

Peasant farming as improvisation: what theory do we possess and how might it be used?

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Abstract

Improvisation is currently enjoying an intellectual vogue across fields as diverse as the musicology of free jazz to management science. But what are the theoretical moorings of this far-reaching new enterprise? First, the article offers a brief review of some potential foundations for studies of improvisation. The hypothesis that humans possess neurons for mirrored interaction because they have evolved as social animals is arguably as plausible as the notion that interactive, social behaviour is a product of a neural architecture primed for interactive cognition. Durkheim responded to a similar unresolved set of arguments about brains and cognition at the end of nineteenth century by taking his well-known late ethnographic turn (towards Australia). This takes us to the second part of the article. The ethnography of performance retains its value to nourish our understanding of larger questions regarding properties of human sociality. Specifically, the article seeks to suggest that a focus on the ritual shaping of embodied actions is crucial to understand and address the emergence of a range of competing "styles of thought." An example helps show that the "bubbles" and "echo chambers" of opinion, of which contemporary political commentators complain, are not (as supposed) products of the internet and social media, but rooted in more fundamental differences in social ordering reinforced by variations in practical and ritual performance. The article seeks to bring out the persistent "deafness" of development agencies to connections between shifting cultivation and social practices of marriage and death in a West African farming community. Calls by development agencies to abandon shifting cultivation have no effect. Approaching agrarian intervention via joint improvisation might help two circular arguments sustained by institutional differences to connect.

Key words: Social theory, development, ethnography, performance

Résumé

L'improvisation jouit actuellement d'une vogue intellectuelle dans des domaines aussi divers que la musicologie du free jazz ou les sciences de gestion. Mais quels sont les ancrages théoriques de cette nouvelle entreprise de grande envergure? En premier lieu, l'article propose un bref aperçu de quelques bases potentielles pour des études sur l'improvisation. L'hypothèse selon laquelle les humains possèdent des neurones pour une interaction en miroir parce qu'ils ont évolué en tant qu'animaux sociaux est sans doute aussi plausible que la notion que le comportement social interactif est le produit d'une architecture neuronale conçue pour la cognition interactive. Durkheim a répondu à un ensemble similaire d'arguments non résolus sur le cerveau et la cognition à la fin du XIXe siècle. Il a pris un tournant ethnographique tardif bien connu (vers l'Australie). Cela nous amène à la deuxième partie de l'article. L'ethnographie de la performance conserve sa valeur pour nourrir notre compréhension de questions plus vastes concernant les propriétés de la socialité humaine. Plus précisément, l'article cherche à suggérer qu'une concentration sur la mise en forme rituelle des actions incarnées est cruciale pour comprendre et aborder l'émergence d'un éventail de «styles de pensée» concurrents. Un exemple permet de montrer que les "bulles" et les "chambres d'écho" de l'opinion, dont se plaignent les commentateurs politiques contemporains, ne sont pas (comme supposés) des produits d'Internet et des médias sociaux, mais

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des différences plus fondamentales dans l'ordre social dans la performance pratique et rituelle. L'article cherche à faire ressortir la "surdité" persistante des agences de développement face aux liens entre la culture itinérante et les pratiques sociales du mariage et de la mort dans une communauté agricole ouest africaine. Les appels lancés par les agences de développement pour abandonner la production agricole en mutation n'ont aucun effet. L'intervention agricole par l'improvisation conjointe pourrait aider à relier deux arguments circulaires soutenus par des différences institutionnelles.

