

# CULTURAL ANALYSIS

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY FORUM ON FOLKLORE AND POPULAR CULTURE

VOL. 15.2



**CULTURAL ANALYSIS**  
AN INTERDISCIPLINARY FORUM ON FOLKLORE AND POPULAR CULTURE

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# National Competitive Festivals: Formatting Dance Products and Forging Identities in Contemporary Kenya

**Kahithe Kiiru**

*Centre for Ethnology and Comparative Sociology (LESC)  
University Paris West Nanterre La Défense  
France*

## **Abstract**

*In the process of dance heritage creation in contemporary Kenya, an essential and until now underestimated role is played by competitive festivals organized by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture. Due to their accessibility, visibility, recurrence and national distribution, these events facilitate the dissemination and the adaptation of a specific repertoire—that of cultural dances of Kenya. They build on old local customs and reveal continuity with the colonial era during which the repression of “native” dances led to a particular use of choreography and folklore. Inspired by several aesthetic systems, stage products in competitive festivals are directed by elaborated evaluation criteria, which over the years have been exported outside of that context. This article attests to a circulation of actors and products, as well as a circulation of heritage categories and corporalities. It aims at understanding the effect competitive festivals have on the institutionalization of dances in Kenya, but also on the modes of their existence.*

**Key words:** competitions, traditional dance, dance heritage, assessment criteria, choreography, cultural politics, dance anthropology, Kenya

## **Introduction**

Dance and heritage are two cornerstone notions of the ongoing study this paper stems from—the study of dance heritage creation processes in contemporary Kenya. The polysemous nature of dance as an art form, as well as its amenability to social and political agendas, has been recognized early in the social sciences. Since the 1980s, the most important developments in the field of dance anthropology have been made in studies on the link between dance and politics, on the relationships between culture, body, and movement. Thus, dance as an expression and a practice of power and protest, resistance and complicity, has been the subject of numerous analysis, particularly in the areas of ethnicity, national identity, gender and, less frequently, social class. In more recent years, Andrieu (2007), Buckland (2001), Castaldi (2006), Desmond (1993), Djebbari (2011), Edmondson (2001), Fair (1996), Foley (2001), Gibert (2007), Giurchescu (2001), Nahachewsky (2001), Quigley (2001), Reed (1998) and Shay (1999; 2001) are just a part of the large research community that has centered the debate on folklore dance forms and on their symbolic and political power.

This study joins in that academic tradition, as it focuses on the content and status of social and political practices grouped under the appellation *cultural dances of Kenya*. These are defined as a set of traditional practices reinvented and re-contextualized for a stage experience and a contemporary social use. The (re)invention of these practices is ongoing, as we consider dance itself as a performance constantly recreated by the materiality of moving bodies, and dance heritage not in terms of finished products, but from the viewpoint of processes. Heritage, “a new mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past,” as defined by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1995), adds value to practices, in our case dances, which are no longer viable and ensures their survival.

Thus, our analysis puts an emphasis on the identification of heritage production processes at the local level, while trying to understand the relationship that these empirical procedures have with the national identity debates that continue to agitate Kenya since Independence in 1963 up to present day. In a comparative approach, choreographic products, their creators and the strategies they use, are considered from the perspective of a continuous movement between the local and the national—levels often conceptualized in opposition, but in reality interdependent. This prolonged comparison is rooted in a previous study of the national dance troupe repertoire (Kiiru, 2014), accompanied by the analyses of national policies and institutions relating to traditional music/dance, as well as by ethnographic inquiry in the field in selected regions of the country. It relies on the idea that “vernacular folklore and staged folklore exist in indivisible and unbroken continuity” (Giurchescu 2001, 117) and examines the hypothesis of mutual influence between local dance vocabularies and staging strategies and their national counterparts.

The history of traditional dance practices in Kenya is characterized by a series of significant oscillations in the degree of their visibility. This fact results, in the first place, from the particular historical context of a settlement colony<sup>1</sup> that Kenya was, where “indigenous” dances and music were prohibited or strictly controlled. Historically linked to questions of power, local dances were seen as a direct threat to the political and moral order in the colony. Result of a long period of repression, dances seemed to have almost completely disappeared in some parts of Kenya. Since Independence, their status and presence on the national and the local scene fluctuated, while the content of Kenyan dance heritage and the representations it reflects have, on several occasions, been reformulated to correspond to the political issues of the moment. At the same time, local populations seemed to be experiencing a form of discomfort concerning these practices that the Christian churches condemned for decades.

However, corresponding to the cyclic nature of cultural reflexivity (Nahachewsky, 2001), a renewed enthusiasm for traditional dances and other cultural practices can be noted in Kenya in recent years, a fact connected, among others, to the political and security situation. Since the post-election violence of 2007-2008 and the crisis it caused, the national folklore is seen as a potential catalyst for the process of National Reconciliation, and cultural dances as a privileged medium to convey messages of national unity and a call for peace.

Before we proceed to introduce the topic of this paper, we owe the readership a brief reflection on the terminology used. Although we have offered our definition of the ensemble of practices at the core of our study, one might ask the question of *why call them “cultural dances of Kenya.”* It is important to note here that the term itself was reported from interviews from the field, notably with institution representatives, as well as with artists and practitioners. We have found it pertinent not only because of the problematic nature of alternative terms, including traditional, indigenous, and folkloric, but equally because of its reference to the notion of “culture.” In the discourse of our informants “culture” is opposed to “tradition” since, according to T.O. Bwire, Production Manager of Bomas of Kenya (national ethnographic museum and dance troupe), it describes better the dynamic and evolving character of the practices in question. Culture is ever growing, whereas tradition is static. Although this contrast between the two notions does not correspond to their academic definition tentatives, it reflects the reality of the milieu in which we investigate. Additionally, in the competitive festivals context, it corresponds to the exact nomenclature of dance competition categories—“cultural dance” and “creative cultural dance”—that we shall discuss later in the paper.

In the course of our research into traditional dance practices in Kenya, started in 2011, school competitions in music and dance emerged very early as an important vector in terms of constitution and popularization of these practices. With more than 7,000 presentations performed for 11 days in 440 categories by approximately 97,000 students<sup>2</sup> (Orido 2011), these competitions emanating from public institutions, receive impressive attendance and benefit from significant media coverage.<sup>3</sup> A special place is given to the dance categories whose pieces last between 5 and 15 minutes (depending on the festival in question) and attract many participants and spectators. In the premises of a national school selected each year to host the event, we thus encounter a strikingly large number of groups of youths, immersed in a state of stress and intense emotions at the time of their performance and of the adjudicators’ deliberation. The commotion in the school yard that serves as a backstage, the background sounds of different musical styles as groups practice their performance to come, the visual mixture of various colorful costumes and the enthusiasm and energy of performance inspired ethnographic and artistic interest. In front of us was undoubtedly a fertile ethnographic field and we decided to continue our observations, as well as to further develop them through participation in competitive festivals.

This was made possible in 2014, when we integrated a group of consultants/trainers preparing a secondary school for the National Drama Festival<sup>4</sup> and in 2015 and 2016, when we joined local folk groups in rehearsal and in stage performance at the Ministry of Culture’s competitive festival—Kenya Music Festival.<sup>5</sup> This article is the fruit of analysis of data collected primarily through these occasions of participatory observation, but also through the study of video and photograph archives, official policy documents and publications and a series of interviews conducted with actors of the competitive festival structure (festival administrators, several adjudicators, consultants and choreographers, Ministry of Culture representatives at both national





Photo 1: Saint Phillip’s Mukomari Girls Secondary School students on stage performing a cultural creative *isukuti* dance at the county competitions of the National Drama Festival in 2014.

and county levels, students themselves, etc.).

Before continuing, we would like to mention here that what we refer to as “national competitive festivals” and/or “competitive festival system” consists of three specific annual events, which are institutionalized and regulated by two national ministries. The National Drama Festival and the National Music Festival are competitive institutions hosted by the Ministry of Education. They are therefore organized around the yearly school calendar as their participants are pupils and student of different levels—from primary schools to universities and colleges. The Kenya Music Festival, on the other hand, is hosted by the Ministry of Culture and its lower level administrative units.<sup>6</sup> It brings together amateur, semi-professional and professional folk music and dance groups on an annual basis, but follows a more flexible calendar. Although the three are neither identical nor aim at the same participants, we believe they repose on the same premises. Originally, they all developed from one ancestor: the Kenya Music Festival introduced in 1927 by European settlers organized into music amateur clubs. School children and students used to participate alongside adult performers until the mid-

1960s when a festival dedicated exclusively to educational purposes was formed.

It is also relevant to comment briefly on the genres designation, as dance features in both the music- and the drama-labelled festivals, yet does not possess a festival of its own. The popularly-known fact that dance is conceived as an independent reality in very few non-Western cultures, translates, within the Kenyan context, by the term *ngoma*. This cultural notion, and the corresponding Kiswahili term, corresponds to a vision of music and dance, enhanced with elements of theatrical performance, as one coherent and inseparable whole. Recurrent in the East African region, *ngoma* is a term which can have different meanings. We can assume that the initial meaning was the designation of a particular percussive instrument, then, by extension, it evolved to designate either a particular ethnic music/dance, or a musical/dance event, and, finally, music and dance in a broad sense of the word. Yet the linguistic path might have followed the opposite direction, from generality to particular instrument designation.

Considering the decisive role these festivals organized by government institutions play in the gradual construction of dance heritage, it should be recognized that the competitive occasions of music and dance performance are not a novelty introduced by the state. The first section of this article will demonstrate the historical consistency of competitive musical and choreographic practices in East Africa with special reference to the pre-colonial social context and the British colonial administration's subsequent input.

The second section will focus on the institutionalization of competitive festivals within the context of independent Kenya and discuss their relationship with both the educational system and the wider music/dance policies, as well as to nation building. The third section will evoke and interpret the adjudication criteria in competitive festivals, discuss the specific notion of "authenticity" they rely on and compare the two complementary yet discursively opposing national festivals. Lastly, in the fourth section we shall introduce some of our conclusions on the impacts these festivals have had on traditional dance products and conceptions in contemporary Kenya.

### **Dance and music in East Africa: A Tradition of Competiveness**

In his 1975 seminal work in East African ethnomusicology, *Dance and Society in East Africa: The Beni Ngoma*, the historian Terence Ranger defines the *Beni* associations and their competitive practice as musical and social products of cultural contact. However, despite their strong tendency to imitate European manners and customs, Ranger considers the *Beni* deeply rooted in pre-colonial dance and its competitive modes. When the coastal Swahili population encountered the Europeans, they gradually appropriated the signs and symbols of European military power and began to use it in their previously existent music and dances competitions. At the source of the revolutionary work on the invention of tradition the historian pursued with Eric Hobsbawm (1983), this research has profoundly influenced subsequent studies in the region.

The centrality of associative competitions in music and dance is confirmed and detailed in the collective work edited in 2000 by Gunderson and Bartz. Apart from the search for historical origins of the widespread practice of *Beni* ensembles, a number of authors now propose different approaches to ritual events involving musical and choreographic practices of a competitive nature. The designation used—“competitive *ngoma*”—refers to “a musical setting where drum, song, and dance groups compete before an audience, as entertainment” (Gunderson 2000, 11). However, pure entertainment was not the only driving force behind these performances. Their widespread and historical consistency reveal a social efficiency of competitive practices inherent to the functioning of traditional societies of East Africa.

Different forms of competitions served in the past as social equalizers, consolidators of communities, and identity producers. Through the process of staging internal conflicts of a given society, these competitive events allowed questioning of the existing social order and facilitated the overcoming of differences and the reconciliation of “social classes.” They also promoted the identification of individuals with the group and favored cooperation. These competitive events were widespread in East Africa, where traditional society was characteristically organized into age sets (Peatrik, 1995). A well-known example is that of warriors, where the lives of men of that status were filled with music and dance as educational medium and as vector of a certain esprit de corps essential for combat and war (Hanna, 1977). Internal antagonisms between members of the same age group as well as those between groups, were staged in the form of competitions in the ability to sing, play an instrument and especially dance. The prime example of Masaai warriors and their jumping dance is not an exception. Several warrior communities across Africa used dance as a preferred form of expression; a dance that often follows an aesthetic logic of verticality: the Samburu (Spencer, 1985), the Fulani (Lassibille, 2004), the Tuaregs (Djebbari, 2012), etc. In these demonstrative performances, the most skilled warrior is considered the one who jumps the highest; in other words, whoever was the best dancer and singer was often made the age group’s leader (Marmone, forthcoming).

Although the pacification process during the colonial period, had partially mitigated the need for war dances as physical and psychological preparation for combat, their benefit and functionality for the local populations under foreign rule converted into a form of assertion of traditional independence and of symbolic resistance. Thus, festive gatherings or rituals, which were also opportunities for dance and song sessions, were often judged by the colonial authorities as dangerous and conducive to riot. The administration forbade them and/or controlled them by reducing their duration and their attendance, leading progressively to a very elaborate section in the native control regulations. As stated, for example, by the Chief Native Commissioner G.V. Maxwell (1926):

...I hereby declare that any headman may from time to time issue orders to be obeyed by the natives residing within the local limits of his jurisdiction prohibiting or restricting excessive dancing by natives or the public performance of any native dance of indecent or immoral character or of such nature that it is likely to lead to immorality

or a breach of the peace and determining the hours within which, the place or places at which, and the conditions under which any native dance may be publicly performed. (Maxwell 1926)

However, towards the end of the colonial period, we can note proof of early professional associations of music and dance in the colony, a clear reflection of evolving attitudes towards indigenous cultural expressions. These groups are mentioned in documents referring to their movements around the territory of the colony (and even outside it), where they perform on stages of festivals and agricultural or commercial fairs. At times, they are also hired for private parties by the settlers and recruited on occasions of tourists' safari visits to the colony. We argue that, after a long period of regulation and prohibition, which undoubtedly had an adverse impact on traditional music and dance practices in Kenya, the colonial administration gradually pushed for the creation of a Kenyan folklore and laid the foundation of cultural tourism. The substrate of the set of practices represented under the name of *cultural dances of Kenya* owes its origin to the colonial enterprises of staging and heritagisation of communal ("native") dances of different communities of the country, a process that began in the 1950s. And one of the early components of this process was built on a competitive note.

"African Tribal Dance competitions" were proliferate in most districts of the colony in the mid-1950s, while the earliest found record of efforts to organize an "All Kenya" competition that would bring together teams of dancers from different communities dates from 1960. The African Cabinet of Business and Entertainment states, concerning a competition to be held in their organization in Nairobi on October 9<sup>th</sup> 1960 that:

...such dancing functions should receive the greatest measure of support so that we may foster African culture and keep alive the Traditional dances of all tribes; to present to all races and tribes in Kenya and to overseas visitors a true picture of African Tribal Dress and Dancing. By doing so we hope that we may at least add to the standard of Kenya economics through such social activities whilst trying to make some of our people refrain from politics, worries, use of violence, etc. (Githuku 1960)

Even though contemporary national competitive festivals refer to 1927 as the date of their establishment, it is within this historical context of the end of colonial period that we can retrace the emergence of a form similar to their current one. According to Ogot, "the festival started in 1927 as a private organization which catered solely for the Europeans living in Kenya" (1995, 227). The collective participation of local populations awaited for the inclusion of the "African Folk Song" category in the 1950s, a category "whose prescriptions were outlined by the then Colonial music and drama Officer, Graham Hyslop" (Kidula 2015, 1). The educational work, research, composition and publication of this British musicologist has had a crucial impact in the region. Dedicated to the promotion of a musical syncretism that would join African and European sensibilities, Hyslop considered that festivals offer "... a great stimulus to music making and a rise in standards of performance" (Hyslop 1971, 21).

His writings confirm that the transfer of competitive elements from pre-colonial



traditional music into the framework of institutional festivals began as early as the 1940s and that he himself was at the source of this initiative.

Support for Hyslop's vision of an annual syncretic music festival using African and British folk songs grew, until by 1949 competitions in all the provinces were being held. [...] On the strength of the success of the initial festivals, Hyslop went on to become the country's Drama and Music Officer, a position which he held up to 1977. His policies regarding national competitive festivals in Kenya had a marked impact on Tanzanian practices as well. (Gunderson 1999, quoted by Bartz 2000, 427)

Some of Hyslop's official duties included: "(1) Organisation of Music Courses...; (2) Choice of music for festivals; (3) Adjudication at festivals; [and] (4) Development and recording of African Music..." (Buttery 1957), as the colonial government expresses its' wish to "...develop and revive that zest and enjoyment for life which was such a feature in what might be called the old Africa and which is unfortunately now tending to disappear. It is feared moreover that if it is allowed to disappear society will inevitably suffer" (Ibid.).

The historical emergence of national competitive festivals is additionally clarified by the characteristic continuity of a great number of institutions and usages imported from the colonial Empire into the new Independent State, which in 1963 became Kenya. The educational system reproduces the specific competitive modes of the British model, wherein competition is an essential principle rooted in both national and private education. A final national examination system (KCPE and KCSE<sup>8</sup>) creates ranking lists and encourages students to compete for the best possible results, in order to ensure a place in a better, often more costly, school. According to our surveys among stakeholders, some of the extra-curriculum activities are gradually gaining importance in this competitive system. Trophies and good results obtained in national competitive festivals are a source of esteem for institutions of any level of education and have an impact on their overall placement in the public eye. Therefore, "all schools will have to up their game"<sup>9</sup> and make the necessary efforts in order to not only participate in drama and music competitions organized by the Ministry of Education, but also achieve high results. Since, the better the overall ranking of a school, the more candidates it will receive in the following generation, the higher the fees structure it can implement, etc.

The importance and influence of competitive festivals seems to conflict with the extra-curricular status of music and dance in Kenya; they are currently an optional component of the national curriculum. In practice, this translates into music being offered as a separate subject in a small number of schools, for financial and logistic reasons. Interestingly, whether incorporated in the music or the physical education national syllabus, music and dance sections do not bypass the important competitive festivals reality. Festivals are present in the program as a skill to develop and as an activity to participate in. For example, the primary teachers' education syllabus practicals in music include: "learning new traditional folk songs suitable for festival purposes" and "acquaintance with organization of Music festivals and adjudication"

(Ministry of Education, Primary Teacher Education Syllabus 1994, 259).

