the protest against stories being written.

In the process of speaking in the collective, the Dalit writer has lost his space within the urban middle-class community. Despite the Dalit narrator's intention, in goodwill, to express the world of Dalit plight, struggles, and achievements – because only upon acknowledging caste can it be fought – the Dalit protagonist is shunned by this class for revealing to the larger world the lowly past that they are attempting to forget and move on from. According to Rita Kothari (2001), the urban Dalit middle class, which is educated and economically advancing, is facing an identity crisis, which is reflected in Dalit life-narratives. Although the urban middle class has benefited from the material advantages of modern society and enjoys a comfortable life, the protagonist feels that it is unaware of the precariousness of their newfound status. By safeguarding their own well-being, this class is isolating itself from its wider community, and the urban Dalit middle class will never completely make the journey away from the past on its own. The protagonist of the Dalit autobiography is aware of the dangers of cutting ties at the umbilical cord, as it would lead to alienation and isolated struggles, which will lead to further alienation.

The Adivasi Will Not Dance, or, there are all types of Santhals

The dynamics between people of different communities and Santhal people of varying social standings are narrated in each story of this anthology, *The Adivasi Will Not Dance*. No story outrightly glorifies or degrades the Santhals, or any other social group; the stories are written matter-of-factly, holding a mirror to reality. The class, gender, and spatial context of the characters are provided in the narratives, and social groups are not the singular point of oppression. Unlike in *One Part Woman*, where predominant characters belong to the same community and class, the class positions of the Santhals in the short stories vary. There are Santhals who own big businesses, as well as Santhal women who engage in sex work to overcome hunger. The portrayals are also not ideologically or politically driven and two-pronged (me versus the world) as seen in *Baluta*.

The short story "Sons" contrasts the lives of cousin-brothers Suraj and Raghu, who are born on the same day and same time. Both are Santhal tribals, but from different classes. Suraj is born into a wealthy family, and his family has a "large, two-storeyed house which everyone in Ghatshila talked about," whereas Raghu is "the son of an ordinary school teacher and a housewife from a Santhal village". This story illustrates how class or wealth are not directly equivalent to a secure and happy life. Raghu grows up in Suraj's bountiful shade, and naturally, everyone expects Suraj to do well in life, but he turns out to become an alcoholic addicted to the wild ways of life. Raghu becomes a doctor, which Suraj could not do, despite his privileges. This narrative portrays Suraj's father as a corrupt government officer, and Suraj's doom is portrayed as resulting from the degraded family scenario, even though he has sufficient wealth to assert social status.

In *Eating with the Enemy*, we see people of different class positions interacting with one another. The story is told from the perspective of a nameless narrator who is a well-off woman, possibly a Santhal, narrating about her house-help Sulochana, a Ghaasi (a Scheduled Caste community primarily found in eastern India). It projects a class perspective, where a middle-class narrator is unable to find logic in Sulochana's thoughts and behaviour. Sulochana, who would whine about her husband bringing Mohini, a mistress, into the house, but would overnight accept her without explanation. For instance, Sulochana goes on to entertain Babu, the man who molests her young daughter. The narrator is shown as being shocked and disgusted at Sulochana's ability to forget something

as offensive and humiliating as her daughter being abused and being flattered by Babu's car and money. Sulochana cooks mutton for Babu and drinks whisky with him in the new glasses he buys her.

The narrator is also amused at Sulochana's trait of not looking at her own oppression – belonging to an underprivileged caste herself, she points out others as inferior. When some Adivasi (tribal) workers were provided beverages at the narrator's house, Sulochana expresses her opinion: "But, didi... 'they are Adivasis!'" Although her life is in tatters – she is unable to provide for her daughters and her husband does not support her – she is conscious of keeping these social distinctions. *Eating with the Enemy* shows how class can be such a distinction that it is difficult to understand the thought process and behaviours of people from completely different classes.

Shekhar does not make clear distinctions between good and bad; he adopts everything from a third-person perspective, reflecting the narrator's social position. In *Eating with the Enemy*, the narrator is attempting to understand Sulochana. In this way, these stories project the interaction between different types of people, or the differences and similarities in the lives of people of different castes, different classes within the same caste, and people of completely different castes and classes. The stories challenge stereotypes that Adivasis are only oppressed and can never take on the traits of the privileged communities. Sekhar portrays inequality within the Adivasis, projecting corrupt Santhals and showing, through Suraj, that wealth is not necessarily a guarantee of social security.

"Getting Even" is a story about a morally righteous Thakur (historically a land-owning community in northern India) man fighting against a powerful and corrupt Santhal family. The Thakur man is married to a woman from the Santhal family, against the wishes of both communities. The Santhal family is shown as engaging in human trafficking, running a business selling girls from the community for sex work. The son of a Santhal mother and Thakur father is wrongly framed by his maternal family as revenge for exposing their business. The boy's father says these "Kristians[5]," "Santhals" "bring girls from villages on the pretext of giving them education, training, and work, and sell them away." Although the Thakur man opposes human trafficking, he does not oppose stereotyping tribals and discriminating against them. This story inverts the power structure, where the Adivasi is the powerful family and the agrarian Thakur is the weaker one, yet the social hierarchies seep through the class power.

[5] Tribals of India have largely converted to Christianity. Common among Santhal

In the story "Baso-jhi", we also see how Sekhar does not hesitate to portray Santhals as mistreating others and being abusive. In "Baso-jhi", the primary characters are all Santhals. It shows how belonging to the same tribe, or family, does not matter, as those who want to mistreat will find reasons to do so. Basanti *jhi* (a formal and respectful way of addressing a superior or elder person) is a single parent, raising her sons alone after her husband passes away. She resists society's mistreatment of widows, but her sons go on to call her a *dahni* (a witch) and accuse her of causing the death of her grandson. She is then thrown out of her home. "The younger son grabbed Basanti by the hair and threw her to the ground. Then he kicked her in the abdomen. The old woman screamed in pain and grief." Three days pass by. She sleeps in a railway station, where Soren-babu chances upon her and brings her to his house in Sarjomdih, where most of the population is Santhal and the rest are Munda.[6] All of them are followers of Sarna, the aboriginal faith of the Chhotanagpur area. Sarjomdih is a standing testimony to the collapse of an agrarian Adivasi society and the dilution of Adivasi culture, the twin gifts of industrialization and progress. Two years pass by, during which time two old men die in the town, then Maino jhi's grandchild also dies. Once again, Baso *jhi* is framed for sorcery and being a witch. Overnight she quietly leaves Soren-babu's house, and Pushpa (Soren's wife) wakes up in the morning to find her gone. Even in Sarjomdih, where there is a possibility of community bonding, an old widow is ostracized by the family.

While portraying Santhals in such a poor light, Shekahar simultaneously portrays the plight of the Adivasis. Through Talamai, we see how poor Adivasi women are pushed into sex work, and a moralistic stand is not taken about it; only the plight is projected. "November is the Month of Migrations" is a dark story written very matter-of-factly. Twenty-year-old Talamai Kisku is migrating, along with fellow Adivasis, from her village in the hills to the Bardhaman district in West Bengal for seasonal agricultural employment in rice cultivation. Talamai is seen doing "work" for a jawan of the Railway Protection Force in the railway station for two pieces of cold bread pakoras and a fifty-rupee note. After the work is over, "she re-ties her *saya* (clothing covering the torso) and *lungi* (a wrap-around clothing) and stuffs the fifty-rupee note into her blouse" and joins fellow migrants. Sex work, which is carried out by women of oppressed communities battling poverty, is darkly and ironically portrayed as any other

[6] A tribal community largely found in the state of Jharkand in India. A popular leader from the community, Birsa Munda is an important figure in the tribal movement in the subcontinent.

work. The community members who are aware of where Talamai has been are found to be sitting around waiting for her to return so that they can continue their journey. This is a disturbing story because it blatantly describes the plight of people who are on the edge of society.

The short story "The Adivasi Will Not Dance" is also offensive; it is about 60-year-old Mangal Murmu,[7] who refuses to dance at a government function. When the indigent Murmu first receives an invitation to perform, he is pleased. He soon learns that the occasion is the inauguration of the construction activity for a thermal plant privately funded by the President of India. The land on which the plant is to be built is part of a village whose residents have been evicted through official diktat. Murmu's daughter and her family are part of the evictee group and have been forced to move to her father's house. "You are making us Santhals dance in Pakur," Mangal Murmu wants to say to the officials who are organizing the ceremony, "and you are displacing Santhals from their villages in Godda. Isn't your VIP going to see that?... Doesn't your VIP read the papers or watch the news on TV?"

"If coal merchants have taken a part of our lands," the hapless Mangal Murmu says, "the other part has been taken over by stone merchants, all Diku – Marwari, Sindhi, Mandal, Bhagat, Muslim. They turn our land upside down, inside out, with their heavy machines. They sell the stones they mine from our earth in faraway places – Dilli, Noida, Punjab." Mangal Murmu continues: "What do we Santhals get in return? Tatters to wear. Barely enough food. Such diseases that we can't breathe properly. We cough blood and forever remain bare bones." And this is why Mangal Murmu – addressing the president – announces that the Adivasi will not dance anymore. This is the last story in the book, and it calls for resistance as the only means to survive for the marginalized people.

Despite all the oppression, abuse, and plight in the collection, the first story, "They Eat Meat", shows the power of friendship. Panmuni-jhi, a Santhal woman from Jharkhand, and Mrs Rao, a Reddy woman from Andhra Pradesh, bond over secretly eating eggs in Subhanpura Colony, Vadodara, a city where non-vegetarian food is scarce, their husbands are kept away from this bonding. Their friendship, which blooms over a petty desire to eat a particular food that is restricted, goes on to help save lives during a riot. "On the morning of Wednesday, 27 February 2002, Biram-kumang and Hopen were at the Vadodara Railway Station... Someone shouted that a train had been set on

[7] Murmu

fire" – this is a fictional portrayal of the 2002 Godhra riots. Soon, a mob attacks the Mohammeds, the only Muslim family in Subhanpura Colony. The entire neighbourhood watches through their windows as "two trucks approached, nearly twenty men in each, armed with swords and sticks and burning torches, shouting '*Jai Shri Ram*!' (Hail lord Ram!) and '*Mussalmano, Bharat chhodo!*' (Muslims, get out of India!)". Mrs Roa initiates the resistance against the attack on the Mohammeds by throwing cooking utensils at the mob. Panmuni-jhi joins in, as do other women in the colony. This shows how a minor bonding over egg-eating can lead to something as big as saving the lives of an entire family. Similarities in cultures between and beyond social background – despite language, location, faith, and culture – as a common point to make friends is upheld. Notably, the Mohammed are also culturally meat eaters, which probably makes Panmini-jhi and Mrs. Rao empathize with them.

