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# On Afghan Footbaths and Sacred Cows in Kosovo: Urban Legends of Intervention

Berit Bliesemann de Guevara and Florian P. Kühn

## Abstract

Drawing on ideas of the narrative turn in social and cultural studies, this article explores the oral, informal side of communication in contexts of international peacebuilding interventions. It takes urban legends – entertaining stories about events that supposedly happened to ‘a friend of a friend’ and usually contain a moral – as methodological access road to the study of meta-narratives that underpin interveners’ understandings of themselves and the intervention context. Three categories of urban legends/meta-narratives are discussed: legends about ‘the intervened’ whose common thread is barbarianism; legends about ‘the interveners’ which revolve around a meta-narrative of western/northern hubris; and legends about intercultural interactions, which reproduce a meta-narrative of cultural misunderstandings and intervention failure. Using Scott’s idea of public and hidden transcripts, we discuss possible functions of such narrations in the context of interventions.

**Keywords:** intervention, peacebuilding, statebuilding, narrative, urban legend, anecdote, storytelling, communication

## Introduction

### *The Successful Condom Distribution*

A couple of years ago, a humanitarian organisation started distributing condoms as part of a program on HIV prevention in South Sudan. A lot of people regularly lined up to get the condoms. The organisation and its donor were very happy: the program was working well, the rural

population was sensitised to the importance of using condoms. The population was very happy too: finally an organisation that understood their needs, and provided solid plastic containers to transport their tobacco crops. It took years for the organisation to realise the misunderstanding.<sup>1</sup>

In international interventions, like in any sphere of life, there is a lively stock of informal, mostly oral information about what is happening in the respective countries and among the interveners. One form of such informal communication and knowledge production is that local and international actors narrate incidents they know about from hearsay, and claim to know people who actually experienced them. Such narrations, like the one cited above, are called urban legends.<sup>2</sup>

Urban legends are short and have a ‘strong basic story-appeal, a foundation in actual belief, and a meaningful message or “moral”’<sup>3</sup>. They are told by someone credible and narrated in a believable style because the narrator actually believes them.<sup>4</sup> Usually, their credibility is enhanced by discursively involving ‘a friend of a friend’, that is, trustworthiness of what is told is enhanced by social proximity. Urban legends are usually told between rather homogeneous groups, and take place in settings familiar to listeners. They may have their origins in actual events; often, however, they are just ‘too good to be true’.<sup>5</sup>

In the course of field research in the Balkans and Afghanistan, we came across this kind of story with specific reference to intervention contexts. Expatriate peacebuilders and aid workers – civilian and military – told anecdotes to illustrate statements about their environs. Sometimes criticism within the expat community, e.g. between different intervention agencies of one mission, was voiced or illustrated in form of funny or horrifying legends. We also got to hear of

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<sup>1</sup> *Source*: Story provided by Severine Autesserre, Columbia University, based on a confidential interview with a Sudanese journalist in Juba, April 2011. She heard similar stories involving different players, e.g. MSF, and a different use for the condoms, e.g. to carry water or homemade alcohol.

<sup>2</sup> We use the most common English term for such anecdotes, despite a lively debate about whether the adjective ‘urban’ is useful to describe this type of stories, which are neither told nor take place exclusively in urban settings.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker. American Urban Legends and Their Meanings* (New York/London: W.W. Norton, 1981), 10.

<sup>4</sup> For different narrating performances depending on whether the legend is believed or not see Gillian Bennett, ‘Legend: Performance and Truth’, in *Monsters with Iron Teeth. Perspectives on Contemporary Legend Vol. III*, eds Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 13-36.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Harold Brunvand, *Too Good to Be True. The Colossal Book of Urban Legends* (New York/London: W.W. Norton 1999).

stories circulated by local actors about the intervention and its international staff. We took these observations as a starting point for a research project on what we have termed ‘urban legends of intervention’<sup>6</sup>.

By taking urban legends as methodological access road, the project aims at shedding light on implicit assumptions that guide actors in international peacebuilding interventions. Drawing on insights of several decades of folklorists’ research on urban legends – ‘stories that most people have heard as true accounts of real-life experience’<sup>7</sup> – we explore whether such narrations in the specific setting of international interventions evolve around typical contents or themes (meta-narratives) and discuss their possible functions. While intervention research usually focuses on official, formal communication in interventions based on standardised written exchanges, we are interested in the other, spoken and informal side of how the intervention is interpreted and retold.

Urban legends and other stories help actors reflect on their own role in the intervention. By providing information about the situation in which they find themselves, legends are part of the framing of actors’ situation as such. Stories may also help deal with, and make sense of, contradictory phenomena that actors in interventions are confronted with. Often, legends contain alternative interpretations to the intervention’s official statements of aims and norms, constituting a form of verbal unofficial criticism. In a more instrumental sense, storytelling is also a strategy for aid organisations, the military and not least scholars to deal with the problem of transmitting a message: a story is always good to catch readers’ or listeners’ attention and highlight certain aspects of a problem.<sup>8</sup> In this process, it is not necessary that what is told has actually – and verifiably – happened; as with all urban legends, what counts is that the story is believed and repeatedly retold. It is in this sense that the project reflects on informal forms of knowledge production and how they contribute to producing and reproducing cultural constructions of interveners and intervened.

We first introduce concepts of storytelling, narration and meta-narratives and locate folklorist research on urban legends within the field. We then interpret samples of urban legends of intervention in three broad categories: legends about ‘the intervened’ which refer to a meta-narrative of barbarianism; legends about ‘the interveners’ and their meta-narrative of

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.legends-of-intervention.com>

<sup>7</sup> Brunvand, *Hitchhiker*, xi.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. GTZ, *Wirkungen zielgerichtet kommunizieren: Storytelling für die Außendarstellung* (Eschborn: Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, 2009).

western/northern hubris; and legends about intercultural interactions, which draw on a meta-narrative of cultural misunderstandings and intervention failure. Finally, drawing on James C. Scott's ideas of public and hidden transcripts, we discuss three possible functions urban legends can assume for the international actors in the context of interventions: as valve for critique and doubts of the intervention; as a form of shedding light on opaque local contexts and of attaching meaning to social action; and as an aspect of expatriates' social group cohesion and identity.

