PRACTICING HARMONY IDEOLOGY

Ethnographic Reflections on Community and Coercion

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What is harmony? Understood less controversially with regard to its role in music, harmony as a concept has been applied to social dynamics since the early days of anthropological and sociological inquiry. It has been twenty-five years since the legal anthropologist Laura Nader, in discussing “justice and control in a Zapotec mountain village,” introduced the term harmony ideology, suggesting that the ideal of social harmony is often used to justify coercion.1 As she made her point in the title of an article published in 2001, “harmony coerced is freedom denied.”2 The hermeneutics of suspicion is well established in anthropology as in many other disciplines, and so are the arguments against it. Nader’s concept has been and remains both valid and valuable, and we would like to build upon it here by raising unanswered and in some cases unasked questions about the nature and practice of coercion within communities. Our own ethnographic material,

from fieldwork in northern Kyrgyzstan and southern Ethiopia, is susceptible to examination through Nader’s methodological lens, and our doing so has led us to conclude that the concepts of social harmony and harmony ideology should be reconsidered from the perspective of praxis, rather than of theory.

Harmony speaks to the most basic questions in the study of society, even to the fundamental issue of its very possibility and persistence. But for all this sense of relevance, and perhaps exacerbated by its strong link to intangibles like music, the term defies easy definition when applied to social order. How do we recognize harmony? Who is qualified to identify it—the observing scholar, or the people living in putative harmony? Is harmony a result of social action, or is it a basis, a structural condition, of our communal being in the world? However such questions are answered, harmony is generally understood as fundamentally positive and as an asymptotic aim. There are also methodological questions for the scholar to answer: Can an individual alone be said to live in harmony, for example, or (in keeping with the musical metaphor) do a certain number of elements need to be in tune with one another? For anthropologists interested in social cohesion and well-being in various settings the world over—or interested, for that matter, in conflict and disruption—dealing with these issues demands reflection on each scale where the term *harmony* might be applied. Given the semantic and even philosophical uncertainties, to say nothing of the rather dubious empirical status of harmony, it pays to look back into the disciplinary past where social harmony has been a recurring concern. Overall, it seems that—from the heyday of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and early British structural functionalism, to that of Ralf Dahrendorf and the “Manchester school,” to the present time—a disciplinary pendulum swings back and forth, between a focus on and preference for integration and harmony and a focus on conflict and disintegration. Our survey here of these periodic swings will be brief and evocative, rather than exhaustive.

Radcliffe-Brown in the 1930s defined “functional unity” as

a condition in which all parts of the social system work together with a sufficient degree of harmony or internal consistency, i.e., without producing persistent conflicts which can neither be resolved nor regulated. This idea of the functional unity of a social system is, of course, a hypothesis. But it is one which, to the functionalist, it seems worth while to test by systematic examination of the facts.3

From this perspective, harmony is an ingredient that keeps the parts of a system running smoothly. The interest lies in understanding how the structures

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of society function to perpetuate it. Anthony Wallace’s model of “revitalization” (first proposed in 1956) similarly deals with how to compare and analyze religious movements across continents, making “use of an organismic analogy” and proposing “revitalization movements as a process of equilibrium restoration that may be applied to any society, whatever the source of the failure of harmony and the rise of anomie.”4 This metaphorical model apparently takes “equilibrium” to be the normal state of society, with failures of harmony understood as both symptoms and causes of crises. During the 1950s and 1960s, harmony was rarely investigated as such by anthropologists working in colonial and early postcolonial contexts but was rather taken as a commonsensical or at least unproblematic issue for theorists. Meyer Fortes, for example, conceived of “amity” as a principle central to upholding any social order as “automatically and inescapably binding.”5 According to Mary Schweitzer, these anthropologists, rather than reflecting on their use of the term harmony and its implications, “were predisposed to accept harmony as the standard of measure.”6

Radcliffe-Brown had been frank that his understanding of functional unity as dependent on harmony between the parts of a social system had been only an “idea,” a “hypothesis” good to think with—and not long after his idea began to circulate among ethnographers, a shift within anthropology (and to a degree, sociology) replaced the interest in equilibrium and harmony with a predilection for thinking of social systems in terms of conflict. Ralf Dahrendorf deemed harmony merely “one of the factors adduced to account for utopian stability” and argued instead for a focus on the centrifugal (rather than the centripetal) forces acting upon society.7

Strictly speaking, it does not matter whether we select for investigation problems that can be understood only in terms of the equilibrium model or problems for the explanation of which the conflict model is required. There is no intrinsic criterion for preferring one to the other. My own feeling is, however, that, in the face of recent developments in our discipline . . . we may be well advised to concentrate in the future not only on concrete problems but on such problems as involve explanations in terms of constraint, conflict, and change. This second face of society may aesthetically be rather less pleasing than the social system—but, if all that sociology had to offer were an easy escape to utopian tranquility, it would hardly be worth our efforts.8


The “second face of society” of which Dahrendorf wrote in the late 1950s had a decided effect on the thinking of even Radcliffe-Brown’s successors. For a time, what became interesting to anthropologists were situations in which people or even whole societies sang out of tune, and so the earlier interest in equilibrium and its maintenance was scornfully rejected. Partly this reaction was due to the colonial (and thus often violently pacified) contexts in which many ethnologists of the earlier paradigm had worked.

This shift marked a great advance in the field, as it stimulated considerations of the role of individuals as politically positioned actors. Much of the new thinking came more or less out of Max Gluckman’s “Manchester school” of political anthropology, which introduced the “extended case method” for the study of conflict. Victor Turner’s model of the “social drama” originated in this context, as did F. G. Bailey’s “toolkit” for manipulative actors and their strategies.9 Still, it was typical in these approaches that the interpretive monopoly lay with the analyzing scholar: it was the researcher and not the informants who decided whether to emphasize harmony or disharmony, not only as the relevant frame for a given study but also as the way in which the people studied were to be characterized in the monograph devoted to them. Another theoretical fashion of the time, structuralism, left very little agency with its subjects, who were regarded as unaware of the structures that ordered their everyday life.10 Put differently, harmony, for a structuralist ethnographer, was nothing that people could have reflected upon, since they were subjected to it by the “deep grammar” of their social system. But Claude Lévi-Strauss himself was looking for harmony: structuralism, he wrote, is “the search for unsuspected harmonies,” and it was in myths that he sought to find them.11 The practitioners of all these early approaches took on an outsider’s point of view, assuming an etic rather than emic stance toward social dynamics: the viewpoints of those studied either did not matter or were thought to be fundamentally distorted by cultural false consciousness.

In the mid-1970s, Jeremy Boissevain, who was part of Gluckman’s Manchester school, came to the conclusion that “structural-functionalism with its conservative accent on harmony, rebellion (in place of revolution), balanced opposition and the functional interdependence of all institutions, is patently unable to explain and cope with the rush of events.”12 This “rush of events”—the

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concrete situation as experienced by the anthropologist during fieldwork, with its spontaneous dynamics, its attendant emotions, and the clear evidence it presents of individual agency—came to the forefront of political anthropology and remained there for a good while. As late as 1995, Elizabeth Colson criticized what she saw as overemphasis on the resolution of disputes in anthropology and on the (re)establishing of social harmony, when most conflicts, she argued, either linger on in their original forms or, without being resolved, are transposed or displaced.13 Meanwhile, conflict theorists argued that conflicts are integral to society and began to analyze them as, in their own right, preexisting systems of communication into which the actors themselves are integrated.14

It was during this swing of the pendulum that Laura Nader introduced the term harmony ideology.15 Her use of the two words in conjunction was among the first attempts explicitly to locate the concern with harmony from the actors’ perspective. But Nader’s concept, while known and employed by other anthropologists, never colonized the whole field, so questions regarding harmony ideology were kept apart from the conceptual categories and approaches to praxis—focusing on process, agency, and creativity—that anthropologists had begun developing in the 1980s.16 In other words, harmony ideology fell off the disciplinary bandwagon because it was associated in anthropologists’ minds exclusively with the equilibrium model of structural-functionalism. But, as F. G. Bailey has shown, even structural-functionalism was less unequivocal and adamant than its opponents supposed: it was only the ambition for anthropology to be counted among the sciences, albeit combined with a commitment to moral relativism, that led the structural-functionalists to conceive of equilibrium as a natural state, rather than a moral demand:


One can model social equilibrium as a natural phenomenon, void of content and nothing more than a steady state, but only by doing what the neoclassical economists do, which is to depersonalize the situation entirely, strip it of its cultural content and thus of its institutions, and so model society as a natural system. Some of the structural functionalists found it difficult to abandon that ideal, and in their writings . . . the line dividing a natural equilibrium from one that was intended (a moral order) was not always clear.17

Bailey not only repairs some reputations here but shows as well that the study of harmony and its penumbra of related concepts got off to an unfortunate start by misguidedly separating concern with social harmony from concern with its practitioners.

