

Workshop 6

Anthropology of Pleasure

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Pleasure is a universal human capacity. The term is related to a set of positive emotions (satisfaction, joy, happiness, lust, passion) which are caused by the sensual perception of the world. It can be demonstrated in public, carefully hidden, covered and disguised, or even denied. Some societies conceptualise pleasure as an ultimate meaning of life (pleasure principle), others mistrust its anarchistic potentials and restrict it to specific occasions. Although it is individually perceived pleasure is deeply rooted in culture, dependant on hegemonic moral discourses and social frames which allow some expressions and prohibit others. Since it is fluid, ambivalent and not easy to investigate pleasure had not been an explicit topic in anthropology in the past. With this volume we would like to fill the gap and compare different societies from the point of their concept of pleasure. We will focus on general cultural ideas and on particular aspects like gastronomic culture, sexual passions, spending spree, ecstatic religious experiences, desire of suffering and hedonism. Central to all contributions should be the focus which asks for the practice and meaning of pleasure within and across cultural borders. Additionally, we invite contributors to write about the pleasure of anthropology in the field and beyond. Selected workshop papers could be part of a planned publication on the same topic, published by Shahnaz Nadjmabadi, Editha Platte and Susanne Schröter in 2006. We are looking forward to pleasurable and engaged discussions.

The Pleasure of Tam Tam. How to “Make Noise” in Northern Nigeria

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Talking about pleasure in northern Nigeria, most frequently discussions centre around private and public gatherings and meetings of people during ceremonies. Besides those collective enjoyments more individual and sensual ways of getting pleasure caused for example by a cold wind, a relaxed sleep, good food or sex are mentioned. One aspect which cuts across both, individual and collectively experienced pleasure is the urge of getting attention. Since neither the gathering itself nor the individual's

means and options make it easy to get the recognition many people are longing for, some efforts are necessary to solve the urge of being at the centre stage. Those efforts are quite often commented as “making noise” or “showing off”.

The data presented result from several research trips to Nigeria, where I visited since 1991 the rural area dominated by Kanuri and Shuwa speaking people as well as multiethnic urban and migration centres of Maiduguri and Lake Chad. My paper will firstly contribute to a broader understanding of the culturally rooted perception of pleasure in Kanuri society and secondly concentrate on one aspect of pleasure received through “making noise” in diverse contexts.

Ambiguous Pleasures. Sexual Pleasure and Cultural Identity Among Young Professional Adults in Nairobi, Kenya

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Professional women and men aged between twenty and thirty years old see themselves as frontrunners of a contemporary lifestyle in Nairobi, marked by a certain ‘fast life’ of going out and shifting (sexual) relationships as they tend to delay getting married. Strengthened by their independent financial position, they form a social group of women and men who implicitly and explicitly criticise conventional gender and sex roles. They embody many changes resulting from the rapid changing social and cultural contexts in postcolonial Kenya, for which they are criticised by society at large for being ‘westernised’ and ‘un-African’. Much of this response focuses on the perceived ‘blatant’ sexual behaviour of this generation, overlapping many times with moralising discourses or the moral panic caused by AIDS. Sexual pleasure has gained a specific meaning, like an identity badge for both young professional women and men, albeit differently. Women’s narratives reveal the formation of a sexual self in relation to contrasting hegemonic discourses where female sexuality is defined in relation to motherhood and wifehood. Central to these narratives is their insistence on sexual pleasure as essential to being a ‘modern’ woman. In men’s narratives, sex figures as constitutive of a gendered sense of self, balancing between too much sex and too less. Conventional discourses on male sexuality discursively justify multiple partner sexuality, while discourses on contemporary lifestyles advocate monogamous relationships based on notions of a ‘modern’ man as a ‘good lover’. Having sex is thus highly ambiguous for both women and men as sex becomes intricately linked to issues of contemporary identity and cultural heritage. On the one hand sexuality has become symbolically linked with contemporariness, while it is also central to narratives of cultural heritage. The focus of this paper is an ethnographic description how this ambiguity unfolds in individual women’s and men’s sexual biographies. People’s experience of sexual pleasure, or the lack of it, provides an intimate reading about a sensual perception of a volatile context

where the meaning of sex is redefined.