### **Narration and storytelling in everyday life, and the concept of urban legends**

Research on narrations and storytelling has become *en vogue* in disciplines as distinct as anthropology, economics, political science and language studies. Besides a *narrative turn* in cultural studies, there is what may be called an evolving 'narrative theory of culture'<sup>9</sup>, which can be used as a frame of reference for research on urban legends of intervention. From this perspective, stories help understand how people, as *homo narrans*, and their individual cognition are tightly connected to their social embeddedness. In theory, there are myriads of possible modes of communication. In practice, however, there is always a limit to the forms of communication individuals may choose, because a wide variety of communication modes may produce communication breakdown. Individuals understand well how they are influenced by, and part of, a group. This is why it is important to reflect the group situation constitutive for each type of communication. Within a system of communication, a certain durability – a factor of which is expectancy – is necessary to uphold common understandings that need not be reified constantly. These 'relationship rules' prescribe communication, while at the same time shaping self-images and identities.<sup>10</sup>

Crucial for collecting stories as methodological approach to exploring meta-narratives is the idea that talk becomes true because humans are ensnarled in the communicative situation.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ingo Schneider, 'Über das multidisziplinäre Erzählen und die Vielfalt der Erzähltheorien', in *Erzählkultur. Beiträge zur kulturwissenschaftlichen Erzählforschung*, ed. Rolf Wilhelm Brednich (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 3-14.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin Bavelas, and Don D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication. A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967), 129-34.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York et al.: Harper &

Whatever is talked about is part of a larger script, or an overarching narrative, which has no start and no end.<sup>12</sup> Parts of this are meta-narratives, understood as ‘the implicit and usually invisible ideologies, systems, and assumptions which operate globally in a society to order knowledge and experience’.<sup>13</sup> Stories are told ‘within a pre-established framework. [Story-telling] can constitute, mould or break the framework, but the stories will always be conditioned by it’.<sup>14</sup> Meta-narratives thus constitute the link between individual narrations or stories, understood both as replicating versions and antagonistic re-versions of a pre-text,<sup>15</sup> establishing ‘supposedly transcendent and universal truth about a collective “self” and its relationship to other in-groups including “others”’.<sup>16</sup> For the study of urban legends of intervention we may thus assume that these stories can be traced back to a limited number of meta-narratives that are anchored in the narrators’ culturally shaped understanding of the world.<sup>17</sup>

Within the contextual frame there is conscious and unconscious knowledge present in thinking, recalling and narrating. As it is impossible to interpret what unconscious ingredients are contained in a narrative, one has to concentrate on what serves as a conscious basis to locate oneself within a narration: in hearing someone telling a story, the listener will locate herself within what is being told as if it happened to her. Even if we deny the existence of a collective conscience or collective identity, inter-subjective patterns of understanding can be identified. In effect, this may lead to a kind of – hardly intelligible – ‘second hand experience’, which is transported in narrations.<sup>18</sup>

So what constitutes urban legends more specifically? Some definitions concentrate on

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Row, 1962), Chapter 5; Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit, Gesammelte Schriften, Band 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), 213-239; Watzlawick, Beavin Bavelas and Jackson, *Pragmatics*, 259-271.

<sup>12</sup> Schapp 1976 quoted in Albrecht Lehmann, ‘*Homo narrans – Individuelle und kollektive Dimensionen des Erzählens*’, in *Erzählkultur*, ed. Brednich, 59-70, 63.

<sup>13</sup> John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture. Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children’s Literature* (New York/London: Garland, 1998), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Morten Bøås, ‘Uganda in the Regional War Zone: Meta-Narratives, Pasts and Presents’, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 23, no.3 (2004): 283-303, 284.

<sup>15</sup> Stephens and McCallum, *Retelling Stories*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Bøås, ‘Uganda’, 284.

<sup>17</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, for example, points to the constitutive effects of meta-theories for the truth claims of theories; analogously basic meta-narratives determine form and functions of narratives. Lyotard, *Das postmoderne Wissen. Ein Bericht* (Graz/Wien: Böhlau, 1986), 87-111.

<sup>18</sup> Lehmann, ‘*Homo narrans*’, 66.

these stories' relations with modernity, thus referring to them as 'modern legends'. For DiFonzo and Bordia, for instance, urban legends are 'stories of unusual, humorous or horrible events that contain themes related to the modern world'.<sup>19</sup> In this reading, legends evolve in situations which create a general need for meaning, as answer to the perceived aimlessness and purposelessness of modernity, considering them as 'a type of logotherapy in that they primarily function as meaning-making, value-endorsing and mores-promoting stories'.<sup>20</sup> While it is plausible that urban legends fulfil these functions, it would be misleading to merely focus on their relation to modernity. Indeed, while contemporary legends have a 'modern' outlook, they are most often rooted in much older stories, which in some cases have been traced back several hundred years.<sup>21</sup> Others put their definition's stress on the adjective 'urban'. Fine, for example, argues that the 'urbanity' of the stories is their setting and content, which assumedly revolves around 'behaviours and institutions characteristic of urban life. [...They] reflect the perceived dangers of the urban environment, especially its size, heterogeneity, and anonymity'.<sup>22</sup> However, while the 'urban' as main subject may be a subset of urban legends (and a vivid one despite claims of a decline in storytelling due to TV and internet), our understanding is that in intervention contexts these stories are rather *told* in urban surroundings, that is, the city where peacebuilders gather and tell their stories.

A general characteristic of urban legends is their social embeddedness: they are narrated between members of a fairly homogenous group. This is the case when a group of professionals – in the context of international interventions: soldiers and civilian workers of international organisations – are producers as well as recipients of urban legends. Being told within a fairly homogenous group, it is also important for legends' credibility that they are set in familiar environments – not in the immediate social vicinity, but close enough that one knows some of the places involved. At a minimum, locations must be demarcated as comparable to known settings – above-mentioned 'second hand' experience facilitates understanding. Especially, listeners ought to be familiar with the social proceedings that are described. Stories are furthermore connected to

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<sup>19</sup> Nicholas DiFonzo and Prashant Bordia, 'Rumor, Gossip and Urban Legends', *Diogenes*, no.213 (2007): 19-35, 28; cf. also Ronald L. Baker, 'The Influence of Mass Culture on Modern Legends', *Southern Folklore Quarterly* 40 (1976): 367-76.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-9.

<sup>21</sup> Rolf Wilhelm Brednich, *Die Spinne in der Yucca-Palme* (München: C.H. Beck, 2007), 13-19; and Gillian Bennett, 'What's "Modern" about the Modern Legend?', *Fabula* 26 (1985): 219-29.

<sup>22</sup> Gary Alan Fine, 'The City as a Folklore Generator. Legends in the Metropolis', *Urban Resources* 4, no.3 (1987), 3-6, 3.

a person's authority as knowledgeable, mostly by relating what supposedly happened to 'a friend of a friend'. The appeal of these stories, however, is not only related to their social embeddedness. Telling them is a performative act, and the stories' structure is well designed to entertain. The stories are usually 'polished, balanced, focused, and neat'<sup>23</sup>.

Finally, urban legends are not static, but tend to migrate and are highly adaptive to changes in environment or technology. Even though it is hard to exactly trace migration patterns, the fact that the same core plots appear at different times, in different places and across cultures hints at their travelling nature. The 'Vagina Dentata' legend, which surfaced in different wars, is but one example of migratory legends.<sup>24</sup> As interventions are staffed by a limited number of global professionals who travel between different theatres, stories also make their way from the Balkans to Africa or Central Asia. Finding such migrating stories is a strong indicator of their fictitious nature; however, the question of whether there is a 'true' original incident on which a story is based is not central to the forms and functions it assumes when being told and re-told by different narrators and in different settings – the story develops an independent existence.