Ideology should not be thought of as abstract discourse; ideology is a practice. While it is certainly easier to identify a social situation as conflictual than as harmonious, the difficulty of the latter is reduced when harmony is analyzed as an ideological practice in its own right. Rather than take that step, recent studies on the patterning of social action have been focusing on what could be considered alternative approaches to nonconflictual social practice: “consensuality,”18 “corporate social responsibility,”19 “security,”20 and “punctuated cooperation”21 are topics that are explored instead. Harmony per se does not feature in these approaches. It has maintained a reputation, by and large as Dahrendorf had portrayed it, as a utopian and idealist fantasy. Formulations such as the “myth of community harmony,” the “appearance of harmony,” or the “gloss of harmony” abound.22 The exploration of harmony ideology as a practice is neglected or excluded. Even if harmony has become tainted as an etic concept for anthropology, why should its fate as an emic concept have followed suit? Conceptions that can be said to correspond to the English word harmony are hardly uncommon,

and the maintenance of harmony analogues—as we will show in case studies of very different groups, living respectively in northern Kyrgyzstan and southern Ethiopia—is a common concern of people everywhere. Our examples will illustrate how harmony ideology is not only a diagnosis, delivered by the scholar, of a kind of social coercion; it is also sometimes a solution for people unable properly to redress grievances and identify “wrongdoers” without fear of endangering the social whole.

**Nader’s Harmony Ideology: Counterhegemonic Strategy and Alternative Dispute Resolution**

The question for which Nader’s concept of harmony ideology was developed as the answer was particular, rather than theoretical: Why, she asked, “do the Talean Zapotec litigate so frequently in comparison with other American Indian groups?” Tale is a Zapotec village in southern Mexico, and Nader had set out to study the villagers’ apparent preference, when resorting to the village courts, for settling disputes through compromise and reconciliation. The social outcome of a case, rather than the decision rendered by the court, was considered most important. But while the desired result of everyone involved was harmony, the much-sought-after compromise was not always a result of mutual concessions. It was the judge, rather than the litigants, who decided where consensus lay: “Taleans are active in asserting themselves to find remedies for wrongs, and their judges are active in articulating a harmony model for dispute resolution.”

Nader argued that Talean social organization was based on hierarchy (command), symmetry, and cross-linkage, which in the daily round served to stratify, level or equalize, and integrate the village. Here, harmony ideology refers to local rhetoric, but rhetoric that is juxtaposed with an outside force, usually the “state.” By maintaining the appearance of harmony, so Nader argued, villagers prevented the Mexican government from interfering in their relative autonomy. Another reason that Taleans preferred village courts over state courts or claimed to like “a bad compromise more than a good fight” was that they perceived appealing to state courts as too costly and unpredictable.

In Nader’s understanding, harmony ideology is the result of adjudication as promoted by colonial powers. The proverb about the superiority of bad compromises, for example, was originally a Spanish adage that the Taleans now claim to be their own. Nader argues that the Zapotec learned harmony ideology as a form of social regulation from the practices of Christian missionaries prior to and during colonization. Nowadays, Talean villagers have political purposes.

for their invocations of harmony, so that “harmony ideology” refers both to “a requirement of conquest” and to “a counterhegemonic response to more than five hundred years of dealing with colonization.” In the case of court officials, on whom Nader focused in her 1990 book, “the core of harmony style and the associated ideology facilitate internal governance and serve to manage problems stemming from conquest and domination.”

In a different usage, Nader applied the concept of harmony ideology to American alternative dispute resolution (ADR), which developed beginning in the 1960s. She came to see ADR as a symptom of a larger global phenomenon, namely, a shift of legal systems away “from a concern with justice to a concern with harmony and efficiency, and from a concern with right and wrong to a concern with therapeutic treatment.” Whether applied to Zapotec or to American courts, harmony ideology is for her a mechanism of control:

When I looked at legal reform in the United States, I also found harmony being used as a control, this time by the powerful. In the 1970s, something called alternative dispute resolution was born. It was a reform movement in response to the new cases (proponents of the movement called them “garbage cases”) that were entering the courts after the social turmoil of the 1960s—cases about civil rights, environmental and consumer rights, Native American and gender issues, and so forth. The movement favored compromise over adversarial procedures, harmony over social justice. Its mandatory mediation and binding arbitration cost us our right to sue. It was a war against the contentious. . . . Coercive harmony has often accompanied large-scale social movements, including Western colonialism, Christian missionary work, and globalization.

Nader found that the ideology of equality in the United States had led to denial that some Americans were more powerful than others, with the result that people, as Sally Engle Merry paraphrased Nader’s conclusion, were “getting along rather than getting justice through the rule of law.” Nader points out the irony here in terms of modernity, development, and the export of models of governance: “Once the ‘primitives’ had courts” like North Americans, lawyers and litigants in the United States came to value ADR and negotiations as more “civilized” than courtroom trials.

In her various publications on the topic, Nader eventually came to differentiate “genuine” or “organic” harmony as a cultural norm and value from “coercive” harmony, understood as “the selling of a political idea, namely communitarianism: favoring the traditional family, moral instruction in school, and crime control policies that would limit some of our rights.” From this perspective, harmony ideology is a way to “colonize the mind” by means of impersonal, embedded, and often invisible hegemony—shades of Foucauldian “governmentality.” Cultural control, according to Nader, is powerful because its processes come to be regarded as natural over time: harmony is viewed as “the natural order of things.” For Nader, “the rhetoric of harmony” (as she came to call it, in a jointly authored article with Elisabetta Grande) is deceptive but powerful. Bailey’s reflections on the tension between natural and moral orders in the understanding of society are relevant here, and it seems that this problem is one not only for structural-functionalists but also for the Zapotec and other peoples as a whole. Ethnography, for Nader, is in essence “a form of knowledge that connects humans rather than divides them.” By comparing case materials, she has sought to illuminate what is specific to a local context and what could be viewed as commonalities. She has argued, moreover, that it is through comparison that anthropologists “keep themselves uncomfortable about what might be taken for granted.” The ethnographic case studies that follow here are meant to substantiate our claim that Nader’s harmony ideology has true comparative potential and, conceivably, universal relevance as well. In both our field sites, we found instances of harmony ideology in both of the two senses favored by her: as a counterhegemonic strategy and as an alternative means of dispute resolution.

National Politics and Wise Elders in Kyrgyzstan

Beyer’s field site is located in the northern part of the Central Asian Republic of Kyrgyzstan, in Talas province (Fig. 1). Over 80 percent of the population in Talas resides in small villages of two thousand to four thousand inhabitants. Most people live on their animals and on what they can grow in the fields and in the

37. Laura Nader, Culture and Dignity: Dialogues between the Middle East and the West (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 76.
gardens behind their houses. While they keep chicken and geese in yards, sheep, cows, goats, and horses are sent to the pastures during the summer months. Although animal husbandry is largely on the increase, only very few Kyrgyz people at present manage to make a living exclusively on breeding sheep and horses. In Talas, a family will own an average of fifteen sheep, one or two cows, and a horse or donkey. After having been portrayed as “backward” during Soviet times, the possession of animals and the activity of transhumance today carry a positive valence, since they indicate wealth and also since pastoralism is now cherished as an expression of “authentic” Kyrgyz culture.

Beyer’s fieldwork took place from spring 2005 until fall 2006 (with follow-up fieldwork during 2008 and 2010), in two neighboring villages that had been set up during early Soviet times and were later collectivized into a joint kolkhoz. Villagers living in the two locations share not only a political and economic history but also common ancestry. Residents of the upper village and the west part of the lower village belong to the same lineage group (uruu), whereas those on the east side of the lower village trace their origin to another ancestor.40 Marriages are exogamous and uxorilocal. Elaborate life-cycle rituals, particularly marriages and funerals, accompany everyday life—and it was in such contexts that Beyer heard the invocation of “harmony” for the first time. The imperative Yntymak kerek! (We need harmony!) was uttered in many diverse settings, however, rang-

40. According to Beyer’s informants’ accounts and their own (written) genealogies, an uruu is made up of a group of agnates who view themselves as having descended from a common ancestor. Uruu is a relative term because its range of significance depends on ego and refers to various depths of genealogical descent. Lineage is “a relation between a number of smaller units” (E. E. Evans-Pritchard, The Nuer: A Description of the Modes of Livelihood and Political Institutions of a Nilotic People [1940; repr., Oxford: Clarendon, 1963], 115, emphasis added.) Uruu can serve as a model for conceptualizing relations of difference and the organization of common practices.
ing from the speeches of political leaders in the country’s capital Bishkek and the provincial capital Talas, to sessions of the village court of elders, to conflict situations on the main street of the village, to the mosque, and finally to private talks with informants. Beyer’s initial field research project was focused—in the classic fashion of legal anthropology—on investigating ways of dispute resolution in the local courts of elders, called aksakal courts.41 Her focus changed during the course of fieldwork, as her research interest moved away from “local dispute watching” toward understanding the actualization of emic concepts such as yntymak in people’s everyday lives.42

Yntymak, which translates as “harmony,” is a frequent idiom of political speech in Kyrgyzstan. On a national level, it appears in phrases such as “societal harmony,” “(inter)ethnic harmony,” “civic harmony,” and “national harmony.” The concept is frequently employed by politicians who voice the importance of yntymak in connection with stability and a conflict-free public life (Fig. 2). While some have argued that the prevalence of harmony ideology in Central Asian states needs to be seen in connection with nostalgia for a Soviet Union of “brotherly nations” that lived together in peace, harmony ideology has taken on quite distinct features in each of the post-Soviet countries.43 Kazakhstan, for example, has (according to Bhavna Dave) “purposefully promoted its image as an ‘oasis of stability’” in the region and as a “multi-ethnic state that has successfully preserved ethnic harmony and peace throughout the turbulent years of transition from Soviet rule.”44 Dave even argues that the Kazakhstani regime’s “fixation with ‘stability’ and ‘preservation of ethnic harmony’ has impeded the development of civic and participatory institutions, despite the creation of favourable economic conditions for a political transition.”45 John Heathershaw has written of Tajikistan, which witnessed a bloody civil war in 1992, that harmony ideology is a post–civil war strategy of local state actors that basically consists in negation of any conflict.46 Kyrgyzstan initially followed other Central Asian states in criminalizing protests and political opposition and in assuming the role of the “keeper of harmony.” Shortly after independence was declared in August 1991, ethnic


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Kyrgyz and ethnic Uzbeks, both citizens of the new state, clashed over resources in the southern part of the country—this was the so-called Osh conflict—and hundreds died. In the aftermath, the country’s first president, Askar Akaev, coined the slogan “Kyrgyzstan is our common home” and, a couple of years later, made the “establishing of inter-ethnic peace and harmony” one of the country’s “top priorities”. “The spirit which led our people to the victory in October 1990,” he said, “has not disappeared and, moreover, cannot disappear. We only need to unite it with strong and deep political thinking to verify it, in the words of a poet, with the ‘algebra of harmony.’”