The Nexus of Genre and Community

Hansda Shekhar's collection of stories tells us that there are all kinds of Santhals, for whom the short story is a conducive form. It also shows the struggle that tribal communities face in their journey to integrate into the capitalist system of life. The multiplicity of the Santhals, portraying layers of the community in its transition from the tribal, forest-dwelling to the urban, bourgeois lifestyle. The Dalit life-narrative shows how the narrator is withdrawn from the majority urban-educated Dalit class, and Pawar does not portray the post-independence urban middle-class Dalits as having a uni-linear ideology or a singular lifestyle. The intuitive life-narrative captures the split in the urban Dalit identity. Lastly, the Gounders are portrayed as a historically close-knit, wealthy, and God-fearing community in the period fiction.

Gounders are a propertied and landed community; they hold panchayat for disputes and live a devout life filled with fasting and festivals. The community is not divided along lines of class, ideology, rural-urban, etc; it is a holistic community, though the future is visible through the character Nalluppayan. This is a straightforward novel with a single story; the Gounder community is also portrayed singularly, through the lens of the protagonists. This singular lens of the community reflects the genre of novel. Novels generally narrate a single story, sometimes with fragments of perspective and subplots. The split in perspective sets in with Muthu making an essential decision for Ponna and Kali, consciously aware of their difference of opinion in the matter.

The gender portrayal in *One Part Woman* is engaging. Kali, a common female name is given for a man, and he does not exude the stereotypical chivalric male characteristics but rather he is gentle, passionate, and generous. On the other hand, Ponna is a common male name, given to the woman. The title also illustrates that male and female are not clear binaries and that we all have one part of the opposite gender. The feudal communities are projected to have this belief. Furthermore, in the feudal community, procreation is illustrated as necessary. If the many curses, penances, rituals, prayers, fasts, eating of various plants, and drinking of different potions did not reap results, strict norms were shown to be loosened for those who are childless.

Autobiography as a genre, particularly Dalit life-narratives, portray the narrator versus the world. Two perspectives are available: the protagonist's and the world's, which contrast with one another. The contrast further widens with the narrator becoming critical of the community to which he belongs. As this genre reflects life, what is portrayed as the world is also the narrator's perspective, and it is singular.

The form of the short story is more colourful because intrinsic to this form is the portrayal of several narratives from various perspectives. The Santhals in the *Adivasi Will Not Dance* stories are multi-layered; no two Santhal characters are alike. There is no linear sense of community in Hansda Shekhar's stories. For each character, the community has a different meaning. Class and social status are essential to creating the various textures of the community. Shekhar has shown the ways in which the community can be a hindrance to individuals, as well as showing that it can be a point of unity and that there can be unity beyond the community as well. Such friendships beyond one's community and conflict within the community make this collection of stories futuristic. The form of the short story also provides for such a nuanced and dynamic variety of storytelling. Shekhar, through his stories, is illustrating that there is no point saying, "We are good," but the dominant castes, caste-Hindus, are bad. Such outright segregation may be counter-productive. As much as we point fingers at others, it is necessary to also look inward. In this way, the stories are similar to Dalit life-narratives, which provide a holistic take on life and society.

This politics of acknowledging caste, speaking/narrativizing caste, and broadening the vision of one's own community has offended select sections of the respective communities of these writers. These authors take up the task of representing caste through narratives as a counter-hegemonic task of resistance. Through these books, the writers do not just play the victim or master, but rather

they turn their eyes inward by portraying the various dynamics within their own caste/community. Such a nuanced lens is employed while not disregarding the humiliation meted out by dominant/privileged castes to deprived people (i.e., graded inequality is the backdrop of these narratives).

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BLEJA, BEER, AND BOMBS: AN EXPLORATION INTO THE INHABITED SPACES AND PROLONGED YOUTH OF A GROUP OF SERBIAN YOUNG ADULTS FROM A GENERATION BORN INTO A DECADE OF CONFLICT AND CRITICAL EVENTS

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Abstract: ***This paper aims to explore the worldview of young people in Serbia (defined here as roughly those aged 18–30) who are experiencing prolonged youth due to the repercussions of critical events that shaped their formative years, from the viewpoint of one particular friendship group. By documenting the "nodal points" and rituals of a group of young people in a small Serbian city, utilizing research gathered through a variety of methods, including direct observation, ethnographic participation, and formal interviews, this paper seeks to open a window of understanding to the liminal space occupied by youth in the face of the material and economic forces shaping the sociopolitical background of their lives. This paper also aims to contextualize the current social and economic climate that young Serbians are facing.***

Keywords: ***Brain drain; Communitas; Critical Events; Serbian Youth; Alcohol***

Introduction

Stepping out of the arrivals terminal of Nikola Tesla airport, I am greeted with the familiar babble of the Belgrade accent and the smell of Pall Mall cigarettes, the midday 40-degree sun almost knocking me flat, hot air refracting from the asphalt. A familiar face smiles at me through the crowd with half a head of missing teeth. Dejan, a family friend, has come to collect me. Getting into his

car, I notice that in true Serbian fashion, he has hidden the seatbelts behind the seats. "Don't worry. There are no seatbelt checkpoints on our journey," he says to me. "Their pointless rules are forcing me to not buckle up in *inat* ("defiance/spite")! How was your flight? Parents all good? Are they visiting soon too?" The torrent of questions begins to flood in, and he starts showing me photos on his phone whilst speeding down the motorway at 80 mph. The frightening game of twenty-one questions continues as we hurtle out of Belgrade, past acres of lush green trees dotted with the red roofs of unfinished houses – a view I never get bored of. "Making a film, are you? Why the hell do you wanna do that in Smederevo? Go film Belgrade instead!" I wonder for a moment about his question. Why does Smederevo interest me?

Born in the UK to Serbian parents who emigrated at the turn of the 1990s in the face of social and political unrest in what was then Yugoslavia, I was strongly encouraged to maintain a bond with my homeland. My parents had left at 21, originally intending to stay in the UK for a short few months, and I always sensed that my mother's heart had never left Yugoslavia. She firmly believed the greatest gift in life would be a second language and a relationship with our roots, so I spent every summer and winter in Serbia at my grandparents' houses, left to my own devices to explore and forge friendships. Smederevo, my hometown, is a relatively small city located on the Danube 40 km away from the capital Belgrade. The city's history dates back to the 1st century BCE, and it is colloquially known as the city of *gvožđe i grožđe* ("iron and grapes"); urban legend says that upon asking what the city does best, Yugoslavian President Josip Tito's misheard the word *gvožđe* instead of *grožđe*, and this is supposedly what launched the city's steel and iron industry. Currently, the city is economically dependent on the volatile, polluting, and unpredictable steel industry, rather than the arguably more sustainable agriculture or tourism sectors. This dependency, coupled with the turbulence of the 1990s and bureaucratic inefficiency, has meant that despite vineyards, beautiful vistas, and ancient history, the town has been polluted by industry and has begun dying economically, a slow death that is apparent in every facet of life in the town. For many, it has become a metaphor for the dysfunction in the country caused by decades of political instability.

This article investigates how the lives of Serbian youth (defined within this paper as roughly those aged 18–30) are entwined with the repercussions of political, social, and economic events of their formative years, most predominantly the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. For this paper, focusing on the ethnographic research I compiled in Smederevo with one specific group of people, I will

Fig. 1 The participants of this research greet and embrace each other in front of the steps of Dom Kulture, a key urban space discussed within this paper.

explore the liminal space occupied by Serbian youth in the face of the material and economic forces shaping the sociopolitical background of their lives through the lens of this group. This is done by exploring the urban spaces they inhabited and their rituals, such as the culture of "*bleja*", utilizing ethnographic research collected from direct observation, ethnographic participation, and formal video interviews. I will contextualize the history and ethnographic research within wider theoretical frameworks, with a specific focus on "critical events" (Das 1995), Kevin Lynch's model for ordering urban spaces (Lynch 1960), Doreen Massey's "Spatial Construction of Youth Cultures" (Massey 1998), and "Communitas" (Turner 1969).

The article is structured as follows. Firstly I will introduce my research methods. I will then explore the wider historical and current sociopolitical context surrounding Serbian youth, and discuss how "critical events" (Das 1995) can result in decades of personal, political, and social repercussions. Following this, I will introduce the participants I am focusing on. Next, I will explore the spatial element of this research, how "nodal points" (Lynch 1960) service the group, and how spatial constructions affect and contribute to the complexity of social relations (Massey 1998). Then, I will explore how "critical events" and spatial organization can result in "communitas" (Turner 1969) between those experiencing "liminality" together (ibid.) as a response to times of crisis. In presenting this ethnographic research alongside these theoretical frameworks, I aim to open a window of understanding to the liminal space occupied by youth in the face of the material and economic forces shaping the sociopolitical background of their lives.

Research Methods

In the summer of 2015, between late-May and mid-September, I went to my hometown in central Serbia for a four-month ethnographic research period centred around the loose topic of "the repercussions of conflict for those born into it" for my MA in Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester. The intention was to create a documentary film, but I did not yet have a concrete direction. Using my network of family and friends, I reached out to a diverse pool of people between the ages of 18–30 living in various cities and towns around Serbia to interview them about their current lives in Serbia and their thoughts on the wider social and economic climate in Serbia. Whilst conducting this research, I noticed an interesting case study for my area of study

within the leisure time I spent in my hometown, and so I began to shift and narrow my focus and research towards my group of friends and Smederevo. Video interviews were conducted, as I was not at this point planning to shift away from documentary film. The video interviews were conducted one-on-one, during the daytime, in spaces chosen by the participants where they felt comfortable. Photographs were taken throughout the fieldwork period. Readers will note that the photographs were taken in black-and-white, which was an intentional choice. I wished to place my work stylistically amongst that of documentarists whose work I admire, predominantly Martin Parr's and Chris Killip's work in working-class Britain. In my mind, black-and-white differentiates the image from the "everyday taken for granted", giving pause for both the author and viewer to investigate the idiosyncrasies and peculiarities of the "everyday ordinary". This stylistic choice gives rise to an array of wider issues concerning objectivity; however, all ethnographic data is subject to a myriad of issues concerning representation, privilege, permission, ethics, funding, intent, and auteurship. Whilst I am aware, as the author of this work, that this is a hugely important aspect of presenting the data, I note that there is not enough scope within this paper to delve too deeply into such discussions.