A note on methodological clarification: by disconnecting urban legends of intervention's content from the performance of the act of storytelling and from their performativity in creating intervention realities, we highlight the story told at the expense of how it is told and what effects it has. Our analysis thus remains at a level of content akin to literary analysis.<sup>25</sup> The reason for this is the way in which we have collected the stories – namely through academics and practitioners telling us *about* legends, rather than observing the act of storytelling ourselves. This also requires them being aware of the concept of urban legends and identifying them in everyday talk. We are aware that the omission of performances downplays the bonding and group cohesion

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<sup>23</sup> Brunvand, *Too Good to Be True*, 19. This is what makes them attractive for newspapers and other news outlets, despite urban legends' quality as oral genre. Brunvand, who also highlights the role of the internet for disseminating parody urban legends (ibid., 473-4), and Brednich have shown that urban legends often find their way into newspapers and other formal media, thereby being 'ennobled' as part of formal, reliable information. Brednich points to surveys according to which 18 per cent of respondents claimed to have read urban legends in papers, while 7 per cent had heard them on radio or TV. We can thus assume that urban legends are sometimes transferred from the oral, informal to the written, formal realm, thereby contributing to formal knowledge production. Rolf Wilhelm Brednich, *Pinguine in Rückenlage. Brandneue sagenhafte Geschichten von heute* (München: C. H. Beck, 2004), 10.

<sup>24</sup> Monte Gulzow and Carol Mitchell, "'Vagina Dentata' and 'Incurable Venereal Disease'". Legends from the Viet Nam War', *Western Folklore* 39 (1980): 306-316, 315.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion cf. Daniel R. Barnes, 'Interpreting urban legends', *Nordic Yearbook of Folklore* 40 (1984): 67-78.



functions as well as the above-mentioned ‘valve’ functions of talk, which can be extremely significant in the ghettoized circumstances peacebuilders may find themselves in. We therefore cannot explain exactly *how* telling stories constructs relations between groups, has effect in the moment and creates forms of solidarity, envy, credibility. We are also aware that our analysis lacks focus on performativity, which would allow for deeper insights into the subjectivity-shaping and meaning-making functions of storytelling. All these aspects are beyond the scope of this analysis, but we hope to prepare the ground for such research – for example, the application of ethnographical methods to analyse the act and the broader social context of telling urban legends of intervention. For the time being, and as a first step, we analyse urban legends for content and repeating themes that allow for conclusions about the meta-narratives of peacebuilding.

### **Exploring the meta-narratives of peacebuilding: a sample of urban legends of intervention**

Oral, informal forms of knowledge production and dissemination are seldom taken into account in research on international peacebuilding and statebuilding interventions, as interventions are highly bureaucratic endeavours displaying the typical characteristics of modern administration, not least the importance of documenting official processes.<sup>26</sup> Modern bureaucracies in general, and international interventions more specifically, are based on written culture. This results in the production of standardised written texts like evaluation, monitoring and benchmarking reports, strategy papers, road maps, action plans and memorandums – which are often used as primary sources for academic analysis. Functionally, documents are the only means of institutional memory, as interventions generally have a much higher turnover than other professional/governance environments. Short periods of deployment, rotation of assigned duties and adaptation to different contexts require at least some information that staff can rely on. Furthermore, formal texts are the main line of communication between the ‘three coupled arenas’

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<sup>26</sup> Despite accounts to the contrary, which list lack of documentation as an important source for inefficient, unsustainable projects run by intervention agencies; this, however, is usually used to describe aberrant practices and exceptions to the rule – in any way, they reify that formality *ought* to be the guiding norm. Paul Fishstein and Andrew Wilder, *Winning hearts and minds? Examining the Relationship between Aid and Security in Afghanistan* (Medford, MA: Feinstein International Center, 2011), 47-50.

of the intervention: the western headquarters of the intervening states and organisations, the national base camps in the capital of the intervened country, and the local office branches and projects.<sup>27</sup>

For our research the base camp is the most important arena of intervention. It is the central site of formal knowledge production. Its main task is to collect information, which is then processed in two ways: it is used for further planning and ‘condensed into reports’ for western headquarters. The official documents circulating between these arenas dominate the public discourse about goals, achievements, failings and lessons learned. They also constitute a main source for researchers. Yet these formal texts are far from representing the voices and stories of all those who participate in, or are affected by, the intervention. Therefore, it is also here at the base camp where internationals of different agencies meet and exchange their knowledge – not least by informal communication that often contests formal, official representations to some extent. These encounters provide the site where ‘intersubjective knowledge of local problems and external solutions is generated’.<sup>28</sup> It is also here where most urban legends of intervention are told and retold.

In the following, we discuss a sample of the urban legends of intervention collected in our project. Some were reported by field researchers and practitioners at international conferences, others have been sent in by email or via our project website *www.legends-of-intervention.com*. This approach was chosen for practical reasons and we are aware that it comes with caveats, especially that informants are prone to report the more spectacular stories and omit/are unaware of the more mundane ones, and that reporting *about* a legend does not allow to study the legend in its narrative performance contexts. The stories are clustered following a content-based categorisation that serves, first, to take stock of the types of stories circulating in international intervention settings, and second, to trace these types of contents back to underlying meta-narratives that inform the way in which actors frame the intervention. The contents so far reveal three broad analytical categories: (1) stories about ‘the intervened’ which have the meta-narrative of local barbarianism in common; (2) stories about ‘the interveners’, i.e. peacebuilders and other members of the aid community, which cluster around meta-narratives of western/northern

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<sup>27</sup> Alex Veit and Klaus Schlichte, ‘Three arenas. The conflictive logics of external statebuilding’, in *Statebuilding and State-Formation. The political sociology of intervention*, ed. Berit Bliesemann de Guevara (London/New York: Routledge, 2012), 167-181.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

arrogance and feelings of superiority; and (3) stories about failed intercultural interaction, whose meta-narrative is one of misunderstandings among interveners and intervened and of intervention failure.

### ***Legends about ‘the intervened’: variations on barbarianism***

A first stock of stories deals, in the broadest sense, with the barbarianism of ‘the locals’, coded in different graduations and ways. Sub-categories include educational, organisational and/or technical backwardness and topics such as cannibalism and magic. The following are four examples of this type:

#### *The Afghan Footbath*

The military decided to set up Camp Warehouse, just outside Kabul, on premises that had partly been used as barracks before, but at the time were mainly an empty field. In the beginning, pioneer troops had to share one toilet in the only remaining building of the compound. Even worse, the “toilet” was only a hole in the ground. Hence, mobile toilets were soon ordered and, after a few weeks of delays and trouble, finally delivered. Before they could be used, however, soldiers realized that many of the Afghan construction workers hired to set up the camp’s infrastructure had blue feet. As it turned out, absent other cleaning facilities, Afghans had chosen to wash their feet in the toilets before prayer. It took some time to convince them that this was not the intended purpose of the “portaloos”.<sup>29</sup>

#### *Charging Cell Phones in Afghanistan*

In north-eastern Afghanistan, in the high and remote mountain ranges of Badakhshan, people went to aid agencies’ offices to charge their mobile phones. After a while, electricity provided by a generator was supplied to a whole neighbourhood, planned and funded by the international community. The supply only worked for some days, however, namely until someone opened one of the electrical pillars, ignorant that the currency in this transformer was several hundred volts.