Akaev was originally a physicist and proved creative when it came to applying the language of science to state matters, particularly in his “nation-building” projects. In the “Seven Precepts of Manas,” which Akaev formulated himself but attributed to the genealogical ancestor of all Kyrgyz, the warrior Manas, “interethnic harmony” and “harmony with nature” featured prominently. After two uprisings, in 2005 and 2010, and still more bloodshed, Roza Otunbaeva,

who served as interim president after the 2010 coup d’État, again emphasized the importance of “harmony,” mostly in interethnic relations: “We ask all who suffered, who lost loved ones, to change the anger to compassion and generosity, emotions to conserving [sic] and patience, for the sake of the future, for the sake of our children to live and work in harmony.”51 In these speeches, yntymak appears as national ideology in the service of ruling politicians, who justify and legitimate their actions in its language. One might think that yntymak might be rendered an empty signifier, a mere piece of “rhetoric,” by being invoked so regularly in the aftermath of violence by ever-changing brigades of high state officials, who themselves are regularly denounced as corrupt. Among citizens, there is indeed harsh criticism of those “in power,” but the criticism is for dividing people instead of bringing them harmoniously together. In a Kyrgyz-language newspaper article on the malaise of “traibalism,” the author reported, after visiting Talas province, that “the people of the valley, who used to be relatives, friends, and in good relations, are now far from harmony.”52 As explanation for this unwelcome development, the author quoted a “wise elder”: “Those who are seeking a place in power have dissolved harmony.”

The role of “wise elders” at political events deserves special attention, as it is through them that harmony ideology is invoked most successfully. Politicians officially “pay respect” to aksakals (literally, “white-beards”) by inviting them for food and entertainment on public occasions. Elders also receive gifts and money from well-known regional players. Politicians are referred to as bash (leaders, literally “heads”), and aksakals have to respect younger people in that role. These events always take place before an immediate audience and in the presence of the media, which broadcast these exchanges widely. To fulfill the role in which they are cast, elders will recite proverbs and provide illustrations by drawing on shared history. The content of these formalized speech acts is characterized by the preponderance of invocations of yntymak, which was the main point of reference in most of the public speeches by elders to which Beyer listened. In order to dissociate the aksakals’ performance from the political demonstrations, referred to as meetings, of opposition forces, these events are referred to locally as antimeetings (“antimeetings”).


52. Kyrgyz Rukh, 1995. Traibalism is the russified version of the English word tribalism, meaning the division of the Kyrgyz population along clan lines for political campaigning. The concept is regarded as deeply problematic, because potentially it could destroy the harmonious relationship among all Kyrgyz, independent of their clan identities. See David Gullette, The Genealogical Construction of the Kyrgyz Republic: Kinship, State, and “Tribalism” (Folkestone, UK: Global Oriental, 2010); and Svetlana Jacquesson, Pastoralismes: Anthropologie historique des processus d’intégration chez les Kirghiz du Tian Shan Intérieur (Wiesbaden: Ludwig Reichert, 2010).
Besides appearing as a familiar idiom of political speech, yntymak features prominently in the way that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operate in Kyrgyzstan. Harmony is, indeed, among NGO personnel, one of the most commonly mentioned concepts about how intersocietal relations should be ordered. Christine Bichsel has investigated the application of harmony ideology to conflict-mitigation projects run by nongovernmental organizations in the Ferghana Valley, which shares borders with Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Bichsel argues that, in organizational contexts, harmony ideology leads to “depoliticising conflicts and to negating their inherent power relations.”53 Yntymak often features in the name of NGOs that seek to prevent or manage conflicts in the area. Yntymak sayasaty (Politics of Harmony), an NGO in Kyrgyzstan’s southern Batken province, has taken over responsibility for conflict prevention from the state.54 That harmony is combined with politics in the organization’s name bears witness to an emic understanding of harmony as always both political and ideological (Fig. 3).


54. For Yntymak sayasaty, see Madeleine Reeves, Border Work: Spatial Lives of the State in Rural Central Asia (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).
Formalized Peace Meetings and the Rules of Reconciliation in Ethiopia

Our second set of ethnographic material derives from Girke’s research in southern Ethiopia, specifically among the Kara, a small group of agropastoralists (about fifteen hundred individuals) in the South Omo zone (Fig. 4). This part of the country—which is fundamentally peripheral, geographically, culturally, and economically—is characterized by a mosaic of ethnic groups, none of which is well represented or well integrated into the state. There is no monopoly of force, and when each year Ethiopian citizens take up arms to kill one another, their doing so cannot be reliably prevented by state authorities, nor can the culprits (even when identified) be reliably apprehended and judged. Most Kara live in three villages along the Omo River, where residents make their living from subsistence production; they plant sorghum on the inundated river banks when the yearly flood retreats. Kara country constitutes an extraordinary ecological niche, as the regular floods ensure fertility and allow for much more reliable agriculture than would rain-fed cultivation. Pastoralism, while also an economic factor, is much less important for subsistence; nevertheless, the Kara are affectively herd- ers, and the typical East African egalitarian-pastoralist ethos is strongly cultivated. Every married male Kara is the head of his own household, and all are in principle equal. This equality is qualified: Despite its small size in absolute terms, Kara is ethnically very diverse, as the population over time has absorbed immigrants from surrounding groups. While today these and their descendants are integrated into the Kara polity and community, they are not necessarily “as equal” as the “true Kara,” which is Girke’s term for the politically dominant ethnic section. This hierarchy is most strongly expressed in marriage practice, as the daughters of “true Kara” may only be given to other “true Kara” men. Within their cultural neighborhood, the Kara are a small polity.55 Two of the neighboring groups, the Hamar and the Nyangatom, have populations of more than 20,000, and in dealing with them the Kara understand themselves as underdogs, who can safeguard their own interests (specifically, their river lands) only by cleverness, guile, and at times ferocity. Girke’s fieldwork in Kara between 2003 and 2008 focused of necessity on the perpetually uneasy relationship of the Kara and the Nyangatom, which several times broke out in direct conflict and even small-scale warfare.56

In cases of intergroup homicide, the various polities of the region exhibit a feuding pattern typical of tribal groups: if one individual kills another one of a

different ethnic affiliation, ceteris paribus members of both groups will consider themselves at war by default. Each group will avoid exposing itself to the other, everyday interaction will be disrupted, and on both sides debates will spring up over whether to turn a cold war into a hot one. At the same time, the direct relatives of the victim are under considerable social pressure to take revenge by killing any member of the perpetrator’s group. Taking revenge is what usually happens, often after a prolonged period of tension and low-level violence, and return
attacks may well follow. In earlier days, the retaliation would have continued until, at some point, within both groups, sufficient voices would have called for an end to hostilities. Then, certain crosscutting ties would be activated: individuals with personal friends on the other side would signal that their own side would consider making peace, so that first meetings might be arranged, where each side would assure the other that they were tired of fighting. Eventually, a final ritual of reconciliation would be held, in which the formal state of war would be ended by the ritual specialists of the two groups.

Today, this time-tested procedure is rare. Very soon after the news of a killing reaches the nearest town, NGOs and government officials now visit the settlement areas of the combating groups to press for an end to hostilities. The Ethiopian administration, however, is badly equipped to understand the underlying reasons for many of the conflicts of recent years and so falls back on classifying all warfare as evidence of a pathology. That assumption has given rise, over the past twenty years, to a very particular sort of formalized event: the peace meeting.57 The meetings themselves are usually convened in a third place, neither here nor there, often a nearby market town, and from both groups specified representatives are asked to come. Sometimes the delegates are selected from lists of well-known elders prepared in advance by administrators, then they are picked up in cars and driven to the meeting site. Sometimes, however, the participants are chosen ad hoc. Housing is provided for the delegates on their arrival at the appointed place, and a schedule is then set. The proceedings are opened either by the ranking administrator or by an NGO representative, who often bears the costs incurred, including those of transportation and daily allowances. After remarks by these third parties, both of the opposing groups are asked to select speakers to present their respective positions. This pattern might be repeated several times. Often schoolboys from both groups will provide near-simultaneous translation for the NGO personnel and administrators, repeating in Amharic, the Ethiopian national language, remarks made in the local languages. It is well understood by all participants that such meetings are meant neither for negotiation nor for ritual peacemaking; the explicit aim of the conveners is to elicit gestures of goodwill and statements of intention to reconcile. If possible, the time and place for future meetings are discussed at the end of the event, which usually finishes within the day.

