

PUBLIC TALK

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Stranger-density and the construction of hospitality in Tibetan borderlands

Convened by Sahana Udupa und Martin Saxer

Imagine what anthropology might look like today if Marcel Mauss had chosen hospitality rather than the gift as the subject of his famous essay, in which he identified the three obligations to give, receive and return as constitutive of the gift relationship. To follow this thought experiment, I suggest a distinction between five categories of hospitality, which are often dangerously conflated: commensality, conviviality, hosting, hospitality, and visitation. I then introduce four logics pertaining to most manifestations of “hospitality”: englobing, sacrificiality, attentionality, stranger-density.

The ideas I seek to put forward in this talk can be summarised as follows: 1) many of the social instances traditionally encompassed by anthropologists within the category of gift-giving are rather manifestations of hospitality, hosting situations and events; 2) hospitality, that is “a strategy for connecting with strangers” constitutes a transcendental field of value creation and relations of exchange, a meta-communicative and subjunctive framing peculiarly (and paradoxically) similar to play and joking; yet, they involve the deference and trust (Bloch 2004) implied in modes of ritualisation; 3) hospitality is an additional “mode of relation” (Descola 2005). Like sacrifice, to which it is often compounded, hospitality is an irreversible operation with a view to establish a connection between two initially separate domains (Levi-Strauss 1966: 225); 3) among (Dechen) Tibetans, contrary to other cosmologies and societies, “hospitality” towards strangers must be “constructed”, to say it with Roy Wagner (1986): it is neither an innate form of sociality or a customary one; when hospitality is not constructed, it is tantamount to predation (through poisoning, cf. da Col 2012); 4) among (Dechen) Tibetans, landscape is witchcraft; or to be more precise: it can act as such, which explains why, contrary to the Zande world, among Tibetans witchcraft is not much diffused. In this context, radical hospitality is an ideal yet treacherous strategy for counteracting witchcraft.

I illustrate my arguments through the ethnography of an unprecedentedly documented annual ritual of hospitality named Kha dru du, in Dechen dialect “collecting contributions for a party”. Held in Rlung grong (Ch. Yongzhi), a village near the sacred pilgrimage gate (*gnas sgo*) of the sacred mountain Kha ba dkar po in Northwest Yunnan (PRC), the ritual consists in male cross-dressing and mimetic mocking of women’s activities and hospitality events. The purpose, villagers argue, is to produce future fortunate outcomes by mocking them in advance and entertaining and humouring the local female territorial mountain deity (*gzhi bdag*). However, what the ritual hides is “the construction of the stranger” and a radical sacrificial act of the very space of hospitality.

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