Finally, the history of presence of these artistic practices in the national education curriculum reflects the variability of government's cultural policies and the changing political expectations of them. Despite this, the National Drama Festival and the National Music Festival continue to grow each year, not only in terms of number of participants, but also in the intensity of competition and rivalry between different schools, in the complexity of presented stage products, the financial rewards for consultants, the time and energy invested by schools at all levels in preparation and competition.

### **Institutionalization: National Education Policy, Music and Dance**

After Independence the country suffered from the lack of an official cultural policy. Although the first president Jomo Kenyatta, who received training in anthropology, proclaimed himself defender of traditional artistic practices, all attempts to establish a national cultural policy and corresponding institutions seem to have been doomed to failure. Simultaneously, another government agency, the National Committee on Educational Objectives and Policies, in a 1976 report denounced the education system, which would have acted in the past as an agent of alienation of Kenyans from their own culture, and proposed reforms that would carry out the necessary *corrections*. One of the proposed measures was to “adopt various ethnically based practices as part of a national culture” and “integrate traditional practices with modern scientific and technological developments” (Republic of Kenya 1976, quoted by Opondo 2000, 18).

In the 1980s, the government responded to the absence of a policy framework by the appointment of a commission for music which was, after delivering a highly influential report, promoted into a permanent unit of the Office of the President, *Permanent Presidential Music Commission* (PPMC). One of the main recommendations of the commission was to ensure the teaching of music at all school levels, and the other was to ensure that “opportunities for music and dance performance, such as concerts, organized festivals, (to) be abundant in all areas for the provision of entertainment and exposure to (our) cultural heritage during most times of the year”; and for it to be “... available to all people at minimal cost and effort” (PPMC 1984, viii).

The convergence of all these institutional recommendations made the Ministry of Education a key player in the implementation of new policies, a role it fulfills mainly through the preparation and implementation of curricula, but also through the organization of national music and drama festivals for educational institutions of all levels.

The competitive festivals system organized by the Kenyan Ministry of Education is highly elaborate. Just like any institution of the state, inspired as well by the old colonial administrative system, it develops gradually over four levels: sub-county level (corresponds to the former administrative units of districts), county level (corresponds to former provincial administrative units); regional level (counties resembled in eight regions); and finally the national level (the final level). This hierarchical framework

puts groups of students in annual competition in a multitude of categories and covers all educational levels from primary schools to universities. The accessibility, the geographical extent of the entire country and the annual fixed schedule which they follow, brand these competitive events as powerful weapons for the promotion and preservation of scenic arts in Kenya.

Moreover, their mission does not stop at that. They aspire to identify, promote, and develop the artistic potential and talent among youth by providing opportunities for expression and actualization (Ministry of Education 2014). As an example, the National Drama Festival Official Rules cite the following objectives:

- facilitate the development of artistic potential and talent among Kenyan - learners for holistic growth into responsible citizens;
- promote a sense of nationalism and patriotism;
- give the Kenyan learners an opportunity to acquire and develop positive - values, attitudes skills and competences;
- provide a forum for the Kenyan learners to share and enrich their artistic experiences as individual Kenyans, members of the East African and international communities;
- appreciate, develop, preserve and promote Kenya's positive diverse cultures;
- promote Kiswahili, English, Kenya Sign Language and indigenous languages of the people of Kenya;
- provide a forum for the Kenyan learners to interact and co-exist peacefully as members of one cohesive Kenyan family;
- develop the participants' eloquence in expressing their ideas and feelings so as to enable them communicate effectively and convincingly in their daily lives;
- educate and create awareness on topical and emerging issues affecting the society;
- provide an opportunity for edutainment and quality use of time;
- promote social equality and responsibility» (Ministry of Education 2000, 3-4).

These objectives evoke similar enterprises in West Africa and elsewhere in the world. The important role played by different folklore oriented institutions in the construction of national identity, the promotion of respect for cultural diversity and other values, was the subject of numerous studies (Cf. Kadende-Kaiser & Kaiser 1997; Shay 2002; Askew 2002; Castaldi 2006; Gibert 2007; Djebbari 2011; etc.). In the context of this study on the creation of Kenyan dance heritage, it is our desire to rather put the emphasis on choreographic strategies and staging mechanisms practiced by actors of competitive festivals. These will progressively reveal themselves in the following chapter, as we proceed with an analysis of assessment criteria of which they are a direct reflection. An interpretation of large-scale impacts competitive festivals have on

cultural dance practices and realities in contemporary Kenya (in the last chapter on circulations) will re-evoke some of the identity issues we chose not to elaborate on in this chapter.

### **Formatting Stage Products: Adjudicators and Adjudication Criteria**

In our initial survey on competitive festivals, in 2011 in Nakuru, the fourth largest city in Kenya situated in the former Rift Valley Province, first impressions were unquestionably strong. Instinctively, our attention was drawn to the explanatory comments given by the jury before proclaiming the winner in each category. Their remarks somehow condensed working conceptions on what Kenyans defined as cultural dances, and what are, in their eyes, the traits important to preserve and pass on to younger generations. Later, a thorough analysis of the evaluation task carried out by the jury members revealed marking schemes corresponding to a long list of pre-defined criteria, intended to objectify judgments. Although several attempts at codification have been made (e.g. Wambugu 2015, 121-126), the details on how each *item* (piece, presentation) should be judged are not openly explicit or written down, which ultimately allows each jury member to deploy a certain degree of subjectivity.

Within the National Drama Festival items are marked by a jury of three members, while at the National Music Festival by two jurors only. These individuals are mainly part of the teaching staff, but sometimes music, dance and/or theatre practitioners can be hired for the job. Jurors are selected based on their previous achievements in the field in question and form a decision making group whose influence extends outside the competitive events structure.

In a country where training in the art of choreography does not exist, government competitive festivals act as crucial recruitment grounds. Many administrators, officials, and practitioners in the music and dance field have earned their reputation as experts through their participation and their victories in competitive festivals. The group that makes up today's elite of the cultural dance milieu in government institutions followed, almost without exception, the same professional path: "simple" teachers passionate about music and dance have gained esteem because of consistent success at competitive festivals. This initially leads to their recruitment as a member of jury at competitions. From there they are gradually assimilated into the system and often recruited by a government institution, whether at local or national level. The factuality and the internal bond developed by participants of the national competitive festivals (administrators, adjudicators, trainers and consultants) is exemplified by the existence of a group entitled "I am a product of the Kenya National Drama Festival" on social media.<sup>10</sup>

But how exactly is a dance presented on stage at one of these competitive festivals judged? What are the factual criteria used by the jury? Before we give a response to these questions, we must specify the logic of presentation of ethnographic materials in the following paragraphs. The evaluation scheme referred to hereafter comes from the National Drama Festival, but it is presented within the context of continuous dialogue



with the National Music Festival's regulations, stressing the differences between the two. These differences between the two national competitive festivals are deemed crucial to the construction of dance heritage in contemporary Kenya. In a general manner, the two festivals represent two extremes, two visions of staging traditional dances.

The National Music Festival aims to be more conservative and promotes staging products that would be the closest possible to the "original" version of dances, that it to say to that of their traditional, communal context of execution. Still, this does not signify the search for "absolute authenticity," but takes into account the "forces of dynamism that have acted on the songs and dances as they are recontextualised for performance in different public arenas" (Omolo Ongati 2015, 63). There is talk of growth and innovation, as opposed to "fossilisation" (Ibid., 64) In this context, the first reconfigurations and content modifications of African folk songs and dances were prescribed by Graham Hyslop in the 1940s, and some of them are still retained (Omolo Ongati 2015). However, new guidelines developed throughout the years are considered to be more respective of the "communal aspect of performance that integrates music, dance and instruments as practiced within the African communities hence bringing out the African articulation" (Omolo Ongati 2015, 65). This comment illustrates a definition of authenticity in opposition to European ideas and values of performance and evokes Bendix's suggestion that the crucial question to ask is not so much *what is really authentic*, but *who needs authenticity and why*, as well as *how authenticity has been used by different groups* (Bendix 1997, 21).

Let us illustrate the conservative attitude of the National Music Festival with some comments from the jury: "Here we are trying to stick to the culture of the people you are try trying to represent ..."; "Stick to the cultural ..."; "Capture the idiom ..."; "We have seen some very foreign movements."; "Careful about the artefacts and cultural sounds and shouts. Let them be controlled."; "These were movements from Sakata."<sup>11</sup><sup>12</sup>; "Remember you are operating in a well spelled out idiom and it has its own demands...You need to understand the rhythmic behaviours; how do rhythms behave in that community....Don't impose yours, because when you impose yours, then it is no longer an arrangement, you are composing. It's a composition."<sup>13</sup>

The National Drama Festival is more open to creation and innovation, in all presented categories. This is manifest in the "creative" adjective added to the common name of the competitive dance category: thus, the *creative cultural dance* category coincides with what we would classify as "dramatized dance." This staging choice acclaimed by Kenyans consists of introducing a story or a problematized theme in the dance. In the words of our informants: "What you can say to make it simple is that it has to have drama infused in it. The thing is that you have to act and sing and in the process of acting make sure it's not a playact."<sup>14</sup>

George Orido, journalist with long experience of covering the national competitive festivals, as well as participating in them and adjudicating, explains the difference between the two festivals from an authenticity point of view: in the (National) Music Festival the performers "actually bring the traditional, authentic form that was done

many years ago," whereas in the Drama festival "they are not that authentic" because "if you keep to the authentic idiom, you will go nowhere."<sup>15</sup>

The conceptual difference between the two festivals is also reflected in the composition of the dance pieces: "In Drama they concentrate more on the patterns, they give you creativity, they tell you the formations were good, they'll tell you all those things. But there has to be no *masking*."<sup>16</sup> But in Music, masking is allowed because it's a traditional dance, those dances were danced that way."<sup>17</sup>

The existence of difficult adjudication criteria to be met in the Music Festival seems to result in fewer groups selecting to perform in the "cultural dance category." This fact is at the source of an increased popularity of the National Drama Festival, in which the criteria is considered to be freer. According to Orido, the Drama Festival is "more powerful in terms of educational message"<sup>18</sup> and easier to adjudicate on regardless of the ethnic category one presents the item in. It is "not something that is remote"; "it's not academic, it's real."<sup>19</sup>

The adjudication schema for *creative cultural dance* is a grid which consists of three main components. Each stage *item* is first evaluated on the theme of the dance (e.g. female circumcision) and the cultural idiom chosen for interpretation, namely the type of traditional music/dance. As observed in traditional music competition contexts elsewhere in the region, the theme/topic is of paramount importance, because it is used to convey a message the public is sensitive to. "The thematic concerns of the songs inform the communities about political, economic and socio-cultural issues..." (Cooke and Dokotum, in Gunderson and Barz 2000, 277). Some examples of themes staged within the dramatized dance experience include that of corruption, road accidents and public vehicles security, premature marriage for girls, FGM, alcoholism in the family, infidelity, lack of financial stability, issues of not meeting the school fees on time, tribalism and ethnic violence, etc. As we have identified earlier in our definition of cultural dances, the themes and the concerns they express correspond to contemporary problems within the national context, and are not specifically related to the community practices of the idiom (music/dance genre) the performers use.

The second element of evaluation is called choreography. This can account for a maximum of 80 out of 100 points and covers a much wider definition of the term than the one to which we are accustomed to. To demonstrate this, we wish to draw on the definition of choreography within the Music Festival context, explicated by Rose Omolo Ongati (2015):

Choreography is the act of designing and directing a dance sometimes also referred to as dance composition. The two most important levels of choreographic content are usually the choreographic structures and sequence of movements. The first involves those artistic features that characterise a particular dance genre or style making it recognisable to that culture e.g. the *otenga* (shoulder gyrations), squatting, etc. The second is the sequence in which these elements are structured into dance themes including the tempo, rhythm and effort with which they are executed, as well as the characteristic use of space, levels and formation modalities to be able to communicate logically. (Omolo Ongati 2015, 72)

“Choreography” is divided into four interrelated elements: music, the story, the costumes and décor, and dance. Regarding the “dance” criterion, the judges of the dramatic festival observe and mark the choice of movements and dance steps, the level of harmony and refinement in these movements, uniformity, adaptation of movements to the storyline (each dramatic action should be associated to a dance movement without it becoming mime). Finally, the most important is that “...whatever movement it is, it needs to be in the rhythm, in tune with the music.”<sup>20</sup> In terms of music, the jury examines the harmony of singers; soloists; the chorus; the aptness of instruments playing, etc.

The third marked element, entitled “achievement,” refers to the general impression each adjudicator had of the dance. This is probably the most subjective criterion. It is supposed to be based on each individual’s recognition of the flow between music, dance, and dramatized theme. Finally, the marking grid is, in the National Drama Festival, accompanied by another document—the *script*. During the preparations for competition, all the songs and the formations/patterns that will be presented on stage are “scripted.” In other words, they are written down, recorded in graphic form using simple diagrams and drawings, rather than a certified dance notation system. This significantly affects the process of adjudication, since the adjudicator is invited to refer to a written document and assess the degree of compliance with the choreographic intentions stated in it. Our informant considers this method of choreographic construction beneficial for the competing groups, since, in case of problems, the dancers can always rely on the mentioned document which records their initial plan. In his own words: “...don’t you think at the end of the day you will have better choreography then when they are not compelled...”<sup>21</sup>

Finally, the competitive institution that proclaims to be liberal and focused on creation, does not however manage to leave a lot of freedom to the interpreter. On the contrary, it creates a fixed and explicit framework, which, due to the annual repetition of national competitive festivals, provokes a return effect. The guidelines and comments, which are also distributed in print to participants at the end of each competition, govern their future choreographic work. Since it is considered that:

...the general aim of any festival is for the music groups to perform and be evaluated so that all the performers can learn from it. It is therefore imperative that performers get an opportunity to learn from the experience in order to improve their performances.  
(Wambugu 2015, 121)

This is the main channel through which competitive festivals have influenced traditional music and dance practices in Kenya. Annual repetition, which aspires to victory by adapting to adjudicators remarks and to the general evaluation criteria, transforms performances to artefacts (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998).

They become canonical. They take forms that are alien, if not antithetical, to how they are produced and experienced in their local setting, for with repeated exposure, cultural

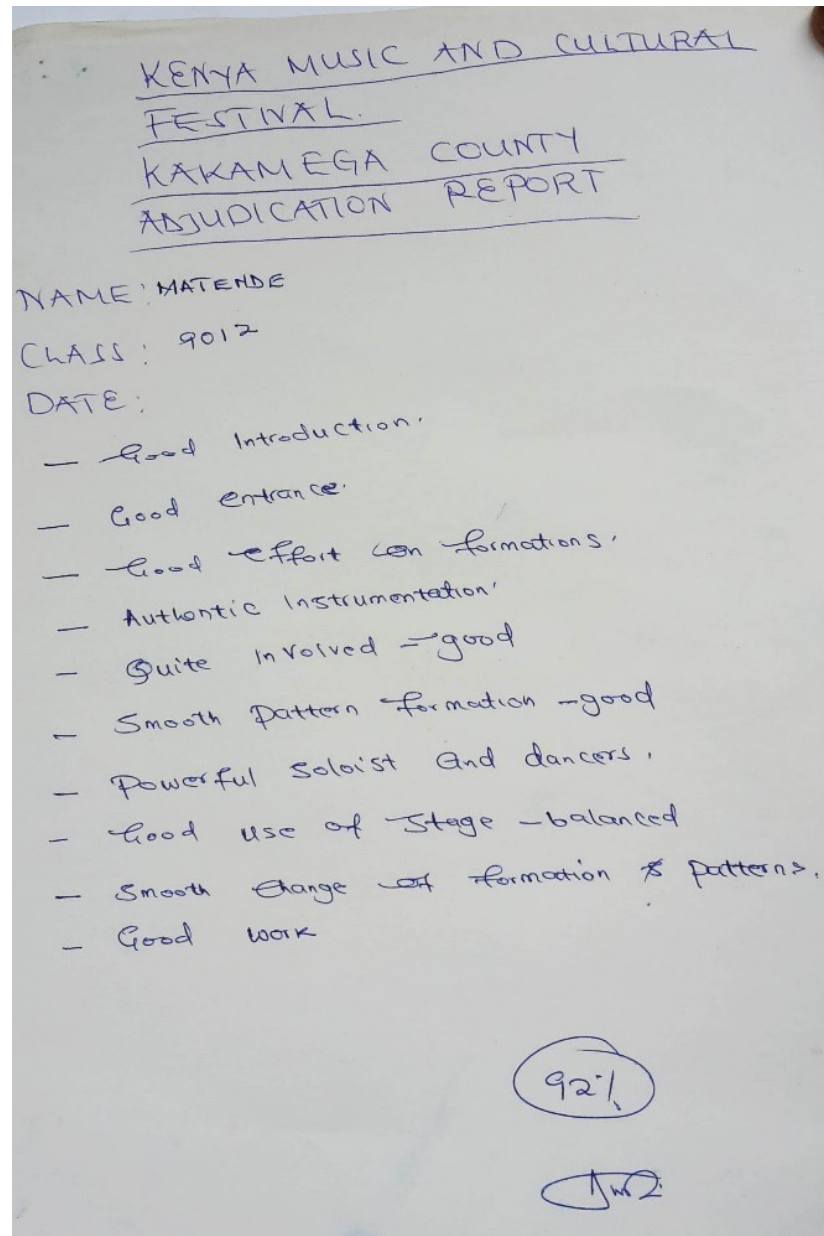


Photo 2: Adjudication comments sheet handed out to *Matende Cultural Isukuti Youth Group* at the end of the Kenya Music Festival 2015 finals held in Kisumu.

performances can become routinized and trivialized. The result may be events that have no clear analogue within the community from which they purportedly derive and that come to resemble one another more than that which they are intended to represent. (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 64)

The ambiguous effect national competitive festivals in Kenya have on the dances (and musical content) they (re)present will be detailed in the following chapter.