These peace meetings are instances of applied ADR, which is attractive to state officials who are aware of the limits of their powers. There have been no

attempts to deal with the conflicts between ethnic groups through the judiciary, and the state representatives do not have enough security personnel at their disposal to enforce peace. State efforts to pacify the region or to disarm the local populations have never been thoroughly implemented. Even incarcerating individuals deemed guilty has little effect on the current conflict. It is common to hear people say, “Oh, if he goes to prison he will at least get regular food.” While this commonplace is not actually true, it is clear that the methods of the state apparatus, to assign guilt to individuals and punish them with jail time, do not fit the dynamics of conflict in South Omo, which are communal or even tribal in a very classic sense. The limited power of the officials and their emulation of global ADR models cast light on several aspects of the peace meetings, including how harmony ideology is practiced at them.

“Speak no evil”

Many peace meetings start with an admonition, along the following lines: “Do not speak of the misdeeds of the past! Let us only talk about the good things lying ahead! Do not speak of guilt; speak of cooperation and friendship!” But this ground rule is not always followed. Some participants do voice their grievances explicitly, demanding that government representatives acknowledge that they have been wronged. The legitimization of grievances, however, is hardly ever provided, and indeed clarity about such questions is subject to reprimand. A participant who issues a bald complaint might be chastised by the conveners for being uncooperative, hostile, and uninterested in reconciliation.58

The NGO-sponsored reconciliation process is, as we have said, predicated on the relative inability of local administration (whether in the frame of the larger South Omo Zone or of the smaller Hamar District) to deal with the grievances that lead to violence (Fig. 5). While individual homicides are often followed by warfare, there are underlying issues of competition over control of and access to land. Buffer zones between ethnic groups’ territories are disappearing as populations grow and are pushed out of former habitats or grazing grounds by large-scale development. Groups encroach upon one another until one group has to choose between surrendering its territory or firing the first shot. “Encroachment,” though, in the practice of peace meetings, is not a sanctionable offense.

In the Kara case, their entire territory on the western bank of the Omo River has been occupied by Nyangatom. But since, in the view of national author-

58. Such manners of speaking have been discussed by Ivo Strecker, who develops his rhetorical version of politeness theory with reference to material from Hamar, the immediate neighbors of the Kara. See Strecker, The Social Practice of Symbolization: An Anthropological Analysis (London: Athlone, 1988).
Figure 5. Settlements of Kara
ities, most peripheral populations are “pastoralists,” if not “nomads,” the claim of land theft cannot possibly be true: the Nyangatom only want to water their herds at the river. By definition, they do not farm, so how could they displace the Kara, who in any case do not have enough livestock to require the whole river? Of course, the Nyangatom do farm; but there also are many thousands of them, well armed as a result of the instability across the nearby Sudanese border. Thus, to voice a grievance about a state of affairs that, to correct it, would require massive military intervention by government forces is naturally going to result in the claimant being recast as the troublemaker. As Nader makes this point in another context, “harmony law models” of the kind operative in the South Omo peace meetings are “intolerant of conflict, its causes, and its expression. . . . Plaintiffs are patients needing treatment.”59 Furthermore, she adds, “disputes are reshaped as communication problems, rather than conflicts over values. Unequal power does not enter the paradigm, and disputes about facts and legal rights are transformed into disputes about feelings and relationships.”60 The only reasons for conflict ever acknowledged by officials as valid are “cattle theft” and “revenge killing.” But this restricted view reduces the Kara and their neighbors to caricatures of tribal pastoralists, and the actual trigger events for conflicts can also always be treated as obvious individual failures, in no way connected to underlying structural causes. The Kara and Nyangatom are dysfunctional, in this model of conflict analysis, but can be healed by therapy: “Harmony and controversy are different poles of the same system of control: the disputants bring controversy, and third parties apply the rhetoric and practices of harmony.”61

“Your fathers’ ways”

While the peace meetings are chaired and moderated by administrators, the conveners refer often to cultural practices of the conflicting parties and cast the whole event as in line with “traditional” and “ritual” practices: “According to your own traditions, we have met here today. . . .” By giving tribal elders the chance to speak their mind in their own language and to orate while walking up and down in the schoolhouse, police station, mission storehouse, or whichever other clearly uncustomary place has been chosen, the claim that people’s own practices are cherished and respected is substantiated (Fig. 6). Both administrators and NGO personnel operate on the assumption that there are, in fact, well-established mechanisms for reconciliation and peacemaking; in setting up the peace meetings in the way they do, they claim to accommodate these practices. The exact nature of these rather complex mechanisms, however, is not well known,

given the strong cultural, social, and linguistic divide between the Ethiopian highlanders, who dominate the administrative apparatus, and the populations with which they need to deal. Instead, the customary ways of peacemaking and mediation are intuited, and the intuitions are often far from the mark—a crucial point, rarely admitted.

A striking example came when, at the very end of a lengthy meeting, the respective leaders of the Kara and Nyangatom delegations were urged to stand up and shake hands. They did, and the conveners—as usual, sitting on chairs and benches, thus high above the other participants, sitting on their little herd-ers’ stools—enthusiastically applauded this image of consensus and conciliation. When reporting this event back in Kara, a young friend of mine characterized it as appalling: “And then, Ejke [the Nyangatom leader] and Moraxan [the Kara spokesman] were made to get up and hold hands—just like some sheep.” What did he mean by “like . . . sheep”? When the arrival of a visitor at a household is celebrated, a sheep (or goat) is first led to the honored guest, who takes hold of its foreleg, and then to the place where it is slaughtered and cut in pieces. While shaking hands as a greeting is familiar to these elders, its symbolic power as a gesture of friendship is, to say the least, questionable.
“Bottom-Up”

As a rule, the conveners present themselves as mere facilitators; the NGO provides the funds for meetings, and the government officials provide a legitimate frame for the discussion. If international NGOs have sent representatives, their role in the meetings is as a global audience. The conveners, beginning with their opening addresses, claim that lists of participants, as well as the place and time for the meetings, were jointly chosen by the conflicting parties themselves, who had seen no alternative to asking a third party (the officials) for mediation and for establishing neutral ground. Actually, there is very little choice for the local polity about what to do when a police car arrives to invite elders to a meeting. Refusal to comply with an “invitation” would mean incurring blame for not wanting to reconcile. Both the schedule and the location for meetings follow the preference of the NGOs and administrators; dates announced two weeks in advance are subject to sudden change, if there is a shortage of diesel fuel or if the district head has to go elsewhere on party business. In one instance witnessed by Girke, Kara elders waited for more than a week for the arrival of cars that had been scheduled to collect them, and they complained that this behavior was typical of the administrators. Such delays and practical problems clash sharply with the general sense of urgency that governmental and NGO intervention imparts.

The irony is that the Kara have a clear sense of just when a conflict should or should not be resolved, but officials do not request or honor their views and experience of these affairs. One day, when inquiring about a meeting that had been called to discuss an outbreak of hostilities, Girke was told that “we should not meet yet. It has not hurt both sides enough; if we make peace now, it will simply start again.” There was a right time for reconciliation, and at that time reconciliation would be pursued. Beginning too soon meant that officials did not understand the dynamics of tribal warfare. There was, in summary, very little “bottom-up” contribution to matters of scheduling, agenda, or procedure. Exceptions occurred only when the two opposing groups colluded to keep the conveners in the dark. Commonly both groups performed in ways that the conveners stipulated, and as the proceedings ended they jointly claimed satisfaction with the meetings and hope for an imminent reconciliation. Presenting a united front in this way to the outsider in order to retain some autonomy is, as we have seen, also a part of Nader’s model of harmony ideology. As the administrators work with their “speak no evil” approach in order to report something positive to their superiors, the Kara and Nyangatom are aware that they cannot generally achieve redress on the spot, so they satisfy themselves with playing along in the framework provided, scoring one or another discursive point as they make a member of the other group lose his calm (and get reprimanded) or as they gain approval from the audience for speaking in accordance with the one role open to them, that of wise elders.
The example of the peace meetings between Kara and Nyangatom gives us some insight into the use of harmony as a controlling device. By sidelining attempts to articulate grievances, and by mandating exclusive use of the harmony genre for all speech, the state is denying the legitimacy of any voice besides that of national citizenship. “You both have one and the same father—the government”: this statement is heard at every meeting, and it serves to undercut the claims issued by the opposing sides. In this sense, the harmony being offered is coercive. On the other hand, due to lack of resources and their own marginality, the administrators are relative helpless and have little choice other than to pass the buck: they perform their duty of facilitating peace talks, communicate that accomplishment easily to their superiors, and simply hope that the conflict eventually winds down. This procedure eases the pressure on them, and eventual success may even be credited to their intervention.