Mots-clés: théorie sociale, développement, ethnographie, performance

Resumen

La improvisación goza de estar en boga intelectual en diversos campos que van desde la musicología del free jazz, hasta las ciencias de la gestión. Pero ¿cuáles son las bases teóricas de esta nueva empresa de largo alcance? Primero, el artículo ofrece un breve resumen de algunas bases de estudios de la improvisación. La hipótesis de que los humanos poseen neuronas para la interacción reflejada a causa de haber evolucionado como animales sociales, es tan discutiblemente posible como la noción de que el comportamiento social e interactivo son producto de una arquitectura neural primordialmente para la cognición interactiva. Para fines del siglo XIX, Durkheim respondió a un conjunto similar de argumentos sin resolver relacionados con cerebros y cognición, al tomar su bien conocido giro etnográfico (dirigido a Australia). Esto nos lleva a la segunda parte del artículo. La etnografía del performance conserva su valor para alimentar nuestro entendimiento de mayores preguntas acerca de las propiedades de la sociabilidad humana. Específicamente, este artículo busca sugerir que un enfoque en la estructuración ritual de acciones incorporadas, es crucial para entender y referir la emergencia de una gama de "estilos de pensamiento" que compiten entre ellos. Un ejemplo ayuda a demostrar que las "burbujas" y "cámaras de eco" de opinión, de las que los actuales analistas políticos se quejan, no son (como se supone) productos de Internet y redes sociales, sino que están arraigados a diferencias más fundamentales en el orden social que está reforzado por las variaciones en performance práctico y ritual. El artículo busca poner al descubierto la persistente "sordera" de las agencias de desarrollo respecto a las conexiones entre la rotación de cultivos y prácticas sociales de matrimonio y la muerte, en una comunidad agrícola del oeste de África. El llamado de la agencia de desarrollo a dejar la rotación de cultivo no ha tenido efecto. Una aproximación a la intervención agraria a través de improvisación articulada, puede ayudar a conectar dos argumentos circulares mantenidos por las diferencias institucionales

Palabras clave: improvisación, performance, agricultura, Sierra Leona

1. Philosophies of social performance

It is relevant to mention that this article first took shape as an introduction to a debate held in Germany's oldest university. The University of Heidelberg was founded in 1386, at the dawn of a new era. As with other ancient European universities, Heidelberg met a need to supply clerics and lawyers, in an age that increasingly took the documented word as its starting point. This led to a bias towards words over objects with which more modern philosophers have had to struggle. Logicians declare the truth value of statements. Science, to some, is a business based on the correspondence theory of truth. Statements refer to conditions in a material world, or they are meaningless.

A modern push-back is found in the work, among others, of Ludwig Wittgenstein. In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein elaborated the helpful notion of "language games" (1953). The meaning of statements is relative to (and to be found in) the practical context in which they are uttered. Willard Van Orman Quine added (in *Word and Object*, 1960) that there is a fundamental indeterminacy over translation between languages, at least when only linguistic phenomena are considered. Meaning is clarified with reference to a practical context (which is the way a child learns one language, or several). J.L. Austin (1962) pointed out that many statements have no truth values attached to them. They are statements of purpose, not descriptions of the world. These kinds of statements are intended actions. Statements such as "I promise" (illocution), or "I believe" (perlocution) he named "speech acts."

These modern philosophers help us understand the dangers of backgrounding the context of performance within which statements are uttered. It is a bias from which the highly literate suffer unduly.

Meanwhile 21st century science has not been backward in addressing hitherto neglected issues of performance. Gallese and others discovered that neurons governing actions in Macacques were "primed" by

witnessing the action being performed by other Macaques, and termed this as "mirroring" (Gallese *et al.* 1996). It now appears to be widely accepted that a similar priming of "mirror" neurons is found in humans, and this capacity may be involved in capacity for social coordination. The impact has been felt as widely as in sports studies and musicology.

Whether it is an evolved or (culturally) acquired capacity is more in doubt. Neurons are "trained." The more they fire the more likely they are to fire in future. If mirror neurons emerge through training then they could be as much a response to learning social collaboration as its cause. The current intellectual climate thus remains comparable to the one confronting Durkheim and Freud at the end of the 19th century. Experimental methods remain constrained in their ability to throw light on brain function, and there is still considerable reliance on more-or-less indirect methods of observation (whether through brain imaging or descriptions of behavior).