### **Circulations: the impact of competitive festivals on dance practices in Kenya**

The study of adjudicators' remarks and assessment criteria facilitates the understanding of the common aesthetic and the trends derived from these competitions, which are applied to cultural dances staging all over contemporary Kenya. Because over the years these guidelines have been exported outside the context of festivals and, some say, "interfere with cultural dances."<sup>22</sup> It is clear that "these guidelines created a new idiom and invented a tradition of performing African folk at the KMF space/stage" (Omolo Ongati 2015, 65), and beyond.

Authenticity, the leitmotif of these guidelines is accompanied by explicit advice on how to adequately stage a specific dance and on the most accurate manner to present the tradition of a particular community. Paradoxically, all of these advice inform us of a contemporary vision of the dances in question—of their stage version. To adapt a traditional dance for a stage, a number of changes must be made in terms of its' configuration in space and time, changes put in place primarily so that the viewer does not lose interest in the show. The most common of transformations are the following: reduction of space the dance occupies; decrease in the number of dancers; shortening of the duration of the dance performance; spatial separation of active performers from the passive audience; establishment of a frontal orientation (in order to face the audience); variations in the configuration of dancers on stage and in their movement trajectories; etc. (Dagan 1997, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, Gibert 2007).

A second facet of influence the national festivals have had on the practice of traditional dances is the appearance of adaptations characteristic of the competitive environment. The rivalry between competing groups pushes them to give their best, to excel, a strategy that often translates into excesses in musical or choreographic composition. Specifically, we noted that over the years the rhythm of certain dances was accelerated, as an unintentional by-product of the desire to win. Needless to state, this change in musicality mirrors in the rapidity of dance movements. And this musical enthusiasm can also lead to innovations in singing, especially in the solo parts.

A third visually striking impact is the transformation of costumes used for some traditional dances. This is implied by financial and logistic criteria, but also reflects changes in culture and mores. The materials necessary for the manufacture of certain costumes are expensive or difficult to obtain; for example, in many Kenyan communities, in communal ceremonies men used to wear hats and vests made of colobus monkey skin, an animal which is now a protected species. This type of



problem was solved by the gradual introduction of modern materials, a practice that has been accepted by most contemporary folk groups. The example of *isukuti* dance of the Luhya community is illustrative: sisal skirts were gradually replaced with textile flounced skirts for women, and trousers and shirts with ruffles on the sides for men.

Another explicitly cited reason for certain costume transformations is one of a “moral” nature: avoiding excessive nudity. “You do not show people your undergarments ... My God, we are Africans, so let us be decent.”<sup>23</sup> Decency and Christian values are at the source of lengthening of skirts, addition of ruffles and pieces of material at any zone judged inappropriate to expose. Once all these reasons were combined, dance costumes were subject to a certain degree of simplification and codification. An interesting reflection of the codification process can be seen in the colors used for stage costumes by groups from different parts of the country.

Within the Kenyan setting, members of the audience have learnt to attach some colours of costumes to some communities for example the Masaai are usually in red, the Agikuyu in soft brown, Pokot in black, etc. Whenever they line up on stage to perform, members of the audience would automatically know the community represented from the costumes worn by the performer before they stage their performance. (Omolo Ongati 2015, 72)



Photo 3: Typical Agikuyu folk costumes worn by a female cultural dance group from Nyeri, Central Kenya at the Kenya Music Festival 2015 finals. Notice the head jewelry modifications (earrings tied with a head band), the white t-shirts they wear underneath the costume, the costume material and ornaments and the characteristic brown color that replaces the original leather material.

Finally, the constant quest for innovation and originality, that each group pursues in order to distinguish itself from its rivals, frequently leads to the introduction of foreign elements in the dance vocabulary, borrowed from "African popular dance" (in particular the Congolese rumba, referred to in Kenya as *lingala*) or styles of "international dance" (for example, elements inspired by African American music videos).

In short, scenic products of national competitive festivals reveal, like many heritage enterprises, a tension between two poles: the wish to "change nothing" so as to "stay close to what used to be done" and the idea of a need to "take the audience into consideration and to please it", which implies change (Gibert 2007). To this opposition is added the powerful catalyst of rivalry which causes various changes within the musical substrate. The combination of conservative strategies for tradition safeguarding with modern choreographic mechanisms and innovations by a competitive framework gives birth to a new aesthetic and to a specific dance vocabulary that has been incorporated by practitioners and replicated in other dance situations and contexts. Their echoes are easily noted in the dance vocabulary and stage strategies of folklore groups on different levels, both local and national, as well as both rural and urban based ones. Let us draw here on examples from two regions of Kenya, two dance genres belonging to two communities: *isukuti* dance of the Isukha and Idakho Luhya communities<sup>24</sup> in Western Kenya and *gonda* dance of the Giriama Mijikenda community<sup>25</sup> in the coastal region and coastal hinterland.

If one watches several performances of Matende Cultural Isukuti Youth group, a locally based folk group from Kakamega town, he/she will note a consistency in the level of choreographic elaboration (patterns, sequences and design) as well as in the apparent quest for accuracy and uniformity. Whether they are performing at a national public celebration in Nairobi, at a home-coming event for a victorious local politician, or for a commercial event (commissioned by a supermarket for the opening of a new branch), there is a certain quality to their style of performance, a choreographic intent that does not vary. Even when the spatial setting and the social context of the occasion, notably a local funeral, do not allow for elaborate formations, patterns and uniformity, they retain the idea, the intent of it in the way they dance. They are subsequent winner of the Kenya Music Festival and a favorite group of the county government of Kakamega. On the other hand, a recent experience at the Kilifi county Kenya Music Festival levels held at the Takaye social hall (a village near Malindi town) confirmed our hypothesis. The group we had been dancing with in the context of our inquiries on *gonda* dance was not selected to proceed to the nationals. The jury indicated that, although their originality and authenticity was appreciated, they had lacked stage presence and their "item" did not correspond to some of the festivals predetermined conditions. Consequently, the group leaders started discussing adaptations to their usual repertoire and planning for next year's participation in the competitive festival in question.

At the same time, the aesthetic and technical guidelines provided by adjudicators leave their mark on individual dance skills, as both (semi-) professional dancers and amateurs who take the ritual stage center for the pure love of dance, have almost

without exception gone through the national competitive festivals system in their school education years. Eventually, the two parallel traditions—dance in the field and dance on stage—“approach one another in the use of ‘authentic’ elements found in the choreographic output of the professional companies as well as in the degree of theatricalization found in ‘traditional’ performances” (Shay 1999, 31).

The Kenyan dance heritage is in a permanent adjustment process through which multiple stakeholders (individuals, groups, communities and institutions) interact within a complex network that they themselves contribute to knit. National competitive festivals are important nodes in that network. They represent both a physical space for demonstration and creation of heritage products and a symbolic space of their legitimization and their dissemination. In them products are formatted and put in motion in a particular way, and the entire system of circulation and exchange finds renewed energy therein. Fruit of an institutional decision, the competitive system appears to be self-sustaining as carried by the civil society. In this, it is representative of a mode of operation typical of contemporary Kenya.

Although the official design of the festivals aims to showcase the music and the dance from all regions of the country, leaving the competitors with a free choice of dances they wish to stage, our observations show that schools pick, almost without exception,<sup>26</sup> on a dance of the majority population in their home regions. In the case of exceptions, comments and remarks from other groups and participants can be harsh, as they mention “adulterated” or “fake” e.g. *isukuti*. In that sense, “the performers at the festival are to be those to whom the arts ‘belong’ by virtue of their having been acquired in a traditional manner and setting, that is, by insiders from insiders—by descent” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 75). As suggested by various studies, descent still plays a decisive role in our formulations of heritage. Thus, the journey through the nation festival of a specific school or folk group, their victories and failures become representative not only of their school (at the county level), but also of their ethnic tradition (at the regional and national level). In this primary sense of geographical circulation, competitive festivals offer different populations of Kenya the opportunity to take their dance traditions on a journey, to present them on the national stage.

They also promote the exchange of knowledge and of dance materials between young people from different regions, and in some cases, these exchanges develop into musical and choreographic loans that leave a permanent mark on the traditions in contact. The National Drama Festival with the creative cultural dance category is especially favorable for ethnic styles blending, since it “allows you to go out there and bring in all those forms.”<sup>27</sup> Certain stage products bring together elements from different ethnic traditions as a means of achieving creativity: “In drama now you have a Kikuyu cultural dance, but the movements and even the tunes is Luhya or Luo... The words, the lyrics are Kikuyu but the tune is Luo, and even the movement is Luhya or Luo.”<sup>28</sup> Others incorporate contemporary popular music tunes, at times in Kiswahili, with traditional dance movements.

These unusual arrangements are encouraged, as can be seen in the official school syllabi, which state pupils should practice:



“...innovating dances in various traditional styles, combining different skills they have learnt. For example, introducing the rhythms and movements of a Luhya dance into a Kikuyu dance; creating a dance in a Tanzanian style to illustrate ‘ujamaa’, or using the steps for a Scottish dance to make a new dance, etc.” (K.I.E., Psychical Education Syllabus for Upper Primary 2001, 133).

Therefore, “cross-fertilization” becomes an integral part of the dramatized cultural dances spirit. In line with this, we can also talk of encounters between various body techniques and of a mixing of corporealities, which gradually produce a consensus on the body movements that are “truly Kenyan” and even “African.”

Besides the mobility of actors and products, we believe these festivals effectively facilitate the circulation of categories and models. Thus, the tradition of dramatizing cultural dances is found in other heritage institutions (including the national dance troupe of Bomas of Kenya). Dramatized dances and their codes have had a profound influence on the definition of Kenyan cultural dances in general. Their way of occupying the stage, of associating songs of a musical genre, of problematizing current social and political issues are now part of the heritage knowledge of all stakeholders. We talk here of the effect that competitive festivals have had on the institutionalization of dances, but also on the modes of their existence in Kenya.

Thus, the symbolic recognition a local dance obtains through successive victories in competitive festivals represents an essential point on its journey to access the ensemble of practices designated as Kenyan dance heritage. This is due not only to the dissemination of previously unknown (or unfamiliar) traditions to a wider audience, but also to the opportunity to attract attention of government authorities. Access to heritage designation for dancing traditions passes through the network of key stakeholders of the competitive festivals. The decision making network in the field of promoting cultural dances is closely linked to these festivals, since the same people who adjudicate in the festivals (and/or serve as festival administrators) are later integrated into government offices at different levels.

In this context, it is interesting to note the path of *isukuti* dance of Isukha and Idakho Luhya communities, which was recently (in November 2014) inscribed on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. The origin of this initiative and the research that led to the constitution of the nomination file, lead us back to the same key actors and reveal the importance of political ties and ethnic favoritism in the world of dance heritage Kenya. At the same time, the UNESCO nomination file’s reference to “commercially oriented *isukuti* performances” (UNESCO 2014, 6), indicates the complexity and the fuzziness of the national government’s authenticity concept, as well as its readiness to conform to international discourse tendencies and categories in order to gain access to a certain status for cultural practices, and especially to the accompanying financial support. In fact, our field experience demonstrates that *isukuti* is far from being extinct or in danger of extinction. It is very much present in the local populations’ rituals and communal celebrations, as much as it is prominent

on the national folklore stage. This brings us back to the importance of the competitive festival system.

We believe that *isukuti* dance owes its popularity and support largely to its success at national festivals, which it has been dominating for decades. Our informants confirm this observation and elaborate further on the categorization of ethnic styles in competitive festivals:

Initially (in the 1970s and 1980s) in the dance category was, everybody just came... And you know what happened, it was either a Luhya or a Luo dance that won. And everybody felt so bad. Do you mean these other cultures don't have dances that can win...It is that concern, people started breaking into categories.<sup>29</sup>

The reasons behind this supremacy is the nature of dance rhythms and movements: "it's cause of the intensity and the level of competition it brought (even) at the festivals."<sup>30</sup> The Luhya and Luo dances are specifically favorable for the stage experience and for a competition "because they are vigorous, they're energetic, so they carry the moment with cheer power."<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, the competitive festivals are experienced by their participants and by the public as major popular entertainment. At the end of the day, the staging of differences and the process of putting these differences into competition produce a special kind of cooperation and of coexistence that strengthens communities as it creates links between them. This makes the National Music Festival, the National Drama Festival, and the Kenya Music Festival some of the few secular institutions in Kenya in which ethnic identities are experienced non-antagonistically.

An inherent characteristic of dramatized staging of cultural dances makes them particularly suitable for the transmission of messages of pacification. For, "dramatized dances thrive on conflict and then conflict resolution."<sup>32</sup> A stage piece constructed according to this logic both reflects conflict and implies its condemnation, a way to promote the ideal of peace and harmony between groups and individuals. In the fragile political and geopolitical context of contemporary Kenya (post-election violence of 2008, International Criminal Court convocation of the country's leaders, the threat of terrorism, insecurity, politicized power problems, etc.), the role of Reconciliation attributed to these dances is well exploited by politicians who remain close to national festivals, as every year winners are given the honor to perform for the President and his entourage. This circulation between categories and social hierarchies is another typical feature of the competitive institutions.

Finally, another particularly interesting feature of the mobility integrated in the system of national competitive festivals is its latent character. The valorization, dissemination, heritage development, and pacification proceed without explicit claims. The influence that these festivals have on the set of practices designated as *cultural dances of Kenya* and more broadly on the Kenyan society seems unintentional and hardly commented.

## Conclusion

Although school competitions in music and dance are not unique to Kenya or East Africa, their origins, uses, and manifestations are particular. These competitions are an extension of former local practices, in the same way that the competitive education system and the institutional framework established by the British Empire coincided, though involuntarily, if not with the frames of pre-colonial societies, at least with the ethos of initiation and learning systems of age sets.

Yet, even if the history of Kenyan competitive festivals testifies to a continuity with the colonial era, they must be thought of as a creative response and not as a simple copy of colonial practices. When a cultural form is oppressed or eradicated, another emerges to fill its void. Finally, the colonial prohibition of “indigenous” dances conceals an interesting paradox. To be able to monitor and contain music and dance events more effectively, administrators encouraged their “staging.” It is a case of a particular use of spectacularization and folklorization, in which choreography is a tool of partial censorship. If the practice of certain dances had been reduced dramatically or completely stopped, still their folklorized or re-invented practice quickly took the baton.

Co-constructed by all these historical roots, competitive festivals organized by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture progressively became very elaborate structures that draw upon several aesthetic systems. The cohabitation of sometimes conflicting recommendations and evaluation criteria is not perceived in terms of tension, but described in the speech of informants as a homogeneous whole. “As it is within competitive...performances that seemingly conflicting aesthetic systems often demonstrate both rigidity and flexibility, formality and adaptability” (Barz in Gunderson & Barz 2000, 396-397).

The differences displayed between the two major festivals, the National Music Festival and the National Drama Festival, and their underlying implications, are not without consequences. Their explicitly different missions and standards are complementary and jointly provide for the objectives inherent to all heritage projects: to preserve and to safeguard but also to promote creation and development of performing arts. The combination of these two dimensions enables Kenyans to negotiate in one single dance form the process of affirmation of cultural specificity without sacrificing the national dimension of their identity (Gibert 2007). National competitive festivals fulfil their role in the formation and consolidation of imagined ethnic communities, as well as in the construction of the Kenyan nation. Competition and rivalry become an effective way to mediate conflict by staging it.

Locally and nationally, competitive festivals have had a profound influence on the vision Kenyans today have of their cultural dances. They forged a vision of dances appropriate for the stage experience; favored their separation from the original context of execution; trained Kenyans in the arts of staging and choreography; encouraged young people to pursue music and dance as a profession; and others. Their accessibility, geographical extent, and recurrence define them as key agents in the study of processes of diffusion and adaptation of the repertoire of dances that form the heritage designation *cultural dances of Kenya*, a topic that merits further investigation.

## Notes

- 1 The Colony and Protectorate of Kenya was officially established in 1920, after the territories of former East Africa Protectorate (also known as British East Africa) were annexed by Britain. Officially, the term “Colony of Kenya” referred to the interior lands, whereas the “Protectorate of Kenya” designated the 16 km coastal strip together with several islands which remained under the sovereignty of the Sultan of Zanzibar until Kenya’s Independence. The British system of indirect rule was introduced in the colony, together with a large number of White immigrants who settled in the central highlands attracted by fertile soil and good farming conditions. This presence of Europeans and their cohabitation with African populations (as well as with Asians – notably the economically and culturally influential Indian community) lead to particular attention to native’s customs and behaviors.
- 2 These numbers are from the 2011 National Music Festival finals held in Nakuru. The participation has since that time most likely risen.
- 3 After a certain editing delay, a selection of performances is also aired on national television.
- 4 In March 2014, we worked with a group of consultants, headed by the chief choreographer George Litswa (of the Department of Culture) in training a group of girls from St Philip’s Mukomari Secondary School in Kakamega County (Western Kenya) for the county level of the National Drama Festivals. We acted as a dance consultant for an *isukuti* creative cultural dance performance.
- 5 From October to November 2015, we incorporated a local folk group – *Matende Cultural Isukuti Youth Group*, and took part in daily rehearsals and the final stage competition at the county level of Kenya Music Festival held in Mumias (Western Kenya). The group won and proceeded to the nationals. In October 2016, the local folk group we had been conducting our research within the coast—*Charo Nyundo Gonda Dambala* from Gede, also participated in the county level of Kenya Music Festival. We, of course, joined them on stage.
- 6 Since the promulgation of a new constitution in 2010, Kenya has been going through an important political and administrative reform—Devolution. The implementation of devolution has presented many challenges and opportunities. This includes the formation of forty seven county governments as well as the subsequent transfer of functions, resources and responsibilities from the national government to the county governments. Culture is one of the functions that was devolved and this had direct consequences on the organization of all cultural events—Kenya Music Festival (KMF) included.
- 7 After Independence (1963), his position is renamed as “Organising Inspector of Music and Drama”.
- 8 Kenya Certificate of Primary Education and Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education.
- 9 Quote from interview with Miss Gladys Midecha Savala, National Drama and Music Festival Consultant, held in Nairobi on April 28<sup>th</sup> 2014.
- 10 Facebook group referred to can be accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/101451811231/> (last consulted on January 28<sup>th</sup> 2016)
- 11 Sakata is a popular music and dance television broadcast created by Citizen TV channel, which also takes the form of a competition between groups of young dancers from different urban areas in Kenya and East Africa.
- 12 The remarks quoted here for illustration are those made by Ms. Faith Mbote and a second unidentified adjudicator during National Music Festival’s finals (university level) held in Nakuru on August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2011.
- 13 This remark is a quote from those made by Mr. Khadambi, an adjudicator during Kenya

Music Festival finals held in Kisumu on November 25<sup>th</sup> 2015.

