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of, and the off-stage relationships surrounding, particular hierarchical dependencies. But either way, in developing a perspective on inequality that foregrounds relationships of mutual obligation, one key area for exploration is how asymmetries of brute force figure in people's perceptions and self-understandings. This, in turn, is an important entry point for asking what dependent relationships look like from both ends.

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THE PROMISE OF EQUALITY

• TIMO KAARTINEN •

Debates over political transformation in countries outside the orbit of affluent, Western democracies tend to be focused on human rights. It should not be surprising that such language coincides with a global agenda of economic liberalization. Neither is it a surprise that authoritarian governments reject the language of rights and frame their policy making as the pursuit of economic growth and social justice. The reader of a magazine like *The Economist* will be familiar with the face-saving argument that attempts to reconcile these conflicting development visions. According to this narrative, economic growth inevitably fosters an urban, educated middle class that forces its government to improve its record on freedoms and rights.

Anthropology has challenged this simple narrative by showing a huge variation in the conditions under which people actually invoke and make claims about political principles. In his thought-provoking ethnography of African radio journalism, Harri Englund describes a seemingly pedestrian and conformist genre of moral narratives that, on closer analysis, turns out to challenge dysfunctional institutions and the misuse of power in more potent ways than the liberal discourse of equality. By broadcasting these popular narratives, the editors and hosts of Malawian radio programs create a public sphere in which personal relationships—something that people normally recognize as an element of intimate and communal social life—are revealed as the source of moral

obligation. By reaching nation-wide publics, the radio programs extend this moral sensibility to the behaviour of public figures. At the same time, they give us a glimpse of vernacular counterparts to the global development rhetoric that often serves to weaken political agency (Ferguson 2006).

Much anthropological ink has been spent on analyzing the reception of universalizing moral and political messages among the authoritarian, poor nations of Africa and Asia. What particularly excites me is Englund's focus on the production of messages that do not resist or criticize institutional power in any obvious way, and yet manage to inflect its development rhetoric and to open up new moral and political possibilities (Zigon 2014: 761). Contrasting with James Scott's (1990) account of 'hidden transcripts' that conceal resentment in supplication when serfs address their masters, more recent anthropological concern with language ideologies, publics and mediation, such as Englund's book, has revealed other ways in which moral messages can be aligned with power.

Inequality continues to pose a political dilemma for anthropologists who confront it both as ideology and as manifested in social interaction. Banda Eli, the Eastern Indonesian village I began to study in 1992, makes no pretence to being an equal community. Its upper class affirms its historical ties to a regional trade aristocracy. This cultural heritage is used to justify the nobility's leadership over a servant class of mixed ancestry, and restrictions over women's marriage choices. Hundreds of villagers have moved to cities in recent years, and the ensuing experience of national modernity has meant that many now look at their native class and gender inequality as embarrassing anachronisms. Although national institutions represent a promise of equality, they in fact provide a channel for the rich into membership in the educated class and incorporate others into the working class. Particularly during Indonesia's economic and political crisis in 1998–2002, many displaced people struggled to replace old relations of patronage with some new form of incorporation.

The question is not whether one kind of inequality is more real than another—whether, for instance, it is more relevant to analyze socioeconomic structures and weak institutions rather than traditional hierarchies. Englund's discussion suggests that people often think about the effect of institutions on their lives within a similar moral framework as smaller-scale personal obligations. For instance, many people I know are thankful to banks and government bodies for resolving their housing problems after the crisis, but they are also mindful of the role of influential community leaders in making this happen. From their point of view, public institutions and social relations intersect as constituting levels of the same, lived world (James 1996: 38).

Is it possible to analyze the ethics and morality of such worlds anthropologically without imposing concepts that are alien to them? Jarrett Zigon (2014: 752) suggests that we might 'limit our analysis to that which emerges from a world rather than add value to it by means of moral concepts'. What seems to emerge in this case is a social concern that is grounded in pre-existing relations, but must be invented again in new conditions of institutional power. Zigon argues that such concerns do not arise from moral concepts that are already embedded in the lived world. To understand their ethical nature, we should instead 'find and create concepts that articulate the essential intertwining that constitutes being-in-a-world' (Zigon 2014: 752).