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<sup>29</sup> *Source:* Story collected by Florian Kühn, Helmut Schmidt University Hamburg, based on interviews with German military personnel, Kabul, May 2006.

Of course, there was no plug either, but they tried to connect the charger to the cables anyway, thereby short-circuiting the whole thing and setting it ablaze. The whole thing burned down, and a new generator building had expensively to be built and equipped.<sup>30</sup>

### *Communications in the Congo*

It is impossible to face the problems of Congo with the actual force and system in place. The information has to travel thousands of kilometres in a country where the communications and transport system is almost inexistent. As an example, we were informed recently of the information trail relating to two armed men that crossed the border here in Gisenyi. This information followed the normal channels. It was reported to the headquarters in Goma; from there it was passed to the High Commander in North Kivu and from North Kivu onto Kinshasa. To verify the information the High Commander in North Kivu asked, "Is it confirmed that they are carrying arms?" The headquarters in Goma could not confirm because they had not seen the armed men, so they said, "No." As a result the information transmitted to Kinshasa was, "Soldiers crossing border unconfirmed." Kinshasa threw the communication out in the rubbish bin.<sup>31</sup>

### *The Over-valued JuJu*

Belief in certain invulnerability and supernatural spiritual powers is widespread in many parts of Liberia today. In everyday language, these powers are called "JuJu". Thus, if someone has a lot of JuJu, he is invulnerable, that's what people believe. [...] Well, in Liberia in 2010 the following happened. A man claimed to have an extraordinary JuJu. In order to prove this, he asked his friend to shoot him three times with a shotgun. He said he would survive the shots without any injuries. [...] First, his friend hesitated, but [...] finally shot him. Little surprisingly, the guy who was shot died. Now, serious crimes like murder and homicide have to be brought to a formal court in Liberia. [...] Little surprisingly, in such a court there are no legal norms on how to deal with overvalued JuJu. It seems to have taken a while, and also some consultations with the UN rule of law section, until the judge felt able to close the case. In the end, the man was discharged. There were sufficient witnesses who confirmed the event. And, of course, the shooter could not be

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<sup>30</sup> *Source:* Story documented from personal conversation by Florian Kühn with a project coordinator at the German Society for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), approx. 2008.

<sup>31</sup> *Source:* Story provided by Marta Iñiguez de Heredia, London School of Economics, based on an interview with a diplomat on his impressions of the UN Mission in Congo, Goma, July 2009.

blamed for the other guy's bad JuJu.<sup>32</sup>

The 'Afghan Footbath' story is set in newly post-Taliban Kabul, in a situation where interaction between stabilisation forces and local population worked unprotected and unpredicted. It is set in a familiar setting – everyone who ever worked in Kabul knows Camp Warehouse. The legend idealises the early days of the intervention for their assumed peacefulness. The main topic, however, is the interaction with the local population, which is one between divergent levels of technological knowledge. In this sense, the story works to portray Afghans as 'unfit to even know a toilet', as one soldier remarked.<sup>33</sup> 'Charging Cell Phones in Afghanistan' works along very similar lines. In 'Communications in the Congo' the degree of backwardness is less pronounced; nonetheless, the Congolese army officers are criticised for not mastering the most basic rules of intra-organisational communication. In 'The Over-valued JuJu' local superstition is the main theme and again backwardness, this time in cultural terms, the main message.

All four examples belong to the broader theme of local barbarianism, yet in different shades. Although these legends explicitly refer to contemporary settings, their general content can be traced back to much older forms of engagement of European with non-European societies in colonialism and imperialism. All the above stories use well-known stereotypes and are highly recognisable for a culturally western audience. By presenting 'the local' in intervention contexts as mysterious, threatening and/or backward, they contain exotic, culturalist and sometimes overtly racist notions that come together in the worldview described as orientalism.<sup>34</sup> This is most

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<sup>32</sup> Story provided by Hannah Neumann, Coordinator/Researcher of the International Research Network Cultures of Intervention (CoINet), Berlin 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Interviews (Florian Kühn) with military personnel, Kabul, May 2006. A similar bottom line was conveyed by an account of a German police project leader, who traced back desertions to the unfamiliar luxury that Afghan police cadets experience at German training facilities in Afghanistan: 'When these guys [e.g. the cadets] come to our place, it is the first time in their lives that they sleep in proper beds. We often found the plumbing to be blocked by stones. That is because these guys usually go to a field to 'do their business' and use a handful of stones to clean themselves. When they do that in a proper bathroom, they of course block the tubes. We usually had to teach them how to use toilet paper. Many of them deserted when later they were deployed to remote places where they found they had to live in holes rather than in the luxurious quarters of the training academy, as that wasn't what they had imagined' (former leader of the German bilateral police project in Kabul; presentation held at Atlantic Academy spring academy, Lambrecht, 15 March 2012, collected by Florian Kühn).

<sup>34</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1979); Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (updates edition, New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Kevin C. Dunn, *Imagining the Congo*,

visible in another set of legends that belong into this category: cannibalism legends. Oliver Richmond, for instance, reports:

I first heard this story in DRC, Ituri, and this was told to me by, I think, some Croatian peacekeepers [...]. They were pretty worried, because they had heard these graphic stories about peacekeepers who had been captured and had literally been suspended over a pot – alive. I did a lot of research [...] and found out that these stories were pieces in the news across the world. And, increasingly, it's a graphic story about a spit and a pot and hot water and spices and all that kind of thing. [...] I also remember, in the Congo it has been used as a way of highlighting the dangers of being on patrol for peacekeepers and constructing, if you like, a security discourse about the dangers of peacekeeping.<sup>35</sup>

What is significant regarding the cannibalism legends is that they seem to follow an underlying script that comes to the fore in the graphic elements of storytelling. Much more obviously than other barbarianism legends, these legends resort to older narratives about 'the savage', hinting at old, deep roots of such legends and their foundation in folk beliefs and literature, which are reproduced in contemporary popular culture (cf. 'belief legends'<sup>36</sup>).