It was in recognition of this difficulty that Emile Durkheim took the productive ethnographic detour (to Australia) that underpinned his last and perhaps most influential book, *Elementary forms of religious life* (Durkheim 1996 [1912]). There, he directed much attention to the performative basis of collective life. Collective representations, such as totems, were (literally) danced into being. The great French sociologist also fleshed out what might be termed a proto-cybernetic theory of social dynamics in his concept of "sacred contagion." Collective understandings and social values were not indissolubly linked to material circumstances. At times of especial difficulty (war or famine, for example) extreme steps taken by threatened groups to reinforce shared values amounted to a positive feedback (and at times destructive force) he termed "effervescence."

His argument was grounded in Australian Aboriginal ethnographic data, many of which were performative in character (see, for example, Durkheim's description, based on Spencer and Gillen's ethnographic writing, of the *corroboree*). In fact, he came to see that social life more generally was underpinned by performative ritual action, which he refers to under two main categories, as positive and negative cults (of commission and denial). Some of this cult activity, quite clearly, was not planned according to any set of ceremonial rules. It was improvised. This is apparent in his famous summary of what Spencer and Gillen write about a *corroboree*: "passions so heated and so free from all control cannot but help spill over, from every side there is nothing but wild movements... [but then] gestures and cries tend to fall into rhythm and regularity, and from there into songs and dances" (Durkheim 1996 [1912]: xx; Richards 2013).

Explaining emergent coordination from free improvisation attracted other contributions from among Durkheim's associates. Examples include Henri Hubert's short monograph on sacred and secular time as "clocks" for social life (Hubert 1995 [1905], and Maurice Halbwach's essay on the collective memory of musicians (1939). The topic was also taken up in Marcel Mauss's essay on the techniques of the body (1973 [1935]). Mauss points to the ways in which social cooperation tends to "entrain" bodies into performing in certain styles. He was a liaison officer between French and British regiments on the battlefields of Northern France in the Great War, and in one intriguing example reports that when a British regiment replaced a French one at the front line the trenching shovels had to be replaced, because British and French soldiers dug differently. One presumes many of the troops were farm boys, experienced in working different soils.

Mauss also reports an amusing but instructive anecdote about one British regiment, awarded a ceremonial march-past in a French town they had gallantly defended. Evidently the event was something of a disaster because the taller British soldiers had a different gait when marching to their French counterparts, and could not keep in step to the beat signalled by the French drummer and bugler leading the parade.

The Durkheimian performative approach to the understanding of the ritual dynamics of social cohesion has more recently been revived and greatly extended by Mary Douglas. In particular, her seminal short book *How institutions think* (1986) laid a theoretical foundation for a subsequent return to close ethnographic analysis in her late set of writings on the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Douglas 1993), and a final essay on ancient literature as a medium for repairing breaches of social cohesion, *Thinking in circles* (2007).

Durkheim, in *Elementary forms*, had addressed the ritual, performative dynamics underpinning only one elementary form or style of social solidarity – the form of social ordering Douglas latterly referred to as the enclave. But in *Suicide* Durkheim (1951 [1897]) had identified two other styles – individual and hierarchical

ordering, and in a lengthy footnote on the slave revolt had indicated the presence (by implication) of a fourth form of ordering, later termed by Douglas as isolate ordering.

Durkheim had recognised distinct forms of social ordering only in terms of the pathological breakdown of social cohesion represented by different forms of suicide. Douglas recognised that the four forms of suicide had non-pathological equivalent forms of social cohesion, recognisable from cross-tabulating Durkheim's axes of social regulation and social integration: isolate, individualist, hierarchical and enclave ordering, in what she then termed "grid-group analysis" (Douglas 1996, 1999; Perri 6 and Richards 2017; Figure 1).