- 14 Quote from interview with Miss Gladys Midecha Savala, National Drama and Music Festival Consultant, held in Nairobi on April 28<sup>th</sup> 2014.
- 15 Quotes from interview with Mr. George Orido, reporter covering drama and music festivals for Standard newspaper, held in Nairobi on January 18<sup>th</sup> 2016.
- 16 The term masking is used here as a technical term in choreography and it refers to ways of positioning dancers on the stage. The placement of performers is such that performer 1 prevents the audience from seeing performer 2 - he hides/masks him.
- 17 Quote from interview with Miss Gladys Midecha Savala, National Drama and Music Festival Consultant, held in Nairobi on April 28<sup>th</sup> 2014.
- 18 Orido interview, January 18<sup>th</sup> 2016.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Quote from interview with Wycliff Indakwa Ombwayo, National Drama and Music Festival consultant and regional level administrator, also adjudicator at national levels, held on April 18<sup>th</sup> 2014 in Kakamega.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Quote from a remark made by Ms. Faith Mbote at the National Music Festival in Nakuru on August 2<sup>nd</sup> 2011.
- 24 The Luhya (or Luyia) are in numbers the second largest ethnic group in Kenya. This amalgam of Bantu populations, settled in what was in the colonial days referred to as North Kavirondo, named itself into existence through “a self-consciously creative process” (MacArthur 2013, 352) in the 1930s. The Isukha and the Idakho are two constituent groups of that entity, inhabiting predominantly the rural areas of Shinyalu and Ikolomani constituencies, not far from Kakamega town in Western Kenya.
- 25 The Mijikenda (literally translated as “Nine Towns”) are a group of nine related Bantu ethnic groups inhabiting the coast of Kenya, between the Sabaki and the Uмба rivers. The oral history, as well as some archaeological research, identifies their origins in Shungwaya and other parts of northern Somali coast, where from they were pushed down south by the Galla (Oromo) around the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Giriama are among the largest of the Mijikenda “houses” and inhabit the area bordered by the coastal cities of Mombasa and Malindi, and inland towns of Mariakani and Kaloleni.
- 26 Within this context, schools from the capital Nairobi and other major urban areas (Mombasa, Kisumu) are an exception and their choice of dance would make a pertinent case study.
- 27 George Orido interview, held in Nairobi on January 18<sup>th</sup> 2016.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Gladys Midecha, April 28<sup>th</sup> 2014.
- 31 Orido, January 18<sup>th</sup> 2016.
- 32 Quote from an interview with T.O. Bwire, Production Manager and choreographer of the national troupe—Harambee Dancers from Bomasa of Kenya, conducted on September 3<sup>rd</sup> 2012 in Nairobi.



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# The Role of Costuming in Two Pre-wedding Rituals for Women in Northern Scotland

Sheila M. Young  
Elphinstone Institute  
University of Aberdeen  
Scotland

## Abstract

*The blackening and the hen party are two pre-wedding rituals for women. The blackening has its roots in a feet washing ceremony, which although once widespread across Scotland is now generally found in rural areas in Northern Scotland. The hen party is a more recent urban phenomenon, enjoying unprecedented popularity. These two rites of passage appear to co-exist happily. Shukla (2005) notes that “successful transitions between life stages are not only socially relevant, they are personally significant milestones, visibly marked by a change in bodily presentation.” This paper will explore that “change in bodily presentation” by examining the role costume plays in the blackening and hen-party rituals. There is a huge variety in what the bride and her attendants wear, where the ritual dressing takes place, and at what point during the proceedings. I will show that the purpose of dress and adornment in each of these rituals is varied, from singling out the bride and making a statement, through to establishing group identity. Furthermore, the purposes have changed through time, significantly in the case of the hen party.*

## Setting the scene

This paper explores the role played by costume in two pre-wedding rituals practiced by women in Northern Scotland, the blackening and hen party, and how that role has changed since the 1940s. Costuming is just one of many significant elements, such as organisation and planning, journeying, games, eating and drinking, and gifting, in the two events that I explored as part of my doctoral research. While any of these would have been equally worthwhile, I focus on costuming, because, of all the elements examined, I believe that this has seen the greatest change in function, particularly in relation to the hen party. Although, the function of costuming has been discussed for life cycle rites of passage, such as the wedding (Charsley 1991; Montemurro 2006; Otnes and Pleck 2003), the role of subverted costuming at other rites of passage is under researched. The blackening ritual itself has largely been ignored by scholars until now, and I introduce the idea of the blackening materials as a type of costuming. In addition, I argue that *undress*, a feature of both the hen party and blackening, is also a form of costuming.

Before discussing the purpose of costuming in these two pre-wedding rituals, I offer a short description of both. The blackening takes place in the weeks running

up to the wedding and is planned secretly by those closest to the bride and groom. Great care is taken, not to alert them to the fact it is happening. The couple knows it will happen but they do not know exactly when. This adds to their anxiety. They might be blackened together or separately. If blackened alone, only her close female friends and relatives generally blacken the bride. If together, the company is mixed. The bride/couple is generally “kidnapped,” either from work or home, and often an elaborate scheme has been devised to tempt them out of their home, or to dupe them into believing they are doing something else. There is usually an element of chase as they are expected to try to escape. However, this is just part of the game; they are not expected to succeed. Once caught, they are usually taken to a public space and, to ensure they do not escape, often tied to an improvised pillory, or to each other. They may be given special clothes to wear or may be encouraged to change into old clothes. The blackening proper then begins as the participants begin to pour, throw or squirt litres of the vilest concoctions on top of them, including something sticky such as treacle, and something which sticks, such as feathers. The couple is generally left on display for a while so that passers-by can laugh at their misfortune. The couple then go home, have a shower, and then spend the rest of the evening relaxing and reliving the event with their friends.

The hen party also takes place in the weeks leading up to the wedding. While the bride generally has an input to where and when it will be, as well as who will be attending, there are always a few surprises thrown in that she does not know about, generally designed to embarrass her. The hen party can take place on an evening in a local city, a whole weekend, perhaps in another city in the UK, or a long weekend in a foreign resort. Each is unique and incredible creativity can be shown by some of the bridesmaids who plan the event. In its simplest form it will last one evening and will involve dressing up the bride, sharing a meal, drinking to excess, challenging the bride to lewd dares (generally with strangers), parading the bride to and between venues (pubs and clubs) and attracting attention by making a noise. If the hen party takes place over a longer period it will typically involve all the above but also several daytime activities, such as dance classes, making cocktails or having spa treatments.

The blackening has its roots in an earlier “feet washing” ceremony<sup>1</sup> (Young 2016a, 2016b), which, although once widespread across Scotland, is now generally found only in rural areas in Northern Scotland.<sup>2</sup> The hen party is a more recent, predominantly urban phenomenon, now enjoying unprecedented popularity. It is practiced throughout Scotland, and indeed throughout the western world, though under slightly different names.<sup>3</sup> There is nothing unique about the hen party, as celebrated in Northern Scotland;<sup>4</sup> the ritual is homogenous across the UK. While we might expect the blackening to diminish in popularity at the expense of the commodified hen party, there is no evidence to support this. These two rites of passage appear to be able to co-exist happily, with the same women taking part in both. Furthermore, it is not unusual for them to have more than one hen party or blackening.<sup>5</sup>

However, the rituals are very different. First, the hen party is generally a female only affair (the male equivalent is the stag party), whereas the blackening is celebrated

by both men and women, often together. Second, the hen party is ubiquitous; everyone, rural and urban dwellers alike, has a hen party, whereas the blackening is selective. In every village in Northern Scotland there are locals and non-locals (Insiders/ Outsiders).<sup>6</sup> The blackening is a ritual for locals (Insiders). Non-locals do not get blackened unless they are marrying a local. Related to this is the third difference, the hen party is volitional, the blackening is not. It is done *to* you. You cannot choose to be blackened. I should add, that while men in Scotland (and elsewhere in Britain) have been blackened, or tarred and feathered in various rituals for decades, it is only in Northern parts of rural Scotland that women are regularly blackened.

The hen (and stag party<sup>7</sup>), have received some attention from scholars from a variety of disciplines (Hellspong 1988; Tye, Powers 1998; Bennett 2004; Montemurro 2006; Knuts 2007). Costuming is discussed by each of these authors, but not in great depth, and with limited interpretation, and only Bennett looks specifically at the rituals as practiced in Scotland. However, the blackening has been largely ignored, save for recent articles by McEntire (2007), and Young (2016a, 2016b). Although it has been discussed within general works on Scottish traditions such as Gregor (1874, 1881), King (1993) Livingstone (1997) and especially Margaret Bennett (2004), little mention is made of the role of costuming.

Ethnographic data for this study were gathered over a two-year period from women who have attended and organized hen parties and blackenings. The field area was Northern Scotland. I collected around 100 accounts of the blackening and the hen party from women aged between 21 and 93. My contributors came from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds (school pupils, students, manual workers, professionals), as well as from a mix of rural and urban backgrounds. I conducted around 50 in-depth interviews lasting around an hour, which were recorded and transcribed, though many other accounts were gathered from casual conversations in the community, for example at bus stops, in shops, at the gym. I attended both a blackening and a hen party. Due to the sensitive nature of some of the information gathered in interviews, particularly about hen parties and initially at the interviewees' request, I decided to anonymize my contributors.<sup>8</sup>

Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992, 3) suggest that the term "costume" be reserved "for use in discussions of dress for theatre, folk or other festivals, ceremonies and rituals," since it indicates an "out-of-every-day" activity or social role. However, I would like to describe the type of costuming found at hen parties and blackenings as "*liminal costuming*," (i.e. costuming associated with a rite of passage) since this type of costuming subverts the normal rules of dress. For example, the *removal* of clothing, *undress*, is an important part of "liminal costuming." Dress scholars (Roach-Higgins and Eicher 1992; Shukla 2005; Lynch *et al* 2007) have focused on the putting on of clothing and other adornments when talking about dress, but the removal of clothing to a state of nudity or semi-nudity, in Western cultures, is just as valid. It also fits with Shukla's definition of body art as "aesthetic modification" of the body. The removal of clothing is the most extreme form of dress that we see at hen/stag parties and blackenings. I would suggest that rather than looking at undress simply from the

point of view of deviant behavior, it should also be looked on as a type of “liminal costuming.”

Like other areas of pre-wedding ritual, such as playing games, journeying and feasting, normal rules around costuming are not followed during liminal periods. As we will see, costumes worn at hen parties and blackenings subvert normal expectations of dress. In her study of Greek village dress, Linda Welters notes that, “Part of the charm of the special occasion attire was its elegance compared to everyday dress” (Welters 2007, 10). Although dress at hen parties and blackenings is “special occasion attire,” it is anything but elegant and it is designed to shock and/or amuse, rather than to charm. Costuming for the life cycle rituals of birth, marriage and death tends to be elegant or sombre, rather than shocking or amusing. There are a couple of exceptions to this. The first is costuming at the Möhippa (Swedish hen party), which Hellspong (1988) tells us involves a masked group of women, dressed as men (with false moustaches and wearing dark clothes), or dressed as little girls with ribbons in their hair, who lead a blindfold young girl in a mock bridal procession. Knuts (2007) brings Hellspong’s study up to contemporary times and tells us that the older mock-bride rituals have almost died out but that the hen party is in the ascendance, with sexy outfits being very popular. At the Finnish Poltis<sup>9</sup> the bride is dressed up as “provocative sinful” or “ugly, officious or ridiculous” (Åström 1989, 95). Another example is costuming at American bachelor parties, at which, Williams (1994) tells us, men are cross-dressed, feminized, and humiliated. Thurnell-Read (2011) states that one of the ways that the British stag tour experience is embodied is through dress. This is achieved through fancy- and coordinated-dress. Liminal costuming can also be seen at other rites of passage such as hazing (Bronner 2012a, 2012b; Allan and Madden 2008), and calendar customs such as Hallowe’en (McNeill n.d; Santino 1983), and also at festivals and carnivals (Abrahams and Bauman 1978; Driver 1991)

There is also plenty of evidence in the literature for “blacking up” rituals, such as guising, the Mummers Day Parade<sup>10</sup> in Padstow, Cornwall, and the (Coco)Nutters Dance<sup>11</sup> from Bacup, Lancashire (Buckland 1990). Further evidence is to be found at other “punishment” style rituals, such as rough music (Thompson 1992), tarring and feathering (Irvin 2003; Levy 2011), and at initiation rituals, such as marking the end of an apprenticeship. The apprentice coopers ritual, from Speyside in the north-east of Scotland, is a local example, still taking place today. When the apprentice coopers complete their training they are covered in gunge (pot ale, feathers, etc.), and are then put into a sherry barrel, and are rolled around the cooperage.<sup>12</sup> What these rituals share with the blackening is that the community collaborates to put the subject through a trial; in the case of tarring and feathering, it is because they have offended community norms. For hazing and initiation rituals, the initiate is moving from one status to another. What these authors do not suggest is that the blacking up is a form of costuming itself.

### **Liminal costuming at the hen party and the blackening**

“Dress up the hen. It’s your duty!” is the cry to the hen party organizers from hen party website, Hen Heaven,<sup>13</sup> as part of its accessories sales spiel. So is it a duty, or is it something the majority of women/hen party organizers are naturally inclined to do anyway? Women are said to enjoy dressing up, so it should come as no surprise that all of the 38 hen parties I studied, bar one, included dressing up. Furthermore, at hen parties lasting longer than an evening there were sometimes several changes of clothing for the bride and her hens. Indeed the majority of hen parties (20) involved one change of clothing, four engaged in two changes of clothing, and two had three changes of clothing. For example, for their weekend hen party, HP1 had to provide clothing for a Polka Dot themed evening on the Friday, followed by Burlesque outfits for a Dance class the following day, and then a Nerd theme outfit to go clubbing on the Saturday night. Costuming then, is an extremely important element of the hen party.

On first appearance it would seem that dress, in the conventional sense of the word, may or may not play a part in the blackening ritual. The blackening itself is not volitional, the desires and views of the bride are not taken into consideration, so some brides are given old clothes to change into, some are dressed as parody brides, and yet others are blackened in the clothes they are captured in.<sup>14</sup> However, if costuming means changing the appearance of an individual, then surely the concoction of products used, which many of my contributors termed “gunge,”<sup>15</sup> could be considered to be some kind of adornment or liminal costuming itself? The blackening materials single the bride out, mark her as “the special one”, and generally act a guise (as opposed to *disguise*). Certainly, she will have trouble removing this guise.

There is generally only one outfit for brides, if they are being dressed up to be blackened, that of parody bride. Brides at hen parties on the other hand can, and do wear all kinds of outfits. Adorning the bride with accessories was generally more common than clothing the bride. The dictionary definition of the term accessory is “items which add interest to and complete an outfit.” Props are also a common form of costuming, and rather than its usual definition, I would define it in this context as “a moveable, object separate from clothing and accessories which is used to add to the performance.” The most popular accessories were the sash, veil, tiara and L-plates.<sup>16</sup>

Although not a pre-requisite of a hen party, dressing up is an accepted part of the vast majority of hen parties today. Generally speaking, those who do not dress up do so to set themselves apart, to be different, or to distance themselves from the rest of the society. The bride is the focus of the dressing up, but it is increasingly common for all of the hens to engage in dressing up too. At the blackening only the bride is dressed up, though the blackeners are dressed in protective clothing.

In summary then, all blackenings include “adornment” by blackening materials, however not all brides are dressed in costumes before the blackening “adornment” is added. Although not a pre-requisite for the hen party, dress and adornment is extremely popular with groups of hens.





Figure 1. Illustrating the difference between these items in the bride's costume. The burlesque basque is the clothing, the sash, veil, and badge are the accessories and the inflatable man (unfixed, unattached) is the prop.

### **The purposes of liminal costuming at the hen party and the blackening**

What, then, is the purpose of dress and adornment at hen parties and blackenings? When I asked my contributors that question, I discovered, like Simon Bronner (2012a, xvi), that "often influences and consequences exist outside of their awareness." Only the first two purposes were identified by my contributors (emic), the rest were etic. Furthermore, the function depended on the role of the contributor; there were many more functions for the bride, than for her entourage. We will also see that, in some cases, these purposes have changed with time.

### **The functions of liminal costuming**

- To make the bride as filthy as possible
- For fun and amusement
- To ritualize the event

- To single out the bride for attention
- For functionality
- To embarrass the bride
- To communicate messages
- To attract the male/public gaze
- To enable licensed behavior
- To help the group to bond
- To memorialize the event
- To display class identity
- To contrast with the wedding day

### **To make the bride as filthy as possible/feel as ridiculous as possible**

[Leanne] I was in the shower for at least half an hour to an hour, because it took seven washes to get the stuff out of my hair. I wasn't bothered about bits being in my hair [...] I think it almost went worse when I added shampoo to it. It just became like a sticky mess and you think you'd put your head under and it would just rinse off but it didn't. [EI 2013. 073]<sup>17</sup>

and

[Jenna] You're never so glad to get a shower but [...] you can still smell it for weeks after especially when you're damp. [EI 2013. 076]

In the eyes of the blackeners, the main purpose of applying the gunge is to make the bride look as filthy as possible, and feel as disgusting as possible, for as long as possible, as these two accounts show.

At the hen party, the principal aim of liminal costuming is to make the bride look and feel ridiculous. This in turn gives the group great enjoyment.

### **For fun and amusement**

Jasmine had two hen parties, one in the UK, the other in Australia, where she was living at the time. Here she talks about an amusing incident related to dress at her Australian hen party:

[SY] What did you have to wear?

[Jasmine] [*laughter*]. It was a dress, like a short summer dress, and then there was a big sash that said, "Miss Eaglebay 2000" because we were staying in this house at Eaglebay.