### ***Legends about 'the interveners': variations on arrogance and supposed superiority***

Stories about 'the interveners' in peacebuilding and development contexts are told by both local and international narrators. It is thus important to note the source of a story. In the following, we focus exclusively on legends told by international narrators:<sup>37</sup>

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(New York/Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003); Séverine Autesserre, 'Dangerous Tales: Dominant narratives on the Congo and their unintended consequences', *International Organization* 63, no.2 (2012): 249-280; and Himadeep Muppidi, *The Colonial Signs of International Relations* (London: Hurst, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Literal transcript (extract) of Oliver Richmond's contribution as speaker at the ISA Innovative Panel 'Urban Legends of Intervention: Narratives about Locals and International Peacebuilders', International Studies Association Annual Convention, Montreal, 17 March 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Linda Dégh, 'The "Belief Legend" in Modern Society', in *American Folk Legend: A Symposium*, ed. Wayland D. Hand (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 55-68.

<sup>37</sup> The other category surfacing in the stories we have collected so far, but which will not be discussed in this article, is local legends offering alternative explanations of the aims and agendas of international interventionism – most

### *The Template Report*

The UN recently published a report on its action in the [DR Congo]. Surprisingly enough, entire sections of this document focused on East Timor. The organization launched an internal inquiry to determine the reasons behind this puzzling discrepancy. It discovered that the staff member who had prepared the report had just been redeployed from East Timor to the Congo. On arrival in his new position, he implemented the exact same strategies in the exact same way he had done in all his previous postings. As usual, when reporting time arrived, he took his template report, hit “search and find,” and replaced “East Timor” with “the Congo.” This time, he simply missed a few occurrences.<sup>38</sup>

### *The UN-trained Child Soldiers*

[Radhika] Coomaraswamy, [UN Under-Secretary-General and Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict] [...] had gone to [...] the Congo, and was inspecting the retrained Congolese army. And among the lined-up ranks of soldiers there were child soldiers. So, obviously, [...] Coomaraswamy was supposed to be having a role banning child soldiers, and [...] there she is, this big delegation concerned about child soldiers, but there she is, the reality is, there are child soldiers in the very front of her.<sup>39</sup>

### *Kosovo Customs*

In Kosovo [...] there is this kind of discourse of internationals about locals, “Did he know who I am?” [...]. I actually heard that from an international working at the OSCE who had been held up

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prominently among them peacekeeping as paid leisure, hidden economic agendas as drivers of peacebuilders, and the idea that a country’s women must be the reason for foreign (mostly male) peacekeepers to participate in interventions.

<sup>38</sup> Source: Severine Autesserre, *The Trouble with the Congo - Local Violence and the Failure of International Peacebuilding* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 84. Autesserre stresses the migratory nature of this legend: ‘Depending on whether I was in Kosovo, the Congo, or Afghanistan, I heard different versions of it applied to the World Bank, the United Nations (UN), or the International Monetary Fund [...]’; *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Source: Literal transcript of a story reported by Vanessa Pupavac, University of Nottingham, recorded at the conference ‘Conflict, Intervention and the Politics of Knowledge’, hosted by the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute at the University of Manchester, 25-26 November 2010.

at the border and had been actually responsible for the drafting of the customs laws in Kosovo. And she was held up by a customs officer who was simply doing his job. And she turned around, and she told me this story, she turned around and said, “Do you know who I am? I drafted these laws!”<sup>40</sup>

### *Sacred Cows in Kosovo*

A local cattle herder was walking on the road with his animals, when he saw a UN police car coming up with high speed. He wanted to get his cows out of the way and started beating them with the stick he was carrying. The UN police car stopped and out jumped an angry UN police officer. He started yelling at the farmer and threatened him with punishment. What had happened? The police officer was a Hindu from India for whom cows are sacred.<sup>41</sup>

‘The Template Report’ works differently with different audiences. To the critical outside observer who is not involved in interventions, it deals with both the problem of peacebuilding blueprints or one-size-fits-all models and the high turnovers in intervention agencies. Both topics have been discussed at length in peacebuilding literature and evolved into common knowledge as core problems of peacebuilding that root in bureaucratic organisation necessities. For a critical observer, the story thus illustrates well her general scepticism towards interventions. Yet, the story also appeals to those who staff intervention agencies.<sup>42</sup> Their criticism is mainly directed against donors’ demands and squishy directives that the aid workers ‘on the ground’ have to react to. ‘UN-trained Child Soldiers’ specifically mocks a representative of the highest decision-making level in interventions and can thus also be understood as both an external and internal critique of UN missions.

‘Kosovar Customs’ is also concerned with a specific individual within the broader category of ‘the interveners’. This story is interesting because again it means different things to

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<sup>40</sup> *Source*: Literal transcript (extract) of Oliver Richmond’s contribution as speaker at the ISA Innovative Panel ‘Urban Legends of Intervention: Narratives about Locals and International Peacebuilders’, International Studies Association Annual Convention, Montreal, 17 March 2011.

<sup>41</sup> *Source*: Story collected by Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, Aberystwyth University, based on interviews with German military personnel at the KFOR field camp in Prizren, Kosovo, June 2004.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. for example Ben Ramalingam ‘The Genesis of Aid (A Parody)’, 28 February 2012, <http://aidontheedge.info/2012/02/28/the-genesis-of-aid/> (accessed 4 March 2012)



different narrators and/or audiences. The source claims to have been the OSCE person in the story herself; so we can assume that the story was not told to illustrate the international mind-set, as might be the first association, but to underline a claim made with regard to the Kosovo Albanians' new role as *state* representatives after the unilateral declaration of Kosovo's independence in early 2008. Yet, the story travelled and also changed its message. In September 2008 one of the authors heard it from a UN legal officer in Prishtina who told the legend to illustrate the levels of arrogance she had noticed in some international staff towards locals. In this version, the core of the legend was the idea of double standards of those internationals who attempt to exempt themselves from local authority and assume a quasi-colonial attitude.

'Sacred Cows in Kosovo' illustrates the different themes a single urban legend can comprehend. The story was first collected on a research trip to the KFOR field camp in Prizren, Kosovo, in June 2004. During an informal gathering in the field camp, the researchers asked a CIMIC officer of the German Armed Forces about the most important problems of the intervention in Kosovo. The CIMIC officer pointed among other things to difficulties arising from the internal structure and multinational composition of the UN agencies in Kosovo. He told the story, which he claimed to have heard from someone working at the UN Mission in Kosovo, to illustrate his point. A few weeks later, the author heard the same story again, at a small conference in Konjic, Bosnia and Herzegovina. A west-European researcher used the story as anecdotic introduction to his talk on the role and effectiveness of the UN interim administration in Kosovo. In both cases, the stated intention to tell the story was to illustrate organisational problems of the intervention. Yet, the story's main appeal is its inherent culturalism. The main topic is not the interaction between locals and internationals as such, but the exotism and educational backwardness of certain UN staff, namely *Indian* police officers. In this sense, the orientalism informing legends about 'the intervened' is repeated here with regard to UN staff with non-western background.