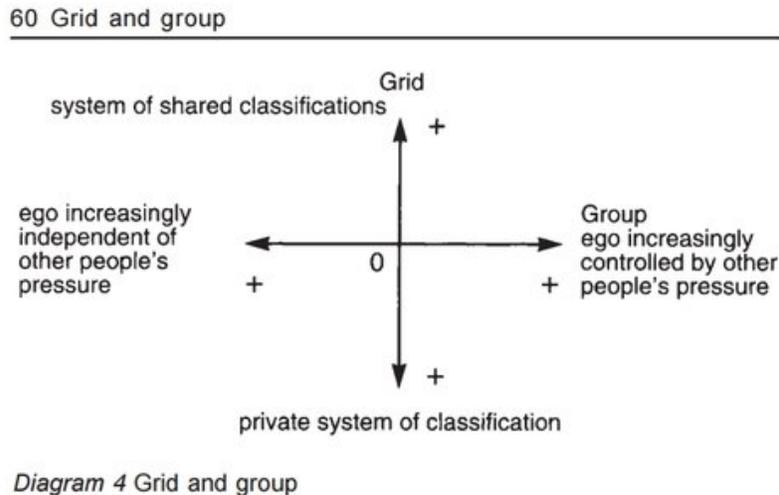


Figure 1: Grid and Group. Source: Douglas (1996 [1970]: 60).

Each of the four forms maintains a distinctive thought style, often perceived as a threat to the existence of the other forms. Whether from internal pressure or pressure from other groups organised differently, each form can become disorganised through positive feedback, i.e. overemphasis on its characteristic features of organization to the point of dysfunction. The "bubble" and "echo chamber" effects said to underlie recent, unanticipated shifts in political sentiment in many democratic countries (and sometimes - implausibly - blamed on the rise of social media) can be understood as products of destabilising positive feedback ("sacred contagion") within some (or all) of the four elementary forms.

Stable communities, according to Douglas, always depend on a degree of recognition of all the four different styles of thought, and messy compromises typically emerge, resulting in what Thompson and colleagues have termed "clumsy institutions." (Thompson *et al.* 1990). Many times these hybrid arrangements are of necessity improvised, but they become viable by means of ingenious modes of ritual management. For an example, we can consider the arrangements underpinning the Irish peace agreement.

In the Irish case, much rests on the coordinative activity of the Northern Ireland Parades Commission, governing when and where the different communities can march to celebrate their identity, and what they can bring with them by way of totems. When these (often tacit) compromises over coordination among conflicted modes of social cohesion break down, "bubble" and "echo chamber" effects emerge as symptoms of an internal vicious cycle of reinforcement, potentially resulting in outright conflict between those ordered according to different organizational principles and understandings. Racism and stigmatism thrive in these contested conditions.

A key point of Douglas' argument, however, is that there is no "objective" standpoint from which to mediate conflicts attendant on differences in forms of social ordering. Each set of institutional orderings has

its own internal logic and rationality. International elites ordered by and manifestly benefiting from the free flow of international market forces cannot lecture or impose their will on those who adhere to nationalism or some other principle of enclave communitarian logic, since there is no absolute frame of reference justifying the values of one form of social ordering over any other, at least as long as these modes of ordering retain viability for a significant number of members. The disasters associated with the collapse of sectarian sieges (from Muenster in 16th century Westfalia to Waco in late 20th century Texas) show only that when hierarchs attempt to impose their will on enclavists, massacres or mass suicides are a likely result.

The solution Douglas and colleagues advocate is to compose anew a set of "clumsy" arrangements in which all the contested parties can see some of their values manifested, and to which the interests of peace can then be attached (Verweij *et al.* 2006). In her last book on ring composition as an ancient literary form, Douglas (2007) suggested that the poetic ring was a widely-used tool of contrapuntal composition used to position conflicted parties, with all their flags and totems flying, but with common values encircled in the middle. According to Douglas' ritual-focused perspective, peace making is always a variant of the Parades Commission. It works by introducing some agreed form of management of rival performances. In the heat of conflict it is performative magic resting on a capacity for improvisation. Being able to unscramble a performance gone wrong depends on the "collective memory of musicians", and for this purpose all have to play their part.² Douglas' approach, it should be added, contrasts with the main rival theory of peace making - deliberative bargaining, which requires all participants share the values of one of the four elementary form of social ordering (competitive individualism).

