

The Grammar of Honour and Revenge

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Abstract

There is a rich anthropological literature on honour and revenge, but more often than not, analyses are limited to cultural or historical expressions of the phenomena. As a corollary, the recent re-emergence of honour in Europe is usually explained in terms of non-western immigrants who bring notions of honour as part of their cultural luggage. However, the practice of honour and revenge by Danish Motorcycle Clubs suggests that such an approach is insufficient. The ambition in the article is to go beyond the various cultural expressions and search for a basic 'grammar' that can explain why honour becomes a valid theme in some societies and in certain situations. In that endeavour, two questions are vital: What is honour all about? And what is the logic in the perception that lost honour can be restored through revenge? Analysis of a prototypical feuding community in Northern Pakistan concludes that honour is best understood as a family's publicly recognized capability for self-defence, and that revenge is a means to restore that image if it has been shattered. I contend that honour – in the sense of self-defence – is vital in societies where there is no accessible level of appeal in cases of conflict. Furthermore, the logic of honour that prevails among competing families in Northern Pakistan can also occasionally be recognized at the state level in international politics since there is no reliable supranational level of appeal in cases of perceived injustice.

When former US President George H.W. Bush assured that the 1991 Iraq war was a means to “restore the nation’s honour”, and when a Turkish father in Oslo claimed that he killed the lover of his daughter “in order to restore the honour of the family”, were they referring to the same kind of honour? A relativist answer would of course be negative. At first glance, comparing the two highly dissimilar phenomena of the Iraq war and a homicide in an immigrant community in Oslo hardly makes sense. The fact that both refer to honour may reasonably be related to linguistic shortcomings. Since European languages have only one term for ‘honour’ (Stewart 1994), it is a cover term for a wide range of sentiments and circumstances. The futility of comparison is aggravated by the translation of Turkish *şeref* into English honour (*ære* in Norwegian). How do we know that we are dealing with the same phenomenon? An easy way to circumvent the question is to confine our analyses to an idiographic level of honour-in-local-context, which is also what most writers on the topic do.

Idiographic analyses of honour-in-context are praiseworthy in their own right, and even more so when they add to the ethnography of global cultural variation. However, is it possible to go beyond the local expressions and look for universal traits of honour that do not respect cultural borders? At the risk of being accused of essentialism, that is exactly what I try to accomplish in this article. That attempt is in line with the works of anthropologists like Fredrik Barth and Robert Borofsky, who are “concerned with making flux and variations intelligible by discovering mechanisms that produce them” (Vayda 1994:324). I shall look for mechanisms that can present honour actions

as solutions to human dilemmas of wide extension and not confine myself to ascribing them to incommensurable cultural rationalities. In this endeavour I shall lean on critical realism, which contends that empirical phenomena are outcomes of causal mechanisms that are hidden from observation (Bhaskar 1978, Putnam 1987, Sayer 2000, Groff 2000, Hansen & Simonsen 2004). Since the mechanisms that produce variation are not observable, we can only approximate them by constructing theories. My ambition in this article is precisely that; to propose a theory of honour.

The alleged incompatibility of honour and modernity.

Thirty five years ago Peter Berger claimed that modern society has no room for honour. In the modern context, he wrote, honour merely appears as “ideological leftovers in the consciousness of obsolete social classes, such as military officers and ethnic grandmothers” (Berger et al 1974:78). Honour has resisted extinction by modernization in small pockets of Mediterranean Europe. In Albania, for example, honour (*khanun*) was the *leitmotif* of 6000 murders during 1995-2005 (Le Figaro 04.07.2005). But in modern Europe at large honour has been outdated for a long time. France was one of the last countries to remove the paragraph on *crime de passion* from its legislation in 1975. Berger’s contention that honour is incompatible with modernity sounds intuitively to be equally valid.

During the last twenty years, however, honour has re-emerged in Europe. European countries witness occasional gang-fights where honour and revenge are central motifs; homicides are committed in order to restore the honour of the family; and women are killed in the name of honour. More often than not such events are linked to immigrant communities by news media. In 2002, Sweden was shaken by the story of a Kurdish father who killed his daughter Fadime who co-habited with an ethnic Swede; Oslo is occasionally plagued by gunfights between two gangs dominated by second-generation Pakistanis; and the murder of Turkish Hatün Sürücü by her brother in Berlin 2005 raised a national debate over honour killings in Germany, to mention but a few examples.

Such incidents challenge European ideas about integration. Ethnic Europeans are not willing to accept any custom just because it is claimed to be part of cultural tradition. The two discourses of multiculturalism and justice seem to be disjunctive, to borrow a phrase from Appadurai (2003). The question is whether the idea of honour is compatible with the idea of multicultural society, or whether Berger is right when he claims that there is no room for honour in modern democracies. The problem can be illustrated by an example.

Some years ago an honour killing was committed in a Turkish community in Oslo. The background was a sexual relationship between a young Turkish girl and a thirteen-year older married Turkish man. When the encroachment was discovered, the girl alleged that she had been forced into the affair. The girl’s father and two brothers decided to kill the lover in order to restore the honour of the family, which they did. When the case was later brought to trial, the High Court requested an anthropologist to explain the Turkish cultural context of honour. Eventually, the three accused were given relatively mild sentences. However, the family of the murder victim was not content with the mild punishment and appealed the case to the Supreme Court. There, the sentences of imprisonment were increased by 4-6 years for all the three accused. Obviously, the High Court took into consideration Turkish conceptions of family honour and handed down light sentences, while

the Supreme Court disregarded the anthropologist's explanation and chose to apply Norwegian sentencing standards.

The case demonstrates the ambivalence and uncertainty on the part of the modern state – here represented by the court – when integration and multiculturalism are at stake. The case also came to reveal that anthropologists have divergent views on multiculturalism. A Norwegian anthropologist, Tordis Borchgrevink, agrees with the Supreme Court when she labels considerations for Turkish notions of female sexuality and family honour in Norwegian courts as a “generous sell-out of European values” and a denial of women's right to their own sexuality (Borchgrevink 1997). The anthropologist who explained the ‘cultural ecology of honour’ (as he labelled it) to the High Court defended his position by claiming that it has always been a principle of European law that the court should understand the motives of the accused before reaching a verdict (Grønhaug 1997).