The interlocutors of this ethnographic research are a city-wide network of friends. Roughly forty people make up the wider group, with approximately fifteen people making the "core" group that consented to be formally interviewed, all of them males born between the years 1989 and 1995. The ethnographic data used to inform this paper consisted of thirteen video interviews, four additional conversations recorded as audio, ten casual conversations where only notes were taken, photographs taken over four months, ethnographic participation, and a lifetime of lived context. This data represents a rich range of information, mixing formal and casual.

A weakness in the data concerns the "performative" nature of photographing social situations and the self-reflexivity involved in video interviews. However, this data is also informed by the wider context in which I have experienced it as the researcher; I have known the subjects for many years and have been photographing them throughout our friendship, which both aided me in identifying anomalies in their behaviour as well as minimizing the novelty of being researched. The group is also often engaged in photographing themselves as part of their social gatherings, which further reduces the "abnormality" of being photographed for research.

On the question of gender roles, I, the author, am a female operating in and researching what is a predominantly male space, and I am also a child of the diaspora predominantly living abroad. These factors beg several questions, such as "How much of what I am researching applies only to men in Serbia?" and "How much of this recorded behaviour is performative and geared towards me as both a female and an insider/outsider in their space?" I have chosen not to focus on myself in this paper; however, my role as a "semi-foreign" female researcher in a male-dominated monocultural space is a factor that is perhaps worthy of further anthropological scrutiny.

Whilst consent to use the photographs, video material, and interviews was given and signed for at the time of the research, all photographs and names included in this photo essay have been censored to respect and protect the current confidentiality of the individuals.

Critical Events

The "political" in Serbia permeates the lives of everyone. We begin to understand how "political" can be understood as a power relation between private and public realms by exploring the interface between public discourse and internal experience (Jackson 2002), for example here, the wider international narrative concerning politics (such as sanctions, war, diplomatic relations, etc.) versus the everyday lived experiences of those affected by it. To begin thinking of the conflict of the 1990s in relation to individual human experience, in this case the youth raised amongst such conflict, we can look at these events as critical events (Das 1995) and redescribe them to understand their implications within broader narratives and in the framework of anthropological thought. "Critical events" usually involve the exploitation of people and resources, famine, environmental degradation, or political and ethnic conflicts that result in the dismantling of the state and civil order (Long 2000, 194). The events of the 1990s, the decade in which my participants and I were born and raised, can be categorized as a decade of "critical events", as outlined by Das. Prior to the nineties, the entire institution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was broken down from within by external and internal political forces, following the death of Yugoslavian President Josip Tito. June 1992 was a culmination of political turmoil following this disintegration and the six former republics all experienced a period of unrest and uncertainty, facing decisions about future developments, which more often than not provoked further conflicts with their neighbouring

Fig. 2 Posters reading "DVERI [a political party] ARE CALLING YOU TO WAKE UP! PROTEST AGAINST BLAIR'S GOVERNMENT. SAT 21 MAR 13:00 IN FRONT OF THE SERBIAN GOVERNMENT, BELGRADE".

former fellow countrymen (Prosic-Dvornic 1992, 127). At this time, internal ethnic conflicts as well as international political involvement, which was both part of the cause as well as a response to these conflicts, led to the collapse of Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav Wars. With a shift in focus towards the "everyman" in Serbia specifically, the immediate effects of these critical events were various. Sanctions brought in place due to the then-ongoing wars affected people's ability to buy food and essentials, as well as migrate, travel, and do business. Mass inflation left many people in a state of abject poverty, whilst unregulated markets allowed a small number of opportunistic magnates to amass great wealth. The power vacuum in Serbia, coupled with the desperately spiralling poverty, created a space for aggressive media propaganda and populist movements, including that of Slobodan Milošević, which invoked the revival of nationalist sentiments, the glorification of national history, and the selective promotion of traditional values, which only led to a worsening of foreign relations and tensions within domestic affairs (Prosic-Dvornic 1992, 127). The 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia (then Yugoslavia) during the Kosovo War was perceived by the Serbian people as an illegal attack specifically targeting civilians, which left behind an indelible scar in the form of deep distrust towards Western politicians and political agendas (Fig. 2).

The bombing caused environmental degradation to cities and infrastructure, especially in the south, where depleted uranium bombs were dropped, the biological fallout of which is likely still there today. The list of repercussions both small and large is arguably endless.

Conflict and political unrest are not simply a discourse that takes place between politicians in boardrooms – they are felt by the civilians in a multitude of ways, and often those who are furthest away from the decisions made by those in power are the ones who must deal with the repercussions. For those born into or raised in this turbulent time, these critical events have been at the very centre of their every experience. Beyond the immediate implications of critical events lays the realm of decades-later repercussions, which are evident in every aspect of current Serbian life, most notably in the tumultuous political landscape of current-day Serbia. Whilst I was out for a walk with Boris, a 23-year-old jobseeker, we touched upon the subject of critical events and why he has little hope that anything will change:

> My generation has seen that fighting just isn't worth it. History shows us that when you get rid of someone, somebody even worse comes along. When I was a kid, I was out there shouting and screaming because my dad wouldn't take me to Belgrade to protest with everyone... I then catch myself 15 years later thinking "Hey, that Milošević wasn't so bad in comparison." That doesn't feel good. We demonstrated for 10 years, and nothing. Everything is the same, if not worse. Demonstrations and protests should last two months, but here you had people constantly demonstrating every day, every night, and nothing changed. You can't expect to pull some fighting spirit out of anyone after that. People should just look after themselves and their own happiness.

Boris refers to the many protests that were held in Serbia throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the most notable of which is the 5 October 2000 protest that toppled the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milošević. Young people and students (namely *Otpor!*,[1] "Resistance!") played a large role in this revolution, which came with the hope of wiping the slate clean of corruption. But many young

[1] *Otpor!* was a political organization in Serbia formed in 1998, which started life as a civic movement against the policies of the Serbian authorities under the influence of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević. *Otpor* at its conception consisted Serbia's Democratic Party's youth wing members, activists from various NGOs, and students from the University of Belgrade and the University of Arts. Soon after the 2003 elections, *Otpor* merged into the Democratic Party (DS).

Serbians found that democracy in practice was not the same as democracy in theory, and they failed to shift the momentum of the revolution into rebuilding corrupt democratic institutions. Miodrag, a student of political science born in 1993, explained to me why he believes this to be the case:

> What everybody achieved in 2000 is massive, but nothing fundamentally changed because the underlying structures didn't change. The ones that arrived in power in 1944 – their children are now the ones in government. They racked up capital masquerading as socialists; the only difference now is that they don't have to hide their capitalist principles. When they arrived in Belgrade, they didn't arrive to "liberate" it; they saw it as their warplane. A liberator doesn't intend to exploit; otherwise, everything just falls apart.

Once the dust had settled on the explosive overthrowing of Milošević's regime, it became evident to many that nothing crucial had changed. A figurehead had been toppled, but many of the same people who were part of the regime had stayed, unchanged except in party name. Disappointment is a fundamental feature of living in the wake of turmoil (Greenberg 2014) and thus many of the young people who had lived through the student-led protests and the wider push to remove Milošević became doubtful that they could bring about meaningful change, a despondency that no doubt has been passed onto their children. Many of the people I spoke to mentioned either that they did not remember the Yugoslav Wars or that they had fond memories of camaraderie and strong neighbourhood unity but that the war had affected their parents and has no doubt been passed onto them in a multitude of subconscious ways. Whilst we sat in his garden with a cup of coffee, I asked Miodrag whether he himself had any memories of the nineties:

> I don't remember the bad parts of the war… perhaps a few segments here and there. My parents sent me to stay with my grandparents for the majority of that time, so all I recall is playing with other children.
>
> Our parents, however… For them, the stress of the war is not something easily forgotten and it no doubt affected them and the ways they raised us. But we are a crazy nation used to chaos. We learn to live with it and move on.

On the same walk where we discussed protests, Boris was posed with the same question:

> I remember the bombings very well. I was six or seven and lived in town. Nobody was working, all the factories were closed, and the shops were empty because of sanctions. Everybody was in their garden. Every night my friends and I would hang out in my garage. We often talk about how unified everyone was then – it seems people need a common enemy. I remember my parents taking me to "community meetings" every night, and on the walk there we would wear targets on our back, like "Go on, aim here, we dare you!"

General discussions about the history of the revolution, *Otpor!*, their techniques that culminated in the overthrow of Milošević, and their eventual dissipation are various and can be found in the works of Sombatpoonsiri (2015a) and (2015b), Mrvos (2010), Greenburg (2014), Prosić-Dvornić (1993), Bujošević and Radovanović (2003) and Nikolayenko (2007).

Mock Labour and the Brain Drain

Inescapably, the prospects and opportunities afforded to citizens begin and end with their country's economic footing. Serbia's economic transition was delayed and stunted due to critical events, with sanctions, trade shocks, and economic uncertainty resulting in Serbia's GDP falling in 2000 to one-half of its value in 1989 (Marjanovic 2006, 4). The political and economic landscape has since been in a state of continuous flux, and those wishing to "do business" face obstacles in the form of corruption, inefficiencies in the state bureaucracy, lack of financing, and political instability (Marjanovic 2006, 5). Even if a person is qualified and well educated, the central control over state institutions, in particular over public administrations (Pavićević 2017a, 12), means that often one of the only ways to gain significant employment is through political patronage (Pavićević 2017b, 33), an employment strategy that makes sense in job-scarce economies such as those of the former SFRY, where privatization processes have consolidated elite power (Kurtović 2017). This is a phenomenon that few are willing to openly discuss, both socially and academically, a point also observed by Đorđe Pavićević in his 2017 paper (2017b, 34). I asked Zoran, a currently unemployed university graduate, what he felt was stunting his job-seeking efforts:

> I don't particularly want to talk too much about this, but you're pretty much only going to get a job if you join a political party. For example, one of my friends had to join the town's party and hand out their flyers for a month to get his job, flyers

> for a party that at the last election "campaigned against" political discrimination and nepotism in employment. Another friend who was recently hired, I won't say where, the conditions for the job were that they and their whole family join the party and vote for them, even though they have a degree in the field and have every right to the position. This stuff happens every day. It's completely normal to be employed through "connections" here. And no one protests it. No one is grabbing their head and asking "Oh my god, how is this possible?" The opposite really – we laugh about it. But it isn't funny. It's just sad.