During the peace meetings, as well as during public meetings in Kyrgyzstan, the state and the tribal elders collude to make the procedure of dispute resolution seem both counterhegemonic, on the one hand, and coercive, on the other. While there is pressure on the elders to comply with the summons and adhere to the procedure, the actual form of the meetings has become a part of their “culture” as well. And while Kara elders, like Kyrgyz aksakals, are pressed into participating in such public events, they appreciate being called to the meetings and relish the chance to match their wits in front of an often considerable audience. At the same time, the stern faces of the administrators poorly mask their actual inability to enforce their will against local resistance; and since they themselves are only representatives of a center even farther away, they often to do not embody Leviathan convincingly. To speak, as Nader does, of the “naturalization” of harmony ideology is to ignore that these practices of dispute resolution are coemergent—the product of a joint performance, of which the local participants are not unaware.62 They are not, in the words of Harold Garfinkel, “cultural dopes.”63

The material from both our fieldwork indicates that the contribution of elders is fundamental to governmental practices. The elders’ presence is necessary, because they are regarded as able to invoke harmony and peace most convincingly (Fig. 7). Although their performances are officially declared apolitical (hence the name “antimeeting” in the Kyrgyz context), they have thereby become deeply entrenched in political action and political discourse, even when purportedly they act only according to “custom” and “consensus.” Politicians require “a plethora of empathic images and memories”—a shared history, for example—in order to encourage political identification and commitment.64 In Kyrgyzstan, they call on elders to invoke these images and memories in their performances. Jonathan

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Spencer has observed that “actors involved in the ‘political’ deny any political intent—their intervention is always said to be in the ‘national’ interest.” In both our field sites, this denial of self-interest is more often framed, in terms of harmony, as an appeal to a moral community. And even as the performances carried out in its name serve antagonistic goals, the invocations of harmony by politicians exist side by side with those of ordinary citizens bemoaning that it is politicians who destroy it. It is not, then, that people challenge each other’s claim to legitimacy when invoking yntymak. Rather, they claim authority over its correct attribution to specific social and political situations. The concept of harmony is not being “spoiled” for use, therefore, but continues to be used for different and often contradictory purposes. As harmony is conceived as in constant need of manifestation, it is an integral part both of local practice and of political action at the national level.

Only at first sight do the examples presented so far suggest that the invocation of harmony is even occasionally part of a hegemonic strategy. The process of urging tribal peoples to forgo factionalism and unite under the benevolent guidance of their national leaders is coercive only in appearance. In the face of the practical collusion—the de facto complicity—between tribal antagonists, on the one hand, and the state, on the other hand, easy dichotomies, like the

one (often so clearly apt) of hegemon and subaltern, should be distrusted. The neologism “transhegemonic practice” emerged from our discussion of the condition of entanglement, where everyone is co-opted into a practice—in this case, the practice of “doing” harmony.

**Toward Harmony Ideology as Practice**

Nader argues that “we have a duty to investigate the dangers of coercive harmony and to expose repression when it poses as consensus.” Hence she urges anthropologists to pay closer attention to who benefits from laying disputes to rest through the invocation of harmony. Her metaphor of the “colonization of the mind” is striking here. Nader assumes that, while people act on the basis of a shared mentality, only “a few actors are driving the machine.” Granted that some have more control than others, the question remains unanswered, because unasked, whether these more powerful actors might be as unconscious of the origins of their behavior as are those who are less powerful. Nader does not seem to be interested in people’s reflection on their own cultural practices, and here a criticism made by Peter Just of Nader’s work cuts deeply. Just observes that there “seems little attempt to develop a sense of what might be called Zapotec ‘legal ontology,’ ” and he criticizes Nader for not exploring the possible origins of harmony ideology in Zapotec society before colonialism. Could there not have been “autochthonous origins”? Just finds harmony ideologies abounding in places that do not share the historical experience of Christianization and conquest. John Bodley too suspects “that harmony and consensus were already intrinsic features of daily life in autonomous small-scale cultures where they served internal ends.”

There is no discussion in Nader’s work of harmony ideology except as it is instrumentalized in the context of litigation among Taleans or as it is performed to keep outsiders at bay. There is the occasional offhand remark about “genuine harmony” that includes “barn raising and all that,” but Nader does not seem to have the data to explore what “all that” might be and whether it was “genuine” or ideological and manipulatively rhetorical.

Daniel Levine notes that it is data from the late 1950s and early 1960s on which Nader’s *Harmony Ideology*, published in 1990, is based. Thus, one can

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read her understanding of harmony ideology as counterhegemonic in itself—as an argument, that is, against the structural-functionalism that was dominant at the time she carried out her fieldwork. Her differentiation between “organic harmony” and “cultural control” is reminiscent of older formalistic dichotomies: Émile Durkheim’s distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity, for instance, or Ferdinand Tönnies’s opposition of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft.73 On the one hand, institutions are imagined to work in harmony with one another on the basis of collective values, experiences, sense of place, identity, and emotional commitment. On the other hand, heterogeneity is assumed to prevail, and social cohesion is said to be achieved through specialization, interdependence, and reciprocity. Laurel Rose, a student of Nader’s, worked with this dichotomy when distinguishing between two kinds of harmony ideology in her work on land-dispute strategies in Swaziland:

Organic harmony ideology is supported by specific statements about traditional status, sacred kingship, ethnic identity, custom and morality—all of which define inherent structural controls upon Swazi social relations. Control harmony is supported by statements about absolute power, threat of sanctions, reliance on modern authorities and intervention of a Christian God—all of which define external political controls upon Swazi social relationship.74

Rose’s argument that “organic harmony ideologies” are balanced, in that they achieve consensus in social relationships through popular appeals to custom, shared values, and consensus in belief, is not entirely convincing. Consensus and custom are not givens; they are components of people’s processes of negotiation with one another.75 “Organic harmony ideologies” are therefore potentially as conflict ridden as “control harmony ideologies.” What matters, then, is that these ideologies are put to use by actors who work toward their full application, even while harmony remains a utopian goal: always in sight but never quite reached.

Nader may have wanted to show Western anthropologists that what they had construed in fieldwork as non-Western values were actually distorted versions of Western control-centered values, directed back at the colonizers by cunning natives. In her article “Harmony Models and the Construction of Law,” Nader writes that “assumptions deeply held among anthropologists stemming from their cultural upbringing suggest a strong attachment to harmony models (as with Christians more generally).”76 Harmony may well be a deep-seated

Christian value, but it is hardly unique to Christianity. This issue is particularly important for us, given that we both have found harmony ideologies at our field sites that cannot be traced back to colonial control or understood as counter-hegemonic strategies for dealing with a dominant nation-state. For our informants, these harmony ideologies are master values in their own right, central to social organization as such and not only in the field of litigation. It is time that anthropologists shift their level of analysis, in studying harmony ideologies, from a bird’s-eye view of how harmony is deployed in the service of coercive social structures to a worm’s-eye view of how people refer to harmony when transforming their patterns of relatedness and interaction. The case studies that follow are examples of what we mean.

Invoking Yntymak in the Village: Celebrations and Conflicts

In previous work, Beyer has discussed how villagers in Talas province referred to *yntymak* when emphasizing the importance of their coming together as an *uruu*, a lineage, for festivities and commemorations. During *tülöö*, a spring ritual, the villagers gathered within their respective lineages along the local river in order to eat together and pray for a good harvest season. For life-cycle rituals of this kind, and for other festive occasions, the elders are usually among the first to be invited. Their duty is “to sit”: their mere physical presence is required to mark the occasion and ensure that the event happens in an “orderly” fashion. While sitting and eating together, Beyer’s neighbors, a male and a female elder, told her of several events carried out along descent lines. They classified these gatherings as *yntymak* in themselves:

**Man:** During commemorations, or if somebody has died, then the whole lineage gets together.
**Woman:** This is harmony [*yntymak bolot*].
**Man:** This is harmony.
**Woman:** When we give our daughters, when in-laws come and visit.
**Man:** When we have celebrations.
**Woman:** During holidays.

Many Talas villagers, as we have seen, have accused politicians at the national level of dividing the population along lines of descent, but these two elders offered a persuasive counternarrative. What is divisive on a national level may be integrative when considered from below.

During marriage rituals, *aksaks* “sit” not only to bless the joyous event but also to ensure that the (re)formation of community is carried out “according to customary law,” which may include any Islamic principles that need to

be followed. At wedding parties, much alcohol may be consumed and, in both villages where Beyer carried out fieldwork, the behavior of the newlyweds and their guests—some of whom were meeting each other for the first time—was being eyed suspiciously by the older generation. In the upper village, the aksakals began visiting the groom’s house uninvited and “sitting” throughout the evening with the newlyweds and their guests. When Beyer asked how the wedding party reacted to their uninvited presence, one of the elders explained:

They are embarrassed. That’s why we won’t stay overnight at his place. We don’t need his bread. We only summon him to be civilized [yimanduu]. That’s why this guy cannot say a single word if ten aksakals are at his place. We don’t intend to drink tea at his place. We only want a person to be yimanduu. We want a person to live in yntymak. We want a person to live in unity. We want a person to be a person [el bolsun dep]. Then the daughter-in-law’s relatives will think good things about this village, saying, “We went to that village and it is like this there.” When aksakals are there, young people don’t speak, don’t drink vodka.

During another wedding party, one that Beyer witnessed, the toasting with vodka went hand in hand with the invocation of yntymak, which came immediately after opening the bottle and uttering the Arabic phrase Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rabim (“in the name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful”). All good things that are about to start should be greeted with those words.

Just as in the political sphere, so in the ritual sphere yntymak is invoked with sincerity but in ways that may seem contradictory, if observed from outside. The verbalization of yntymak as a wish (May you lead a harmonious life! Let us live in harmony!) or as a reminder (We need harmony!) is formulaic, much as is the recitation of the Islamic verse, put to new use in the context of this wedding.