### ***Legends about intercultural interaction: variations on misunderstanding and failure***

The third broad category in our collection of urban legends deals with misunderstandings between 'the intervened' and 'the interveners' and the resulting failure of aid projects. Here are three typical examples (see also 'The Successful Condom Distribution' above):

### *Chicken Farms in Liberia*

Someone at UNMIL had the great idea to rope local villages in for egg production. Normally, in Liberia people do not keep chickens for egg production. But UNMIL seemed to need lots of eggs. Now, there was this idea, I think it was the PX, that one could build chicken farms for the villages, give them some chickens and a bit of feed for the first months, and then buy all the eggs from them. This way, UNMIL would have enough eggs, the villages would have an income, and everything would be fine. So far, so good. The chicken farms were built – simply concrete walls with plastic foil spanned across a wooden construction to serve as roof. They also brought chickens and feed to the communities and explained that they would come back to buy the eggs. This worked for exactly six months – as long as the collection of eggs was accompanied by new feed for the chickens. After this period, the communities were supposed to buy feed themselves, using the receipts from the egg production. Yet, either nobody had explained them this idea, or they had just forgotten it, or there was no feed to buy. Anyway, the chickens grew skinnier, and at some point the villagers took pity on them and ate the chickens. No chickens, no eggs, no feed, no UNMIL visits any more. Yet many villages now have churches that look surprisingly alike...<sup>43</sup>

### *Charging Cell Phones in Liberia*

[S]ome nice NGO workers [...] wanted to be as open as possible to the Liberians. So they started to allow people in the neighbourhood where they had their office to come in and charge their mobile phones. At first, there was just one, then it was two, then it was three, then it was four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. And then one day they couldn't work anymore because [...] their whole office was full of Liberians who came there to charge their cell phones. In fact, they couldn't, even if they had managed to get some physical space, they couldn't work because all their computers had been unplugged and removed from the sockets by Liberians who wanted to charge their cell phones.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Source:* Story sent in by Hannah Neumann, Coordinator/Researcher of the International Research Network Cultures of Intervention (CoINet), Berlin.

<sup>44</sup> Literal transcript (extract) of Morten Bøås's contribution as speaker at the ISA Innovative Panel 'Urban Legends of Intervention: Narratives about Locals and International Peacebuilders', International Studies Association Annual Convention, Montreal, 17 March 2011.

### *The Village Well Project*

There was a village that got a well, dug by German development workers of the German Society for Technical Cooperation. The well was built in the middle of the village in order to stymie complaints about different distances people would have to walk to get to the well. The old well was far outside the village and women had been tasked to walk and bring the water back. The time at the well, as well as the time walking there, however, had been the only time women were outside of the control of men, which was also a good opportunity for them to talk to other women. By digging the well in the centre of the village where they could be observed all the time, the development experts had breached many of their directives, of which a central one is empowerment of women.<sup>45</sup>

An alternative ending to this story goes even further and contains a slightly changed moral:

Since the well was in the middle of the village, where everyone was able to see the women collect and carry the water, henceforth, men had to carry the water, as women in local tradition have to be kept from the sights of other men. Thus, the women were even more confined to the houses and lost some freedom thanks to the development assistance – at the same time, men were forced to assume some of those formerly women’s duties.<sup>46</sup>

Although these legends also contain traces of the local barbarianism theme, those who are most ridiculed here are ‘the interveners’, who despite their knowledge and high educational standard are unable to prevent their projects or the interaction with local stakeholders from failing. The main focus of these stories is on how local populations appropriate development projects in multi-faceted and clever ways. With regard to ‘The Village Well Project’, the two different versions illustrate once more the fluidity of stories; the details may vary whenever the stories are re-told, but their characteristics remain untouched. The locals in these stories behave other than expected in their reaction to externally provided aid; however, their actions are explicable within their own logics, which only partly overlap with the aid agencies’ intentions. Both endings seem to indicate that external assistance is unaware of local contexts, thus triggering unintended

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<sup>45</sup> *Source:* Story collected from personal communication with Hannah Neumann, Coordinator/Researcher of the International Research Network Cultures of Intervention (CoINet), Berlin.

<sup>46</sup> *Source:* Alternative version supplied by Florian Kühn, unrecorded source.

consequences. In effect, ‘ownership’ of development projects by local populations changes its meaning: even though building a well may follow the best of intentions and seems a sensible thing to do, the social practices surrounding it in the often delicately balanced social relations of target countries may transform what is being offered in unanticipated ways. The story’s moral appears to be that ‘whatever you do, it is not in your hands’.

### **Storytelling and peacebuilding: functions of urban legends of intervention**

How do we make sense of the (meta-)narratives of intervention that surface in urban legends? In order to analytically grasp the plurality of official and unofficial representations, we follow Scott’s differentiation between public and hidden transcripts and Heathershaw’s adaptation of this concept to the context of interventions.<sup>47</sup> We adapt Scott’s ideas without his strict appliance to hierarchical power relationships. Indeed, in the practice of interventions it is sometimes hard to tell who calls the shots – hence, we make use of the distinction of official and virtually private narratives, but abstain from deducing formalised patterns of subordination.

*Public transcripts* are made up of the dominant discourses and practices in a given context – it is what Scott calls the ‘respectable performance’.<sup>48</sup> In the case of the discourse of intervention, they can be found in official documents and testimonies, in government and international agencies’ reports, and in public events and appearances, which usually ‘narrate a simplistic schema of liberal intervention’, that does not account for the perspective of the recipients of intervention or the private views of peacebuilding personnel.<sup>49</sup> The power of the public transcript is limited – it cannot reach into the private realm of communication –, but it is at the same time powerful in that it keeps certain perspectives from becoming part of the public discourse.

*Hidden transcripts* describe the discourses and practices that form an alternative, often

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<sup>47</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1990); and John D. Heathershaw, *Post-Conflict Tajikistan. The politics of peacebuilding and the emergence of legitimate order* (Abingdon/New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>48</sup> Scott, *Transcripts*, 45-69.

<sup>49</sup> Heathershaw, *Post-Conflict Tajikistan*, 52.

hidden reality and have ‘a fairly extensive offstage social existence’.<sup>50</sup> As long as the public transcripts are not openly contested, hidden transcripts strengthen and stabilise dominant discourse. While Scott is most interested in the ‘infrapolitics of subordinate groups’ and notions of resistance, he stresses that dominant groups too have hidden transcripts that are incoherent with the public ones and that they too are subjected to the rules of the public transcript; it would thus be simplifying to conflate public transcripts with dominance and hidden transcripts with critique/resistance. Public and hidden transcripts may have the same author, but target different audiences and are subject to different constraints of power. They are ‘dialectically related’: they cannot be reduced to simple binary categories like false/true or bad/good, but influence each other’s emergence.<sup>51</sup> Of Scott’s four varieties of political discourse that constitute the hidden transcript, the ‘politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors’ is of specific interest for this research: ‘[r]umor, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, and euphemisms – a good part of the folk culture of subordinate groups – fit this description’.<sup>52</sup>

The *public transcript of contemporary interventions* in international relations, which informs official, written, formalised communication and official encounters between interveners and intervened, is based on western liberal ideology. International interventions have increasingly referred to the security of the individual and thereby projected norms extrapolated from the social space of the liberal state onto the global space. Within the concept of ‘global governance’, it is assumed that what classically ought to be the state’s business is now everyone’s in a global ‘responsibility to protect’.<sup>53</sup> For the public transcript of liberal peacebuilding interventions, ‘[m]uch of the assessment and evaluation that takes place is conducted by internationals, not locals or even independent organisations, from within the liberal peacebuilding system, meaning that these processes become circular’.<sup>54</sup> Since international (often western) agents dominate the

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<sup>50</sup> Scott, *Transcripts*, 21.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>52</sup> Scott, *Transcripts*, 18-19.