It is not only in court that modern European values are challenged. In a study of identity formation in an Oslo high school dominated by second-generation immigrants from Pakistan and Somalia, Lien (2002) found that immigrant boys developed what she labels ‘hyper-macho’ identities in which honour was a central theme. In the field of romance which is so important in this age group, the aim of the immigrant boys was to seduce Norwegian girls and to protect their own sisters from potential boyfriends. In this play, the values of honour and respect became embraced by all students, immigrants and Norwegians alike: “Young boys and girls have become concerned with respect and honour, and, most importantly, they talk about it all the time” (Lien 2002:31). The emergent code of honour is at odds with mainstream ideals in Norwegian schools, where dialogical conflict solution and gender equality are official goals. Easy-going teachers, and male teachers who acted “feminine” by collecting their children from kindergarten after working hours, did not win much respect among the immigrant boys.

Neither the law nor anthropology are capable of producing the ultimate solutions to the disjunctive practices of honour, justice, and gender equality, which is probably as it should be, since these are basically political and ethical dilemmas. But even if anthropologists and other social scientists cannot assume the role of soothsayers, we can and continuously do produce knowledge about honour and about multicultural society. The question is what kind of knowledge we do produce, and what policy implications that knowledge does invite. I shall argue that anthropologists unintentionally prepare the ground for populist resistance to immigration by conceiving of honour as a kind of cultural import that is out of place in modern democracies.

Pre-modern honour and modern dignity

Julian Pitt-Rivers (1965) was one of the few anthropologists to have suggested a theory of honour. He discovered that in spite of temporal and spatial variations in the perceptions and practises of honour, there were some similarities. On the basis of these similarities he formulated a theory that he called the *pecking-order theory of honour*. In short, the theory runs thus: Honour is a person's worth as seen by himself (Pitt-Rivers write in the male form), but also the way in which he is regarded by his community. When a person is member of a primary group – a family, a clan, or a tribe – he invests his honour in the group, and the community around him recognizes it. The honour of the group thereby becomes synonymous with the honour of its individual members.

This collective honour emerges in societies which are characterized by a) multi-stranded social relationships, and b) groups of equal standing who compete for rank. The competition for rank is carried out in a zero-sum game: the rank gained by one family is the loss of another. The logic of the game is that families (or other primary groups) attempt to take down competing families and thereby raise their own rank and honour; hence the term 'pecking-order theory'. But an important point is that the game of honour only takes place between persons or groups of approximately equal standing. To compete for honour with a group which is clearly below one's own in rank would mean to admit equality to that group. "A man is only responsible for his honour to social equals, that is, to men with whom he can compete for honour" (Pitt-Rivers 1965:31). Hence, a nobleman would not duel with a peasant; if he did, he would lower his standing to that of the peasant.

Five years after the publication of Pitt-Rivers' seminal article his viewpoints were put into the context of modernization by the sociologist Peter Berger (1970), who distinguished between pre-modern society (*ancien régime*) and modern society. The main differentiating criterion between the two eras is the way in which social positions are obtained. In pre-modern society social position, or status, is ascribed by birth. Because people in such societies are closely identified with what they do, personal identities are intimately related to social positions. Honour is a kind of marker that distinguishes the position from other, inferior positions. A challenge to the position is simultaneously a challenge to the identity of the persons who belong to that position and will therefore invoke a vehement reply.

In modern society, ascribed social positions have been replaced by achieved positions. In such a society perceptions of honour becomes obsolete. Since social positions are no longer ascribed at birth, it is not necessary to demarcate them against other positions. Honour has been replaced by another ideal, the notion of *dignity*. Dignity turns upon the very essence of being human – man and woman stripped of all positions and roles, according to Berger (1974). Our ancestors wished to die with honour; modern people wish to die with dignity.

The inadequate 'theory of acculturation'

Nils Christie, a criminologist, has used the number of cases of slander and libel¹ reported to the police as an index of Norwegian preoccupation with honour (Christie 1985). He found a clear decline in reported cases from 1945 to the late 1970s, which he interpreted as implying that Norwegians are becoming less concerned with their honour. This would appear to validate Berger's theory; there is no room for honour in modern Norway.

Sweden has experienced a similar decline in the numbers of slander and libel cases in the post-war period. There, however, Christie noticed a slight increase during the latter half of the 1970s. This, he contended, was caused by immigration from non-Western countries. A similar development could be expected in Norway which was some years behind Sweden in accepting substantial numbers of immigrants (*ibid*). Now, twenty five years later we can ask if Christie was right. Have reported slander cases increased in tandem with immigration from countries where honour still matters?

1 Slander and libel translates into 'violations of honour' in Norwegian.

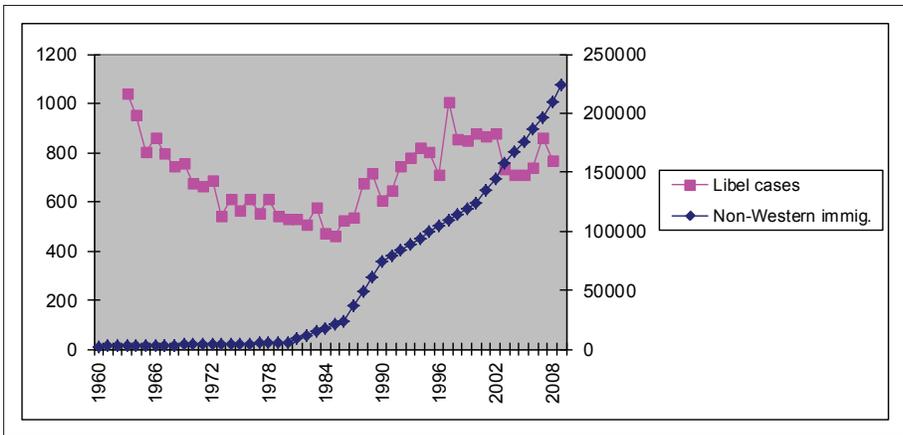


Figure 1. Reported cases of slander and libel, and non-Western immigration² to Norway

Figure 1 shows a steady decline in the number of slander and libel cases from 1962 until the mid-80s, in conformity with Berger's theory of modernization. But after 1985 the number of reported cases increases. It is close at hand to interpret the significant correlation ($p < 0.001$) between immigration from non-western countries and slander cases since 1980 in the manner that the rising incidence of slander cases is due to immigration from typical 'honour cultures'.