Apart from being invoked during celebrations, harmony ideology is a central idiom of speech in the local aksakal court sessions where conflicts between villagers are dealt with. The following case provides an account of one such conflict and of how harmony ideology was put to use in resolving it.78

**The Lost Cow**

In northern Kyrgyzstan, most households, as already noted, own a small herd of sheep, goats, and a couple of cows. While, in the summer months, the herd is

78. Not all expressions of harmony ideology in Talas are speech acts. Villagers give “harmony money” (yntymak akcha) to a family that has lost a beloved member and is now under the obligation to prepare a funeral ritual that, carried out in elaborate stages, often lasts for several days. The ritual involves the slaughtering of large animals as well as the hosting of hundreds of guests, including relatives, neighbors, classmates, and acquaintances, and is therefore quite costly. In Talas town, forty kilometers from Beyer’s field site, a festive hall is available for those who want to celebrate or commemorate outside their homes. The name of the place is Café Yntymak.
being brought onto higher pastures to return only in the fall, some animals are
kept in the vicinity of the village all year. In order to ease their workload, herd-
ers of different households share the responsibility to herd the animals, taking
turns. In this particular case, a herder, call him Belek, took a herd of cows onto a
grazing patch outside the village for the day, although he did not have an animal
of his own among the herd. The villagers who gave their cows that day did not
know that Belek was the one herding their animals. When Belek returned that
evening, the cow of Talant was missing. Talant complained to the village aksakal
court, arguing that Belek might have sold his cow to make some money, as he
was rather poor. On the day of the court session, four men were invited to serve
as witnesses. Before the session began, the aged head of the aksakal court urged
the claimants to write witness letters (tüşbiindiik; literally, letters of agreement) on
the spot. The letters stated that all four of them had given their cows to the herd
that Belek had taken to the mountains that day. While they were writing their
letters, the aksakal inquired about the men’s health, their families and children.
He then began to inquire why Belek had been herding if his own animals were
not among the herd. It turned out that Belek owned only one cow, which was on
the summer pasture. The court session began by hearing the statements of the
disputants, which consisted of Talant accusing Belek of having sold his cow (for
which Talant had no evidence). Talant’s wife, whom he brought to court, had the
job of threatening to take the case to the district court in Talas town, should the
aksakal court not judge “fairly.” Belek stated that the cow was simply “lost” and
that he was sorry.

Having listened to both parties, the head of the aksakal court came to the
following conclusions:

According to the opinions of all court members and according to the
talk of the people, both sides are guilty. If you [to the wife of Talant]
turn to any court, or to the prosecutor or to the militia, they will ask,
“Did you show the shepherd your cow when giving your cow?” You will
say “no.” He [Bekl] will also say, “I don’t know which cow was his. I
just herded all the animals together.” His fault is in herding cows even
though he [himself] didn’t have a cow.

[Addressing Belek:] Why did you do that? This is your fault. Anyone here can think, “since he wanted to herd that day, it’s he who
sold the cow.”

[To everyone in the room:] But he doesn’t look like he could sell
[he does not look like he is a criminal]. Then the [district] court will
make a fair decision. If you are dissatisfied with our decision, you can
take the decision and turn to the district court. But keep in mind that
the regional court will appraise the cow, and you will pay twenty per-
cent of that price [in] cash right away. You will also pay the lawyer. So
you will pay almost half the price of the cow. Think about that, too. All
the people sitting here tell only their just words [meaning, they have no jurisprudential knowledge]. Maybe one of you will like it and the other one won’t like it. But people will decide. That’s why people say, “an animal is sweet and a soul is bitter” [mal tattuu, zhan acbuu].

For you [wife of Talant], your animal is “sweet,” but he [Belek] is saying he doesn’t have anything. Make peace between yourselves. Taking into account the words of Arun and Temish [his fellow-court members], I have made this decision and I think this decision is right because both of you are guilty [raising his voice].

Decision: You [Belek] will pay back in the late fall. Usually the court gives only a monthly term. But I am giving you time until late fall, taking into consideration that you have nothing to give and that you are relatives [tuugandar]. By late fall you will buy them a young cow. You [wife of Talant] will wait for a year and in the following year you will have a big cow. If you agree with this decision, you agree, if not, then you can turn to higher places. [Addressing Belek:] Do you both agree?

Belek: It is right. I have already told you that I will pay back. I have explained my circumstances.

Head of the aksakal court: OK. Then the court case is over. You can go [everyone gets up].

In this case as in the previous one, coercing disputants to fall in line with harmony ideology is part of a process of control initiated by the “village community”—often personified by the aksakals but also by neighbors, lineage members, or the staff of the mayor’s office. Whereas third parties (such as NGOs or the government) may invoke harmony as an overall goal that everyone should pursue, this court case appears to show that such invocations resonate with the disputants themselves. Talant and Belek were both scolded for not taking care of the herding business properly. And although, in this case as in many others of the kind, one disputing party tended to gain and the other tended to lose, the rhetorical invocation of harmony was always addressed to both. The term harmony was deployed throughout the court hearing to make both parties aware that establishing or reestablishing harmony cannot be accomplished by the parties alone. As the members of the court themselves understand it, their duty lies in “finding solutions,” rather than “deciding cases.” As the head of the court stated:

The main goal of the aksakal court is to keep the harmony in this village, to stabilize, to overcome misdeed, to dissolve theft, to create good relationships, and to live in peace. Our main goal is not to divide people but to bring them together. That’s it. There is no other goal. To overcome, without letting the problem reach the region, province, and the national level, without disturbing others. And then the village will be in peace. If one village is in peace, the others are also in peace, so
the region is in peace. All are in peace, and then there will be no riots and unrest.

The judge’s statement is an emic, bottom-up account of how harmony ideology on the village level is perceived as contributing to the tranquility of the whole state. How, on a small scale, the deeds of the village community have repercussions on a national scale is a matter about which the aksakal himself expresses concern. Here, as in the political speeches of the ruling elite, harmony ideology is linked to political change and to the tumult of the last twenty years since independence. But responsibility and agency are regarded as resting with the village community. It is they who are the guarantors of harmony.

The Lone Wolf
Harmony ideology in this next case works to the benefit of a powerful male elder who has displayed “uncustomary” behavior. In contrast to the previous case, there is in this one no active public coercion of any actor. Instead, harmony ideology is put to use by an actor to further his own particular interests. This strategy of his was successful, because he could count on others complying with the expectations that harmony ideology entails. Elders must perform their role properly in interactions with others in order to achieve authority—their “job,” as Harvey Sacks would say, is “doing ‘being elders.’”79 The proverb “a beard is needed at a feast” (sakal toido kerek), which Beyer often heard as an answer to questions about why aksakals in particular were invited to “sit” during life-cycle rituals, conveys both the respect that people accord to elders and the expectations that villagers have of them. The elders’ agency is steered by those expectations. One way in which aksakals attain authority and respect is to perform yntymak. But what if an aksakal does not want to comply with this expectation? The following case study analyzes how a male elder, unchallenged by others, got away without “doing ‘being aksakal.’”

Kasym Ata was head of the aksakal court in the second village where Beyer carried out field research.80 At age eighty-two, he was among the oldest aksakals in the village. He was also the head of his household, which consisted of himself, his wife, his divorced daughter (who moved back to his house with her two children), as well as several grandchildren whom he raised at home. He had studied

79. This construction is adapted from Harvey Sacks, who argued that even “being ordinary” needs to be actively pursued: “There is not ‘an ordinary person’ as some person, but as somebody having as one’s job, as one’s constant preoccupation, doing ‘being ordinary’—it is not that somebody is ordinary; it is perhaps that that is what one’s business is, and it takes work, as any other business does.” Sacks, “On ‘Doing Being Ordinary,’” in Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis, ed. J. Maxwell Atkinson and John Heritage (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 414.

80. Ata means “father” in Kyrgyz and is a respectful way to address a male elder.
in the capital Bishkek during Soviet times and had taken up a career as a journalist. Traveling throughout the Soviet Union as an active party member, he was rewarded for propagating atheism as well as for his journalistic talent. He was a member of the Kyrgyz Society of Journalists and became director of the village school in the 1960s, holding this position until his retirement in the 1990s. Among the older male population there was hardly a villager who had not been taught by Kasym Ata. He was respected (and sometimes feared) by young and old for his impressive career and for the strong hand with which he ruled his aksakal court. A solitary character who showed no concern about what other villagers thought of him, Kasym Ata was financially independent and intellectually superior to most other people. These features of his personality, along with his personal connections, made it possible for him to deal successfully with state, as well as with local, officials and politicians. He often stood up for fellow villagers who did not manage to obtain needed documents or who felt unfairly treated by officials or by the court in Talas town. Stories of how he had “won” in his dealings with a judge of the Talas city court, whom he accused of having been partial and corrupt in divorce cases, circulated widely in both field sites. He himself liked to remind others that “even the state judges” feared him and that, unlike state judges, he did not have to be elected: “I am the eternal judge,” he once laughingly replied when Beyer asked him whether there would be elections for aksakal judges in the village any time soon.