<sup>53</sup> Florian P. Kühn, *Sicherheit und Entwicklung in der Weltgesellschaft. Liberales Paradigma und Statebuilding in Afghanistan* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2010); Berit Bliesemann de Guevara and Florian P. Kühn, ‘The International Community – Rhetoric and Reality: Tracing a seemingly well-known apparition’, *Sicherheit + Frieden (Security + Peace)* 27, no.2 (2009): 73-39; and Berit Bliesemann de Guevara und Florian P. Kühn, *Illusion Statebuilding. Warum der westliche Staat so schwer zu exportieren ist* (Hamburg: edition Körber-Stiftung, 2010).

<sup>54</sup> Oliver P. Richmond and Jason Franks, *Liberal Peace Transitions. Between Statebuilding and Peacebuilding*

public intervention discourse and advertise a state model that is derived from the liberal state, self-referentially ‘the liberal state is the only solution to contemporary conflict’, thus obviating to evaluate the very liberal state as a source of conflict.<sup>55</sup>

Merging, or at least confusing, cause and effects of liberal statehood also conflates distinct phenomena, constructing causalities: in these scripts, poor people and those lacking proper education will become terrorists – despite evidence to the contrary. As Duffield points out, comparable arguments were made during decolonisation, linking poverty with communism.<sup>56</sup> Politically serving a distinction between ‘standards of civilization’,<sup>57</sup> such circularities serve to explain why interventions take place in the first place. Where ‘human security’ is lacking, states are disempowered and global governance regimes step in to rectify shortcomings. Local political arrangements are denigrated for their seemingly obvious inability to regulate, and international actors circumscribe sovereignty to act on behalf of enlightened modernity. The human security paradigm, within which contemporary interventions take place at least declaratorily, puts individuals at its centre, whilst in fact, as Duffield notes, ‘it can be more accurately understood as *effective states prioritizing the well-being of populations living within ineffective ones*’.<sup>58</sup> This contains the organisational myth<sup>59</sup> of benignly and temporarily taking on responsibilities. Also, it mythologises military engagement as in support of development programmes, while, with similar credibility, development action might be read as a supporting element of security or a military campaign.<sup>60</sup>

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(Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 185.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.; and cf. Bliesemann de Guevara and Kühn, *Illusion Statebuilding*.

<sup>56</sup> Mark Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War* (Cambridge: polity, 2007), 115.

<sup>57</sup> Gerrit W. Gong, *The Standard of ‘Civilization’ in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984); and Catherine Götze, ‘Sameness and Distinction: Understanding Democratic Peace in a Bourdieusian Perspective’, in *Democratic Wars. Looking at the Dark Side of Democratic Peace*, eds. Anna Geis, Lothar Brock and Harald Müller (Houndmills/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 170-191.

<sup>58</sup> Duffield, *Development*, 122 (emphasis in original).

<sup>59</sup> Organizational and policy myths are ‘a narrative created and believed by a group of people that diverts attention away from a puzzling part of their reality’. Dvora Yanow, ‘Silences in Public Policy Discourse: Organizational and Policy Myths’, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 2, no.4 (1992): 399-423, 401. Defining myths as narrations refers to the language used: myths are ‘not propositions of logic or arguments of rhetoric’ (ibid.), but narrations meant to make sense when believed without further questioning. Myths are socially constructed and evolve as a public discourse in a particular setting and in ‘response to the needs of the moment’ (ibid.).

<sup>60</sup> Thomas Gebauer, ‘Zivil-militärische Zusammenarbeit. NGOs im Kontext der Militarisierung des Humanitären’, in

The *hidden transcripts of current interventions*, of which urban legends are part, must be read against the background of public discourse and performances. The official narrative is dominated by the intervening agencies – they demarcate what is possible in official perceptions and evaluations of the intervention – and reproduced by all actors, international and local, who participate in public performances that adhere to the official script. Scepticism on the part of individual intervention agents and dissident local perspectives on the intervention, but also more radical interpretations of the ‘situation on the ground’ are mainly sidelined in official accounts. They surface in the hidden transcripts of two ‘author groups’: the interveners themselves and local actors. In this article, we have focused on the first group, the international agents of the intervention. There are at least three main sources for hidden transcripts of ‘the interveners’.

The *first* source is inconsistencies between the public transcript of intervention and peacebuilders’ everyday experiences. During field trips, researchers commonly experience that their interviewees have a lot to say off the record and may reveal contradictions that arise between ‘ideal’ and ‘reality’. Heathershaw concludes from his fieldwork that,

the regularity of such dissent indicated more than merely the stresses and strains of implementing challenging programmes in a difficult environment. Rather, these “hidden” accounts express doubts about the ethical, spatial and temporal parameters of the public transcript. They suggest that particularity and context is considerably more important than the idea of the universal or universalisable the International Community supposes.<sup>61</sup>

A *second* source of the internationals’ hidden transcript is the impenetrability of the situation of intervention ‘on the ground’. For the intervening states and organisations, the local situation is often opaque, and ‘[k]nowledge construction is characterized by high levels of uncertainty’.<sup>62</sup> To make sense of what is happening politically may be difficult, while interaction with local intermediaries is often a source of ambiguity and mistrust. Duffield points to racist undercurrents, fostering mistrust and suspicion on practical as well as conceptual levels.<sup>63</sup>

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*Afghanistan: Ein Krieg in der Sackgasse*, eds. Johannes M. and Herbert Wulf (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2010), 145-160.

<sup>61</sup> Heathershaw, *Post-Conflict Tajikistan*, 52.

<sup>62</sup> Klaus Schlichte and Alex Veit, *Coupled Arenas: Why state-building is so difficult*, Working Papers Micropolitics no. 3/2007, Berlin: Humboldt University, 24; and Alex Veit, *Intervention as Indirect Rule. Civil War and Statebuilding in the Democratic Republic of Congo* (Frankfurt a. M. et al.: Campus, 2010).

<sup>63</sup> Duffield, *Development*, 188.