Implicit in Christie's reasoning is a belief that immigrants will renounce certain cultural traits after some time in the host community. This belief is supported by the *theory of acculturation* that enjoyed wide credibility in academic circles during the 1970s and 80s. Fischer (1986:231) summarizes the theory thus: "In the first generation of immigrants problems are related to the family or to the ethnic group; in later generations they become related to the individual, and they will disappear, too". According to the theory of acculturation it is just a matter of time before notions of honour and other cultural peculiarities will disappear. Berger was reasoning along these lines when he ascribed honour in the US to 'ethnic grandmothers' (Berger 1970).

The theory of acculturation was anchored in experiences with immigrants to the US in the early 20th century. In contrast to Europe a hundred years later, the universal ideal was to *assimilate* newly arrived Americans. After several generations in the American 'melting pot' they were all to become Americans, stripped of distinctive ethnic or cultural characteristics. In modern Europe, on the other hand, the idea of *integration* encourages immigrants to maintain cultural peculiarities. That goal does not integrate well with the theory of acculturation. If the ideal is to maintain cultural peculiarities in a multicultural situation, we should not expect honour to be replaced by dignity in immigrant milieus. Wikan (2003) has accepted that the resurgence of honour is not necessarily a temporary phenomenon: "Honour and honour killing do not belong only to distant cultures. Today they have become part of Norwegian, Swedish, and Nordic tradition and society because

2 Non-Western immigration here means immigration from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Turkey. The graph on immigration is interpolated on numbers from the years 1960, 1970, 1980, 1986, 1990 and annual numbers on 2000-2009.

milieus in which honour can— under certain circumstances – result in homicide, have become part of our new multicultural reality” (Wikan 2003:9; author’s translation). But even if Wikan remains aloof from the theory of acculturation, she implies that honour is a cultural import. Our ‘new multicultural reality’ consists of a majority culture in which honour is no longer a valid theme and several minorities cultural milieus in which it most certainly is. Wikan (2003) as well as Christie (1985) perceive of honour cultures in the Nordic countries as imported relics of pre-modern society in the homelands of non-western immigrants. As I will show below, this distinction between ‘modern’ and ‘pre-modern’ societies is rather dubious.

One of the two great projects of anthropology has been to describe societies in their own terms³, according to Clifford and Marcus (1986). Particularly in the present era of intense human mobility when widely differing rationalities are mixed in individual societies, there is need of researchers who act as intermediaries between different systems of meaning. As long as we do not understand each other’s rationality, there is a need for mediation of that kind in court, in schools, in politics, and in everyday life. But the brokerage between immigrants and the majority implies that two or more separate systems of meaning are established. If by ‘cultural relativism’ we mean to “ascribe rationality to patterns of behaviour that are inconceivable to others” (Fuglerud 2007), that is exactly what anthropologists have tried to accomplish. This way of reasoning is mirrored in what Fuglerud (2007) calls ‘popular cultural explanations’, which are salient and recurrent features of public debates on the topic. When anthropologists speak of *honour cultures* (Wikan 2003, Lien 2002) or *honour code society* (D’Andrade 2002), it is tempting for the popular explanation to postulate that honour is a cultural import that is out of place in a modern European context. The resurgence of honour in modern Europe it is brought here by migrants from the Middle East, North Africa, the Horn of Africa, and the ‘Purdah Belt’ of South Asia (Pakistan, Bangladesh, and North India) in particular. This is exactly the argument which populist political parties in Europe have embraced in their urge for more strict immigration regulations. Immigration from pre-modern societies equals import of problems – honour killing and others.

But is it right to conceive of honour in Europe as a kind of pre-modern weed in a modern garden of dignity? A study of motorcycle (MC) clubs in Denmark (Bay 2002) casts doubt upon the thesis that honour is a cultural luggage brought along by immigrants from typical ‘honour cultures’. The study reveals that Danish MC clubs practice notions of honour that have striking similarities to those in Pakistan to which I shall return shortly.

MC clubs in Denmark are strictly stratified. The most prestigious clubs are entitled to the designation ‘outlaw riders’. If an outlaw riders club loses in the competition for honour, it is degraded to a ‘leisure club’; and if its honour fares even worse, the club ends up at the bottom of the hierarchy as ‘family riders’. In the terminology of Pitt-Rivers, the club thus loses worth in their own eyes as well as in the eyes of other clubs. They become honour-less. The vernacular word for honourable is *sterk* (lit. strong). In the competition for rank the point is to project an impression of being strong/*sterk* on other clubs. Those clubs are *sterk* who are capable to protect their symbolic territories and club-houses by their own effort without seeking support from the police. In their efforts to be *sterkel*

3 The other project has been ‘cultural critique’, which means to study other societies in order to shed light on our own (Clifford and Marcus 1986).

honourable the clubs do not refrain from violence and even homicide (ibid.). Since MC clubs are a highly modern phenomenon, they do not fit into Berger's scheme.

Bourdieu claims that a sense of honour is internalized in the *habitus* of persons who have grown up in milieus where it is a relevant topic: "The system of honour values is enacted rather than thought, and the grammar of honour can inform actions without having to be formulated" (Bourdieu 1979:128). But members of motorcycle clubs like Hells Angels and Bullshit MC have not been socialized in typical 'honour cultures'. They were raised in ethnic Danish families and spent their childhood in ordinary Danish neighbourhoods. Honour is not part of their cultural luggage. How should we explain the fact that they become as concerned with their honour as any Turkish or Somali immigrant when they reach adulthood? In spite of a significant correlation between non-western immigration and an increasing number of libel cases, the Danish MC Clubs call into question the very perception of honour as a cultural import and require an alternative explanation.

