

SESSION 2

ETHNOGRAPHIC FRAGMENTS, ANARCHIST IDEAS

PAPER ABSTRACTS

Looking for anarchy in Northern Ghana: Hierarchy, male dominance and power in acephalous society

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Northern Ghanaian tribes have been described as anarchist, acephalous societies because of their weak centralization of power. Influenced by colonization and later modernization processes, social, economic and political change towards the rising hegemony of modern centralized state is currently happening in Northern Ghana. At the same time, ideological markers that go with state hegemony are becoming more dominant and markers pertaining to traditional acephalous society are marginalizing. In addition to the relationship between the state and traditional society, there is also the growing network of NGOs financed mostly by the West and propagating ideas of civic society, to take into consideration. In my presentation I will look at how local traditional practices and NGOs carrying humanist values of modern societies clash in a fight for a “better society”.

My fieldwork in Northern Ghana concentrates on the tradition of widowhood rites that has been seen problematic there. According to a “traditionalist” view, the ritual is a valuable and important cultural tradition. NGOs that fight against widowhood rites, refer to values not all that unfamiliar to anarchist ideology – human rights of widows, fight against (structural) gendered violence, encouraging women’s emancipation. According to David Graeber among others, anarchist anthropology could view Gurunsi acephalous society at a macro level as a demonstration of the possibility of utopia. However, besides the lack of centralized political power, an anthropologist with anarchist consciousness recognizes that micro level social relationships contain hierarchy, male dominance and gerontocracy that are not compatible with the anarchist utopia.

Freedom from what? Freedom and Anarchy in Zomia

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Freedom and anarchy are often mentioned together, however while the second is a form of social organization, the first term is a relational value. James Scott’s recent book on upland Southeast Asia romantically associates both, but draws attention away from the social and cosmological constraints many upland societies are facing within their own social systems. Therefore, when analyzing anarchy as a means to avoid constraints, we have to ask: How are these constraints specifically valorized, in relation to other constraints which are considered more acceptable? This talk approaches this question by elaborating on the valorization of ritual constraints among Rmeet in upland Laos. I also shed some light on the ongoing negotiations between uplanders and the state in the context of hunting, an activity that is at once prohibited and at the same time addresses relationships with spirits of the forest.

Anarchic Solidarity in Southeast Asia

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This paper describes the patterns of organization of a group of egalitarian societies of insular Southeast Asia – mostly hunter-gatherers and dispersed groups of shifting cultivators – which are characterized by “anarchic solidarity”. They practice a mode of sociality that maximizes personal autonomy, political egalitarianism and inclusive forms of social solidarity. Forming examples of viable and non-violent “anarchic” social formations they contest an enduring assumption of Western philosophy according to which society needs to constrain the individual through either hierarchy or regulatory democracy if a Hobbesian “war of all against all” is not to ensue. The persistence of this form of organization among these populations in a region dominated for centuries by societies based on debt-bondage, tribute extraction and social hierarchy also bears on a long tradition of theorizing on the relationship between agrarian states and “tribal” minorities. Unlike James recent contribution to this tradition, however, this paper primarily understands anarchic social formations not as responses to state domination but in terms of their internal dynamics and of what makes them attractive in their own right, with special reference to the cultural institutions and social practices that enable them to strike a balance between the values of autonomy and solidarity.

Subsistence economy as a form of anarchy in the forest areas in Indonesia?

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Central Kalimantan is located on the island of Borneo and it is part of Indonesian state, bordering East, South and West Kalimantan, while its northern part borders Malaysian part of Borneo. Central Kalimantan is largely formed of swamp and peat land areas, which currently wake lot of interests of the national and multinational carbon trade and climate change scheme actors.

This paper explores tensions and possibilities in maintaining subsistence economy and local social order in the rapidly changing peat swamp forest area in Central Kalimantan. Many Ngaju groups live in peat swamp forest areas in the district of Kapuas, Central Kalimantan. Many of these groups have depended on peat swamp forests collecting forest products (rattan, wild rubber, beeswax) and producing also different crops. Deforestation and peat swamp degradation has brought multiple actors to the area with new development plans and efforts, especially the climate change projects related to new climate change mechanisms (i.e. REDD+ or Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation). Deforestation rate in Indonesia is one of the highest in the world. It is widely held that illegal logging by local communities is the main reason to the deforestation, besides logging practices by the forest corporations. Tensions between the state and private corporations and local communities go back to the colonial times, but especially to the New Order regime (1966-1998), which declared all the forests state land. Consequently, practices of the local communities became, in many cases, illegal, since the forest lands were outsourced to private multinational corporations, which hold temporary power and control over forested land. Further, this paper will discuss how ethnography can reveal these tensions and possibilities of subsistence economy system that could be characterized as anarchist or utopian in the face of market-based development schemes spread by the state and private actors.

Was/is African chieftaincy a form of direct democracy?

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In his celebrated pamphlet *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004) David Graeber asks us to look for alternative models to Western-style majority democracy, which ultimately rests on a powerful coercive apparatus that can be used on the minority in order to enforce the decisions made by the majority. For that the ethnographic corpus gathered by anthropologists offers numerous examples of societies that have a consensus based system of decision making, in which tendencies for centralization of power and monopolization of violence are checked. In my paper I want to reassess this claim through the example of the Akan peoples of southern and central Ghana, West Africa. In Ghana there is a hundred-year-old discourse on traditional chieftaincy as a form of direct democracy. According to it, the election process of a chief and the decision making procedure of his council of elder are thoroughly democratic. The chief cannot take any action without the advice and consent of his elders, who on their parts are subject to similar restraints from their own communities. Every 'citizen' of an Akan chieftaincy is always consulted when major decisions are made and a despotic ruler can be deposed at any time by the 'citizenry'. Hence, to some the 'Akan democracy' looks more authentic or uncontaminated than the Western 'ballot box democracy', where citizens participate in the political process directly only during elections. African anti-colonial political activists, European colonial administrators, military coup makers, and, more recently, planners of neoliberal structural reforms have participated in this discourse with their own objectives in mind. Consequently, the idea of direct democracy can be, and has been, made to serve very different ends. In my paper I propose that in addition to the principles of decision making as such we should also focus on the value system that encompasses them. To put it in another way, we should look comparatively into what sort of things are considered to require collective decision making and why in each society.