In contrast to most elders, Kasym Ata did not try to talk women seeking a divorce into staying with their husbands “for the sake of the children” or for the sake of harmony. He readily dissolved marriages and helped to secure property and land for the women. Although he embodied some of the characteristics that Nazif Shahrani, in writing about the Kyrgyz in the Afghan Pamir, described as ideal qualities for a leader—such as bravery, wealth in livestock, and commitment to protecting the interest of the local community against government officials—Kasym Ata seemed interested mainly in representing himself as a “big man.” Beyer found that others indeed judged him as such. While villagers often cited wealth as the source of his power, he neither shared his wealth with them nor put his assets to use on their behalf. He would protect his clients against the state courts, as already mentioned, but equally he might threaten those same clients with transferring their case to a state court if they did not abide by his words. Just as he was uninterested in working toward yntymak, so also in many instances he did not behave according to customary law (salt); still, he managed to retain his position as head of the aksakal court. People respected him for being chong, which means “strong” but could also imply that he was willful, proud, and

unconcilatory. Had his fellow aksakals removed Kasym Ata from his position as head of the aksakal court, however, that move might have been interpreted by others, especially by the young, as an invitation to do the same. If elders disrespect one another, why should the young pay them respect?

Here, then, is another feature of harmony ideology (operating in a self-serving way, in this case): aksakals may not openly criticize one another, especially not their acknowledged “head,” lest yntymak (to saying nothing of their own authority) be forfeited. Kasym Ata profited from this unwritten rule of customary law, even though he himself did not submit to it. It was less his agency, then, and more others’ patience with his behavior, that enabled him to act independently and enforce order. His ignoring harmony ideology was possible only because others were perpetuating it. In Kyrgyzstan, harmony ideology can be imposed on others, but actors impose it also on themselves by adjusting their agency in line with others’ behavior and expectations. One could speak of autocoerced harmony in such cases. While the idiom of harmony ideology in Kyrgyzstan implies that all parties willingly enter into the preferred sort of relationships with one another, there are no situations in which the invocation of harmony is entirely without coercion. The same goes for the application of harmony ideology among the Kara of Ethiopia.

**Coercive Aspects of Community in Kara**

Ädamo is a noun derived from äda, meaning “kin” or “relatives.” The -mo suffix turns the term into an abstract principle. It would serve little purpose to try translating ädamo with a single word, given that even the root word äda is polysemic and very flexible in use: it refers not only to consanguineous and affine relatives but also to relations of personal significance. To say that someone is äda is to say that he or she belongs, be it through shared history or ritual bonds, with a specific other or others. Ädamo is used mainly in two ways: either to indicate a lack or deficiency (“Does ädamo work like this?”; “This ädamo, it doesn’t taste right”) or else to characterize a relationship (“And so they found ädamo”; “Their ädamo is good”). Clearly, there is a general understanding that people ought to do right by those whose lives are entangled with theirs, whether through support in field labor or through generosity, hospitality, political support, or anything that might make a hardship easier to bear. Despite the word’s etymology, its pertinence goes well beyond kinship, in any strict sense; the word is applicable to all sorts of relatedness that matter in Kara country and its environs.

Through the use of ädamo, then, kinship and its modalities become a metaphor. The demand for harmony entailed by ädamo contrasts with a Kara proclivity, which many researchers have noticed, for differentiation. Kinship is not strong enough to dictate behavior among relatives; therefore, many other social
categories can be activated to find solidarity and backup if an individual's interests seem in jeopardy. The segmentary escalation of conflict so familiar from ethnographies of East Africa is not confined here to one dimension. A Kara elder need not approach his clan for aid; he can just as well go to his age-set, to the neighbors in his settlement, to his hunting friends, or to companions from his initiation period before marriage. Escalation can thus develop in a number of ways, but once a dispute has run its course and the initial fury is spent, Kara are quite aware that, internally, they need to reconcile quickly. In such a small, face-to-face population, it is hardly feasible to allow tensions to accrue or escalation to continue. Hence reconciliation proceeds without attending to grievances: the mere act of making up, of performing ādamo, is expected, apparently, to contribute to communal harmony. Girke, as a researcher of the Kara, found it at times unsettling how quickly people who had just been battering one another were reconciled by the admonishments of present elders, invoking the importance of living together well. This aspect of harmony ideology among the Kara has the effect that there is no right to enduring individual anger, grudge, or resentment.

Problem cases that run too deep for such easy dismissal—such as enmity (maassi, “blood”) between households after a homicide, which often has a sacral and obviously dangerous component—are instead addressed as examples of how not to live one’s public life. Ādamo, then, implies an understanding that, while quarrels will occur, they should be regarded as incidental, not as deriving from what we might call a systemic problem. In this way, ādamo comes to be extended even to the Nyangatom, who, as Girke found in fieldwork, are in spite of their conflicts not maligned by the Kara. Quite the reverse: there are many interpersonal relationships between elders from the two groups, who share memories of hunting, herding, trading, or even of growing up together in their youth.

The communitarian demand for willingness to reconcile quickly is by no means unique, but ādamo has another aspect, pertinent to interethnic relations within Kara, that is less familiar. As already mentioned, the Kara population is ethnically heterogeneous, with the “true Kara” at the top of the hierarchy, followed by people categorized as Bogudo, Gomba, and Moguji. These groups are regarded as the first to have settled in Kara. Significantly, there are no Bogudo and Gomba outside of Kara: if there ever was an independent polity comprising only Bogudo or only Gomba, about which we do not know, it has perished, and neither distinct languages nor substantial cultural features remain today. All of the “true Kara,” Bogudo, Gomba, and Moguji partake instead of what is understood as “Kara culture”: clan structure, kinship organization, public rituals, practices of livelihood, even language—all of these are shared. What matters for our present purposes is that there is no native term for the social category of “true Kara.” They are known, but they cannot be marked other than with terms signifying the political group of which all the others are members as well. The
details of the interrelations among these categories go beyond the scope of this essay, but taking intermarriage and landholding as an example it is possible to highlight one pernicious aspect of ädamo as a harmony ideology. Only the “true Kara,” the male elders in particular, are able to define what is harmonious and what is not. Other members of the Kara community have fewer possibilities to declare ädamo missing and needed. Thus, ädamo is, on the one hand, the sense of the importance of harmony—along with the invocation of communal harmony and of proper kin-worthy behavior—but it is also, on the other hand, a rhetorical device that can be used to remove fraught topics from public discussion when “true Kara” feel that open discussion would disturb communal peace.

“We are all Kara” is often said as a shorthand for the understanding that all of the people living together on the Lower Omo are in principle political equals. The ethnic categories are supposed to matter only in regard to people’s gilo, their ritual practice, from which one cannot deviate without running the risk of death and disaster. “Ritual,” for instance, dictates that “true Kara” may not eat from the same bowl with Moguji. Ritual also dictates who can marry whom, and here a hierarchy emerges: the intensity and severity of one’s ritual responsibilities correspond to one’s ranking on this social ladder. The “true Kara” and Bogudo exhibit only slight ritual differences, with the Gomba and the Moguji sharing fewer of the religious restrictions imposed on the “true Kara.” Marriage prohibitions reflect this ritual hierarchy: for their first wives, “true Kara” men will marry “true Kara” girls or Bogudo, though for their second they might consider Gomba; Moguji are entirely beyond the pale. In turn, “true Kara” will never give their girls to those who are not “true Kara”; if one inquires openly, they will invoke ritual prohibitions. Similarly, Moguji are prohibited from owning land on the fertile riverbanks. As the supposed firstcomers to the river valley, their hunter-gatherer and fisherman ancestors are said, because they had no understanding of the riverbanks’ value for agriculture, to have sold all the best land to the true Kara, who arrived later from the mountains to the east.

The Moguji are said to have remained, at heart, unskilled at the more “civilized” practices of animal husbandry and crop cultivation. Correspondingly, the “true Kara” suggest that the Moguji’s association with the wild and untamed bush is somewhat polluting, being symbolically opposed to the cultivated field and the herds of small stock. As the ones who in mythical history were tricked out of their property—which comprises the main basis of Kara society today—the Moguji are an internal threat that the “true Kara” feel they need to marginalize, both symbolically and politically. People in Kara are far from equal even outside the ritual realm, but to say so openly is all but impossible. The hierarchy is masked by reference to unfortunate ritual restrictions, whereas actually it is an economically motivated system built on sustaining difference and excluding some from the means of production (the riverbank fields). The net effect of this “saving lie”
(to use F. G. Bailey’s term) is the political and economic dominance of the “true Kara” and the exploitation of Moguji labor.82 The domination is not covert—the actual state of affairs is well known—but ādamo, the demand for harmony, serves to delegitimize any fundamental criticism of the social order.83 There is a bitter irony in this circumstance: ādamo is treated as if it were (in Peter Just’s terms) an “autochthonous” harmony ideology, even though the “true Kara” deploy it to stifle discussion of their unwarranted economic dominance—and yet the Kara criticize NGO and state efforts to impose harmony in everyday life on the South Omo zone. The Kara are discontented when the grounds for conflict in their region are delegitimized in the context of ADR peace meetings, which is to say that the Kara practice internally a procedure that they openly denounce when it is practiced with them on the receiving end.

But our pointing out this irony is not to meant to imply that the Kara have nothing of which to complain. Clearly, the introduction of what Nader would regard as coercive harmony ideology makes a sham of state and NGO claims that their peace meetings are organized bottom-up and according to the ways of tribal ancestors.