The obvious problem with morality that is embedded in social relations and practices is that it tends to appeal to historical precedent and status quo. Ambon, the provincial city where I did fieldwork in 2009, had recently returned to normal life after a three-year civil war that began in 1999. The war had been seen as a religious conflict, and reconciliation efforts sought to ensure equal settlement rights for Muslims and Christians in the city. Yet a new perception had emerged about the causes of the war: it was being blamed on immigrants and on the policies of the previous government that had encouraged their movement into the province. In the 1970s, a clove boom attracted many immigrants to the agricultural sector of Maluku, and they began to settle in the city area after the boom was over. The civil war displaced these people again, and afterwards they received new housing in a shoddy, quickly built area outside the city. Many of them worked in the Ambon harbour—an institution that guaranteed their incorporation into the state economy—but suffered ethnic and social exclusion.

Although the rhetoric of peace and inter-faith dialogue that upheld the new civil order was framed in local, cultural terms, it reverberated with national and global security discourse. At the same time it excluded the 'BBM', an acronym for 'Bugis, Butonese, and Makassarese'—the three largest immigrant groups from outside Maluku. Upper class immigrants were able to shed this ethnic classification through intermarriage with indigenous, landowning groups. The rest had no space in the discourses that were available about what constitutes legitimate residence in the city.

The harbour—a state space separated from the rest of the city—may seem an unlikely site of intertwining between diverse personal, historical and ethnic experiences. Yet it provided the men working there with a firm sense of belonging and masculine pride. In the 1950s, the dock workers organized themselves into a cooperative that controls the recruitment of new harbour staff. The government was still fighting a pro-Dutch secessionist movement in the province and gave the management of the harbour to Bugis immigrants. In the following years they hired and trained people from several seagoing Muslim groups, including urban migrants from Banda Eli, as stevedores. The current ethnic composition of the harbour community reflects the shared history of these Muslim groups, all of which have pursued maritime trade since the 16th century. In 2009, I witnessed an initiative to represent this community politically in the city council—initially with success, although their candidate passed away suddenly after winning the election. He was born in Banda Eli, and was therefore part of the indigenous population, but his political network spread well outside the province.

We might take this as an example of efforts to make institutions work for people: to actually deliver the equality that is inherent in their ideological promise. Paradoxically this often happens when people appeal to historical, personal and ethnic solidarities—supposedly transcended by national and human equality. But this can only be productive if the emerging practice succeeds in transforming the conditions in which people live, or at least opens new possibilities for dwelling in them (Zigon 2014: 762). A discourse of rights—whether universal or local—often fails to capture these possibilities. Narratives and activities through which people historicize their situated lives carry more promise for the anthropological understanding of vernacular ethics. As Englund points out, equality is real, effective, and consequential when it is not a utopian goal of social transformation but something that can be actualized in the near future.

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EQUALITY IN THE VERNACULAR—RESPONSE BY HARRI ENGLUND

• HARRI ENGLUND •

If I wrote *Prisoners of Freedom* in a state of outrage, *Human Rights and African Airwaves* had its origins in an altogether more propitious realization. There was something almost cathartic about suspending criticism in order to explore what else there might be to Malawi's process of democratization since the early 1990s than the all too ubiquitous rhetoric about human rights as freedoms. To be sure, the new rhetoric was itself an area of considerable ethnographic interest and gave me the opportunity to consider, in the final pages of *Prisoners of Freedom*, the extent to which anthropologists might be able to reclaim the concept of freedom from the neoliberal agendas pursued by NGOs and 'democratic' politicians. Yet in order to reach further in my ethnographic revision of liberal moral and political theory, I had to look elsewhere. That elsewhere exposed human rights activists' own unwillingness to suspend criticism. As a bastion of state propaganda both before and after the democratic transition, the Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) stood at the end of a path that human rights activists dared to tread only as critics. What my friends in villages and townships told me, by contrast, was that one of the MBC's most popular programmes gave them a far better outlet to express and reflect on injustices than any NGO-led campaign they were aware of. *Nkhani Zam'maboma* (News from the Districts), an alternative daily newscast based on listeners' letters and phone calls, gave the anthropologist a perspective on equality that neither activists nor liberal philosophers were ever likely to encounter, ideologically and practically disconnected as they were from the vernacular.

The comments assembled here very generously extend my work into new contexts of inquiry and push me to address certain aspects of my argument. From the outset, it is helpful to recognize what my project tried to achieve. Timo Kaartinen puts it well when

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