The much-evaded question of what honour is

"The anthropological literature on honour certainly has a number of curious features, one of them being that it rarely asks what exactly honour is" (Stewart 1994:IX). Stewart may have had Maddox in mind, as the latter explicitly rejects any endeavour to explain what honour actually is and instead proposes to describe its strategic use in certain social contexts (Maddox 1987). Stewart himself has given a brilliant account of the many usages of the term in historical Europe. Here, I am only concerned with the kind of honour Stewart labels 'reflexive honour', which is honour that must be avenged if it is threatened. But in spite of his allegation that anthropologists rarely asks what honour is, Stewart himself hardly offers a substantial definition. Other writers do not do much better. Welsh, for example, asks bluntly what honour is, but ends up by reflecting on what honour does: "For Greeks and Romans honour was something that was a powerful impetus to action; for Enlightenment philosophers honour could be more effective than virtue in controlling our selfish and animal-like desires; and for Kant and Rousseau honour competes with love and religion in shaping rules by which we live" (Welsh 2008:211). Here there is no suggestion as to what that 'something' that is an impetus to action, actually is. A survey of the literature on the topic leaves two questions in particular open to further enquiry.

The first question relates to what honour actually is. *What* was it a Turkish father in Oslo had to restore by killing his daughter's lover? *What* did the former US President mean that the 1991 Iraq War could restore? Let us have a closer look at Pitt-Rivers' much-cited definition of honour and see how far it can take us. As noted above, he defines honour as a personal value as perceived by the person himself and by others. "Honour is the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society" (Pitt-Rivers 1965:21). For Pitt-Rivers, honour is an intrinsic value claimed by a person or a group, but is simultaneously the value that other persons or groups are willing to yield. The game of honour is an effort to merge these two aspects, to obtain social recognition for the value a group claims to have. This is a very important insight. It implies that honour is dynamic and must therefore be negotiated and re-negotiated continuously. Honour can be lost, and there are ways to restore it. Loss and restoration of honour happen in close interaction with the social environment, that is, with other persons or groups who also have claims for honour. Stewart is only echoing Pitt-Rivers when he suggests "that we look on honour as a right, roughly speaking,

the right to be treated as having a certain worth” (Steward 1994:21). But is it possible to go further and ask how a person’s or a group’s intrinsic value (Pitt-Rivers) or worth (Stewart) is constituted? A cultural-relativist answer is that a person’s value is intimately related to his or her culture. All historical periods and contemporary societies display their own peculiar values attached to persons or groups, and any attempt to identify a universal essence in human intrinsic values is a dead end. Even so, is it possible to go beyond a pure cultural analysis and ask whether there exist some universal traits of personal value related to reflexive honour, that is, honour that must be avenged?

The second question relates to revenge. What is the logic in the notion that honour (whatever that may be) can be restored through revenge? If honour is something that is possessed by a family, it can be lost through certain kinds of behaviour. But what is the logic in the belief that it can be restored through, for example, a homicide? Wikan maintains that “honour killing can be directed towards men, as during blood feuds. But nowadays the victims are mostly women and girls who have dishonoured the family by breaking the norms of chastity” (Wikan 2005; author’s translation). This is somewhat confusing. Men can be killed during blood feuds while women are killed for breaking the norms of chastity. Is, then, the logic of killing men different from that of killing women? And if so, do we have two different kinds of honour? Are men honourable while women are chaste? Or does male honour reside in the bodies of women?

Cultural explanations of honour leave two questions unanswered: 1) what is honour, and 2) what is the logic behind the notion that lost honour can be restored through revenge. Answering those two questions can widen the scope of our analysis from locating honour in certain ‘pre-modern social formations’ or in ‘honour code societies’, to regarding honour as a response to more universal human dilemmas. I shall try to elucidate the two questions by analyzing cases of honour killing in a Pakistani community in which honour and revenge are particularly salient features of everyday life⁴. The objective of that endeavour is to propose a theory of honour that can illuminate a wide range of events in the contemporary world, including Danish MC clubs.

Honour and Revenge in Hindu Kush

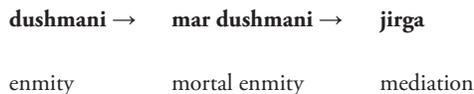
The site for this study of honour killing is a valley in the inaccessible Hindu Kush Mountains in Northern Pakistan. The region is locally labelled Yagistan which means ‘the unruly country’. Approximately 20,000 people live in the valley of my study, Tangir. The population is divided into the three indigenous ethnic groups (*qoum*) of Yashkun, Shin, and Kameen. In addition there are newcomers (*uperah*) to the valley who belong to several other groups. All inhabitants are Sunni Muslims. In the course of a single decade, 127 honour killings were officially registered in the valley, but the real number is probably far higher. Because of the abundance of weapons and the high level of conflict, the valley only rarely receives visitors from the outside world. The travel guide *Lonely Planet* warns tourists against going there. In spite of their violent reputation, however, I found Tangiris to be more open and hospitable than many other peoples of the region. Their honour, however, should be taken seriously; if not, the response is vehement and spontaneous. About half the families have blood feuds going with one or several neighbours. Those families have erected solid stone towers on their farmsteads in which they sleep at night, and the men are armed wherever

4 The analysis is based upon several shorter fieldworks carried out during 1992-2000.

they go. They sip tea with the gun in their lap and they even carry arms when they go to relieve themselves in the fields, in case a vindictive neighbour should pass by.

Honour killing is institutionalized in Tangir. It is conceptualized in the local Shina language, and there are criteria for the emergence of an honour situation and rules for how it can be solved. An honour situation is often initiated by harmless enmity (*dushmani*) between two families. If the honour (*gheirat*) of one of the families becomes involved in the enmity, it may develop into mortal enmity (*mar dushmani*). Under certain circumstances a peace can be mediated (*jirga*), but by then several killings have usually been committed on each side.