And there was a tiara and I think I had this flyswatter that was the shape of Australia ... But it was quite amusing because we turned up, me dressed like this, and there was a table of American people sitting in the restaurant. And I guess most people would think, "Oh it's a hen party" and this American table [*laughter*] actually thought that I'd won some beauty contest, and was actually Miss Eaglebay, which was quite funny. Hilarious. [EI 2014:090]

The bride is not always made a mockery of and in some cases her wishes, regarding dress, were taken into consideration, as we can see here:

[Mandy] In the evening we want to dress up a bit. Pam [the bride] is very glammy and glitzy. So we thought there would be a little bit of a theme [*sparkly*] and we'll all sit down for dinner and that will be the main evening. [EI 2014: 089]

The chief reason for pillorying the bride at a blackening is so her friends, family, and often, the public, can laugh at her, as this account of Clare's second blackening illustrates:

[Clare] They tied us upsides down to a tree in the car park an' left us and they were goin' past us in their cars and jist laughin' and singin'. And we was left there for about half an hour til an hour I think and it was Sunday night and everyone was gaen past, tootin' their horns. [EI 2012: 025]

Dressing up was generally perceived to be an enjoyable activity, or it was seen as amusing. The principal reason, given by my contributors, for dressing up the bride at the hen party and the blackening, was simply for fun and "to have a laugh." Of course the question arises, fun and amusement for whom? There is dressing up and there is dressing up; dressing up to look good, in clothing of one's own choice, is an altogether different proposition to being dressed up in an embarrassing costume with the chief aim of being made to look ridiculous. The bride is frequently dressed up, to amuse and entertain both her inner circle (her entourage), and the outer circle (passersby).

### **To ritualize the event**

Dressing up is a way of ritualizing an event, of separating the extraordinary from the mundane. It is a frequent feature of a ritual or rite of passage (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1969; Driver 1991; Leeds-Hurwitz 2002). The principal reason is to mark the occasion as "special". Special clothes are set aside for special occasions. Shukla tells us that "successful transitions between life stages are not only socially relevant, they are personally significant milestones, visibly marked by a change in bodily presentation." This is so that the wearer feels that he/she is taking part in something special or sacred as well as the wearer realizes that she has reached a significant moment in her life. The costume also helps members of the community and the public to recognize this as a significant moment and, while urban living has led to an increasingly individualist society, it was clear during fieldwork that ordinary members of the public still acknowledged that the individual was marking a significant life cycle event. This



Figure 2. As figure 2 shows, the bride stands out very clearly through a combination of use of colour and accessories. The photo also illustrates how accessories and colour are used to single out the other members of the bridal party such as the bridesmaids.

acknowledgement could be as simple as a smile or a comment such as “good luck,” or there could be more verbal interaction with the bride.

### **To draw attention to the focus of the ritual, the bride-to-be**

I observed hen parties in Aberdeen, Edinburgh, and Liverpool. Admittedly, I had a trained eye, but I could spot a hen party, and most notably, the bride to be, from a considerable distance, and this was the intention of the costuming. Of the senses, sight and sound are most commonly employed to draw attention toward the bride, and to the event. You can see and hear them from afar. The tiara and veil, or the deely-boppers, raise the height of the bride and make her stand out from her entourage. The tiara and veil are frequently white or pink, and sparkly. Singling out the bride can also be achieved by the use of colour. HP11 wore team T-shirts. The bride’s T-shirt was white, the rest were black. Everyone had been told to bring a black skirt/trousers, apart from the bride who was told to wear white.

Thurnell-Read (2011), in his study of stag groups, remarked that the status of the stag was often shown by making him wear something distinguishable such as a pink (girly) T-shirt, while everyone else's was black. Having observed groups of stags out in the town, I would say that it is much more difficult to identify the groom within a group of stags; indeed when I approached groups of stags to talk to them I usually had to ask, "Which one is the groom?" The bride, on the other hand, is virtually always instantly identifiable. If we look ahead to dress at the wedding, we see that the groom, his best man and ushers generally wear identical clothing, whereas there can be no disputing who the bride is. Indeed, one of the most important rules for the bridesmaids is not to outshine the bride.

However, the bride does not always have to be dressed up to be identifiable.

[Alison]Well, she was the noisiest and the most visually [...] attractive girl. I just assumed because she was so extrovert and so blatantly sort of ...

[SY] So she didn't have a veil on her head [...] or a sash that said, "Bride"? [...]

[Alison]No, no [...] but quite soon ... because she sort of caught my eye [*laughter*] and I said, "Are you the bride?" And she said, "Oh yes." [*laughter*]

[EI 2013.079]

This contributor travelled by train next to a group of hens. The bride did not have any obvious accessories on to show that she was the bride, yet Alison knew immediately who she was. We can see here that there is something in the behaviour, and body language of the bride, that can single her out.

With the blackening, it is the covering of the bride with gunge and the very public manner in which that is done, which draws attention to the bride, rather than her clothing, because perhaps only half of all brides are dressed up at blackenings. Most blackenings are held in a public space, such as a village green, and/or the bride is transported round her community on the back of a truck, accompanied by the noise of tooting horns, shouting and singing, or the clanging of pots and pans. Many people stop to watch and smile, some transported back to their own blackening in years past, others with the uneasy feeling that the blackening lies ahead of them.

### **For functionality**

It would be inappropriate to turn up for a rock climbing class wearing high heels and a short skirt. Conversely, clothing which is practical for a rock climbing class would be inappropriate for a night out in the city. There were numerous accounts of clothing being functional at hen parties. Distinctions were also made between "special" clothes and "normal" clothes. "Normal" clothes were perhaps worn to go shopping or to relax in, while "special" clothes were needed for special activities.

Clothing can dictate where you can and cannot go.

[Freya] But when we went out on the Saturday night after we'd had the Naked Butler, we went to a bar and nightclub and they had specifically said that they didn't accept big, raucous hen parties dressed up, so in some ways it was quite nice that we'd had lots of dressing up, and we'd done our Burlesque class but by that point we all put on our nice clothes [*laughter*], [...]got changed out of our corsets and feather boas and just wore a nice dress out. [EI 2011.014]

Increasingly, venues are prohibiting groups of hens from wearing hen party paraphernalia. Night-clubs have certain standards of dress which customers have to conform to.

A lot of clubs try to promote a certain image, and only allow smartly dressed people, with dress shoes, through the door. No trainers are allowed. Hens dressed up are sometimes treated similarly to those in the queue who are considered too drunk to enter by the bouncers. So clothing, particularly that of hens, is discriminated against and can be at the discretion of the particular bouncers. [Personal Communication, Victoria Mackie, April, 2015]

At the blackening some brides are given the option of changing into old clothes, while others are not. Some blackeners then, give consideration to the functionality of the clothing the bride is wearing, while others disregard it completely. Of course, when it comes to their own dress, they tend to come very well prepared, being careful to wear either protective, or old clothing. The blackening generally ends up becoming a "food fight" and it is impossible to stay clean. The boiler suit is a very popular form of protective clothing worn at blackenings, both by males and females. There are the traditional dark blue boiler suits worn by farmers and mechanics, as well as the boiler suit commonly worn by those working in the oil industry, which often has a reflective stripe at the ankle. Sturdy work boots or wellington boots are the usual footwear.

### **To embarrass the bride**

While many would argue that it is not socially acceptable under any circumstances to walk along Princes Street, Edinburgh, on a Saturday afternoon clutching a large, inflatable penis, it is nonetheless still not against the law to do so,<sup>18</sup> and many brides are expected to do just that. There can be no other reason for doing so other than to cause the bride embarrassment. It is typical of behavior during liminal periods. Different behavior is accepted and indeed expected in the day-time economy, compared with the night-time economy, when virtually anything goes. The example given is a case in point. While it might still be embarrassing for the bride to carry the prop in question through the city at 1 a.m., it is unlikely to draw any criticism or cause much offence. Indeed the behavior in the night-time economy is generally so excessive anyway, that hen party behavior has to be super-excessive to cause offence. The inflatable penis carried by a scantily dressed bride to be in the day-time economy however, with its expectation of moderation, caution, sensibleness, is a different prospect altogether. It is designed to shock and to explode accepted norms.

Jasmine talks about the embarrassment she felt when required to do a dare requiring her to approach strangers asking them to suck sweets which were sewn onto a T-shirt she was wearing:

[Jasmine] [...] they did make me wear a T-shirt that had sweets sewn onto it and so you can imagine what had to [happen]... to get people to eat sweets off this T-shirt.

[SY] "People" being strange men.

[Jasmine] Yeah, yeah. Which was a bit grim I have to say. [EI 2014: 090]

Indeed, ritually dressing the bride was often associated with playing a game, with clothing and accessories being "punishments" for getting a question wrong, as happened at Jasmine's sister's hen party dinner:

[Jasmine] The first forfeit was quite early on I think. [...] So there was things like she had to ask the waiter for a kiss or something ... And then if she did it she got something to wear. So then she got something like the sash. [EI 2014: 090]

In the end the bride was dressed in a sash, veil, garter and pink feather boa.

What about the blackening? In a culture obsessed with cleanliness and perfection, covering a young woman from head to foot in a vile concoction of foodstuffs and other products in the day-time economy, on a village green, a place normally concerned with wholesome community events and families, is designed to embarrass. As the person who is central to the ritual, it is generally the bride who is embarrassed in these situations, rather than those who are putting her through the ritual.

### **To communicate messages**

In the 1970s and 80s on the bride's last day at work before her wedding, it was common for her colleagues to dress her in a home-made coat/dress decorated with paper flowers. Onto this were pinned messages, written by her colleagues. These messages were lewd in nature, frequently alluding to sex, such as the example below from Bennett (2004, 133):

*Long and thin goes too far in  
And doesn't please the ladies  
Short and thick does the trick  
And manufactures babies.*

Forty years later sex is no longer a mystery for the majority of Scottish women about to get married. Most, in fact, have been living with their partner for some time (Charsley 1991; Bennett 2004). Indeed, apart from one bride married in 2000,<sup>19</sup> all the brides interviewed who married in or after the 1990s lived together before marriage. Written messages are still a feature of hen party costumes, but they are now mass-produced and no longer personalized. The hand written rhyme, such as the one above, of forty years ago is today's slogan on a T-shirt which reads, "Horny Hen" or "Hot Hens" (see





Figure 3.

figure 3). Cullum-Swan and Manning (1994, 423) look at how the T-shirt is used to carry messages.

They describe this type of text as “floating epithets such as statements emblazoned on the front of shirts referring to a putative self or identity, usually vulgar, crude, attention seeking or all three.” They also suggest that “the self becomes increasingly lodged in public displays of claimed statuses, imagined positions, missing or desired feelings, and the ever-present absent consumable, other selves” (Cullum-Swan and Manning, 1994, 429), and “they display what one is *not*, and may call out for validation of one’s absent desires” (ibid. 431).

Costume is seldom used to communicate messages at a blackening. Occasionally a banner with the words “Jenny’s blackening” or “Jenny’s getting married,” will be attached to the vehicle the bride is being transported in, but I did not come across any instances in which written messages were placed on the bride’s costume.

### To attract the male/public gaze

Costuming is undoubtedly used to attract the male gaze at the hen party. For example,

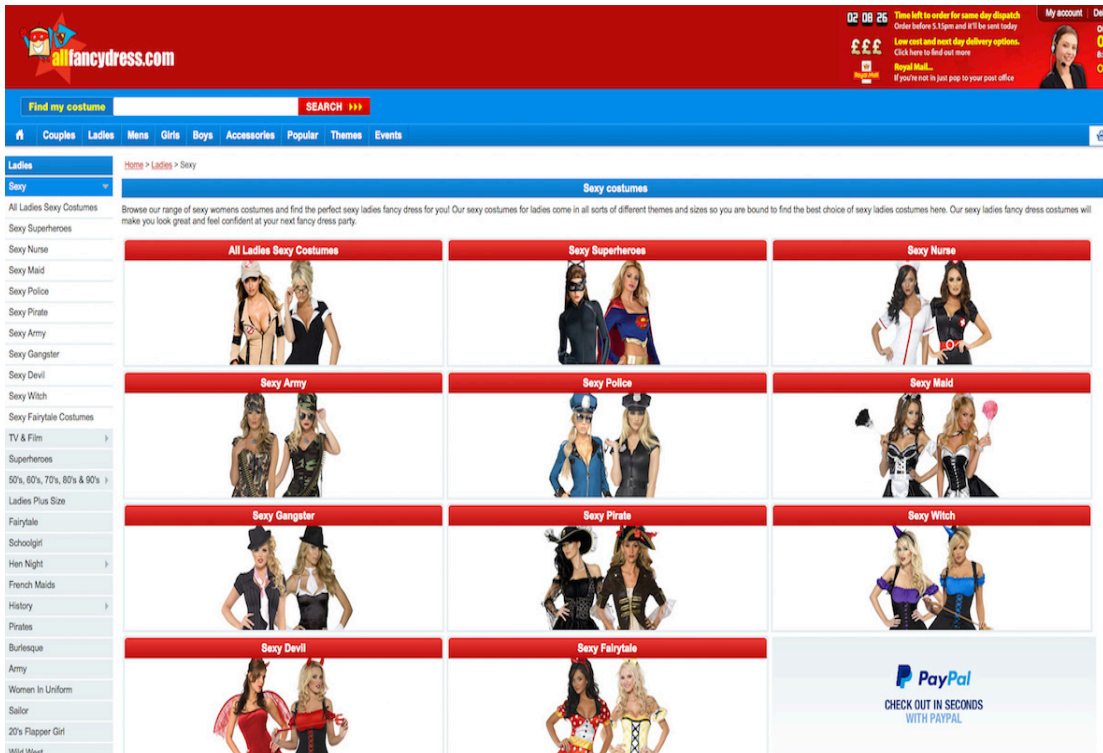


Figure 4. The screenshot below shows the variety of costumes available from the “hen party costumes” section of the website, Allfancydress.com. Categories are Sexy, TV and film, superheroes, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s, fairytale, schoolgirl, history, French maids, pirates, Burlesque, Army, women in uniform, sailor, 20s flapper, wild west, gangsters, clown, popstar, nuns and Hawaiian. In each section, around a half of the costumes are sexualized, with names such as “Sexy Nurse Costume”, “Constable Cutie Costume” and “Combat Chick Costume.”

a T-shirt with two fried eggs strategically placed over the breasts. The eye is drawn to the image, and therefore to the breasts. When Sarah Adams wore *uli*, a form of Nigerian body art she noted, “it was one of the few times when in Nigeria I felt I had a degree of control not over whether people looked at me but *how* people looked at me, where they looked, and focused their attention” (Adams 2007, 116). Many of the costumes worn by groups of hens are highly sexualized and therefore likely to attract the male gaze.

One of the iconic symbols of the hen party is the phallus. There are accessories and props of all sorts associated with the phallus, (see figure 5) for example, willy shot glasses, willy whistles, willy deely-boppers, willy chocolates, and the best sellers, willy straws, which, as this interviewee noted, no self-respecting hen party should be without: “you can’t have a hen night without willy straws” [EI 2013, 083].

As to why women at hen parties use accessories and props with objects in the



Figure 5.

shape of the phallus, such as deely-boppers, willy straws etc., reasons given during fieldwork include “because it’s amusing”, “because that is what is available in the merchandise,” and also “because it has become synonymous with hen parties.” Tye and Powers, who looked at stagette parties in Atlantic Canada, think there are deeper reasons for this obsession with the phallic symbol: “At the stagette, young women play with their own sexual objectification through symbolic reversal” (Tye and Powers 1998, 555). They argue that it is normally women, and not men, who are usually conceptualised by their body parts. At the stagette party this is inverted: “The threatening and culturally powerful phallus is deconstructed as benign and socially playful” (*ibid* 1998, 555). Once again, costumes are being used to explode conventional gender stereotypes.

Attracting the male gaze is not a part of the blackening, though attracting the *public*

*gaze* is. However, although common, it is not even a vital part of the ritual. I have many accounts of blackenings being held on farms, with no contact with the public at all.

### To enable licensed behavior

Does wearing a T-shirt bearing the slogan “Hot Tits Really Squeezy” invite male strangers to see if it is true? The answer is probably “yes”, no doubt aided by copious amounts of alcohol to loosen inhibitions. And does wearing that same T-shirt make the wearer herself feel “hot”? The answer to that is “possibly.” She may be someone at ease with her sexuality, or she may be at ease with her sexuality at that moment with the aid of alcohol and the sense of occasion. Indeed, various writers have described rituals such as these as performative or theatrical (Abrahams and Bauman 1978; Driver 1991; Schechner 1993; Leeds-Hurwitz 2002). There are similarities here with festivals and carnival. Richard Schechner describes the street as “a stage:”

When people go into the streets, *en masse*, they are celebrating life’s fertile possibilities. .... They put on masks and costumes, erect and wave banners, and construct effigies not merely to disguise or embellish their ordinary selves, or to flaunt the outrageous, but also to act out the multiplicity each human life is. Acting out forbidden themes is risky so people don masks and costumes. They protest, often by means of farce and parody, against what is oppressive, ridiculous, and outrageous.....Such playing challenges official culture’s claims to authority, stability, sobriety, immutability, and immortality. (Schechner 1993, 46)

Returning to the bride, and how she feels once dressed and adorned, she may feel anything but “hot,” yet she must play on. Dress may be volitional for all except the bride. She may be instructed to dress in a particular costume, wear accessories and carry props. It may be the last thing she wants to do, but do it she must:

[Pam] She’ll probably get the tat because she’ll want to dress everyone up and parade us around. I think if that happens, that happens [...] In my head I don’t want it but in reality it probably will.

[SY] But you’ll go with it?

[Pam] And I’ll go with it. Because I’d just tick it off and leave it somewhere.

[laughter]

[SY] So it’s better to be a sport than it is ...

[Pam] Yes, than to be the grumpy one.