A further predicament faced by prospective workers is the inefficiency with which many businesses are run, a result of policies financing unprofitable employment due to both this practice of political cronyism and decades of chaotic decision-making on a national scale. A decade of international isolation and war compounded by waves of privatization led to unregulated conditions that allowed unprincipled business moguls to accumulate fortunes as inequality swelled all around the former SFRY, with Serbia experiencing the most extreme income inequality in Europe (Johnson 2019, 662).

Many people work for the *minimalac* (minimum wage), which is one of the lowest in Europe. I spent some time with Dušan in Belgrade, where he lives during the working week before returning to Smederevo on Friday evenings. He works the night shift at a call centre for minimum wage, and shares a cramped one-bedroom apartment with two other friends from Smederevo in order to save money on rent. I asked him why he works for minimum wage:

> Whether you're a young guy or a parent, it's enough for a lot of us to have the minimum to survive, to hang out a bit with our friends, to have just enough to do some fun activity or whatever. People here are used to not having a lot and I think many people find freedom in that. As long as they can pay for food, shelter, coffee, or beer with friends, they don't want huge responsibilities at work.

In what Ivan Rajković calls "mock-labour" (Rajković, I. 2018), many workers employed at these inefficient businesses engage in ritualized performances of productivity with no meaningful work to fulfil, in exchange for a source of fiscal security, abandoning their creative capacities in the process (ibid., 47). Rajković explored, through the lens of one particular firm involved in selling spare car parts, "a firm without property, using a sister firm's premises, with no work to do, relying on state provision of wages until eventual final closure" (ibid.). The employees

spend their days drinking coffee and shooting the breeze, waiting for the workday to end and "doing nothing, because nothing could be done", likening their situation to that of limbo, where nothing happens for the rest of eternity (ibid.). Dana Johnson argues that, unlike Western societies such as the USA, Serbia is in fact "(anti-)meritocratic" (2019, 662), an interesting notion that for me speaks volumes to Serbian blasé attitude towards the "abnormal normality" of their everyday life.

Much like Dana Johnson's interlocutors, mine also use the term *perspektiva* ("perspectives") when reflecting on their current and projected exceptions for work and life. In this context, *perspektiva* is often used to mean "having options"; in work and life, with the chance of self-development and fulfilment of ambitions that are not pre-emptively shut down (ibid., 660). As Johnson found in her study, oftentimes enthusiasm and ambition are pre-emptively extinguished by those in "safe" positions of security, who have adopted an attitude of keeping their heads below the parapets in order to not rock the status quo. Johnson goes on to argue that Serbian society systematically chooses "negative selection" – anybody with ambitions of "bettering" either themselves or the institutions they work for experiences tamping of ambition, non-recognition of hard work, and devaluing of expertise, losing out positions that they are qualified to fulfil to "safer" candidates who are less likely to seek change, by which the unqualified and morally suspect can rise to the top (ibid., 655–656). In this "(anti-)meritocracy", competency is punished and apathy applauded. This is a sentiment that was echoed by my interlocutors many times over the four-month period I spent with them, although many were tentative to elaborate in too much detail. Dragan managed to secure employment in a subsidised Smederevo company several years ago, and explained to me his experiences at work:

> There is no work to do here; it is an endless coffee break. But it doesn't matter; everyone is here as a sock puppet. Whether they're on a temporary contract or employed full-time, they're safe. My colleague doesn't even have to come in anymore. The little work that has to be done falls to those who wouldn't do the crony dance. I've had so many ideas about how to make this space great, but it falls on deaf ears. I don't get paid enough to push it.

In the face of this, many with higher ambitions for themselves chose to migrate and invest their skills in other countries in what has been dubbed the "brain drain" (Vuković 2005, 142). Sanctions and the international community's aversion towards Serbia throughout Milošević's presidency saw extreme

limitations to travel and social mobility. Freedoms that had been enjoyed in former Yugoslavia disintegrated and social entrapment became a reality for many people desiring "escape" (Johnson 2011, 656–657). The reinstatement of visa-free travel to the EU was monumental for Serbian citizens, a change that can be aptly described in Jessica Greenberg's words as a symbolic "road to normal" (Greenburg 2011). Those born into or coming of age in the new millennium had no real memory of the mobility of former Yugoslavia (Johnson 2011, 568); they travel to pursue their ambitions and escape the limbo of mock labour rather than the entrapment of sanctions.

Serbia's significant brain drain, despite its large number of highly educated young people, alongside high youth unemployment, is of great concern.[2] While the Serbian government has made efforts to allow people under 29 years of age to readily enter the labour market, the rate of youth unemployment has remained high (Pavlović, Bjelica and Domazet 2019, 36) due to negative demographic trends, brain drain, and a relatively large grey economy (ibid., 36). According to research by Gordana Bjelobrk (2018),[3] over half of the students expressing a wish to leave say they would not do so if they were offered a job with fair pay in their profession of choice (ibid., 4). Many young people believe that the painful choice to move away from their family, friends, and country is necessary to gain independence and financial stability, but would prefer the option of staying and building a better future for Serbia (ibid., 4). Out of the fifteen people who actively took part in my research, all but one of them explicitly expressed that, despite frustrations on a systemic level, they have no desire to move away other than for urgent monetary reasons.

> I'm proud of my country and hometown! We have everything here! History, nature, good-humoured people, punk bands. Why should I have to move away? We just need to make it better for ourselves. One afternoon in Belgrade is enough to realize I despise the rat race… Imagine what the West must be like.

[2] As discussed by Pavlović, Bjelica, and Domazet in their 2019 paper written as part of research financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia, "youth" is internationally defined as being between the ages of 15–24. In the Republic of Serbia, for the purposes of youth employment/unemployment and the country's "National Youth Strategy from 2015 to 2025", it is defined as 15–30. This paper, taking into account both the emic and etic accounts of what constitutes youth, also considers "young people" to be defined as roughly 15–30.

[3] *Istraživanje o migracijama studenata* ("Research on student migration") for *Demografski pregled* ("Democratic Review") conducted by Gordana Bjelobrk from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. The research includes 110,131 students from public and private higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia, to examine the plans of young people for future migration trends.

Grasping at Rotting Straw

The age-dependency ratio in Serbia amounts to almost half the population (Lukić et al. 2013), an important touchstone for socioeconomic prospects, as an increasing number of people in retirement and education are supported by a small working-age population (Marjanović 2006, 6). In addition, Serbia's pension spending is amongst the highest in Europe, principally due to the disproportionate number of beneficiaries (World Bank 2015), a problem in the form of taxes and wage contributions for those of working age (Marjanović 2006, 6). Despite the concerning number of unemployed youths, Serbian politicians have been more interested in courting retired people than in supporting younger citizens, predominantly due to the relative size of the former and the effectiveness of leveraging strong party support from this particular demographic (Petrović 2011, 147). This translates to a predicament for those of working age hoping to find employment in their smaller towns: Do they move to the capital or to a different country in the hope of more prospects? Or do they stay and become members of a political party they may not support for the sake of accessing the majority of public sector positions? Boris, after telling me about the 5 October protests, reflected on Serbia's attitude towards youth and its unwillingness to repair the broken system:

> We as a collective society keep clinging on to things that don't function and acting as though it is easier to reanimate a corpse than it is to nurture a small child and make something of them. We keep grasping for the rotting straw and neglecting the new grass that is yet to grow. No, no one is looking after it, because ignoring the rot is just easier.

Young Serbs have encountered a phenomenon of forcibly prolonged youth, for the most part, due to their inability to establish economic independence (Ramet 2011, 11). With their economic opportunities in disarray, young adults who have surpassed their teenage years and have entered a realm wherein they would traditionally be expected to have incomes and responsibilities now occupy a liminal space wherein they are "betwixt and between" the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony (Turner 1969, 95). Without the economic independence and social stability required to buy their own houses and start their own families in their country of birth, they are left to spend their days in limbo, turning to each other and their surrounding environment, which I will discuss in the following sections.

The Secret Society

Smederevo, although classified as a "city", is relatively small, and often people joke that you cannot run an errand without being obligated to stop for coffee four times with people you've bumped into along the way. Serbian culture is relatively communal, and many people in Smederevo go outside in the evening to take a walk through the local *trg* ("town square") to the many *kafići* ("cafes") and *kafane* ("taverns/pubs"), many of which are situated in Ulica Kralja Petra ("King Peter's Street", the main walkway that connects the square to the quay) (Fig. 17 [10] and [11]). *Kafići* and *kafane* play a large role in Serbian social life, typically used as a destination to catch up with a friend, a cathartic space in which to vent the problems in one's life or to while away several hours whilst people watching. For this reason, most of them stay open from early morning to late into the night. Many young people, however, choose not to patronize *kafići* and *kafane* at night, and instead they congregate outdoors to drink and socialize until the small morning hours (Fig. 3, 16) – something many refer to as *bleja* ("hanging out", or more literally, "empty staring"). This culture of outdoor *bleja* can be described as what Paul Chatterton and Robert Hollands call "nightlife on the margins" (2003). Margins play an important role in social and spatial ordering through a binary relationship with the "mainstream" centre – without margins, there is no centre, and vice versa (ibid., 198), both spatially and conceptually.

Fig 3 Friends drinking a *bomba* ("bomb"/2L plastic bottle of beer) and climbing trees as the sun rises after a night of drinking.

Bleja is a slang term known throughout Serbia, but is more accurately a social concept that is at once a verb, noun, adjective, and adverb. *Bleja* can refer to both an empty afternoon alone spent looking at the ceiling, or a full day spent camping with twenty people. It can be used to describe the way an activity is done, e.g., "casually without haste", and can be used to describe the essence of a thing. Its use is deeply rooted in context, but for the most part is used the same way "hanging out" is in English, and the group mostly use the term to refer to night-time meet-ups (*"Ko je za bleju večeras?",* "Who is up for hanging out tonight?"). For those on the outside, it may appear at first glance as though youths engaged in *bleja* are sitting and not doing very much, which is not always the case. For example, on one evening during *bleja*, I found myself amidst a pair attempting (and failing) to land a risky skate trick on my left, another pair holding a bluetooth speaker between their ears whilst singing along to a medley of songs behind me, and to my right an unnecessarily loud debate between three people which eventually snowballed into a torrent of expletive-laden jokes involving the day's political breaking news, turbo folk, and old anecdotes, to which Boris turned to me and said, "We are hanging out. *Bleja.".* The interlocutor's rituals are referred to as *bleja* often within this paper, and it is important to distinguish it as a concept that refers not only to the practice of binge drinking.