Figure 2 – Sequence of the blood feud



Since our goal is to understand the role of honour in such feuds, the methodological questions to ask are 1) under which circumstances does an enmity (*dushmani*) develop into mortal enmity (*mar dushmani*), and 2) under which circumstances can a *jirga*⁵ be asked to bring peace between the parties. Let us start with a concrete case and see how the feud unfolds in Tangir.

Case 1

Two women of a Yashkun family were working in the fields when a Kameen neighbour and a companion assaulted them with the alleged intention of raping them. The women screamed, and other villagers managed to avert the crime.

Soon after the incident the Yashkun husband of one of the assaulted women killed the Kameen assailant. Had there been the least suspicion that the women had encouraged the assault, the men of the Yashkun family would have killed them, too. But since this was an obvious case of attempted rape, they were spared.

The Yashkun family was not willing to settle the mar dushmani even though they had gained the upper hand in the conflict. The reason for this may be that the Yashkuns had somewhat higher rank than the Kameens, and in addition, the Yashkun family was considered to be wealthier and more powerful than their Kameen enemies.

The youngest son in the Kameen family was an infant when his older brother was killed. On becoming a young man he sought revenge for his brother and killed the husband of the assaulted woman. A couple of years later The Yashkuns retaliated by killing another

5 A *jirga* is a council of influential elders who are accepted by both parties in a conflict.

Kameen brother. On the same day the youngest Kameen brother again killed another Yashkun man with the help of a distant relative.

*By this time a small police station had been set up in Tangir, and the two Kameen killers were taken to jail in the District capital Gilgit. After some months they managed to bribe their way out of prison⁶, but immediately after their release a dispute arose between them about who should bear the expense of their release. The Yashkun family heard about the disagreement and decided to exploit the situation. They promised the distant relative money and exemption from the *mar dushmani* if he killed his companion or otherwise arranged it so that the Yashkuns could get close to him and kill him. The relative accepted the offer and killed his previous companion himself.*

At this point the two families agreed to hold a jirga. The jirga based its verdict on an account of losses suffered by both families:

- *The Yashkun family had lost two men and suffered an assault on their women's chastity*
- *The Kameen family had lost three men.*

Since an interrupted assault on women's chastity was not considered to be equal to the life of a man, the Yashkun family was requested to pay some money to the Kameens. However, if the Yashkun husband had chosen to kill his wife who was involved in the incident, the two families would have been deemed to be even in terms of losses, without the extra payment of money.

The sequence of events in this feud enables us to draw some conclusions. When the Kameen men approached the two women, they challenged the honour of the Yashkun family. But it was not the honour of the women that was jeopardized. The honour that was at stake here is labelled *gheirat*, and it is managed by men only. Women possess chastity but not *gheirat*. Women's inviolability is part of men's *gheirat*. A man who defends the chastity of his family's women against other men is labelled *gheiratmand* – a man of honour. But if strangers manage to flirt with women without being punished, the male family members of the women become *begheiratmand* – men without honour. The point is that honour is only lost if an illegal approach towards women is allowed to pass unpunished; it is not the approach in itself that causes loss of honour. In the case above the Yashkun men were *begheiratmand* – men without honour - until they managed to kill a male member of the offending family; only then honour was restored. More precisely, their honour was in a state of flux in that period. If they had not taken revenge within a reasonable time, the Yashkuns would have been regarded as *begheiratman* by their social surroundings.

If the women had been raped, their male custodians would most probably have killed them, too, since the shame had been embodied and thus become irreparable. Women are also sometimes killed

6 There is a saying in Gilgit: "Why pay 100,000 rupees to a lawyer when you can get away with 10,000 to the judge"

if they are perceived to be a threat to the family honour, that is, if they challenge their brothers' and husbands' role as guardians of their chastity. Mothers, too, are strongly committed to guard the chastity of their daughters and daughters-in-law, in order to avoid a situation when their sons – their most precious belongings – will have to risk their lives in a blood feud.

The revenge killing restored the honour of the Yashkuns, but thereby the state of *begheiratmand* was transferred to the Kameen family. Now their balance of loss was negative, and the only way to regain their status of *gheiratmand* was to bring more losses upon the Yashkuns. So it went back and forth until both families for some reason decided to settle the feud. I shall return to that reason below, but let us first take a closer look at the Tangiri notion of male honour.

The man who succeeds in protecting the chastity of his family's women - sisters, wives, daughters - has honour. The man who punishes attacks on women's chastity also has honour. Men's role is to protect women's sexuality against outsiders. An attack on its women's chastity therefore exposes loopholes in a family's defence capability. If a man behaves indecently towards unrelated women, with or without their consent, it tells the outside world that their husbands or brothers are not living up to the role of guardians of their chastity. Such men are weak. And weak men do not have honour.

What, then, is the meaning of the Yashkun family's honour being restored by a revenge killing? The assault on their women exposed a weakness in their ability to defend their honour. They had not been able to defend the women against an improper approach. But by killing a man on the offender side they communicated strength and vigour to the social surroundings. The message of the revenge killing is something along the lines of 'nobody assails us with impunity!' Revenge is a means of confirming the capability of defence when that capability is questioned. When both families in the feud had demonstrated their defence power through retaliation, they could accept mediation (*jirga*) but not before! If one of the families had accepted arbitration before it had demonstrated its power, it would have lost honour. It would have lost its credibility as the defender of its women's sexuality and its men's lives.

Settlement of the feud between the two families, then, was dependent on both families having been able to demonstrate power. It is also important that the *jirga* reach a verdict where the account of losses is balanced between the parties. When both families had suffered equal losses, adjusted by the compensation paid to the one who had suffered most, the balance of power between them was restored.

Case 1 is about attack on women's chastity, and indeed, female chastity is the most frequent cause of mortal enmity in Tangir. Thirty-five years ago, Black-Michaud also noticed "the almost invariably violent reactions to offences involving the sexual honour of women" (Black-Michaud 1975:181) in his ethnographic survey of honour in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. But honour and revenge are not exclusively related to female chastity.