[SY] ... to be a party pooper. [EI 2013. 086]

In this account, Pam is talking about how her desire *not* to be dressed up in all the hen party paraphernalia is likely to be ignored by her sister, who is her bridesmaid. Adam and Galinsky (2012) have done some interesting work on what they term “enclothed cognition.” They discovered that not only does what you wear change the way other people see you, it also changes the way you see yourself, and the way you think. Their results showed that the symbolic meaning of the clothing you wear, together with

the psychological experience of wearing that clothing, can result in changes in your behavior. The clothing acts as a constant reminder of what it represents. Clothes, then, have powers over your mind. In their study of Red Hat Society (RHS) women in the US,<sup>20</sup> Lynch, Radina, and Stalp (Lynch, Radina et al. 2007) show that being part of a female only group and wearing the red hats emboldened the members and enabled them to behave in a licensed way. Several contributors stated that they had increased confidence, and felt they could behave a bit wilder. In so doing this challenged normative views on how older women should dress and behave in public spaces. Yet other contributors mentioned the hedonistic attention they received when wearing the red hats, especially from men. What was particularly interesting in this study was that the women associated wearing hats in public with when they were young adults, a time when they were “following rules, being proper, and in many cases dressing up and going to church” (*ibid.* 2007, 152). Subverting the dress rules they learnt as young women added to the fun of wearing their ostentatious hats.

The role of the bride at a blackening, once she has attempted to escape and been recaptured, is *generally* very passive. Once she has been blackened she is *generally* displayed, but does not engage in any form of excessive behaviour. Following the blackening there can be some drinking and this has certainly increased over the past two decades, but not usually of the intensity seen at hen and stag parties.

### **To help with bonding**

Dress also enhances the bonding experience. One of the women in the RHS, mentioned above, noted, “When everybody has on the red hat, then you don’t feel singled out” (Lynch, Radina and Stalp, 2007, 150). None of the literature specifically on hen parties shows a connection between dress and adornment, and bonding, yet it is undoubtedly a contributing factor. Cullum-Swan and Manning (1994, 421) in their paper on the T-shirt state that it “conveys representations that signal or communicate membership in a group, work place or collectivity,” and Thurnell-Read, (2012, 260) talking about the stag tour, states:

Constructing a shared group identity was an important aspect of creating a successful stag tour weekend for participants. The use of matching clothing such as group tour t-shirts or polo shirts emblazoned with a group logo and team motto were a common means of instilling a collective identity.

Twenty women walking down the main street together dressed in virtually identical Burlesque outfits has the effect of uniting the group. Team T-shirts, favoured by both hen and stag parties (more so by the latter, who generally show less enthusiasm for dressing up) have become commonplace.

Friendship and solidarity are a feature of hen parties and blackenings, indeed, Pitaoullis (2005, 18) states that bachelor and bachelorette parties are rituals “in which



friendship is emphasized.” She goes as far as to say that the principal function of the bachelorette party is to ensure that early adult friendships are strengthened and maintained into married life.

At the blackening the bride is “adorned” with gunge, and although she will be the most filthy, all those taking part will also become adorned with the gunge. They are therefore united in the act of ritually dirtying the bride.

### To memorialize the event

One way of memorialising the hen party (as well as taking photographs or videos and putting them on Facebook or YouTube) is to retain clothing, accessories and props as keepsakes. Looking at, touching and smelling memorabilia can all bring the event back. The designer T-shirt is a case in point. Cullum-Swan and Manning (1994) tell us that the T-shirt can have a rich association with the past. On the other hand there is evidence on websites such as gumtree.com for clothing, accessories and props (mainly the cheaper, mass produced merchandise) being resold. As the contemporary hen party has only been going in this form from the early 2000s it is too early to show the longevity of the memorabilia from that event.

In stark contrast to this is the clothing used at a blackening. Whether the bride is given old clothes to wear, is dressed as a parody bride, or dressed in her own clothes, all can be considered liminal costumes. What makes them differ from the costuming at hen parties is that they are considered disposable costumes. Whatever is worn is almost always thrown in the bin as it is deemed unsalvageable. I came across one exception to this rule during my research. Evelyn carefully washed and preserved her veil and over-sized nightdress. When I asked why she did so, she replied:

You know, I’ve no idea! I just did it. I guess for sentimental reasons. And I think I was curious to see if it washed. Which it absolutely did. Also, being a canny Scot, maybe I was thinking I could use it for a blackening in the future! (Personal communication, email, 6/8/15)

However, this is the exception, as these two excerpts illustrate:

[Leanne] What I do know is that none of the clothes we were wearing ever were worn again. [*laughter*] We blasted them with water ... to try and get a lot of it off and gave up and chucked them in the bin. [EI 2013.073]

and

[Jackie] And then I remember going in to Mum and Dad’s shower and takin’ a plastic bag through and just puttin’ all my clothes in. So I went home with no underwear on. [*laughter*] So I obviously had my clothes that I took off but I had to take my underwear off because it was just black.

[SY] Disgusting.

[Jackie] Yeah, so I just took everything off, put it in a bag and bunged it in the bin.  
[EI 2014.002]

I got a sense that the dumping of the filthy clothes into the bin was quite ceremonial in nature. It was a significant act. A sign that the ritual was completed, the filth was washed away, the bride now ready for the wedding. The clothes will never be worn again, and here we find parallels with the [wedding gown](#). It too is usually never worn again, though for different reasons. And it is kept, often with great care, wrapped in tissue paper, and stored in a special place. Sometimes it is handed down as an heirloom. The act of throwing away then, is the symbol of a past life and its accompanying single status; the act of keeping, is the symbol of a future life and status as a married person. You hope to keep your wedding gown, like your marriage, for the rest of your life.

### **To display class identity/membership of a group**

While it may not always be a *conscious* function of costuming at a hen party to display class identity, it inevitably does. Several of my contributors mentioned that they would not be wearing anything “tacky” at their hen party. “Tacky” is defined here by one contributor:

[Anna] I think my vision in my head of “tack” is the tiara with a veil, and an L-plate sign and maybe a blow up man or kind of, yeah something along those lines would be what I interpreted as “tacky”. [EI 2012.023]

This was generally the response of university-educated women, in well-paid jobs. By distancing themselves from the mass-produced, stereotypical hen party costume and accessories they are distancing themselves from the masses.

It cannot be said that the blackening ritual is attached to a particular social class, but it can be said that it is a ritual for locals (Insiders), rather than non-locals (Outsiders). The fact that they get blackened shows that they belong to a particular community, and it is, at the same time, a sign to non-locals that, although they live there, they are not “true locals.”

### **To contrast with the wedding day**

Could the bride possibly look worse than she does at her blackening, covered from head to foot in baked beans, yogurt, left-over chicken curry, raw eggs, flour, feathers, treacle, and to top it all off, cow manure? Contrast this with the wedding day, when she is dressed in a gorgeous white gown, at her most beautiful, painted, polished and perfumed to perfection, as illustrated in figure 6.

Or how about at the hen party, when she looks ridiculously dressed in a pink Smurf outfit with a white tutu? Or when she looks like a “lady of the night” in a nurse’s uniform with stockings and suspender belt. Contrast this with the wedding day, when she generally behaves in a controlled manner and is dignified, demure and



Figure 6.

debonair. Describing the power of the bride figure Charsley (1991, 194) notes in *Rites of Marrying*:

A bride appropriately dressed and on her wedding day becomes the embodiment of a powerful symbol in the culture, a source of interest, attraction and often emotion even to people who do not know her at all.

The difference is intentional. It's the difference between the sacred and the profane, the wedding ritual and the pre-wedding ritual.

### Changes with time

We have seen that costuming has many different functions at the blackening and the hen party, with some, such as memorializing the event or group bonding, being more important at the hen party, than at the blackening. But have these functions changed in the period covered by my fieldwork, the 1940s to present day? By examining closely just one aspect of hen parties and blackenings, the role of costuming, over a period of several generations, it has been possible to show that those changes reflect changes in

the role of women in society as a whole. Ethnologists are in prime position to record these changes and make sense of them. As James Porter (1999: 11-12) tells us:

Ethnology deals with traditional culture in the widest sense, and focuses on explaining not only tradition but also change, since the one cannot be understood without the other.

The primary role of costuming, we have seen, is for fun and amusement, and at first glance this has not changed. The blackening and the hen party have always been about having fun. However, on closer examination it appears that where one fun item of clothing for dressing the bride up in, or one or two products to blacken the bride with, would have been sufficient for the previous generation, this is no longer the case. We are “lovers of novelty” (Hayward and Hobbs 2007, 444), constantly demanding the new and the novel in all areas of life, from holidays, to home furnishings, to gadgets, to fashion and, as we see in this study, to costuming. This is not always understood by women of previous generations, who generally speaking, felt that the behaviour of women at both rituals is now “over the top,” with costuming one aspect of the hen party mentioned as being a part of that excess:

[Lexi] I really cannot understand brides who spend a lot of money going abroad, Barcelona, and spending money and getting outfits to match and all the rest of it when there is so much expense involved in a wedding. [EI 2012: 031]

The brides and hens, of course, do not see it like that. They are products of a post-modern society (Burrows and Marsh 1992; Urry 2002; Bryman 2004; Skeggs 2004; Winlow and Hall 2006), which in Northern Scotland, has happily cast off the oppressive cloak of Calvinism, and embraced hedonism and sensual enjoyment with gusto. One of the questions I sought to answer during my research was whether there was any sign that the blackening was dying out in favour of the hen party, which has enjoyed an almost meteoric rise in popularity since 2000 (Eldridge and Roberts 2008; Eldridge 2009). I discovered that, rather than giving one up, it is common to celebrate *both* rituals these days. This also points to what Slosar terms a “culture of excess” (Slosar 2005); it would have been inconceivable in times of hardship to waste good clothing in the way it is wasted at a blackening, and to spend money, often on multiple costumes and accessories, in times of austerity would have been unthinkable.

Changes have not just occurred with hen party costuming; the blackening has also been affected by Slosar’s culture of excess. While there has been little change in whether women are dressed up as parody brides at a blackening or not, what has changed enormously is the make up of the “gunge” that is used to guise them. Traditionally, only one, or perhaps two products, together with water, was used in the blackening, and its precursor, the feet-washing.<sup>21</sup> Nowadays, however, virtually anything goes, though some care is usually taken to avoid including harmful substances. Pointing to a photograph of her own feet-washing/blackening in the 1940s, Millie explained to me how shocked she was at the combination of products used to blacken her

granddaughter:

[Millie] But you can see all that stuff that we've on there, it washed off easily. But they [granddaughter and grandson-in-law] were absolutely caked. If you'd put them into an oven [*laughter*] they would have...

[Millie & SY] Baked. [EI 2013: 074]

Two of the functions of costuming at the hen party and blackening, to embarrass the bride and to enable licensed behaviour, have always been a part of both rituals, however what is acceptable now is very different to what was acceptable in the past. The women I interviewed, who were married between the 1940s and 1980s, would have been utterly horrified if they had been made to dress like a prostitute, or wear a pair of willy deely-boppers, at their hen party. Nowadays, this is both accepted and expected at many hen parties, and we have seen how clothing can help the wearer to feel differently about herself (Adam and Galinsky 2012), and how this in turn can enable licensed behaviour. There is a much greater acceptance nowadays of showing bare flesh, or even partial nudity. Men have had to cope with being stripped naked or semi naked at stag parties and blackenings for many years, but it is only in the past twenty years or so that we are seeing similar behaviour for women.<sup>22</sup> Women have increasingly become the victims of blackeners who want to cause them maximum humiliation by removing some of their clothing:

[Tanya] I remember [my daughter] and [my son-in-law]... and they were taken... [my] poor [daughter] just had on her pants and a bra. And they tied them to the fountain outside the [pub] [EI 2013. 087]

Another contributor recalls the scene from the shop she owned:

[Dana] Some of the youngsters go a little bit over the top. When we were in the shop; right opposite the shop was the monument for the village and the amount of youngsters we have seen tied up there and left with not much clothes on I'll tell you. [*laughter*]

[SY] So that wasn't typical of your day at all?

[Dana] Oh, no. No, no Sheila. [EI 2013: 081]

Lexi talks about the ways some groups of hens behave in public spaces, such as on trains:

[Lexi] But they are quite noisy and loud. And I do feel that some of the lack of clothing that they wear, the brides...it's not very demure for a bride-to-be and I think... but I suppose it's general now [...], [they should] be a bit more civilised. [EI 2012. 031]

Scottish society, it seems, is becoming more accepting of states of undress, exploding traditional gender stereotypes where women, as this excerpt implies, are expected to dress in a modest, demure, civilized way. Barnard, in his work on fashion and



visual culture, states that women are using accessories and dress to challenge and resist dominant theories of femininity: "They are constructing their own versions of femininity and class identity from the styles that are available" (Barnard 2007, 103).

Singling out the bride so that she is noticed and attracting the male/public gaze goes hand in hand. One of the ways that costuming does this is through the messages it communicates on clothing. The very public nature of those messages can be contrasted with the more personal, and less visible rhymes and messages pinned to the bride's dress at Pay Off Day<sup>23</sup> when she left her job in the factory or office in the 1950s and 1960s (Dyer 1970; Monger 1971; Monger 1975; Beck; 1988; Bennett 2004).

One aspect of liminal costuming that is totally new for the hen party is functional costuming. This has come about because of the growth in Casual Leisure,<sup>24</sup> such as classes in Burlesque Dancing, Rock Climbing, or relaxing by a swimming pool. Each of these activities requires different clothing, and not just for the bride; the whole group will be dressed up. Contrast this with the past when the bride would be the only dressed up, and only in one costume, that of parody bride. The hen party used to be a simple evening out, perhaps with a meal, then on to the pub for a few drinks. Nowadays, it is a highly sophisticated ritual, micro-managed to the last detail, and costuming plays a huge part in that. On the other hand, costuming, in the form of applying blackening material to the bride, has always been part of the blackening, and its predecessor, the feet-washing.

Although we might think of "female bonding" as a relatively new concept, one that has arisen as women have started to claim their own space in the night-time leisure economy, Virginia Smith tells us that rituals which encouraged group bonding have been common for centuries:

Betrothal and marriage ceremonies were more festive occasions: the worldwide rituals of preparatory purification, grooming, bathing, and dressing up of the bride and groom were yet another time of extensive group bonding, when every effort was made to bring about good luck, and expel evil influences (Smith 2007, 34).

What has changed is the type of social situation that women find themselves in with other women. Prior to the 1960s women had to give up work when they got married. Once they had children they were very much tied to house and home in the role of housewife and mother (Montemurro 2006; Abrams and Fleming 2010). Abrams and Fleming refer to this as the "strain of containment:"

And for women who were often tied to their homes by the routines of cooking and the care of infants, the Scottish habit of "windaehinging", where women talked to one another from the vantage points of open tenement windows by leaning on the ledges with their head outside, was a particular way of coping with the strain of containment. (Abrams and Fleming 2010, 52)

Their contact with other women would mainly have been during the day, as they went about their normal daily tasks. Abrams and Fleming, note that “the support network operated by women in such working-class communities could offset domestic drudgery” (Abrams and Fleming 2010, 51/52). Prior to the 1960s women did not generally meet up with other women to socialize in the evenings or at weekends. In general, women did not drink, nor did they go into pubs, as this excerpt from an interview with Sally, who got married in 1949, shows:

[SY] What about drinking. Would you ever have ...

[Sally] Oh no, never. Never. Never.[...] I would have been expelled from home I think if I had ever gone in drinking.

[SY] So when you were a young woman, women just didn't go into pubs?

[Sally] No. No, I can honestly say I never was in a pub drinking. That's not a boast, it was just not done. [EI 2013.077]

All that changed with the development of the leisure night-time economy in Britain in the 1980s when there was a deliberate move by the government to rejuvenate British city centres and to try to create more of a café type culture in Britain (Hobbs 2005; Measham and Brain 2005). There was a recommodification of alcohol and a major overhaul in the design of drinking spaces by the drinks industry to attract young people, and women in particular, as they were regarded as an as yet untapped resource. The introduction of clubs and themed bars saw a move from “spit and sawdust” to “chrome and cocktails” (Measham and Brain 2005, 267).

## Conclusions

Attitudes towards liminal costuming at the hen party and the blackening are quite different. Women have embraced liminal costuming at hen parties with gusto, with many hen parties having multiple changes of costume. Growth in the popularity of liminal costuming is particularly noticeable in the past decade; before that only the bride was dressed up. However, it is now common for the whole group to dress up, although a distinction is usually made between the dress of the bride and the rest of the group. At the blackening the bride will occasionally be dressed as a parody bride, but costuming at the blackening depends on the adornment of the bride with gunge, which, I argue, is a form of liminal costuming in itself. The rest of the group generally dress in clothing that will protect them from the gunge that they throw on the bride. At the hen party there are a whole range of purposes for liminal costuming, including dressing the bride to amuse the group, ritualizing the occasion, drawing attention to the bride, and embarrassing her. This is in contrast to the purpose of the rest of the group dressing up, which is primarily for fun, and for group bonding. At the blackening, there are fewer functions for liminal costuming. For the blackeners, the most important function is to make the bride as filthy as possible, and to protect themselves, as much as possible from getting dirty. Ritual embarrassment is also important, and although it may not be obvious to the group, it is also about group bonding. It was telling that, for

all it is dreaded, one of my contributors told me that people who were not blackened “might have felt a bit disappointed.”<sup>25</sup> When pressed further about this, she said that they “would have missed out.” There was clearly some kudos in being able to say, as my contributor put it, “Yeah, I was [blackened].”<sup>26</sup>

We have seen that the changes in the function of liminal costuming, at the hen party and the blackening, reflect wider changes in the social life of women in Northern Scotland. Yet despite these changes, the hen party and the blackening remain strongly-rooted, crucial rites of passage for most women. The bride-to-be, covered from head to foot in gunge, or wearing a “Horny Hen” T-shirt, becomes transformed into a vision of loveliness as a bride on her wedding day.

