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Hunting the Ethical State. The Benkadi Movement of Côte d'Ivoire

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Once a showcase of postcolonial political stability and economic prosperity, Côte d’Ivoire succumbed to the fate of many other weakened African states during the last few decades of the twentieth century as a result of reduced income from primary export products, structural adjustment policies, forced multiparty democracy, end of super power support, etc. Unable to assume several of its primary functions amidst growing ethnic tensions opposing in particular self-proclaimed autochthonous people in the south and people of migratory background in the north and central part of the country, the Ivorian state received an unexpected and, over time, ambivalent support by the 1990s from one of the country’s most marginalized groups of people. Traditional, Muslim, Mande-speaking hunters from Côte d’Ivoire’s Jula population living in the farthest northwest bordering Mali and Guinea began to organize security patrols and acted as providers of restorative justice among ordinary civilians devoid of trust in existing state security institutions and agents, including the police and gendarmerie. The activities of the self-help security force of ‘traditional’ hunters, officially known as Benkadi (‘Agreement is sweet’), soon spread to the entire country in response to civilians’ requests and, first, tacit, then, overt collaboration with state bureaucracy. A few years later, the potential threat represented by tens of thousands of armed non-state actors in a general climate of increasing political elite conflicts and ethnic animosity entailed the end of official state collaboration and, soon after, the ban of the hunters’ movement’s activities in the southern part of the country. By then, the traditionalist movement had turned into an opposition militia allied with the main rebel movement ‘New Forces’ that assisted in bringing to power the former prime minister and current president Alassane Ouattara.

Joseph Hellweg provides an ethnographically rich, theoretically ambitious, and well-structured account of the rise and trajectory of the hunters’ movement in contemporary Côte d’Ivoire until the turn of the century. The book is an excellent case study of a contemporary African vigilante movement. Tracing, first, the recent historical background of the postcolonial state collapse of Ivory Coast, the book introduces the rituals and the myth that are central to hunters’ activities, then, describes the emergence and changing organizational structure of the Benkadi movement, including its ambivalent relationship with state bureaucracy, as well as provides detailed accounts of
Benkadi police work throughout the country, before finishing by presenting voices from inside the hunters’ association that contest the hunters’ involvement in national politics. The concluding chapter brings the troubled events of the Ivory Coast up to date and suggests, perhaps mistakenly in the light of the most recent violent events, how hunters provide a local model for national reconciliation.

There is, for obvious reasons, no mention of the atrocities allegedly committed by members of the hunters’ movement in western Côte d’Ivoire during the spring of 2011. Yet, the author addresses in some detail instances of power abuse by the hunters’ vigilante organization that is studied with an otherwise comprehensive empathy. The ritually based Benkadi security movement had parallels in several of the sub-region’s troubled countries and also resembles vigilante movements elsewhere on the continent. However, in comparison to other similar civil defence organizations, Hellweg implies that the Ivorian Benkadi movement is of a unique kind. Rather than acting pragmatically by adjusting hunting practices to fighting crime in a new environment, the associated hunters are held to perceive of their activities as analogous to and not identical with hunting. As a result, the hunters’ historical identity has remained relatively stable and the moral code underlying ritualized hunting uncompromised. Members of the Benkadi were not pragmatic opportunists, according to Hellweg, but organic intellectuals who combined tradition with bureaucratic measures to fight crime and re-establish moral order.

The book’s main argument is compelling but also somehow problematic. Politically marginalized people are held to use ritual sacrifice as a moral means of evaluating and responding to crises. According to Hellweg, a moral code of reciprocity underlies hunters’ ritual sacrifice and regulates hunters’ relationship with non-hunters, family members and others, dead hunters and other hunters. Hunters apparently project this moral principle into the realm of crime-ridden everyday life of both rural and urban settings, which they perceive as the Ivorian state’s immoral abandonment of the poor crime. Criminal activity disregarding principles of reciprocity justifies protective and punishing interventions to restore ideal, reciprocal, social relationships. Policing is seen as analogous to hunting and, furthermore, becomes a moral responsibility for traditional hunters, when the state is unable to protect its citizens, poor people in particular.

Despite a careful analysis in several of the book’s chapters of the moral impetus intrinsic to hunters’ ritual sacrifice, the reader is left with some doubt as to the real status of the hunter’s ethical ethos encoded in their sacrifices and guiding their conduct. While the author subscribes to a host of relevant, current social theory, one notices a surprising absence of epistemologically informed reflection on the use of big conceptual entities such as ‘ethos’, moral and ethical ‘codes’, etc. These are bold generalizations reminiscent of pre–postmodern, classical anthropology. Without denying the existence of shared values of an ethical and moral nature, which are held to ‘guide’ hunters’ action, the analysis of these cultural notions’ cognitive and motivational significance for the hunters’ movement would have been more realistic and less speculative, if it had paid fuller attention.
to the mechanisms underlying the acquisition, transmission and representations among individual hunters of such ideas. Is it unlikely, for instance, that a difference prevailed between rural- and urban-based ‘hunters’ perceptions of their role, or between long-term, core members of the hunters’ association and the many newcomers, including the anthropologist himself, who suddenly joined the movement in great numbers and throughout the country with the approval of state bureaucracy? Leaving such questions unanswered, Hellweg’s analytical strategy entails the risk of projecting intentions into core cultural practices, such as rituals of sacrifice, that probably lie beyond the awareness of the sacrificers, that is, the hunters, and thereby compromises the value of the author’s envisaged contribution to a social theory of agency. There should be no doubt, however, that Hunting the Ethical State is a most important and distinguished contribution to the anthropological study of local movements’ role in times of uncertainty and political transformation at state level.

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Buddhism in the Modern World is a very welcome addition to the burgeoning literature approaching a discussion of Buddhism and Modernity. While the vast majority of academic literature addressing Buddhism utilizes historical or textual approaches, an increasing number of researchers are considering Buddhism in its modern contexts, occasionally including an ethnographic approach in their study. Attempts have been made to bring this research together under the rubric of Modern Buddhism (Lopez 2002) or Buddhist Modernism (McMahan 2008) in order to demarcate a new field within Buddhist studies. According to McMahan Buddhist Modernism should be considered ‘a new transnational genre of Buddhism... [which] is a hybrid religious and cultural form that combines selected elements of Buddhism with the major Western discourses and practices of modernity...’ (160). This emerging field within Religious Studies warrants more thorough ethnographic underpinnings, which this volume to a limited degree provides. Nevertheless, the ambitious attempt in this volume to provide a broad coverage of the ways in which Western discourses and practices of modernity have impacted the global development of Buddhism during the past 150 years is a laudable project and can serve as inspiration for new ethnographic inquiries into contemporary Buddhism.

Although at first glance the volume appears to be an introductory textbook for undergraduate students, many of the chapters provide new research and insightful articles that any person, including established scholars, students and practitioners, interested in the ways in which Buddhism encounters modernity will find beneficial. To make the book more accessible, each chapter includes nicely demarcated headlined sections, illustrative photos, a summary, discussion points and suggestions for further reading. The volume is divided into two sections: ‘Buddhism in its Geographical Contexts’, which encompasses regional