Case 2

Some time between the First and Second World Wars, when Tangir was formally under the jurisdiction of Kashmir, a woman from an immigrant Sayed family bought water rights to a spring in the hillside above the village. Later, when Tangir became part of Pakistan, the water rights were confirmed by the Pakistani administration. The appropriation of the spring water did not meet with the approval of the remaining villagers. People complained that monopolization of water contradicted Shari'a (Islamic Law), which states that water is a public resource not to be privately owned.

*An influential Yashkun family from a neighbouring village owned some land below the spring. The Sayeds hoped to buy the land cheaply now that they controlled the water, but the Yashkuns did not want to sell, wealthy as they were. Instead, the Yashkuns started to construct a channel from Tangir River in order to supply irrigation water to the land in question. This was resented by the Sayeds, whose water would thereby lose its value. One day a young Sayed boy shot and killed a Yashkun man while he was working on the channel. During the *mar dushmani* that subsequently developed, two Sayed men were killed in retaliation. Several years later the channel was completed in connection with a Norwegian-sponsored hydro-power project. The new channel rendered the contested spring water irrelevant. The Sayed family had no water rights worth defending any more, and they were also by far the weaker party to the conflict. They therefore sent a message to the Yashkuns that they were willing to negotiate a compromise. A *jirga* was held in which the powerful Yashkuns held the upper hand over the numerically weaker immigrant Sayeds, and were able to dictate the conditions for peace. Even though the Sayeds held the disadvantage in terms of the balance of lives lost in the feud, having lost two men as compared to the Yashkun's loss of one man, the Sayeds had to pay Rupees 500,000 (approximately USD 15,000) to the Yashkuns. They were also obliged to give a daughter in marriage to the Yashkuns.*

The marriage was a significant event in the ritual hierarchy of Tangiri *qoums*. Since Sayeds claim to be direct descendants of the Holy Prophet (pbuh) and thus the purest of all *qoums*, they practice strict endogamy throughout Pakistan. The Sayed woman who was married to a Yashkun man was thus allocating an equal rank to the Yashkuns. The compensation paid by the Sayeds in order to put an end to the feud thus consisted of material capital (money) as well as symbolic capital (acceptance of the equal rank of Yashkuns through marriage).

The settlement of this feud was not approved by Tangiris in general. If the Yashkuns had not exploited their superior power to dictate an uneven peace, they might have been ascribed *izzat* (merit) for being generous. As things turned out, the Yashkuns were termed *magroor*, meaning haughty and arrogant, by fellow Tangiris. By accepting a humiliating defeat, the Sayeds for their part were in danger of losing their honour and becoming *begheiratmand*. The peace is thus a fragile one. Since the Sayeds have lost credibility as defenders of their own interests, it is believed that a young Sayed will eventually react to future taunts and allegations of cowardice by resuming the feud. This belief is based on the experience that feuds are often initiated or resumed as a response to village gossip, which is salient in another case:

Case 3

*One night Family A were woken by unfamiliar noises inside their home, which turned out to come from uninvited guests. Before the intruders managed to escape, one of them was identified as belonging to the neighbouring Family B. The matter gave rise to mild enmity (*dushmani*) between the two families, but it was left at that since no harm had been done. Soon, however, other neighbours started to suggest that the aim of the intruders was not theft, but that –their real intention was to approach the women of family A. This possibility was insinuated by means of metaphor: “Hey brother, the other day I saw some young billy-goats trying to break into the shed of family A to copulate with their nanny-goats!” By repeated taunts of this kind accompanied by sneers and laughter by others in the village, Family A was challenged to prove and defend its honour.*

Enraged by the village gossip and teasing, an A man went to the B house and seriously injured one of the men with an axe. The victim survived treatment at a regional hospital and returned to Tangir partially disabled. Subsequently, the same A man tried to complete his revenge attack but this time the disabled target was armed and managed to kill the aggressor instead. Following this, a brother of the killed A man attacked and injured another B man, and two A brothers managed to inflict serious injury on a third B man.

*At this point both parties agreed to hold a *jirga*. The *mar dushmani* was ended on condition that Family B paid compensation to Family A. In this way the losses of the two families were judged to be even, and the account could be cleared.*

What actually caused this feud was not the nocturnal visit to the A house in itself. If it were not for village gossip, the *dushmani* might have been passed over peacefully. The incident, however, provided an occasion to challenge the two families to prove their power. The opportunity was seized by co-villagers, whose repeated taunts could not be ignored by the A family without a loss of honour. They had to retaliate against family B in order to avoid becoming *begheiratmand*. After having done so, their position in society was restored. They had unwillingly been forced into a situation where their honour was put in doubt, and they confirmed that they still possessed it by attacking the original offenders. In this way they demonstrated their honour – in the sense of capacity for self-defence – not only to family B, but to the community at large.

Feuds, then, are initiated because of real or imagined violations of women’s chastity, but enmity also develops into mortal enmity over rights to water, land and pastures. In such cases it is also the role of the men to be guardians of family interests. It is men who must protect the rights to land and water which are vital for survival in Tangir. If a man is incapable of protecting those rights, he loses honour and becomes *begheiratmand*. From this we can draw the conclusion that *honour is synonymous with the ability of a family to protect its interests* –be those interests women’s sexuality, land, water or other objects they define as being their exclusive possession. It is the weakness they reveal by failing to resist or punish attacks on those rights that leads to loss of honour. This interpretation, which corresponds to Black-Michaud’s contention, allows us to specify the personal or collective ‘value’ that is central in Pitt-Rivers’ classical definition of honour: *A group’s value is*

its publicly acknowledged capability for self-defence. A man of honour is valued as a defender of his family's interests. This perception of honour was approximated by Black-Michaud, who concluded from his comprehensive ethnographic material that honour "is almost identical to the ability to defend it" (Black-Michaud 1975:181).