During this research period, the people I was researching had a secret group that existed on Facebook, a "safe space" for those within it to talk amongst themselves, make jokes, post drunken photos deemed inappropriate for the public domain, and organize *bleja*. The Facebook group comprises roughly forty people, mostly male, with a handful of females. The lack of female members may be attributed to several factors, such as the origin of core members' friendships stemming from school days, the lack of meaningful long-term friendships with females pre-dating young adulthood, and a perceived societal "inappropriateness" for females to binge drink outdoors until the early hours of the morning with men. The members referred to themselves as the demonym of the Facebook group's name (omitted for confidentiality reasons), wrote a satirical "manifesto", and have held "birthday parties" on the group's inception day since 2013 and continuing beyond the year this ethnographic research was done. The group's behaviour during *bleja* is often performative as a consequence of this Facebook group, and thus the performative nature of their *bleja* forms a basis of their kinship. The group's social activities are generally centred around several key urban spaces, most prominently a building called Dom Kulture ("House of Culture), which I will discuss in the next section.

Fig. 4 A group of friends congregate on the steps of the Dom Kulture ("House of Culture") on a hot Sunday night.

Nodal Points

Using Kevin Lynch's (1960) model for the ordering of urban spaces, the spaces that my participants occupy include several "nodal points" (Fig. 17). These spaces are situated throughout Smederevo in relative proximity to one another, where people meet, rendezvous, and socialize. These nodal points function as social nerve centres that accommodate certain social dynamics (Lynch 1960). In addition to Lynch's model, we can also look at spaces in terms of Doreen Massey's spatial construction of youth cultures (1998) by beginning to conceptualize space in terms of the complexity of interacting social relations. Massey suggests that the "construction of spatiality" is an important element in building a social identity (ibid., 129) and that within the complexity of building identity, individuals and social groups are constantly engaged in efforts to territorialize and claim spaces (Massey 1998, 127), points which I will go back to further in this paper. Serbia's afore-discussed historical context, the urban "nodal points" of Smederevo that the group occupies, and the group "communitas" discussed later in this paper are interrelated as a "particular articulation of contacts and

influences" (ibid., 125). As Massey further discusses, spaces are not necessarily organized by "scale" ("body, home, community, urban, region, nation, global") (Smith 1993, 101) but through a complexity of interconnections (Massey 1998, 125). A "local" youth culture, such as the group we are researching, isn't necessarily a "closed system of social relations" but rather a "particular articulation of contacts and influences" pulled from a variety of places, such as fashion, habits, and power relations from different parts of the globe (ibid., 125). In this instance, examples of these "contacts and influences" for this group and the spaces they choose to occupy may be habits formed in early childhood through their shared experience of unity through the wider conflict in childhood (e.g., playing outdoors and neighbourhood camaraderie), the influence of outside global opinion towards the former SFRY and their critical events, the historic use of local spaces by previous generations in their "youth", as well as online global trends and international music.

The Home of Culture and Subculture

One particular "nodal point", the Dom Kulture ("House of Culture"), which was officially renamed Centar Za Kulturu ("Centre for Culture") in 2001 but is still widely referred to by its original name (Fig. 17 [1]), holds particular precedence and significance within the group as well as others in the city. The Dom (*dom* being Serbian for "home") is the town's centre and venue for all cultural events, such as theatre, seminars, and cinema. Its location, wherein it is central, close to the 24/7 supermarket and within walking distance of other "nodal points", and its architectural shape, which hosts concrete steps, a ramp leading to a sub-basement cafe and seating area, various tunnels and hidden spaces, and a covered area for when it is raining, which Lynch would describe as "Paths" and "Edges", makes it the most significant meeting point in the town (Fig. 4, 5, 14, 15, 16). There are many incidental tunnels and covered areas around the Dom, which some people use to hide from CCTV, security, and the general public to smoke and have private conversations. Anyone unsure of the evening's "crowd" can casually walk by to see who is out, without committing to staying or having to contact anybody beforehand.

More so than being "just" a convenient space to sit, the Dom is an institution unto itself. It is often referred to in conversation as a sentient being rather than a place ("*taj Dom"* / "that Dom"), a metaphor and symbol for a certain way of life, a place that many generations before mine have used and

Fig. 5 Two friends sit on the top steps of the Dom Kulture and look over the group.

inhabited. My mother, for example, often reminds me that people have been "hanging out" on the steps of the Dom since the day it was built in 1982. In "The Spatial Construction of Youth Cultures" (1998), Massey discusses Beatrix Campbell's book *Goliath: Britain's Dangerous Places* (1993) and the case of the TWOCers, where an ordinary shopping centre becomes "young men's territory" after 10:00 p.m., a place everyone else keeps well clear of. The TWOCers claim on this space is fundamental to the identity that the young men involved were striving to establish. However, despite being "young men's territory", it is not simply a closed space, but also a meeting place of cultural references drawn from a wide range of other places, evident in the music and fashion represented at these meetings (Massey 1998, 129). In the same way, the Dom, which is a "regular" building during the day, is claimed by the group at night. And yet, others are still able to approach – and indeed other people with different interests, musical tastes, and rituals do use – the Dom to socialize, albeit in different "sections" of the Dom itself (some sit on the steps, some sit under the canopy, and others occupy the entrance) (Fig. 6). In this way, individuals and social groups are constantly engaged in efforts to territorialize the Dom and exclude

Fig. 6 A different group of young people are sat in a different section of the Dom, whilst a member of "the group" (foreground) poses for a photo that they think is being taken of them.

other groups from particular areas they have claimed for the night. However, these other groups still have, in some regards, similar touchpoints to those who also claim the Dom, most commonly in generation and interests in "marginal culture", away from the "mainstream centre". It is worth noting, however, that this "claim" over the Dom is not one gained through aggression or hostility, but rather through a common need of the group and a disregard of the "mainstream centre" for sitting outside without comfort or amenities. The group is not hostile and welcomes anybody willing enough to approach them. I have witnessed on more than a handful of occasions the group welcoming a motley crew of fleeting companions, ranging from middle-aged taxi drivers, older uncles, and random tourists who happened to be walking home from a local *kafana* that had closed. Many who frequent this location often express exasperation with the Dom, in this context the culture and people rather than the physical building, and wish to rid themselves of it ("I need a break from Dom"), yet continue to congregate there – perhaps for "fear of missing out".

Fig. 7 Buying beer, vodka, sparkling water, and snacks with the communally collected cash at the 24/7 supermarket. An EXIT Festival wristband can be seen in the middle photo. The music festival takes place in early July, and was founded in the year 2000 after the Yugoslavian general election "as a student movement fighting for democracy and freedom in Serbia and the Balkans" (www.exitfest.org/en/about-us, accessed 29 August 2023).

The Wider Network of Nodes

The capacity for a nodal point to accommodate certain social dynamics is evident in the Dom and other nodal points around town. The locations service the needs of the group, but having observed the group closely, I have seen how the locations and physical landscape of the town also lend themselves to the perceived needs and behaviours of the group. The Dom is near a 24/7 supermarket called Ideja (Fig. 17 [3] and 4), which is arguably the most crucial nodal point for nightlife in Smederevo.

One of many "drink runs" to Ideja was documented by attaching a camera to an interlocutor in a POV-style video, offering a rich ethnographic account of this important ritual for the group. In this clip (Fig. 7) we see four out of a group of fourteen gathering money and walking for five minutes to the supermarket, bantering and joking along the way. One member sticks stickers from their bag to the other members' foreheads. In the supermarket, we see them debating which snacks to buy; being excited that their preferred vodka is finally back in stock after a week of being sold out; counting the collected money and putting items back on shelves; greeting other familiar people from around town on their own drink runs; and high-fiving the security guard, who shows familiarity and asks them how they are. Visits to Ideja are a ritualistic extension of bleja, and its presence in the town is arguably the key proponent for allowing social gatherings to comfortably exist, by both servicing and creating the needs of the group in the form of provisions.

The *vinski park* ("wine park") (Fig. 17 [2]) is opposite the Dom. Surrounded by huts selling local wines and delicacies by the day (another spatial construction whose purpose changes with the night) several benches allow a decent number of people to gather at night, usually accompanied by plastic cups filled with white wine spritzers. The wine park has a view of those sitting at the Dom without being seen in return and is usually reserved for calmer evenings or for those who don't wish to sit with a larger crowd. The wine park is situated alongside a residential building with shops and a bank on the ground floor, whose wall the group occasionally uses as a bench. Next to the wine park is the town square, where the church, town hall, fountains, and *trafike* ("kiosks") are located (Fig. 8).

Next to the church (Fig. 17 [4]) is a drinking fountain and benches, where some choose to relocate (Fig. 9) whenever they have been asked to move along from the Dom because tenants in the neighbouring apartments have complained about the noise (Fig. 15).

Fig. 8 Buying Cigarettes And Plastic Cups At A *Trafika* ("Kiosk")

The *spomenik* ("memorial statue") by the train tracks and fortress (Fig. 17 [8])(Fig. 12) is another nodal point that is suited to accommodating certain social dynamics. Surrounded by trees, its structure of tiers lends itself to being suitable for sitting and climbing and is a location used for large-scale binge drinking sessions organized via the Facebook group (Fig. 10).

The "official birthday parties" commemorating the creation of the Facebook group in July 2013 are held at the *spomenik*, and an image of the *spomenik* is used as the Facebook group's profile photo. It is interesting to observe this use of the *spomenik* as a symbol, not only for its role in the inception of the current group dynamic but for its wider meaning as a symbol of Smederevo. The *spomenik* was created as a memorial for the 5 June 1941 Smederevo Fortress Explosion. The occupying German army stockpiled ammunition and gasoline belonging to the defeated Royal Yugoslav Army, but the ammunition exploded due to unknown reasons killing anywhere from several hundred to several thousand people. The shadow of Smederevo's history with war, conflict, and disaster looms every day, and it is both interesting and ironic that such reminders are both interwoven and embraced in everyday life – critical events from the past become spatially reoccupied by a new generation. As we can see in Fig. 10, the group sit and play on the *spomenik*, alongside wreaths that have been laid there in memory of the disaster. Whether this behaviour is indifferent disrespect or a stoic embrace of life's bitter moments is debatable; I believe it to be the latter.