In an overview of “grass-roots justice in Ethiopia,” Alula Pankhurst and Getachew Assefa discuss “customary dispute resolution”—CDR rather than ADR—and its entanglement with the state legal system.84 Their emphasis on “customary” rather than “alternative” procedures reflects their understanding that, in many areas of this very heterogeneous country, the local ways of dispute settlement remain standard. The material from South Omo, interestingly a region not covered in their book, muddles the neat distinction between the state legal system and customary ways of resolving conflicts; the Kara and Nyangatom surely would return to their customary ways, if only they could. Custom and state policy are by now so entangled that neither ADR nor CDR quite fits as a characterization of current practice. But the entanglements do not stop there. While in the Kyrgyz case there was linguistic continuity between villages of the periphery and the state, there is none between official Ethiopia and the peripheral Kara. Officials find the Kara fundamentally opaque and at times obtuse and are, moreover, aware that the Kara do not take them very seriously most of the time. Ethiopian state officials operate on the basis of a different kind of harmony ideology altogether and are unfamiliar with the local concept of ādamo.


As already demonstrated, there is a component to the claims of *ādamo* that is just as coercive as the claims of harmony ideology in the context of ADR peace meetings. Unlike Nader’s Zapotec, neither Talas people in Kyrgyzstan nor Kara in southern Ethiopia position themselves vis-à-vis the state to an extent that their actions must be seen to result from the internalization of an imposed ideology or morality. Whereas the state has been and remains an other to these peoples, it is a distant other that does not dominate their everyday lives. There is, therefore, no reason to believe that the kind of harmony ideology we have found in our field sites is a reaction—internalized or otherwise—to colonial control.

Community and Coercion

It is clear that, due to the nature of their ethnographic practice and the strong personal bonds formed during fieldwork, anthropologists generally wish to do right by their informants, many of whom become friends. As David Graeber writes in his essay “The Anthropology of Globalization,” “We are for the little guys.”85 One side effect, already present in the structural-functional writings that Bailey discusses, is that—spurred by commitment to moral relativism—local customs, mores, and modes of life are treated at least neutrally, if not favorably. We take the worries of our informants seriously and are sensitive to how they are marginalized, exploited, derided, “developed,” or taken up into the mainstream. Anthropologists, in a fair assessment of their role, regard themselves as often the only people not wanting to lecture to, convert, or command the villagers or islanders whom they study. Anthropologists regard themselves, in other words, as respectful students and friends. This attitude may be commendable, but it can morph into something like an image of David and Goliath: our informants are David, all other actors are Goliath, and the anthropologists root for David to show himself clever and resilient—successful in his attempts to “outwit the state” or any other challenger.86 Even as anthropology has moved well beyond the classical village study, traces of this predilection remain. The “community” is a central notion, for that reason; it is commonly still approached in holistic terms as a collective actor and, in that way, the main protagonist of the ethnographic account. If harmony is located anywhere, surely it must be within the community?

Nader’s *Harmony Ideology* is best read as grounded in that understanding of community: the native community is a beleaguered David with a long history of being pressed to submit its interests to those of hegemonic Philistines and to

forgo claiming its lawful rights. That this picture is not false does not mean that the community is without its own problems, but to divide the community into elites and commoners does not resolve the methodological issue; to do so would be quite in tune with Nader’s too rigid distinction between “genuine harmony” and harmony ideology. Our material from Talas and Kara, which focuses on communities, is cogent evidence, we think, that the same processes of coercion take place on both larger and smaller scales, at the center and at the peripheries. Yntymak and ädamo are terms with a strong public presence in their respective contexts. Both are regularly invoked, and both are emically understood as matters of practice as well as of ideology: they are practiced when behavior, whether by individuals or by collective actors, is publicly characterized as communitarian, conciliatory, and in accordance with custom. In both our field sites, it is plausible to speak of harmony ideologies in the terms first laid out by Nader. We have found many of her generalizations about what constitutes a harmony ideology apt and resonant with our field experiences. But our cases suggest that the term ideology is misleading: ädamo and yntymak are both practical features of everyday life, interactionally salient and by no means externally induced.

Some points already made bear reiteration. In Talas, Beyer found an interesting counterpoint to the prohibition against the voicing of grievances that is typical for Kara. The various grievances and vested interests of factions were explicitly acknowledged in both villages, and in both they were effectively countered rhetorically. This tension, however, never led to fragmentation. By subsuming all such clashes under the heading of “why we need yntymak,” the attainment of harmony can become a joint objective for all sides. Thus, factionalism is an essential, necessary part of achieving yntymak in the village: without factions, the elders cannot perform their “doing being aksakals.” One needs those bad examples so that harmony can be a constant demand, couched in culturally specific rhetorics and practices that are imposed on members of communities at various scales. To argue that communities accept or overlook individual deviance is fallacious; while there is always some tolerance, there are also always limits to what can be said and done. Our ethnographic examples show that harmony ideology is not just an instrument used by state institutions to enforce civic obedience or to lock marginal communities out of a (probably overburdened) justice system. Harmony, where it is operative as a foundational principle, operates at all levels, and to assume that communities are not based on some principles, reinforced by coercion, is misleading, indeed utopian—a part of the “saving lie” that communal rules exist equally to the benefit of all. But they do not—communities are built on the coercion of individuals, and individual misgivings are more often than not delegitimized and construed as offenses of one against all.

Any ideal, typical distinction between “organic harmony” and “control harmony” is difficult to sustain in the face of the evidence of entangled harmony
ideologies at our field sites. The three usages that Nader identified and her programmatic differentiation of hegemonic and counterhegemonic practices (or of harmony as an authentic cultural value and harmony as a political ideology) do not seem finally tenable to us. Even as we object to these distinctions, however, they have served for us the most important purpose of any model: Nader’s model structured our inquiry, sensitizing us to a type of phenomenon and to possibilities of generalization. Making comparative juxtapositions is not butterfly collecting; doing so helps us to sharpen our conceptual and analytical tools.

Laurel Rose has offered social scientists a very useful and ethnographically informed overview of “perspectives on harmony”—an advance, perhaps, on Nader’s approach, but the problems with Nader’s argument are not overcome. Rose makes it clear that analytic perspectives and those of informants on harmony must both be addressed and that harmony is different things to different people. But she, like Nader, concludes that the application of harmony ideology is always in the service of power and interest. Two excerpts from Rose’s book *Politics of Harmony* will illustrate the point:

Harmony can also mean what dominant “outsiders” (e.g. colonialists) tell “insiders” (e.g. indigenous populations) it should mean, what “insiders” want such “outsiders” to think it means, or what ruler “insiders” (e.g. hereditary elites) want the “ruled” insiders (e.g. commoners) to believe it means. . . .

Harmony ideology may thus be used in two ways: by the rulers to defend or validate a legal/political superstructure of control, and by the ruled to defend or advocate an infrastructure of social relations. Harmony ideologies conveyed by the rulers are encapsulated within shared economic, political and cultural practices, whereas harmony ideologies manipulated by the ruled may be publicly accepted but strategically resisted in private practice.

Rose shows her care here to consider various possibilities for the protean concept of harmony, but the juxtaposition of insiders and outsiders, of rulers and ruled, remains a foundation of her approach and underlies her assumptions about the communities in question. What if, however, the distinction of rulers and ruled, insiders and outsiders, is cast into doubt? What if we no longer see harmony ideologies, as Nader and even Rose still do, as relationships between corporate entities but instead as practices?

An approach to harmony centered on practice would build on ethnographic data to observe the social life of harmony as a value, and also as an instrument of control, at all levels and scales. The study of harmony would be advanced by


our acknowledging that no ideology exists in isolation from practice. “Deeply internalized” ideologies are not empirically accessible, and as soon as an ideology is voiced the act of speaking renders it an element of interaction, of praxis, something being done by somebody, open to interpretation by others and to their reactions. It seems time to move away from abstract harmony ideologies floating through the discursive ether and guiding processes on the ground. There are by now enough ethnographic data to suggest that agency rests squarely with people, all people, who have concerns about their way of life, who seek for an asymptotic path to peaceful coexistence and cooperation, and who develop concepts such as yntymak and ādāmo (or even whole speech genres) to further such aims. Once aware of how any harmony ideology is worded in a given setting, we can attend to its evocation and invocation, to its actualization in speech, and to its effects on social relations of whatever kind. Ideology exists in its evocation, not its ideation. The problem is not that “norms are one thing and practices another” but that norms and, likewise, ideologies are incomprehensible except as actualized and put in practice.89

Harmony ideology should be approached in a new, perhaps more sophisticated way, methodologically, but the concept itself should not be abandoned. Despite the prevailing disdain among anthropologists for the term, there are people everywhere pursuing harmony and worrying that their societies, for whatever reasons, might fall apart. In the context of the present symposium on enmity, it may be useful for us to conclude by repeating that a priori distinctions between rulers and ruled should be rethought. Many officials are bound into systems of governance, just as are the people whom they are supposed to govern, and often the seeming underdogs are instrumental in maintaining the status quo. To say so is not to blame the victim, and there are more than enough instances we could cite of unqualified oppression—but not always, not everywhere. David and Goliath may appear to be dueling, when observed from the bird’s-eye perspective of theory. Viewed from up close, however, it may turn out that they are dancing, shifting positions over rocky ground, as each does what he feels he must to keep the only dance he knows from ending.