The Pleasure of Killing. Sacrifices, Performance and Emotions in Eastern Indonesia

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Most Indonesian societies practice public sacrifices of water buffaloes, pigs or goats. These ritual killings are the climax of many ceremonies which are performed during the annual cycle or are part of individual rites de passage. Since they are economically ruinous, the government and modern religious leaders condemn the sacrifices as a waste of resources and try to convince the people to abandon the rites or to reduce the number of animals to be slaughtered. Local people, however, reject those efforts. Anthropologists usually explain the custom as a social and ritual obligation and as a part of a rigid system where exchange dominates the social strata and where status is connected to wasteful gifts. With an example of the Ngada of Central Flores I show that ritual mass slaughtering is not only a duty or a burden, but an activity which causes pleasure, joy and ecstatic feelings among the participants. Ritual sacrifices set up a frame for the expression of dangerous emotions, sadism, violent masculinity and frenzy without endangering the society. Comparable with carnival and rituals of rebellion they provide space for a kind of pleasure that is strictly proscribed the rest of the year.

Asal kumpul – The Pleasure of Being Together

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Focusing on traditional and modern social practices in Java, this contribution deals with one of the most basic pleasures in human experience: that of the heartfelt enjoyment deriving from being in the company of others. This attitude is expressed in the Javanese saying “mangan ora mangan, asal kumpul” (we eat or we don’t, the important thing for us is meeting) meaning that even if ritual gatherings, as well as most formal and informal visits between relatives, neighbours and friends, involve the common consummation of food, the thing that really matters is to be together.

The most pleasurable things cannot be enjoyed to the full unless shared, and this also applies to modern pleasures within the realm of consumption, like visiting shopping malls, attending night fairs (pasar malam), playing computer games or outings to popular sites of recreation. The paper explores how the individual’s pursuit for pleasure becomes linked to the experience of togetherness, which becomes a prerequisite for and a source of pleasure.

The Voice of Pleasure. Sound and Music at Marriage Ceremonies

in the Iranian Provinces of the Persian Gulf

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Anthropological research to elucidate the concept of pleasure is specially challenging within a community where enjoyment, pleasure and delight should not be shown and lived in public. The behavioural restrictions are intended to ward off the “evil eye”, envy and jealousy. In the Iranian coastal line of the Persian Gulf this culturally rooted attitude is further reinforced by the control of local religious leaders and even state agencies. Taking the example of wedding ceremonies, the paper to be presented during the EASA conference aims to point out, how the introduction of new elements related to ritual, song and sound prepares the ground for transformation processes and how the new generation uses these occasions to contest control and express its joy and pleasure.

Mourning Saints as an Occasion for Earthly Pleasure. Rituals, Crying and Subversion in Iran

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In Shiite Islam mourning the martyrdom of the Imams plays a central role. People gather at private homes and in religious buildings for mourning rituals. While a cantor recites episodes of the tragic fate of these saintly figures, the participants start to cry and beat their chests. A main criterion to judge a ritual as “good” is the cantor’s ability to make people cry. Especially female participants describe the “flow” of the rituals, the rhythmic recitations, the meeting of other women, the feeling of community and the crying as giving them great pleasure and enjoyment.

However in Iran this kind of pleasure is not uncontested. While other participants emphasise the rituals educational effect, a considerable proportion of the young are alienated from these traditions, propagated by the government as representing core religious and cultural values. Keeping the outward form (e.g. dressing in black), they use the mourning rituals for their own purposes, mainly the otherwise restricted mixing of the sexes, time and again provoking chases with police forces. These activities, also representing a kind of subversion, many describe as great pleasure and their main leisure activity.

The paper tries to examine the various forms of pleasure regarding mourning rituals for different groups in Iranian society and the way they overlap.