2. The ethnography of performance

After this brief review of theoretical underpinnings I now turn to an ethnographic case study. This concerns the vexed issue of bush burning in shifting cultivation (Richards 1985). Protagonists of agrarian technical modernization see this as "backward" system and seek its abolition. For peasant farmers in the forest belt of Upper West Africa, bush burning is a key step in articulating their enclave form of social ordering.

For Kpa-Mende villagers in central Sierra Leone farming is an annual performance (Richards 1986). It begins with a speech-act in December or January when heads of household make declarations about where they will "lay a farm." This is almost invariably a promise by a male head of household to provide the household [*mawei*] with its main staple rice for the coming year. The farm in question [*kpa*] is a rain-fed (upland) plot. The plot is located on land to which the speaker has rights of access as part of a fallow cycle worked by his patrilineage [*nedehun, sii*]. The task is supported by the woman [*nyahei*], or women, of the household, who will take charge of the farm from the time it is planted to the time it is ready for harvesting.

Other types of farm will also be made, and by women as well as men. But these are always referred to specifically as "swamp", "garden", "plantation", "old farm" [*jopoi*, often used as a place where groundnuts can be planted], or in recent years "acre" [a plot of grassland cultivated for rice planting by a tractor]. These additional farm plots are for the most part personal projects by husband, wives, adult sons or other members of the household, and are not covered by the initial illocutionary declaration. If there is a conflict over timing of activities, the *kpa* will take precedence over other farming activity, since it is a corporate household venture.

The farm is then "brushed" (trees and shrubs are felled). Depending on the age of the fallow this happens in one operation, or large trees will be felled separately. The work will be done by a group of men, many of whom will generally have farms of their own, and take it in turns to share this heavy task. The felled vegetation is then left for several weeks. The brushing will have been done with an eye to the way fire will spread through the farm when the vegetation is dry. This sets the scene for an eventual set of improvised control measures once the brush is ignited.

Farms are burnt in the second half of March or early April. During this period the first few rain storms will be experienced. Some farmers keep an eye on the weather and set fire to a farm, even a week or two early

² The basic idea is memorably captured in Charles Ives' [Fourth Symphony](#), where marching bands playing different tunes are integrated within a single performance design. The coordinative device, to ensure the music is heard as a whole, and not just as a disrupted muddle, is to deploy two conductors.

in the drying process, if they fear further rain. Others are more blasé, and burn late, even at the expense of a shower or two.

Every day, during the burning period, columns of smoke can be seen towering into the sky, from about mid-afternoon. The head of household will have taken charge of igniting the conflagration, moving about inside the farm to ensure the fire spreads evenly. Keeping the fire moving in the right way to ensure the entire body of brushwood is consumed is a skilled act of improvisation. It requires a good sense of how the local convection currents fed by the fire will affect the spread of the flames. Meanwhile, the farmer's friends and older male children will ring the farm to prevent it getting out of hand. There will be a court case if a fire sets alight a neighbouring farm before the owner was ready to burn it. A good burn is essential to avoid the tedium of having to pile up sticks and burn them separately. It is also a prerequisite for a good harvest, since the ash supplies phosphorus, the limiting soil nutrient on the highly leached soils of this region. Few if any local rice farmers can afford chemical fertilizers.

The burn rarely lasts more than about an hour. It is a tense time, in which quick decisions have to be made, to keep the fire from getting out of control, or from petering out before the brushwood is fully consumed. Each year, inexperienced farmers risk being trapped in the flames, and sometimes, severe burns or deaths eventuate. In short, the burn is an improvisation that can easily go wrong. After this stage the farm is broadcast and the seed covered by lightly hoeing the soil (a practice known as "ploughing"). It is then fenced against rodents and handed over to the women of the household, who will weed it and take daily care until the rice is ready for harvest.