Furthermore, intervention agencies compete with other agencies for knowledge, projects and funding – factors which also shape the way in which official reports are written and encounters performed.<sup>64</sup> Here, the hidden transcript may come in to fill knowledge voids, to make sense of ‘the local’ and/or of the intervention, and to provide orientation in an uncertain situation.

The *third* main source of the hidden transcript is the intervention as a social and living environment.<sup>65</sup> In intervention settings, especially in strained security environments, communication within the group of international professionals is most intense. This is due to a lack of outside contacts (e.g. friends outside the professional circle), hierarchical relations with locals (e.g. drivers or subordinate project workers), or simple language constraints (informal, personal conversations work better in mother tongue or in English/French). Generally, the cosmopolitan outlook of personnel of international organisations, as in the field of aid and development, furthers a certain mental disposition for how the world is perceived. This is, however, not a universalist, inclusive perception of the world, but one which is rooted in highly particular western-liberal social backgrounds, ideas and values.<sup>66</sup> These worldviews are reproduced in informal encounters between the internationals, which serve to bond and built ‘communal identity. [...] “The Africans”, “the Afghanis” are often described as different from the rational, non-corrupt, and hard-working Westerner’.<sup>67</sup> The often paternalistic attitudes are reinforced by ‘competition about insidership’: within the community of intervention workers, claims to have better insight into local culture, superior contacts to the population or politicians, or grasp of the security dynamics are sometimes used as markers of social distinction.<sup>68</sup> On the

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<sup>64</sup> Veit and Schlichte, ‘Arenas’, 172-5.

<sup>65</sup> Lisa Smirl, ‘Building the Other, Constructing Ourselves: Spatial Dimensions of International Humanitarian Response’, *International Political Sociology* 2, no.3 (2008): 236- 253; and Lisa Smirl, ‘The State we are(n’t) in: Liminal Subjectivity in Aid Worker Auto- Biographies’, in *Statebuilding and State-Formation. The political sociology of intervention*, ed. Berit Bliesemann de Guevara (London/New York: Routledge, 2012), 230-245.

<sup>66</sup> Catherine Goetze and Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, ‘The “Statebuilding Habitus”: International Civil Servants in Kosovo’, in *Statebuilding and State-Formation. The political sociology of intervention*, ed. Berit Bliesemann de Guevara (London/New York: Routledge, 2012), 198-213; and Catherine Goetze and Berit Bliesemann de Guevara, ‘Cosmopolitanism and the culture of peacebuilding’, *Review of International Studies* (2014): DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S026021051300051X>.

<sup>67</sup> Schlichte and Veit, *Arenas*, 21; see Pierre Clastres, *Staatsfeinde. Studien zur politischen Anthropologie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1976), 13-23.

<sup>68</sup> Schlichte and Veit, *Arenas*, 21. A similar tendency can be observed among researchers.



positive side, the quest for insidership can also reflect the practitioners' genuine attempt to be self-reflective and to 'do no harm' to the society they are working in,<sup>69</sup> and urban legends of intervention may be one source among many providing clues for interveners' self-reflexivity.

## **Concluding remarks**

What can research on urban legends of intervention contribute to the vast body of academic work on international interventionism? In this article, we have shown how folklorist-inspired literary analysis of urban legends can be used to explore meta-narratives that shape frames of knowledge production in interventions. Three broad meta-narratives became visible within which urban legends serve to make sense of intervention contexts: barbarianism, Western/Northern hubris and cultural misunderstandings. These meta-narratives are not neatly distinct, but constitute each other: local barbarianism is the flipside of interveners' hubris, and both come together in narratives of cultural misunderstandings.

A surprisingly recurrent pattern in the collected stories is orientalism. While most aid workers would probably deny drawing on such simplistic frames, further research would have to establish how 'othering' in the course of an intervention (unconsciously) works and influences policy-making and implementation. With the exception of parts of the military, where reference to a 'southern mentality' is often openly made, orientalism is generally seen as 'politically incorrect' by practitioners for its dichotomising, simplifying and naturalising effects. Urban legends of intervention, however, may be the area where such cognitive undercurrents resurface. Unconsciously present mental dispositions of orientalism may find their valve in urban legends of intervention, as telling and re-telling these stories is a safe way of making unspeakable ideas 'speakable'. Telling these stories involves intellectual distancing, which limits the danger of being socially reprimanded: as true accounts and something that happened to 'a colleague of a colleague', the blame would go to an unspecified source rather than the chronicler.

As some of the discussed stories have suggested, however, urban legends are highly ambiguous in that a single story can be told in different ways, changing contexts and with different message or moral. What in one story appears as badly disguised prejudice may in

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<sup>69</sup> See for example Fiona Terry, *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

another be a self-reflexive attempt to account or sensitize for local traditions and culture. Also, the ambiguous nature of the stories opens them up for strategic use: when development agencies give advice to their staff on how to use storytelling to illustrate their work, this is instrumental for the organisation.<sup>70</sup> In this sense, the meta-narratives say little about the immediate social context and functions of storytelling. What the meta-narratives do suggest, however, is that urban legends of intervention in general, including the seemingly more critical ones, do not challenge the general ideology of liberal peacebuilding, but draw on the same meta-narratives that underpin interventions, especially the idea of world society's uneven civilization and the challenges of the civilizing mission. In other words, orientalist undercurrents of the hidden transcript underscore the official discourse about deficient statehood and conflict-prone societies that is built into the discourse, practice and structure of liberal intervention.

While observing and analysing the performance of storytelling has been beyond the scope of this article, further research will have to re-construct the particularly intended message. Based on intervention research literature, we have suggested possible functions of urban legends for intervening actors and used Scott's ideas of transcripts to locate and organise the murky sphere between the public and hidden narratives and performances of the interveners. In the context of international interventions, Scott's concept can only work if the hierarchical pattern and stress on the emancipative quality of hidden transcripts are qualified. As a prerequisite, as Heathershaw has noted, establishing the dialectics of the political role urban legends of intervention play for actors making sense of reality is vital. In the case of Western 'interveners', individual stories need to be related to the more universal, and often highly stereotyped, underlying meta-narratives. With these categories, derived from a number of stories' morals, we can map existing storylines; a further step is to explore how these storylines work argumentatively and how different actors plug into them to further their cause.<sup>71</sup> This, as well as the performance and performativity of urban legends of intervention, is a task for future research.

This article has shown how the literary analysis of urban legends of intervention can be used as a method through which meta-narratives with deep roots and long life cycles that shape political framings can be traced – not only in contexts of intervention, but also in international

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<sup>70</sup> GTZ, *Wirkungen*. See also Florian P. Kühn, 'The Peace Prefix: Ambiguities of the Word "Peace"', *International Peacekeeping* 19, no.4 (2012), 396-409, 404. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2012.708785>

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Maarten A. Hajer, *The Politics of Environmental Discourse. Ecological Modernization and the Policy Process* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 52-68.

politics more generally. Studied in a more comprehensive way, the narrative side of international politics may prove to be much more relevant than IR theorizing would so far have it.

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