Fig. 9 Friends gather next to the church (Fig. 17 [4]) using an abandoned shopping trolley to push members of the group around the area next to the church. A fake "car reg" has been spraypainted onto the front and says RG–026 *Keš Kolica* ("RG–026 Cash Cart"). "*Keš Kolica*" was a pop-rap song from 2002, "RG" is a code for the Facebook group's name, and "026" is Smederevo's telephone prefix, often used in Serbian online screen names to denote pride for where one is from.

Fig. 10 A group gathers on the *spomenik*. In the top photo, one of the group offers me a sip from the communal "beer bomb". In the bottom photo, the same person has fallen from the top of the statue and is nursing their ankle, whilst their friends look on with varying degrees of judgement and interest. Memorial wreaths laid earlier that month in memory of the disaster can be seen in the bottom photo, sitting alongside the group.

The playground/basketball court of the Tehnička Škola ("Technical Highschool") (Fig. 17 [5]) has no gate, and is often used throughout the summer for basketball sessions (Fig. 11). Many of the interlocutors went to this high school in their teenage years, and continue to claim this space on their own terms.

Various other nodal points, located on the map in Fig. 17*,* all provide a stadium for social dynamics. The fact that the group spends their time outdoors is often a reflexive topic of conversation, and many times I have been asked about my thoughts on the culture of *bleja* and how it relates to my own experiences of the social terrain in the UK. Mile, during a session on the *spomenik,* asked me:

> Does this exist in the UK? *Bleja?* Do they not hang out outside? They're missing out! We'll start a campaign to take *bleja* abroad and the slogan will be "*NEĆEMO KAFIĆE, HOĆEMO PARKIĆE!"*[4]

The group rejects cafes on a monetary premise (drinking all night on a bar tab as a large group is an expensive endeavour), but this rejection also stems from the culture and values attached to them – *kafići* are "the mainstream centre", and the outdoors is "the alternative margin" (Chatterton and Hollands 2003). The location of most of the cafes and bars on Kralja Petra on either side of the walkway means that it is often referred to as a runway on which people go to be seen and to watch others. The group, however, lives their nightlife "on the margins" and encapsulates both play and resistance, which evoke a strong "sense of place" beyond the bricks and mortar of a cafe (Chatterton and Hollands 2003, 197/198). Whilst sitting on the steps of the Dom, I asked Miodrag what he thought kept this large group of personalities together:

> [The group] is a connection between all those people who find each other through shared experiences, both good and bad, to enjoy or cry through it all together.

As Massey (1998) points out, the construction of spatiality can be an important element in building a social identity – youth cultures claim their own spaces and may be as excluding and defensive about them as any nation-state (ibid., 129). As previously discussed, the "nodal points" that the group occupies, and the group "communitas" which I discuss in the next section, are intrinsically related

[4] ("WE DON'T WANT CAFES, WE WANT PARKS!")

Fig. 11 A group gathers on the playground of the Tehnička Škola ("Technical Highschool") to play basketball for a few hours before moving on to the Dom.

to one another, as well as to the overarching sociopolitical and historical context of the group through their "particular articulation of contacts and influences" (Massey 1998, 125). The group is connected by their shared experience of "critical events", which everybody in Serbia born in the 1990s or earlier experienced in one way or another. As noted by Boris earlier, on a neighbourhood level, one of the responses to the crisis in the 1990s was unity: sitting together in gardens, gathering in garages, sharing resources, exchanging jokes, and unanimously agreeing to protest together in solidarity. Coming together in shared urban spaces and sharing resources may be a learned response from a time of crisis, and this new type of unity may be a response to the current crisis of prolonged youth and economic instability.

Fig. 12 A group walking between the fortress and the old *železnička stanica* ("train station").

Communitas

One way we can view "the group" is as a "communitas" (Turner 1969): an unstructured state in which all members of a community are equally allowed to share a common experience, usually through a rite of passage. Communitas is characteristic of people experiencing liminality together, and Turner calls this liberation from the constraints of ordinary life "anti-structure" and the experience of ritual camaraderie "communitas". A spontaneous eruption of communitas "abolishes status, and people encounter each other directly" (Schechner and Brady 2012, 70). Within this communitas is the formation of practices and rituals: meeting at 10:00 p.m. onwards at the Dom, making the round of

small change collection to go on drink runs (Fig. 7), purchasing specific drinks favoured by the majority such as *vinjak* and cola, (Fig. 13, 14 and 15), having white wine and soda water or a *bomba* (Fig. 3, 10, 14 and 15) of beer which can easily be passed around or poured into individual plastic cups (Fig. 13), passing drinks around the circle, and sharing cigarettes. Sharing resources is an unspoken but strictly abided-by rule. Thomas Widlok discusses the "economy of sharing" (2017), and suggests that sharing is often about "leaving things for others to take" rather than giving (ibid., 7). Rather than a calculated "back-and-forth" gift exchange, sharing is an indiscriminate, undirected, and random act that produces reciprocal effects over time without it being the guiding principle of the act (Krige 2020, 213). Within the group, spare change is shared, drinks are shared (often from a single receptacle),[5] snacks are shared, and even T-shirts are swapped and shared. Discussion as to what will be shared are not necessary, and there is no obligation to "owe" one another in response to sharing. However, holding back resources (e.g., buying a snack and withholding it from the group) is frowned upon and deemed to be highly anti-social. Sharing is not only limited to consumable resources but to other arenas of life, such as the previously mentioned Belgrade apartment where Dušan currently lives, which has been rented by an older Smederevo resident for ten years. They have sublet the apartment at various times to many people from Smederevo in need of a tenancy in the city, saving many the expense of long-term contracts and deposits.

According to Jean-Paul Sartre, liminality is a phase in social life in which "activity which has no structure" confronts its "structured results" (Sartre 1974, 255). This "art of doing nothing" forms a structured result where certain practices are carried out every night.

Inside jokes are held in prestige and act as a form of group solidarity; ironic idolization of cult 1980s pop-folk singers; the running joke of playing the same "bad" song all summer ("I'm going to make this the summer hit of 2015!"); keeping each other informed at all times of every small occurrence (ranging from "Tomorrow I have a driving test" to "I went to the shop to buy salami earlier"); the semi-ironic worship of Rubinov Vinjak, a strong Serbian brandy that has been dubbed "liquid cocaine" (Fig. 13); engagement in thrilling and childish behaviour, such as skating from risky heights and riding in abandoned

[5] For context, this ethnographic research was done prior to the COVID–19 pandemic and the group often drank from the same bottles and cups, which was not at the time a point of concern for many of the group.

Fig. 13 A bottle of vinjak, a type of Serbian brandy. Disposable cups and a bottle of cola can be seen, ready to be mixed.

shopping trolleys (Fig. 9); conversations that juxtapose silly jokes with deeply introspective conversations about personal struggles. During his interview, Vuk told me about the significance that time spent on the Dom has in his daily life:

> Everyone runs away from themselves and their lives to the Dom, and then through all that alcohol and other things, they listen to other stories and other people and live through them. It's good that we have that, and some people are willing to help one another, at least through conversation. A person lightens their soul when they speak to someone that understands them because they are going through the same experiences. Everything is easier when you have somebody next to you.

Whilst observing this group through the lens of "communitas" is helpful, internal differences and micro-power relations may often undermine the underpinning concept of an unstructured state in which all members of a community are equally allowed to share a common experience. Within "the group", several members have their own secret online "subgroups" on messenger services with individuals they have been friends with since childhood. This rift in the communal dynamic is also helpful in highlighting the weakness of the "communitas" concept, as internal differences and micro-power relations still come into play.

Fig. 14 Two friends sitting on the steps of the Dom, smoking and drinking *vinjak* and from a *bomba*. The person on the left had just arrived from a family member's wedding, and the person on the right had been playing football earlier.

Moreover, rather than a "spontaneous eruption that abolishes status where people encounter each other directly" (Schechner and Brady 2012, 70), the group is rather structured in that almost all members were of roughly the same age, class, ethnicity and gender before the group was formed. If there were greater diversity of lived experiences within the group, there may have been a different "structured result", or none at all. The commonality of gender, class, ethnicity, age and early-childhood experiences is precisely the glue that keeps the group together. Other groups sharing commonalities (e.g., women or minority groups such as the Roma community) are also affected by the economic and political context surrounding this group, as well as additional factors with regard to their gender, class, religion, and ethnicity that may result in a different type of social bond with others. There is an argument to be had here that camaraderie and community is an inherent trait in people from the Balkans – if the patronage of the busy cafes in town, filled to the brink with people of every age, class, and gender, is anything to go by, it would suggest that had the group not found their place in the "marginal community" of the Dom, or if they were to shift their

fundamental life arenas, they would still be frequenting some form of communal space to see their friends and community. In this regard, we cannot observe the lived experiences and repercussions of critical events of all Serbian youth through this particular group, but instead, use it as a lens through which to view the larger social and political landscape and how formations of community and identity are formed in response to shared experiences of crisis and uncertainty.

A Toast to Laughing at the Misery

"Bleja" can mean many things for many different people, and for the group, it is a practice that is simultaneously entertaining, helpful, and undoing. This is something that the interlocutors are acutely aware of and often discuss, with many of them mentioning both in their video interviews and in casual conversation with each other the often hedonistic nature of the group's *bleja*. Zoran, a group "ringleader", attempted to succinctly describe this:

> ["The group"] represents alcoholism and decay elevated to another level. I love it, and I wouldn't recommend it to anybody [laughter].

The importance of self-mocking, as well as the oftentimes inappropriate, brutal, and offensive humour that populates their banter, can be seen to resonate with the wider experiences of Serbia's "abnormality". This use of dark humour extends beyond youth groups and can be observed as a shared intergenerational practice for Serbs as a whole, such as the demoralized workers using violent metaphors and dark humour to laugh at their own misfortunes in Rajkovic's study of state pay, mock-labour, and unfreedom in a Serbian firm (2018). Intuitive and dark humour have long been staples of Serbian film, music, theatre, and literature, and the Serbian comedic culture of "Laughing at the Misery" (Sombatpoonsiri 2015, 33) extends to everyday conversations too. Many conversations centre around political and historical debate, and a humorous approach to past violence peppers conversations. An example is one interlocutor's response after I asked why the 2L plastic bottles of beer are called *bombe* ("bombs"), "Of course somebody looked at the bottle and thought of a bomb! It makes your bladder explode like a NATO bomb hitting RTS!" Violence, as Veena Das puts it, "descends into the ordinary" (2014), and critical events such as bombing and/or widespread unemployment are gradually normalized. A broader exploration of how humour and nonviolent struggle relate to the lived

experience of 1990s Serbia can be found in Janjira Sombatpoonsiri's 2015 book "Humor and Nonviolent Struggle in Serbia".