The cases above reveal the following grammar – or logic - of reflexive honour in Tangir:

- Reflexive honour is possessed by the guardians of family interests, that is, men.
- Reflexive honour is synonymous with the power to defend one's interests.
- Honour is lost when a certain offense is not avenged. In Tangir, such offences are violations of female chastity and humiliating defeat in conflicts.
- A feud cannot be settled until the involved parties have had the opportunity to demonstrate strength through revenge.
- Sustainable peace can be negotiated when the involved parties have suffered equal losses.
- Honour is given or retained by the social surroundings and communicated through gossip.

The logic of honour is merciless. Women are killed in order to remove shame and men are killed in blood feuds, and survivors live in constant fear of being the next victim. People of Tangir are not proud of this aspect of their society. But the Tangiris are caught in their own web of social relations and institutions, as are we all. Many Western people are not happy with consumer society and bustle and pollution, but we cannot do so much about it. In the same manner Tangiris are forced to defend their honour when it is challenged. A family which does not defend its honour exposes weakness, and weak families run the risk of being marginalised or even pushed out of the valley by neighbours who are eager competitors for land, water and women⁷.

Returning to multicultural Europe, we could draw the simple conclusion that immigrants from so-called 'honour-cultures' like Tangir bring their sense of honour with them. It is part of their cultural baggage, and not until the second or third generation do they become 'accultured' into the modern notion of dignity. But that conclusion is insufficient if our goal is to understand the complex of honour as such. What about the Danish MC clubs? Their word for honourable is *stærk* (strong), and that alone indicates an affinity with the notion of honour in Tangir. Those who are *stærk*, have the capability to defend themselves. *Stærk*/honourable clubs succeed in defending their symbolic territories. Those who do not are degraded to 'leisure riders' (Bay 2002). In cases of conflict the sequence of events is structurally similar to Tangiri feuds. On one occasion the club Hog Riders burned down the club-house of rivalling Barons MC. Some months later, Barons MC succeeded in setting Hog Riders' club-house on fire. After that, both clubs agreed to call on a third club, Hells Angels, to mediate a peace between them (ibid.). The point here is that peace could not be

⁷ Knudsen (2009) gives an account of families who had to leave Kohistan (Pakistan) because they were not able to stand up against others in feuds.

mediated until both clubs had demonstrated their strength. If Barons MC had sought support from Hells Angels or complained to the police before they took revenge, they would immediately lose honour and be degraded to a 'leisure club'. Because this sense of honour and revenge is not part of the cultural baggage of MC club members who are ethnic Danes, it must have come into existence in Denmark. A new question thus arises: Under what circumstances does the defence of honour become important for a group?

A structural theory of honour

A salient feature of the Tangiri feuds is that a person or a family does not possess honour as a permanent quality. As Pitt-Rivers (1965), Stewart (1994) and Wikan (2003) have correctly observed, honour is given or retained by the social surroundings. Since honour is a social phenomenon, a proper understanding of it requires us to take a closer look at the society in which it appears. What characterizes Tangir society?

Tangir is part of the administrative unit officially called Northern Areas, which is only partly integrated into the Pakistani State. Islamabad has only limited jurisdiction there. Tangir itself is an acephalous⁸ society, which is to say that there is no central political power in the valley. Tangir has not, nor has it ever had, a Wali or a Mir, as political leaders are labelled in historical principalities in the vicinity. The name Yagistan – the unruly country – refers to the acephalous social formation. The only political institution in Tangir is the *jirga*. It is the task of the *jirga* to mediate in all kinds of conflicts and disputes in the valley, including blood feuds. But the *jirga* has few if any means of imposing sanctions such as a court has. If the parties in a conflict do not accept the proposed solution, there is not much the *jirga* can do. Its only mandate is mediation. Tangiri political organization thus consists of equal families who are the architects of their own fortunes. If a conflict is not solved according to the wishes of one of the parties, as in the case of the Sayeds (case 2), there is no level of appeal. Not long ago, a police station was built in the valley, but it operates solely on the premises of the *jirgas*. In such a system, the ability of the family to defend its interests by its own means is of paramount importance. Those who are not able to defend their interests succumb to predatory neighbours in the merciless competition for resources. Tangir, then, is a society without a state.

Is it possible to find points of resemblance between Tangir and 'modern' expressions of honour?

Danish MC clubs exist in a highly modern state. But they put themselves in many ways outside the state. The highest ranking clubs boast the title of "Outlaw Riders", which points to the ideal of operating outside the state and its laws. Some clubs are also involved in activities like prostitution and illegal drug-dealing, turning their symbolic territories into areas of criminal operation.

In conflicts between gangs of immigrant youths in Europe, it is also unusual for the parties to seek help from the police. Those who go to the police expose their weakness and thereby lose honour. After several shoot-outs in Oslo some years ago, the police were met with a stony silence when they tried to interview hospitalized victims." It seems that they prefer an inner justice to talking to

8 Litterally 'headless', referring to an anarchic society.

the police. ‘We are seeing more and more of that sort of thing,’ said police super-intendant Anne Karin Blanck” (*Dagbladet* newspaper 18.05.2006; author’s translation). Lien has demonstrated the importance of honour among second-generation high-school students in Oslo (Lien 2002). According to the contention that honour is synonymous with a capability for self-defence, it is also logical that they keep teachers and social workers out of conflicts; otherwise they would lose honour. Another study shows how young non-Western second-generation immigrant men in Oslo gain *respect* by convincing others of their ability to retaliate (Moshuus 2007). ‘Respect’ in this connection corresponds to the way in which I have defined honour. Second-generation immigrant youths in Oslo are not fully integrated in Norwegian society. Various studies show that they more often drop out of school than Norwegian students, and they are frequently discriminated against on the labour- and housing markets (Øya 2000). Like the Danish MC clubs, they are positioned on the margins of society.