### Notes

- 1 The blackening has evolved from an earlier Scottish ritual called the feet-washing, the earliest account of which is in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (Burt 1755). There is uncertainty surrounding just when it began, but it probably started as a solemn washing ritual for both men and women on the eve of their wedding, which was usually in the winter months when the demands of the sea and the land were fewer. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the accounts tell of a blackening of the feet and legs using soot from the chimney. A little later, there is evidence that it had developed into a kind of a game, with the feet and legs being alternately blackened and washed, and then by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century early 20<sup>th</sup> century escape, capture and pillorying had become part of the ritual. In order for this to happen the ritual had to move out of doors. The move out of doors appears to have coincided with a change in wedding practices, with more people marrying in the summer months. Contributors married prior to the 1970s generally referred to the blackening as the feet-washing. Those married in the 1970s and 1980s use both terms interchangeably and the current generation tend to use only the blackening. It is probable then, that a change in the form of the ritual led to a change in name.
- 2 The reasons for why the blackening is confined to Northern Scotland remain unclear.
- 3 For example, bachelorette or stagette party in the USA and Canada, or hens’ party in Australia and New Zealand.
- 4 Save perhaps for a predilection for “tartanry,” particularly if the group is travelling out of Scotland.
- 5 For example, one of my contributors was blackened on two separate occasions by two different friendship groups, and another had two hen parties, and a pre-hen party.
- 6 See MacLeod and Payne’s (1994) fascinating insight into Insider/Outsider culture in the community of Coigach, NW Scotland.
- 7 Pre-wedding ritual for men very similar to a hen party but perhaps containing more competitive activities, such as quad biking, paintballing etc.
- 8 For instance, a bride talking about not wanting to invite her mother-in-law, or a bridesmaid complaining about the cost of the hen party.
- 9 A contemporary version of the ritual known as the Polterabend.
- 10 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06yr6vh> A programme about a black film maker, Michael Jenkins, making a documentary about Mummies Day, formerly known as Darkie Day.
- 11 The Bacup Coconutters are men with blackened faces, dressed in skirts, who perform the Coconut Dance at Easter in Bacup, Lancashire.

- 12 <https://scotchwhisky.com/video/magazine/9143/the-blackening-at-speyside-cooper-age/>
- 13 <http://shop.henheaven.co.uk>
- 14 It is difficult to estimate the number of brides who are dressed up for their blackening. More work needs to be done to assess this; as a very rough estimate it may be around half.
- 15 This was a term used by several interviewees to describe the concoction thrown over them.
- 16 Learner Plates placed on a car for those learning to drive. L-plates were introduced to the UK in 1935. They were initially used at hen parties to suggest that the bride was a novice to sexual intercourse.
- 17 All the interviews from which excerpts are taken are kept in the digital archive of the Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen.
- 18 Unless a member of the public directly complains to the Police, in which case the Police would have to remove it from the bride.
- 19 The bride described her situation as “unusually traditional.”
- 20 The RHS was established in the late 1970s by Sue Ellen Cooper who used dress (ostentatious red hats) to empower post-menopausal women who felt marginalized and stigmatized by society simply because they were aging. The women held lunches in public places and felt empowered and emboldened when they got together and wore their red hats.
- 21 See endnote 1.
- 22 I have not personally heard of a woman being stripped naked at a blackening, but stripped down to underwear is not uncommon.
- 23 Pay Off Day was the final day at work for women before they got married. Until the 1960s a Marriage Bar prevented women from working once married.
- 24 The term used to describe all manner of activities that the hen party engages in.
- 25 [EI 2012, 024]
- 26 Ibid.

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## **“Sweeping the Globe”: Appropriating Global Media Content Through Camera Phone Videos in Everyday Life**

**Christian Ritter**

*Collegium Helveticum of ETH Zurich/University of Zurich/Zurich University of the  
Arts  
Switzerland*

**Klaus Schönberger**

*Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt/Celovec  
Austria*

### **Abstract**

*The paper discusses the intertwining of the global (popular culture) and the local (youth culture) contexts through the production, distribution, and reception of everyday camera phone videos. It shows how the appropriation of popular media content in digitalized everyday life can be analyzed considering the coincidence of both, the blurring of technical and media boundaries as well as the aestheticization of societies. For this purpose, the authors present a model focusing on the relationship between the persistence and recombination of practices, topics and aesthetics in today’s media culture. Based on the reenactment and filming of popular gender roles, different modes of appropriating global media content will be discussed concerning both the local and global dimension of today’s “convergence culture”. Arguing from a cultural media and technology studies approach, the paper reveals how the development of “agency” through the joint performance, production, and consumption of (media) knowledge takes place “offline” on a local level—while hegemonic images such as gender stereotypes are preserved and persist when they access the public sphere of the World Wide Web.*

### **Introduction: Technological Convergence and the Aestheticization of Societies**

**W**ith the development and dissemination of digital information and communication technology (ICT) and in particular the World Wide Web (WWW) in the 1990s, the possibilities for translocal communication in everyday life have greatly expanded. In 2000, the first commercial mobile phones with integrated cameras emerged on the market in Japan. Since then, camera phones have— together with other mobile cameras and webcam technology—enabled the simple and mobile production of audio-visual media. Even if the “digital divide” indicates that access to as well as use and impact of ICT must be evaluated differently in different

countries and regions, camera phone videos have established themselves beyond industrialized countries as an everyday means of communication. This development can be seen, for example, in the connection between the rise of the "Arab Spring" and the appearance of "witness videos" (cf. Snowden 2014) on video sharing platforms such as YouTube.

This technical and medial intertwining of communication goes hand in hand with altered references between practices, symbols and narratives of a global popular culture and local everyday cultures that the American media scholar Henry Jenkins describes as characteristic of today's "convergence culture." Jenkins stresses the coexistence of different contexts as a key feature of this socio-cultural change:

Convergence: A word that describes technological, industrial, cultural and social changes in the ways media circulates within our culture. [...] Perhaps most broadly, media convergence refers to a situation in which multiple media systems coexist and where media content flows fluidly across them. (Jenkins 2005, 282)

Since the early days of the WWW, the communication options of digital ICT technology, in particular the possibility of translocal networking, has been associated with the idea that shared creativity and the collective development of (aesthetic) knowledge make new forms of social enabling possible. However, from an empirical point of view, such technical utopias have rarely been realized on an everyday level.

It is undisputed that in the course of the social-cultural changes that German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz has called "aesthetic capitalism" (Reckwitz 2012), and which have been promoted through the development and dissemination of digital cameras, more and more social actors have started to use the WWW to distribute their own photographs and videos. Empirical studies in Switzerland (Willemse et al. 2014, 34) and Germany (Busemann 2013, 395) point out, however, that not all such artefacts are shared via the infrastructure of the WWW. Our study on youth culture's use of camera phone videos in Switzerland, upon which this paper is based, shows similar results: the teenagers and young adults interviewed used distribution platforms such as YouTube only in exceptional cases to distribute their videos (Holfelder/Ritter 2013, 18; Holfelder/Ritter 2015, 31-33). This is not surprising if one considers that the simple possibility to produce and disseminate media content through the use of ICT does not necessarily mean that all young people (as suggested by the term "digital natives") actually act in a sociocultural or socioeconomic context, which promotes the self-confidence or the habitus to do so – or suddenly acquire it when the technology becomes available. Moreover, it also does not necessarily mean a lower level of digital literacy if young people do not automatically upload their films to the WWW. On the contrary, the opposite is in fact the case. Our interviews showed that youngsters are acutely aware of the fact that once videos have been put online it is almost impossible to remove them from the WWW. In this context, young men and women also take into consideration the people who feature in the films they record. This attitude is reflected in the following statement made by a 21-year-old trainee polytechnician:

Normally this is generally not so good for the colleague. One should actually coordinate with him if he gives permission to publish something. But the problem today is that everything stays in the net as soon as it is uploaded. [...] You cannot delete it definitively.<sup>1</sup>

This digital literacy is, however, closely connected to knowledge and qualifications previously acquired by young people in their respective social contexts. This also applies to shared knowledge about which things should be filmed, how they should be filmed, and which aesthetic and formal qualities play an important role. Following this argument, an assumed persistence of social structures and practices—what we call the “long arm of ‘real life’” (Schönberger 2000)—appears to be an appropriable approach for the analysis of ICT communications. As will be shown in this paper, the relationship of persistence and recombination in the process of socio-cultural change is of interest on two levels: in terms of the social structuring of communication and in the practices through which everyday communication is realized (cf. Schönberger 2015). Following Michel de Certeau (1984) as well as Henry Jenkins’ concepts of “textual poaching,” (1992) the study focused on the intermedial practices by which teenagers and young adults appropriate popular cultural symbols and narratives, but also the ICT and camera technology, for the construction and negotiation of identity.<sup>2</sup>

Vital in this process is the idea of the socio-technological “enabling potential”<sup>3</sup> of digital ICT technology for realizing media combinations (i.e. of image and sound) and intermedial references (i.e. reference to mediated role models) that in John Fiske’s terms can lead to the development of “agency”.<sup>4</sup> This understanding of media technology allows us the analysis of different forms of action and, thus, differentiated forms of socio-cultural change in the context of everyday communication.<sup>5</sup> Against this backdrop, we will discuss two key hypotheses from our study.

First we will show that processes of collective creativity do not take place primarily *in* the virtual environments of the WWW (i.e. in the joint production of media content “online”) as much as they are mediated *through* them in the collaborative reception and production of digital photographs and videos face-to-face and “offline”. We will show that such processes have both a translocal and a local dimension: translocal because symbols and narratives from the WWW are being appropriated at the same time in different places by different actors and in varying social, cultural and institutional contexts; and local, because processes of appropriation take place under specific spatial and social conditions that decide (among other things) how, by whom and with which intentions audio-visual media content is produced and (possibly) distributed on the WWW. Thus, the transcultural dimension of media appropriation is addressed. Following Wolfgang Welsch’s concept of transculturality, symbols from the global media context pass through classical cultural boundaries quite naturally (Welsch 1999, 197).

Second we intend to show that content, space and technology are appropriated in a situation-based way by the use of camera phones and can be made productive for the development of “agency” (e.g. to demonstrate friendship, to foster social relationships, to aestheticize oneself or to experiment with body images and gender



roles). However, these "offline" forms of empowerment in dealing with digital ICT and camera technology do not mean that in the creative process hegemonic ideas of social identity are automatically undermined. The examples we have looked at tend to indicate that society's interpellation for creativity contributes to a mode of subjectivation corresponding to "aesthetic capitalism" and, through this, existing stereotypes are rather updated than criticized.

From the perspective of a cultural media and technology studies approach, and based on videos collected in the field and on the WWW, we will show how global media content is appropriated in local contexts by teenagers and young adults and negotiated in the local context by means of filming with a camera phone, the joint viewing of these videos and – in some cases – their release on the WWW. One way to understand this appropriation in terms of the socio-cultural change associated with digital media is to take a look at the relationship between persistence and recombination, which—as model of cultural analyses—will be discussed in the following.

### **Persistence and Recombination: A Model for the Analysis of Cultural Practices in Socio-Cultural Change**

In the theoretical concept of persistence and recombination, the appropriation of media content is not analyzed in terms of the assertion of something new, but primarily in terms of that which existed previously. It is about the interaction of persistence and recombination. This perspective emphasizes the antecedent, the persistence. It aims to explain the transformation from "the old" into "the new", or simply put, how "the old" is renewed. Importantly, the relationship between old and new, tradition and innovation, persistence and fading away is neither understood as dichotomy nor as dialectical interplay. This means that regardless of the changing technological conditions in which appropriation of social practices take place, existing socio-cultural practices persist, migrate or flow into the outwardly new phenomenon. Both in relation to the socio-cultural practices as well as to the connected existing social praxes, a number of moments of persistence and recombination are witnessed in the interplay between technology, internet-based media formats, and these practices and praxes. Those practices that then emerge under changed technical conditions but on the basis of the existing social structures and particular social practices to be reassembled or recombined are understood as being recombinants. The term "recombination" is used here to describe entanglement and the ties between existing and emerging socio-cultural practices and technologies. In our context, the term "social praxes" relates to concepts of every-day life conduct, way of life, or lifestyle. These social praxes are strongly connected with the dimension of social structuring, i.e. economic resources, social and cultural capital, and gender. In contrast, socio-cultural practices such as writing letters, blogging, writing diaries, taking photographs, or filming denominate patterns of communication and action, which can enable, help realize, double, or transcend a variety of very different social praxes and, thus, also social structures. The term "enabling potential" is meant to denominate the connection between users'

expectations, requirements and hopes on the one hand, and their skills, qualifications and resources on the other.<sup>6</sup>

## Data and Methods

The empirical basis for the following discussion was collected between 2012 and 2014 within the research project “Camera Phone Videos. Artistic and Ethnographic Approaches to Representations of Young People’s Everyday Worlds”, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). The research was conducted by the Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies (ISEK) of the University of Zurich and the Institute for Critical Theory (ith) and the Institute for Contemporary Art Research (IFCAR) at the Zurich University of the Arts.<sup>7</sup>

The project looked at how young users appropriate, on the one hand, mobile phones as technical devices and, on the other hand, their living environment, including the production, distribution and reception of camera phone films—and under which spatial, technical and social conditions this takes place. Looking at the young people’s everyday praxes, we focused in particular on two issues: a) the aesthetic and technical dimensions of the videos as well as the intermedial and transmedial connections between the camera phone videos analyzed and other (e.g. popular culture) media contexts; and b) the interconnection of the “online” and the “offline” (Holfelder and Ritter 2014, 2-3).

The analysis is based on a sample of 380 camera phone videos made available by teenagers and young adults between 14 and 20 years of age. The videos were analyzed during the ethnographic field work carried out in the city of Zurich as well as at a vocational school in the Zurich agglomeration. This empirical work was supplemented by qualitative analyses and interviews. The interviews were carried out, on the one hand, as short one-on-one Q&A sessions during the ethnographic field work in Zurich (with a total of 60 short interviews) and, on the other hand, as group interviews with school pupils from two classes at the vocational school (with a total of 24 interviews). Moreover, research was carried out on video sharing platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo as well as on Facebook. According to an ethnographic concept described by Christine Hine as ethnographics “in, of and through the virtual” (Hine 2008, 65), we aimed to contextualize the data collected offline with online data such as video clips or Facebook communication. Only by looking at both contexts can the practices oscillating between online and offline be fully understood—especially when it comes to the question of “how gendered and racialized identities are negotiated, reproduced, and indexed in online interactions” (Wilson and Peterson 2002, 453–454).

This research design is reflected in the structure and argumentation of this paper, which follows the “moving targets” (Welz 1998) paradigm introduced to European ethnology by Gisela Welz, drawing on George Marcus’ groundbreaking concept of “multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995). In this paper, this concept is understood as an approach based on the blurred boundaries of modern living environments, with the aim of analyzing the moving of people, practices and meanings in changing

contexts. For this purpose, a “radicalization” of this concept is necessary. However, for the purpose of this paper, a “radicalization” of this concept is necessary. We argue that multi-sited ethnography must go beyond a geographic dimension: it should also look at a wide range of social spheres, as well as cultural, economic and institutional contexts. While these are implicitly mentioned in Marcus’s “follow-the” categories, and acknowledged on the theoretical level, empirical operationalizations remain scarce (Schönberger 2013, 132).

The following case studies begin with a camera phone video from the empirical data corpus, which refers to the widespread practice of appropriation of popular cultural content through camera phone videos (Holfelder/Ritter 2015, 65-82). However, in order to interpret the example fully taking into consideration its medial reach, it is necessary to develop the empiricism and analysis beyond the original context. Thus, to achieve this, the primary example will be supplemented by further data mainly gathered on the WWW (videos, user comments). This will form the basis upon which different socio-cultural, socio-technical, and institutional conditions of production, distribution and reception will be compared, contrasted and analyzed. According to the “grounded theory”, the collection and selection of the examples was conducted parallel and based on the material’s potential to provide answers to the questions posed (cf. Glaser/Strauss 1967). The fact that very different topic and contexts play an important role in the process of both, research and analysis shows the multi-layered nature and ambivalence of the mediatized environment of modern digital society.

### **Appropriation and Re-Appropriation: How a Brazilian Pop Music Video Became a Transcultural Phenomenon**

Transculturality, convergence and the aestheticization of everyday life are three aspects of today’s media culture that form the background for the cases that will be discussed in the following. By analyzing examples from everyday and popular culture, we hope to draw conclusions on the relationship between social empowerment and aesthetic practice. This in turn should help us to better understand the (new and old) practices of appropriating and re-coding of meanings connected to the digitalization of communication. Here, focusing in particular on the socio-technical potential of digital communication and camera technology, the connection between persistence and recombination will be discussed using the example of the medial reenactment of a music video, in this case for the very popular song “Ai Se Eu Te Pego” (English = “Oh, if I catch you” aka “Nossa Nossa”) performed by the Brazilian pop singer Michel Teló.

The empirical starting point is a 28-second-long camera phone video collected during the ethnographic field work in Zurich in 2012. The video was given to the research team by a 15-year-old girl and produced during a lunch break at the local vocational school. In the video, two friends of the young woman are shown dancing and singing in a stairwell. While the two girls performing in front of the camera are visible and audible, the young woman operating the camera phone remains offstage (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Dancing and filming during the lunch break (screenshot of a camera phone video)

The video of the girls refers to three modes of appropriation characteristic of those we observed when it comes to how young people use digital camera technology in their everyday lives.

- *The appropriation of public space:* The convergence of the device, but also its mobility and ease of use allows for the spontaneous staging and documentation of performances, thus enabling performative and medial appropriation in totally new situations and contexts. This is shown, for example, in the appropriation of public space through its temporary filmic and spatial occupation as a stage for a (private) video production – in this case of a public stairwell.
- *The appropriation and negotiation of hegemonic body and gender images:* The technical-medial configuration of the camera phone videos enables methods of appropriation and re-enactment of stereotypical roles in daily life, unlike the static representation of the body and gaze in photography. Moreover, the combination of image, sound and movement also makes it possible not only to appropriate the body, through the filming of the performance, but also to provide this appropriation with an audio framework (such as music, sounds or voices).
- *The appropriation of technology:* The example of the dancing girls shows that the “camera phone” as a technical device is integrated in multiple ways into the production of media content. It also shows how the young wom-

en combine multiple devices to create new production environments. For the production of this video, one camera phone was used as camera and data storage, while a second mobile phone was used to played the music. Other examples from the ethnographic field work include the video of the young women exemplifying that the technical device "camera phone" is integrated in multiple ways into the production of media content: not only as recorder of image and sound, but also as a player for the musical "playback" of a performance, as a data storage device, as a display for viewing and verifying the quality of the recording and—at times—as a tool for distributing the recorded videos via Apps like WhatsApp, e.g. transfer technologies like Bluetooth, USB, etc.