In most cases the woman managing the farm on a daily basis will be the wife of the man who caused the farm to be laid. This brings into the picture marriage, as a crucial element of local social ordering. The land belongs to the husband's patrilineage. The patrilineages are exogamous. The wife must be from another lineage, and perhaps (in about 50 per cent of cases) from a lineage located in a neighbouring village. In village parlance, being married, and farming together are in effect synonymous.

The marriage process commences when a man takes permission from the wife's family to begin a relationship with her. He "ties kola" (makes an initial marriage gift). In Mende the word "kola" applies to both the stimulant nut (*Cola spp.*), and to any form of gift. Implicit in this gift is the promise to take care of the woman, thus to feed her, and her children. This requires (in village context) "laying a farm." The woman will report any shortfall in this area to her family, who may seek to terminate the alliance if the husband is lazy or incapable. She then "cooks for the man", which implies that she has sexual relations with him. Where there are several wives, the wife currently in charge of the cooking is the one who sleeps with the husband.

Over the years the man will consolidate the marriage by helping his father-in-law in laying farms, and eventually providing for him when he can no longer farm. He will also provide his wife's family with other kinds of gifts, up to a point where the marriage is now considered "complete." Completion may take many years. Only a fraction of any current set of marriages in a given village is complete. If the wife dies before the arrangements have been completed then the husband has to provide whatever is still owing, or her body must be returned to her own patrilineage (Richards 2016). She will then be buried in the land belonging to her own family.

This locks in place an enclave mode of social ordering, in which wives move to the land of their husbands, while marriage gifts and assistance move to the family of the wife. Any attempt to evade the symmetry of gift (of a woman in marriage) and counter gift (help from the son-in-law to the woman's parents) is considered a breach of basic rules governing social cohesion. To try to marry within your own lineage is *simongamei* [incest] and spreads sickness and death to the sinner and her/his group. Any attempt to have sexual relations without making marriage payments results in a court case for "woman damages." The punishment for "woman damage" is usually an astronomically high fine, which the young male "free-rider" cannot pay (Mokuwa *et al.* 2011). He seeks escape the charge by offering to work off his debt through labouring on the farm of the husband other elder of the family to whose lineage the woman belongs. The enclave ordering thus produced is inclusive, since everyone abides by the same rules, and the only escape is to leave the village and its subsistence economy.

So it can be seen that the "motor" of the entire system of village enclave ordering is the annual illocutionary obligation to declare an intent to "lay a farm", and its corollary, a perlocutionary willingness to accept the risks and uncertain outcomes attendant upon burning a farm. In other words, enclave ordering among Mende subsistence rice farmers pivots upon an annual dangerous and highly volatile improvisatory act.

At Taiama, on the junction of the road from Njala University to Bo there is a large poster. This is a warning (an illocution). It states that bush burning causes climate change, that climate change is real, and that villagers should stop farming. They should undertake swamp rice cultivation instead. Or at least this is what I think it says because the first tornado of the rainy season in 2017 ripped it to shreds. Even though I could not easily read the poster, I can guess what it says, because it is what development agencies have been saying since I came to this area to study rice farming villages over 30 years ago.³

I wrote a couple of books, hoping to challenge the misconception that all that was needed for "development" was to stop farmers using a "backward" method of cultivation, and adopt "correct" agronomic technique (Richards 1985, 1986). If I failed in my aim, it was because I was not able clearly enough to explain the connection between agrarian technique and enclave social ordering. Now I can. This means I would now put the argument more forcefully - *the agencies don't just seek to abolish shifting cultivation; they also risk squandering the social solidarity upon which local agrarian communities are based.*

The 'change agencies' belong to a world of hierarchical social ordering. They command. When (as is often the case) commands are disregarded, they attempt to induce change by offering incentives. But the incentives are not sustainable. Every development agency leaves, sooner or later.