Alcohol consumption is an extremely common practice and a large factor in this group's dynamic. I have mentioned its presence many times throughout the paper so far, something that should not be overlooked or taken for granted. Many, if not most, of the members of the group binge drink regularly, with binge drinking defined as the consumption of five or more drinks in a row (Haines M., Spear S. F., 1996; Nezlek J. B., Pilkington C. J., Bilbro K. G., 1994; Schulenberg J., Wadsworth K. N., O'Malley P. M., Bachman J. G., Johnston L. D., 1996). Throughout my data, both in the formal interviews and casually observed conversation, most of the group self-reflexively talks about their drinking habits, and the perceived toxicity of their habits is often joked about among themselves. Many have expressed that they are dissatisfied with many aspects of their lives and admit to heavy binge drinking to feel better. Filip, an unemployed university graduate, explained how drinking makes him feel better:

> I like drinking. I especially like the state it puts me in, a state of numbness where I don't care about what's going on around me. Either that or it makes it easier to talk about and understand our situation. All in all, drinking makes it easier to bear it all.

Moderate amounts of alcohol consumed in a social setting can enhance positive emotions and social bonding,[6] and drinking behaviour is often influenced by knowledge of the effect it will have (see Callas P. W., Flynn B. S., Worden J. K., 2004; Schulte M. T., Ramo D., Brown S. A., 2009; Urban, R., Kokonyei, G., Demetrovics, Z., 2008; Bensley, L. S., Spieker, S. J., Van Eenwyk, J., Schoder, J., 1999). Binge drinking is an issue of huge concern to public health in the rest of the country. A study of Serbian students in central Serbia aged 18 reported that 97.4% of them consumed alcohol, with 34.9% having their first experience with alcohol at the age of 14 or less (Đorđević N., Bogojević J., Kostić M., 2001, 363). It is hard to say with certainty, without further ethnographic research, whether the relationship between Serbian youth and alcohol stems from nature or nurture, but it is an interesting precursor to the topic "performance", both within this research and their social behaviour away from the camera and researcher.

[6] University of Pittsburgh. "Moderate doses of alcohol increase social bonding in groups." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 29 June 2012. <www.sciencedaily.com/releases/ 2012/06/120629211854.htm>.

Performance

Whilst there may be an element of performance to my data, as touched on in the introduction, I also believe that performance plays a huge role in the group dynamic whether there is a researcher present or not.

This can be illustrated through Đorđe, who is loud, witty, and jovial. He is very popular, and many of his friends look first to his reaction before deciding whether a joke, song, or person has merit. I attempted to formally interview Đorđe several times, but a severe case of camera shyness and a dismissal of his own value to the discussion resulted in footage comprising laughter, self-dismissal of any idea or answer halfway through, and an overcompensation of jokes. During a more lucid conversation away from the camera and microphone, we discussed his heavy drinking and the role of alcohol in his life:

> All the best ideas I've had, all the funniest songs and jokes I've made up, were done when I was drunk. Everybody thinks of me as a great guy, but they don't realize that it's because I'm always socially drunk. Sober, I can't imagine socializing and stomaching other people because I can barely stand myself. Alcohol helps me loosen up and be a better person.

Despite being, by my estimations, highly intelligent and widely liked by his peers, Đorđe does not see himself as valuable or worthy of dialogue, an attribute that is perhaps linked to the "negative selection" experienced by young people in Serbia. For Đorđe, this translates to substance abuse as a way of presenting himself as naturally entertaining and anxiety-free. I asked Đorđe, since he "can't stomach other people", whether he has any other specific aspirations in life:

> I can't stomach other people, but I do also love my friends. I suppose that I should grow up and start a family, but who the f*** is going to raise a child here, in this economy, in this collective insanity, on minimum wage? But I also don't want a better job or children. I wouldn't have the freedoms I do now.

It is difficult to weigh up whether my interlocutors are frustrated by their inability to "grow up", or whether they enjoy their perceived freedom to engage in a hedonistic lifestyle with friends. Are marriage and children a death sentence for one's own pleasure, or are they an escape car to a happier life? At the time of this research, none of the interlocutors were parents or in long-term relationships/

Fig. 15 Friends gather on the steps of the Dom, drinking *vinjak* with cola. One person is posing for the photo whilst several others are mid-conversation. In the middle, one jokingly threatens to throw a *bomba* (the bottle in his hand) at me.

Fig. 16 Friends talking and drinking from a *bomba* on the steps of the Dom Kulture as the sun rises.

marriages. Many of them, both male and the females I didn't formally interview, express that they altogether don't see the point in bothering, and those who do wish to start a family feel they do not have the *perspektive* and economic security to do so.

What's New In Town?

The youth of Smederevo are indeed "betwixt and between", but the shift from "child" to "adult" as arrayed in Western culture cannot occur due to the many economic, political, and social factors at play – be this navigating the complex politics of the workplace, the cost of living, generational trauma, the ever-shifting international relations between the East and the West, national identity, global crisis, etc. Whilst conducting this research, my mind kept going back to the cult Serbian film *Munje* (*Lightning Storms!*, Andrić 2001), an urban comedy set in post-NATO bombing turn-of- the-century Belgrade following a group of "young" unemployed thirty-somethings on a night of escapades where the

urban spatial landscape is their playground. The film is a celebration of nihilism, underground music, and urban nightlife, whilst simultaneously poking fun at the fallout that war has had on the social and political landscape in Serbia and the ever-expanding age range that the term *youth* encompasses. It is hard not to see the parallels between the fictional characters and the reality of young people now, where not much has changed in the twenty years since the film's release.

Young people are experiencing a prolonged period of instability, and their modes of expression are an answer to that instability; if they can't move on to starting their own careers and families, they may as well have fun. This behaviour is not incidental, but a direct repercussion of larger forces at play discussed earlier in this paper. The liminal experience of Serbian youth in the face of critical events has for this group resulted in their own community and rituals, and has no doubt manifested in some other, slightly different, if not entirely similar, ways for other young people in the former SFRY experiencing prolonged youth and economic instability. In the film *Munje*, the "young" thirty-somethings (accompanied by their new friends: a middle-aged, hoodie-wearing drug dealer nicknamed Santa and a frustrated pot-smoking policeman still living with his doting mother) accidentally find themselves at a house party hosted by "young" middle-aged Bohemians and junkies, who proceed to ask them "What's new in town?" Will this betwixt-and-between generation, too, prolong their youth well into middle age? Or will they try to navigate the society they have inherited into a more prosperous and fulfilling future? As the "young" Bohemian in *Munje* points out, they have to "locate their place in the coordinate system of confusion!" Although "the group" is a small and fleeting subculture[7] comprised mostly of white, ethnically Serbian cis men, it illustrates on a micro-level the wider sociopolitical factors at play for young people in Serbia, and the deeper economic, historic, and political context that has shaped and continues to shape the Serbian youth of today and tomorrow.

Acknowledgements: Ethnographic fieldwork was carried out in the summer of 2015, and all references to the present refer to that period, unless otherwise stated. All photographs included in this photo essay have been censored and names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of individuals.

[7] As of August 2023, the date on which this paper was edited, the Facebook group has been inactive for several years. The friendship group, however, is still largely intact and socializes often.

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Appendix

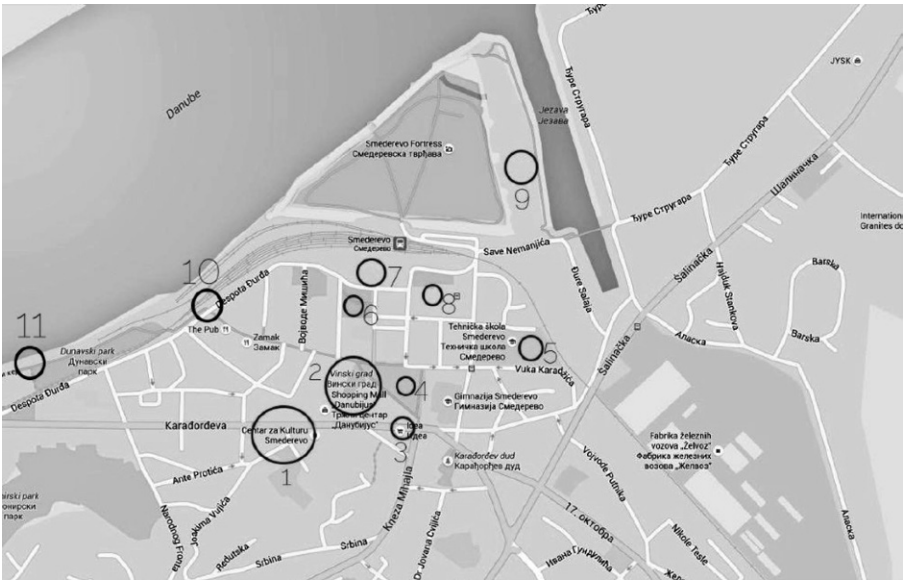

Fig. 17 Map of Smederevo's "nodal points".

[1] Dom Kulture (House of Culture).
[2] Vinski Park (Wine Park).
[3] Ideja (Supermarket).
[4] Crkva (Church): benches and water fountain next to the town church in the town square.
[5] Tehnička (Technical High School) basketball court.
[6] Tri Heroja (Three Heroes) Memorial Park: a park dedicated to three national heroes from Smederevo who died during WWII (Ivan Stefanović, Milivoje Stojković and Svetomir Mladenović).
[7] Železnička: old train tracks and station by the fortress.
[8] Spomenik 5 June 1941: memorial monument for the 5 June 1941 Smederevo Fortress explosion
[9] Poddunavlje: steps and walkway by the river next to the fortress.
[10] Ulica Kralja Petra, where it joins the main road parallel to the quay footpath.
[11] Kej i dunavski park: the quay, a popular footpath along the Danube, with benches, popcorn and ice cream vendors, and a children's playground.