On the basis of the above analyses of honour practises in Tangir, in Danish MC clubs, and in certain immigrant milieus in Norway, the following hypothesis can be advanced: Honour becomes a valid topic in 1) societies that lack a state (Tangir); 2) in groups that are positioned on the margins of the state (non-western immigrants in Oslo), and 3) in groups that position themselves outside the state (Outlaw Riders). In other words, *honour is a social phenomenon that appears at the periphery of the state*. By ‘state’ I refer to institutions that have a mandate to intervene in conflicts, like courts, police, schools, and child care departments. Since some societies and groups do not have accessible and accepted levels of appeal in conflict situations, they become the architects of their own fortunes. In such social formations, honour – in the sense of a publicly approved ability to defend one’s interests – becomes vital for the maintenance of the group’s assets and its social position.

In Tangir, the primary group for ascription of honour is the family. Kurds, in contrast, link honour (*namus*) to the tribe (Akman 2002). Honour is defended by the club in Danish MC milieus and by ethnic or religion-based gangs in Oslo. Hence, the group to which honour is attached is culturally variable but the logic is the same.

Reflexive honour is a persistent trait of modernity.

Some writers would argue that honour can only be practiced in societies that have some explicit perception of it, such as Tangir. In her study of honour and feuding in the Mediterranean, Coombe maintains that social agents can only practice what is within the ‘semantic limits’ of their culture (Coombe 1990:234). D’Andrade advocates an even more stringent requirement for an act to deserve the term “honourable”. For him, honour must be institutionalized in the form of a code in order to be a valid social topic. “An honour code, as an institution, is a code people are expected to follow and must follow or suffer the consequences” (D’Andrade 2002:63). In his analyses of responses to insult in the US, he concludes that Southerners’ higher degree of self-protection through violence as compared to young people from the northern states has nothing to do with honour, as some writers maintain, since that code has long since ‘gone with the wind’ (D’Andrade 2002:77). Cohen, however, ascribes the more violent response to insult among Southerners to the fact that “southern and western states have less strict gun control and more permissive laws for the use of violence in self-defence” (Cohen 1996, cited by D’Andrade 2002:75). In other words, the southern states have left more space open for individual manoeuvre, which is in accordance with the theory of honour

proposed here. The *code* of honour may have 'gone with the wind' in the American south, but the logic remains.

Echoing Berger thirty years earlier, Wyatt-Brown maintains that "the defence of honor's principles continues with special emphasis in the military culture of the (American) nation, in which the southern presence is quite conspicuous" (Wyatt-Brown 2005:432). Wyatt-Brown goes on to demonstrate how this "ethos of the south" played a decisive role in the American Civil War, the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War. In a speech following the 1991 Iraq War, President George H. W. Bush assured that the victory over Saddam's troops was a means to restore the nation's honour after the Vietnam War that had been a traumatic 'national humiliation'. "As a basis for national feeling, humiliation or its perception exacerbates collective feelings of vulnerability or powerlessness and can lead to brutal retaliations and mass bloodshed, triggering cycles of violence that can persist for generations" (Mendible 2008:3-4). Mendible's description of US foreign policy could as well be applied to feuding families in Tangir.

If we now return to my initial question of President Bush and the Turkish father in Oslo, my answer is positive: they both refer to the same complex of honour, defence, humiliation and revenge. When the last helicopter left the American Embassy in Saigon in 1975, the US was humiliated. Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait offered an opportunity to restore the image of a powerful nation. In the same manner, the Turkish father in Oslo felt humiliated by the man who had secretly made love to his daughter and restored his credibility as defender of female sexuality by taking revenge.

The linking of honour to a cultural 'code' (whatever that may be) actually veils the persistent presence of reflexive honour in contemporary society. On the first video-tape released on the al-Jazeera news channel by Osama bin Laden after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, he assured that 'from now on Americans will always be afraid', by which he insinuated that Americans have lost their honour, since honourable people are not afraid. President George W. Bush, being brought up in the 'ethos of the American South' (Wyatt-Brown 2005), probably comprehended the meta-message when his immediate reaction on CNN was an urge for "retaliation". Similarly, the day after the terror bombings in the London subway in 2005, a mass-circulation UK newspaper wrote: "In the name of New York, Washington, Bali, Nairobi, Madrid and now London, we shall have vengeance and justice" (The Sun 08.07.2005:6). Why should highly 'modern' actors such as an American president and a British newspaper resort to pre-modern terms like "retaliation" and "vengeance"? The World Trade Center atrocity was the first foreign attack on American soil since Independence, and it exposed cracks in the American defence system in much the same way as the assault on the Tangiri women of case 1 above. Similarly, the UK was incapable of defending its citizens against terrorists. Since there is no supranational level of appeal or mediation, the nation-state is the architect of its own security, much in the same way a Tangiri family has to rely on its own ability to defend its interests when under attack.

Honour is not only a theme in so-called pre-modern social formations and among ethnic grandmothers. There, Berger and other theorists of modernity were wrong. Indeed, the sharp distinction between 'modern' and 'pre-modern' societies should be rejected since it invites superficial and inadequate explanations like the 'cultural import' theory of honour in Western democracies. It is more close to reality to state that the mechanism of self-defence/reflexive honour is activated

in situations where there is no available level of appeal for justice. On the global level, Sen argues that “perfect global justice through an impeccably just set of institutions ... would certainly demand a sovereign global state” (Sen 2009:25). The United Nations is the closest we have come to establishing a superior global State. But since the UN has limited powers to solve international conflicts, honour, in the sense of a publicly recognized capability for self defence, still matters in the competition for national interests between states.

In conclusion, the kind of honour I have been concerned with here is best understood as the socially recognised ability of a group to defend its collective interests, whatever those interests may be. If the social surroundings withdraw that recognition or are perceived to do so, revenge is a means to restore it. When the defence of interests is taken over by the state, honour becomes obsolete and is replaced by dignity. Since there is no supra-national level of appeal in conflict situations, honour is a salient aspect of international politics.

A pure cultural analysis is sufficient to explain the various expressions of honour around the world – to protect *gheirat* in Tangir, to be *sterk* in Danish MC clubs, to restore *seret* in a Turkish family in Oslo. But if we are capable of seeing through the actual cultural expressions, we can sense an unambiguous logic – or “grammar of honour” as Bourdieu calls it – behind them.

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