Villagers know this, and understand their own predicament. Those villagers who can, also seek to leave. If they settle in the city and find decent work they can slowly divest themselves of enclave commitments, and live by the rules of individualistic ordering in a market society. But many have no option than to stay. Their land, their marriages, and their funerals, which are the last (and in some ways the most important) expression of inter-family enclave solidarity, are the only assets they possess for survival in this world, and the next (Richards 2016). So, few village people are listening to the development agencies. The message was shredded by a tornado triggered by clouds of smoke from their burning farms. The process through which food security, and thus the survival of rural family, is secured has an imperative local logic.

Modification can thus only come through some kind of solution based on new performance that is genuinely inclusive. Those seeking to change the local system will have to live within the system, and share in its existential threats. This is not work for day visitors. Progress towards a solution would involve the development of some kind of process to alleviate some of the worst insecurities associated with local food supply, and the impact of such insecurity on marriage and family life. Perhaps surprisingly, it is the World Bank, in Sierra Leone, that has opened up debate about the need for an inclusive national system of social security to reach the rural poor.

But there is also an internal dynamic of change with which development agencies could ally, if they would only seek to understand it. Since I first began working in the villages reported in this essay (in 1982) there have been important social and agro-ecological changes at local level. Some women now manage upland farms by themselves, hiring in labour or buying agro-chemicals. The arrival of motorcycle taxi riders in the most remote villages, and the growth of periodic markets in the last decade or so, has provided important alternative sources of cash income. Tractor ploughing now offers an alternative cultivation strategy for some households. Additionally, and importantly, farmers no longer burn all the bush. They turn some of it to charcoal, which they sell in order to fund small purchases of food and other household items.

Here, then, are some potentially significant points of entry for development agencies intent upon agricultural modernization. But their utilization will require the parties to adopt a rather circuitous, performative approach towards change. Douglas' point about ring composition is that it is a means whereby all parties can see some of their interests reflected and inter-meshed (Douglas 2007). It is a ritual means to avoid a shouting match of polarised oppositions. Ring composition undertakes the work of the Parades

³ A newsletter from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food Security in 2014 also contains a similar image. <https://www.npcu.org/pdf/May%202014%20Newsletter.pdf>

Commission by providing scope for all parties to bring, and display, their flags and totems, and eventually to appreciate that they are taking part in a single performance.

What kind of ring composition might help modulate the polarised opposition of those who need bush burning to articulate their social ordering in the absence of other options for social security, and those whose devotion to the cause of mitigating climate change requires decisive curtailment of local autonomy? Maybe more attention should be paid to charcoal. It is a focus for concern by both parties. For the villager it is a newly important source of cash to alleviate seasonal food shortage. For development agencies concerned with climate change it is a partially stabilised, delayed form of carbon emission, better than smoke today.

A focus on charcoal trade would not, by itself, satisfy activists, since it simply transfers some of the carbon effects of bush burning to urban cooking pots. But it represents a potentially important step change in local understanding, since charcoal making is a conversion of bush resources for family survival that no longer sets fire to everything. Understood from a local perspective, a focus on charcoal would amount to a first step to articulating a debate, meaningful to both parties, about the eventual more extensive sustainable use of vegetation resources for livelihoods. Shared understanding might then be further facilitated by experiments in effective village use of sustainable energy sources (notably, solar power).

The required steps need to be put into some kind of performative sequence, offering a new opportunity for development practitioners to become familiar with how key social elements in enclave-ordered community interlock. As a prelude to this new kind of joint performance some kind of truth-and-reconciliation ritual might be advisable, to allow past mistakes to be admitted, and dogmatic approaches (development project log frames?) to be dropped.

At its heart, a charcoal-focused process of ring composition would need to embody recognition of a joint capacity to improvise unprecedented solutions. Initially, the marching bands may still collide. However, recognition by all parties that styles of life are not fixed and non-negotiable, but are conflicted performances capable of degrees of improvised coordination, provides scope for a larger picture to emerge. Thus what this article has sought to suggest is that successful agricultural change requires a compositional approach capable of recognising collaborative possibilities amid apparent chaos. This will require, it is suggested, not a written score, but the well-honed, shared instincts of skilled improvisers.

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