Report from the Visegrad Fund workshop in Bratislava

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On the 23rd and 24th of March 2023, the Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences of Comenius University (FSEV UK) in Bratislava hosted an interesting and enriching hybrid workshop. It was organized on the occasion of a Visegrad Fund project entitled "Assessing the study of religious change in Central-Eastern Europe: New fields in the study of religious change in Central-Eastern Europe". During the two days, junior and senior researchers discussed issues related to religion and spirituality, as well as religious changes and processes in V4 countries. The primary goals of the project were to "strengthen cooperation between scholars in the field of religion in the V4 [countries], to make current research in this field of study visible, and to support social dialogue on religious changes in [the given] regions" (FSV UK 2023). The primary goal of the organizers of the workshop was to create a safe environment where young researchers could receive constructive feedback and potential suggestions for improvement, which could then strengthen their experience and interest in their given field of study. This event was one of the three main planned events of the project, of which the main partners are: Charles University's Faculty of Social Sciences (FSV UK) and the University of Pardubice's Faculty of Arts from the Czech Republic; the MTA-SZTE Coexistence Religious Pluralism Research Group from Hungary; the Polish Academy of Sciences' Institute of Archeology and Ethnology; and Comenius University in Bratislava's Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences (FSEV UK), in partnership with the Slovak Association of Social Anthropology (SASA), in Slovakia. In addition to experienced researchers (e.g., Peter Maňo, who spoke about *Ritual Exegesis among Mauritian Hindus*;[1] and Adam Viskup, who lectured about *The Acculturation of Zen Buddhism in Europe*), the opportunity to present the obtained data was also given to several students from various universities in the V4.

Attila Miklovicz (University of Pécs) and Márk Nemes (University of Szeged) were among the first speakers. Both students spoke about the Church of Scientology in Hungary – Attila about the first three decades and Márk about new developments and perspectives in the last decade. Both of them consider the collection of András Máté-Tóth and Gábor Dániel Nagy (2011), *Alternative Religion: Scientology in Hungary*, as still one of the most reliable and objective sources for analyzing the new religious movement's presence and activity in their country.

Mark's contribution revisited some of the authors' original questions and findings, supplementing them with a new set of data. His research, conducted in 2022 within the Hungarian Church of Scientology, outlined some internal changes and developments within the movement – with a special focus on religious activities, social attitudes, and changes in internal values in light of the demographic changes noted. He also paid close attention to

[1] Available online at https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2022.2042418

the impact of developments in the Hungarian social, political, and legal atmosphere during this period. He then concluded his lecture by presenting some perspectives on the presence and activity of the movement in Hungary, and by posing many questions and challenges that need to be addressed in the future.

Attila presented us with an overview of the history of the Church of Scientology as a relatively new religious movement of the 20th and 21st centuries which has been widely researched and publicly known. He highlighted how it had spread to Central and Eastern Europe shortly before the fall of the Iron Curtain. Today, Hungary is the hub of Scientology activities in Central and Eastern Europe. He noted that Máté-Tóth and Nagy (2011) classify Scientology as an "alternative religion", noting that, in the early years of Ancient Rome, Christianity could also have been considered an alternative religion.

The first day of the workshop ended with a roundtable discussion regarding the approaches to the ethnographic study of religion and the relationship between the observation and participation of the researchers. Senior researchers shared their field experiences with younger ones and inquired about their recollections and approaches from past fieldwork.

On the second day, lectures were delivered by six students: Piotr Winiarczyk from the University of Warsaw, Viktória Kovácsová from Comenius University in Bratislava, and four other Hungarian students (Muhammad Amirul Haqqi from the University of Szeged, and three from Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest: Lais Trajano Mendes, Endre Kovács, and Andjela Djuric).

Muhammad Amirul presented on the Wicca, one of the fastest growing New Religious Movements (NRM) of the 21st century, with a particular focus on the practices of LGBTQ+ people in Hungary who practice Wicca according to the Berkano tradition. He provided workshop participants with a deeper understanding of how the traditional Wiccan binary (God and Goddess) changes according to the sexual orientation of individuals and how these individuals innovate their altars, reinterpret traditional Wiccan worldview and religious practice to form a more personal and intimate religious bond. His original hypothesis was that LGBTQ+ Wiccans use the adjective *Wicca* to represent a universalistic yet individualistic belief. His research shows that the subjects in the research sample rediscover and reinterpret their Wiccan beliefs for their own good so that they can become the best version of themselves.

Lais Trajano brought the workshop participants closer to the situation of *Brazilian-Hungarian immigration flows and new religious practices in Hungary,* which are well portrayed in *the case of the Umbanda temple in Budapest,* which was established in 2020. Trajano described research that she was conducting in a local religious group of approximately 40 members, founded by a Brazilian of Hungarian origin. According to her, this temple currently attracts not only Brazilian immigrants but also local Hungarians. She explored how Brazilian national identity is created and portrayed in this temple, focusing more closely on temple activities that seem relevant to understanding how local group values are created. She pointed to the well-established diplomatic relations between

Hungary and Brazil, which are based on mutual migration flows. In this context, "typical" activities associated with Brazilian national identities have gained popularity in Budapest in the last two decades.

Kovács spoke about *Right-wing ideologies in spirituality before and after the regime change in Hungary*. In his research, he explored the connections between new religious movements and changes in conservative and right-wing thinking in Hungary, specifically since the end of the socialist regime. He focused on the role of Buddhism in Hungary, especially the denomination that, before and shortly after the transition to democracy, became a breeding ground for right-wing ideology supported by spiritual arguments. He argued that although these right-wing ideas have been partially overshadowed by the influx of New Age ideas imported from "the West", some elements of them are still dominant in what he calls the Hungarian "spiritual field". Relying on ethnographic data collected in various spiritual communities and a brief overview of their origins, he lectured on how they are related to shifts in far-right ideologies, i.e., to their legacy, their demise, and their transformation.

Djuric and Kováčová's research mapped the situation of some spiritual groups and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Djuric focused on *Family Constellation Work (FCW)* – an extended alternative therapeutic method – in relation to *the virtual space* in her country, while Kováčová focused on *Alternative Spirituality* in Slovakia.

Djuric discussed how nowadays the FCW is mostly intended to repair conflicts within the nuclear and extended families through ritualized group activities. In the frame of workshops led by "facilitators", participants are invited to represent each other's kin and shed light on how they relate to each other according to specific spatial configurations. Selected participants act as "representatives", taking on the role of the client's family members, and the facilitator reorganizes their position in space during the course of the session, which is perceived as the restoration of order in the family system. Although the use of physical space obviously plays a crucial role in this practice, due to the COVID-19 pandemic it had to be transposed to the virtual space. During her fieldwork among therapists-in-training in educational gestalt groups, which coincided with the pandemic, she observed that this forceful transition did not affect the effectiveness of family constellation work. In the absence of physical space, words are the only means left in this online context, and she proposed to examine the use of what practitioners call "healing sentences". Since these utterances seem to replace movement in space and to verbally reorganize relationships, she aimed to reflect upon the question as to whether they can be considered a ritual use of language.

Kováčová focused on how members of the researched community, which practices alternative spirituality, live and think in, for example, the field of health and environmentalism. Her research sample consisted of 10 people (5 men and 5 women) who are part of this community, which is closely connected with the natural environment of the Tatra Mountains in Slovakia. According to her, most informants prefer alternative forms of medicine, such as Ayurveda, and reject the

prevailing biomedical health system associated with the pharmaceutical industry. This attitude was also manifested during the coronavirus pandemic, when most of them refused to be vaccinated and preferred instead to build up their own immunity, as well as to recover from the disease. They tended to search for a deeper, spiritual cause and meaning behind their health problems. Furthermore, the research sample showed a widespread positive attitude towards environmentalism, which is manifested in the lifestyle of the informants. They perceived the planet as their home or as a living organism, so they consider their ecological activities a part of their spirituality, in line with their spiritual values and goals.

On the other hand, Piotr spoke about *Religion in a secular place of remembrance: The Chapel of Reconciliation and the Berlin Wall Memorial*. He claimed that the area where the chapel is located is clearly marked in space, which, according to him, creates the impression that the two parts of the Berlin Wall memorial (secular and religious) are clearly separated from each other. However, in his presentation he showed how they work together, creating the Berlin Wall memorial as a place where secular and religious influences intertwine.

All the presenters and students named above can be found in the full program of the workshop, which is available on the SASA website.[2] To maintain contact between online and in-person participants using the MS Teams platform, all of them were filmed using web cameras. The first student lectures started at 10:00 a.m., and, with lunch and coffee breaks, lasted both days until approximately 5:00 p.m. The programme also included lectures by senior researchers, who shared valuable tips and advice about academic publishing, conferences, and valorizing research with the students.

During the workshop, a *call for papers* was announced with the following list of topics and areas:

— New Religious Movements
— Contemporary spiritualities (New Age, Neopaganism, Neo-shamanism, etc.)
— Emergent practices within established religious contexts
— New rituals
— Alternative therapies
— Personal development
— Ecology and religion/spirituality,
— Religious appropriations of cultural heritage
— "Conspiritualities[3]

Ultimately, it can be said that a comprehensive discussion of religion and spirituality from the perspective of social science research was undertaken over the course of two marvellous days.

References and resources:

Below are the abstracts from the fieldwork of V4 student researchers named in the text above:

I.) *The Church of Scientology in Hungary: The first three decades*. Attila Miklovicz (Doctoral School of Philosophy, University of Pécs)

[2] Available online at https://antropologia.sk/visegrad-workshop-program/

[3] The synthesis of the concepts of *conspiracy theories* & *spirituality* (Ward & Voas 2011).

II.) *New developments and perspectives on the Hungarian Church of Scientology in the past decade* – Márk Nemes (Málnási Bartók György Doctoral School of Philosophy, University of Szeged)

III.) *Religion at a secular site of memorialization: The Chapel of Reconciliation and the Berlin Wall Memorial*. Piotr Winiarczyk (Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology, Polish Academy of Sciences / Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Warsaw)

IV.) *Family constellation work and virtual space: Lessons of fieldwork during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Andjela Djuric (Cultural Anthropology MA program, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest)

V.) *Alternative spirituality in times of pandemic*. Viktória Kováčová (Institute of Social Anthropology, Faculty of Social and Economical Sciences, Comenius University [UK] in Bratislava)

VI.) *Challenging the binary principle: Contemporary LGBTQ+ Wiccan practice in the Berkano Wicca tradition in Hungary*. Muhammad Amirul Haqqi (György Málnási Bartók Doctoral School of Philosophy, University of Szeged, Hungary)

VII.) *Brazil-Hungary immigration flows and new religious practices in Hungary: The case of an Umbanda temple in Budapest*. Lais Trajano Mendes (Cultural Anthropology MA program, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest)

VIII.) *Right-wing ideologies in spirituality before and after the regime change in Hungary*. Endre Kovács (Interdisciplinary Social Research PhD program, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest)

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Máté-Tóth, Attila and Nagy, Gábor, Dániel. 2011. *Alternatív vallás: Szcientológia Magyarországon*. Budapest: L'Harmattan.

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