In order to show a) how the socio-cultural and socio-technical potentials are realized in technical-medial and physical-performative practices of appropriation and b) how these can be analyzed with the model of persistence and recombination—it is of key importance to understand the worldwide "Nossa Nossa" phenomenon.

While the performative and filmic adaption of the "Nossa Nossa" dance became a global mass phenomenon (the video from Zurich mentioned here is one such example), Michel Teló's song stormed music markets in Europe and the Americas, particularly the American Latin Pop Billboard charts. In 2012 the song reached top chart positions in 25 countries. In Switzerland, where our research was conducted, "Ai Se Eu Te Pego" held the number one position for 47 weeks. In Germany, "Ai Se Eu Te Pego" was the best-selling single download ever with over 600,000 units sold.<sup>8</sup>

The global popularity of this song is related directly to the dance shown in the official music video, which has been watched more than 714 million times on YouTube since its release in July 2011 and which became a part of global media culture.<sup>9</sup> The video was shot during a concert in Brazil and shows the male singer performing his song in front of a primarily female audience. During the chorus of the song, the singer and the audience perform a choreographed dance together. Central elements of the dance are hip thrusts reminiscent of a male act of copulation. A number of videos from youth and everyday media culture show how these dance moves are staged in different cultural and social contexts, filmed and—in part—uploaded onto the World Wide Web.

Michel Teló's dance became a viral phenomenon as early as in 2011 as the result of a video recorded by the Brazilian football club FC Santos.<sup>10</sup> The video uploaded onto the club's YouTube channel in September 2011 was produced as a short "behind the scenes" documentary for the fans and shows the players in the locker room after a successful game. At the center of the video is FC Santos player Neymar (today a star player with FC Barcelona) dancing to the music of Michel Teló, mimicking the characteristic dance steps and hip movements (Fig. 2)





Figure 2. Football player Neymar dancing in the locker room (screenshot from YouTube)

Soon after, the video was shared on various fan sites and sports portals on the WWW and gained widespread attention, especially in South America. Later, Teló's dance was taken up by European players like Cristiano Ronaldo and consequently found its way into European television sports coverage and the YouTube channels of European football fans.

Within a short time the reenactment and documentation of the dance became a transcultural phenomenon of viral media culture. In the course of two years, a great number of "Nossa Nossa" videos were produced in very different contexts. While many of these videos never left the mobile phones or computers of the producers, others found their way into the public sphere of the WWW. Today, on YouTube one can find more than 1.7 million videos related to the original song and its visual representation, most of them amateur productions. Similar videos collected through internet research and in ethnographic field work show how the dance is performed at flash mobs, weddings, birthday parties, talent shows or in different private contexts all over the world. The global importance that the phenomenon gained during this time is underlined by the caption of a dance tutorial on YouTube: "It's the dance craze that's been sweeping the globe!"<sup>11</sup>

But also the entertainment industry realized and reflected the global impact of the "Nossa Nossa" phenomenon, as can be observed in very different contexts. One example is the popular video game FIFA 13 by the video game company Electronic Arts Inc. (EA). In this game the virtual players can be made to perform the dance when they score a goal by using a special key combination (Fig. 3).<sup>12</sup> The function can be purchased in the EA store in exchange for so called "FIFA points", which can be collected during the game or bought online.



Figure 3. Dance episode in the video game FIFA 13 (screenshot from YouTube)

Other examples collected during internet research show that the viral “Nossa Nossa” phenomenon also gained the attention of the music industry, illustrated clearly by Michel Teló himself. In February 2012 a Michel Teló concert at the Planeta Atlântida Festival in the Brazilian town of Rio Grande Do Sul was opened with a screening of amateur videos from YouTube, showing groups and individuals performing the dance.<sup>13</sup> This example shows particularly well how camera phone videos produced in local contexts and uploaded onto the WWW take on importance in a shared, obviously local reception situation.

Both examples from the entertainment industry have in common that they point to the re-medialization and re-appropriation of a phenomenon that appears to not only affect everydaylife but also the fields of economy. Jenkins describes it as a feature of today’s convergence culture that, under the portents of blurred technical boundaries and the ubiquity of digital technology in everyday life, there is not only a shifting of the lines between different communications systems and different ways of accessing media content—the relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture are also becoming increasingly complex (Jenkins 2006, 243).

As in comparable viral productions (e.g. the video for the song “Gangnam Style” by the South Korean rapper “Psy” in 2012, Holfelder/Ritter 2015, 65-72), the “Nossa Nossa” performances are typical in that they reproduce a number of different familiar and persistent practices of media appropriation.

Firstly, filming oneself using a camera phone can be seen as an extension of the practice of photographing oneself. Even before the making of camera phone videos emerged in youth culture, visual self-documentation using camera phones (and in part with digital cameras or webcams) was an established youth practice.<sup>14</sup> The much

improved camera technology and the online connectivity of digital devices have made a decisive contribution to the emergence and persistence of stock posing and gesturing for the camera as a widespread form to mediate self-exploration and form community (“Vergemeinschaftung”). Popular culture personalities (stars, models, etc.) from fashion magazines or music videos serve as an inspiration and (implicit or explicit) template for photographed and—now—filmed reenactments (Ritter 2010, 112).

Secondly, the ubiquity of mobile camera technology in everyday life has expanded the possibilities of mediated appropriation to include the dimensions of sound and movement. But such practices of the imitation and audiovisual documentation of filmed sequences using camera phones or webcams also refer to existing, albeit less widespread, youth culture practices. Such examples can be found in videos made (above all) by young people using VHS camcorders to reenact scenes from the blockbusters of the 1980s and 1990s (cf. Klinger 2011). Today it is the WWW and specifically YouTube where such “fan reenactments” are produced explicitly for a translocal online audience—as opposed to the VHS productions, which were made necessarily for the local peer group alone.<sup>15</sup>

Thirdly, popular media culture dance choreographies presented in mass media were imitated by teenagers and young adults years before the emergence of MTV (1981), YouTube (2005) or VEVO (2009) came to dominate everyday media culture. Already in the 1970s and 1980s, dance movies such as *Saturday Night Fever* (1977), *Staying Alive* (1983), and *Dirty Dancing* (1987) inspired young people worldwide to mimic the dance moves of their idols in discotheques and at private parties to brighten their day-to-day lives with the codes of “disco glamour.”<sup>16</sup> However, it is only with the proliferation of mobile and convergent recording devices that such performances have led to the widespread appropriation that includes not only the reception but also the production and distribution of content by “media amateurs” (Regener/Köppert 2013).<sup>17</sup> Today, countless videos can be found on the WWW in which women and men from around the world and in all kinds of situations perform choreographies taken from music videos.

## **Case Studies: Modes of Appropriation in Everyday Use of ICT and Camera Technology**

### *Recoding*

Our empirical study on the youth culture use of mobile phone-produced videos reveals that temporal and spatial transition zones are important sites for the collective production of camera phone videos. This seems to indicate the importance of local contexts, not only as social spaces but also as spatial and technological environments for media production. Making camera phone videos is a way to appropriate and negotiate such spaces through creative processes. The example shown in Figure 3 reveals how social actors can redefine monofunctional spaces (Marc Augé speaks of “non places”, cf. Augé 1995) such as the stairwell through audio-visual documentation

and representation and make them part of their own, youth culture narrative. At the same time, the intimate character of the sexualized "Nossa Nossa" dance offers an opportunity to recode the occupied (public) space as a quasi-private space.

It is not only the venue, but also the timing of the presentation that is recoded by means of dancing and filming. Teenagers in European countries spend a great deal of time traveling by public transportation to school or work, but also in public spaces during breaks, especially in urban areas (Holfelder/Ritter 2015, 81-82). The example of the girls dancing in the stairwell comes from Switzerland, where teenage pupils are not obliged to spend their lunch break on the school premises. As the producer of the camera phone video mentioned in a short interview during the ethnographic fieldwork, the clip of the dancing in the stairwell was recorded at a location near their school during a break.

If every sphere of life is permeated by the invocation of creativity, as Reckwitz suggests, this includes life in temporal and spatial transition zones such as those between school and leisure. The entire filming situation marks a contrast to the social factory of "school" to which the young women had to return a few minutes later. This is no coincidence: dance movies from the disco era to the present day and many music videos represent dancing as a way to escape the everyday drudgery of work and family life – and as a way to "pull oneself out of the swamp by one's own hair" (Kusser 2013, 19). Speaking about 1980s dance movie "Flashdance", Astrid Kusser has examined how the protagonists even need to dance, so as not to succumb to everyday depression (59). However, as opposed to this powerful narrative of the manic dancer in cinema, the act of dancing is not only about escaping from the structures of work, school or family. Moreover, it can be interpreted as embedded in the post-Fordist economics of self-aestheticization. According to this understanding, the mentioned practices of dance and film can be understood as a form of immaterial work in the sense set out by Maurizio Lazzarato (1998) and Toni Negri and Michael Hardt (2000), referring to the post-Fordist work paradigm. According to Michel Foucault, the performance in front of the camera phone can be understood as a technology of the self, which allows the individual to work on its subjectivity (Holfelder 2014). At the same time, they network and thereby carry out communicative, creative and emotional work—skills and abilities which are of vital importance in the cognitive capitalism diagnosed by Yann Moulier-Boutang (2012) and can be incorporated directly into processes of value creation. The example highlights not only how such undefined situations in particular offer opportunities for creative practices of appropriation and self-aestheticization, but also the fact that the mobility and technical convergence of camera phones predestines them to be used in transitional situations. In this case, the aestheticization and medialization of everyday communication is revealed as two closely related aspects of blurred technical and cultural boundaries.

#### *Self-discovery*

Other modes of recoding can also be seen in "Nossa Nossa" videos presented on



YouTube, namely those in which (scantly clad) young women dance for the camera in their still childishly decorated bedrooms. Performances like this can be seen as part of adolescent self-discovery in which young men and women claim aspects of body and gender discourses for their identity constructions and test the aesthetic potential of their bodies.<sup>18</sup> The relation of sexual and popular culture codes in these videos can be described as very ambivalent; the sexual connotations of both dance and song lyrics are at the core of why young women and men around the world imitate the dance. For women as for men, the mixture of lascivious (feminine) movements and the aggressive (masculine) movements of simulated coitus allows them to explore the body codes of the respective opposite sex and to negotiate their own gender identity. Following Johan Huizinga's conception of "Homo ludens," such playing with gender and identity has an "aim in itself" and is "accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary life'" (Huizinga 1980, 28). But the popular culture framing of the dance is important as well in that it allows outside recipients (i.e. on the WWW) to properly decode the representations of the sexualized body and to situate them in a transcultural, popular context.

Identifying the performance as a reenactment of a specific media model is also important to identify the creative effort of the media amateurs. For this to occur, the original dance moves from the Michel Teló video must remain recognizable for the audience. This becomes clear when a protagonist in a "Nossa Nossa" video reprimands another dancer for straying away from the predetermined choreography, accosting them: "you're doing it wrong!"<sup>19</sup> In this situation, the possibility to immediately view the joint product on the mobile phone display or on a PC allows for an immediate discussion and evaluation of the performance.

It becomes clear that not the translocal (virtual) but the local spatial, social, and technical situation dictates whether and how hegemonic codes are negotiated through the use of digital ICT and camera technology. Practices of construction and negotiation of identity take place less "online" than they do "offline" in local social environments. In view of such examples, it appears that the idea of the WWW as a "significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life" (Turkle 1995, 180) is not being maintained—or at least needs to be specified.

### *Stereotyping*

The videos we found on YouTube also emphasize how the decoding of the "Nossa Nossa" dance in the anonymous environment of the Internet is dominated by its interpretation as a sexualized act. Michael Strangelove describes such ambivalent threads of empowerment and stereotyping as typical of the production, circulation and consumption of sexually explicit material on the WWW – not only in terms of the (female) body but also in terms of the sexualization of private spaces, which are being "redefined as sites of sexual pleasure" (Strangelove 2011, 87). Strangelove writes about new modes of amateur erotic performance that represent both "acts of subjugation



and moments of individual liberation through bodily pleasure" (87). An example is a camera phone video uploaded in 2011 by a female user calling herself KathyCostta entitled "Ai se eu te pego – Michel Teló (Katty, Aroa, Albyta)" (Fig. 4).<sup>20</sup> According to the personal details given on YouTube and Facebook, the video was made by a woman living in Spain, where it was also filmed. It shows KathyCostta together with two friends merrily performing and filming the "Nossa Nossa" dance in a bedroom.



Figure 4. Presenting their bodies for the camera's gaze (screenshot from YouTube)

However, here too it can be seen that for an analysis of the practices in the "Nossa Nossa" phenomenon, the country in which the youngsters live and their nationality are far less important than the immediate social context. Like most "Nossa Nossa" reenactments staged in private rooms, KathyCostta's video was not primarily made to gain attention of an actual audience on the internet, but instead was intended to be a fun and playful social act. Patricia Lange describes such videos, which are characteristic of YouTube, as "videos of affinity," that are typically:

...not targeted nor read as necessarily containing material for general audiences. They typically interest delineated groups of people who wish to participate and remain connected socially in some way to the videomaker. The content of such a video is

often not original or interesting, although it certainly can be. Often the content is stereotypical, spontaneous and contains numerous in-jokes and references that many general viewers would not understand in the way creators intended (Lange 2009, 73).

The video was viewed more than twelve million times, rated over 25,000 times (of which 22,423 were positive) and commented on more than 7,000 times (as of January 2016). However, the popularity of the video is not based on “in-jokes” and “references” that only the involved protagonists understand (such as the witty moderation at the beginning of the video). Rather, the decidedly (hetero-)normative character of production plays a much greater role, as witnessed in the numerous comments that explicitly refer to the sexual attractiveness of the dancing girls (i.e. “The one on the left moves so SEXY <3,” or “Thumbs up if you got a boner!!”).<sup>21</sup> Other comments posted by both male and female users analyze the practices, intentions or emotions of the actors (“Girl on the left is a ‘perfect 10’, good choice not to wear glasses. That way reflects her full beauty”)<sup>22</sup> or criticize them:

Bitches listen... 1. the one in the middle is like ,bitches do it right’ and ,im all it’ 2. the one on the right is like ,im so gourgeous and hot and every guy is gonna fuck me’ 3. the one on the left is the only normal one shes cute too but try harder but the picture and the end.. i love it <3 [sic]<sup>23</sup>

Today, several duplicates of this video can be found on YouTube, in part with new names that refer directly to the sexual reading of the video, like the video titled “Ai se eu te pego - Sexy Chicks Dance” uploaded by a German user.<sup>24</sup> In January 2012 even a Facebook page was opened dedicated exclusively to the YouTube video by KathyCostta. This page also demonstrates the ambivalent relationship between social life and self-representation. On the one hand, the associated text suggests that—as mentioned above—the protagonists are primarily interested in the experience of dancing and filming together (“Espero que todavía encontrar tiempo para hacer un video de baile”; English = “I hope I still find time to make another dance video”).<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, KathyCostta formulates the text to meet the expectations of her potential audience (“Me alegra mucho que te guste mi video”; English = “I’m so glad you liked my video”).<sup>26</sup> That the video is embedded in a social economy of user numbers, comments, “likes” and “dislikes” is revealed by a young male from a vocational school whom we showed the video during an interview:

This is not just any moment, they recorded it so that they could post it on Facebook, that they get “likes” and that people write to them. Yes, they look good. But it is purely for attention. It’s not a spur of the moment thing, a snapshot. This is simply a staged situation that they do only for Facebook or whatever.<sup>27</sup>

The examples presented here seem to confirm the feminist film critique of Mulvey and others that the camera’s gaze is a male gaze on the female body (cf. Mulvey 1975). On the whole, it appears that global knowledge about the body and gender in the

transcultural "interpretive communities" (Fish 1980) of the WWW tends to sustain and not challenge stereotypical gender roles. This underlines again the manner in which existing (persistent) cultural practices from the "offline" world are intensified (recombined) "online". Paradigmatic for this process is another example collected on YouTube, showing a "machinima" (Fig. 5). Machinima are animated graphic representations of people, objects, landscapes and architecture that can be reproduced within the structure of computer games, in this case within the virtual world from "Second Life". Media scholar Phylis Johnson describes machinima as "a form of cinematic expression that documents life within virtual spaces." (Johnson 2012, 4).



Figure 5. Gender stereotypes in the virtual reality of Second Life (screenshot from YouTube)

The video shows two very stereotypical female figures with bare legs clad in tutus and boots dancing to Michel Teló's hit song.<sup>28</sup> The representation of bodies in images is always accompanied by practices of reduction of the visible, which is a necessity of image technology (c.f. Silverman 1997, 144). But this is all the more the case when it comes to images that do not simply represent some form of "reality" outside the image (like a photograph or a film) but are in their entirety a technical reconstruction, as is the case with machinima. While the opportunity presents itself here to use the aesthetic transgressions and medial discrepancies between model and image to undermine stereotypical identity models and deconstruct traditional ways of looking at the (female) body, such forms of resistances to hegemonic images of the body are rare in the machinimas. Nudity, idealized figures and overly revealing clothing are typical of female game characters, sustaining stereotyped and sexualized ideals that Karen Dill et al. summarize as "beautiful, busty, scantily clad sex objects" (Dill et al 2008, 1402). As in the example discussed, machinima are often converted into video files and uploaded

on video sharing platforms to make them accessible to the machinima community. In this context, too, the choice of a well-known popular cultural motif and the sexualizing modulation of the dancing bodies can be interpreted: the machinima sequence is not only intended to show the producer's technical, creative and dramaturgical skills to the community—it must also be able to affect the audience and generate attention.

### *Appropriation of technology*

The examples discussed above have shown that technical devices such as smartphones play a dual role in the appropriation of the “Nossa Nossa” dance. On the one hand, they allow for the documentation of a performance and its direct reception and communication. Our interviews suggest that camera phones, but especially the act of filming itself, is less about documentation and memory as it is about the production of a social situation through the timely sharing and negotiation of experience within the peer group. Whether and in what form these videos actually are shared and negotiated in the Social Web or through mobile applications such as WhatsApp, or whether they remain on mobile phones or personal computers (as among the young people we spoke to), seems to be secondary for the social dimension of the act of filming. Evidently, for the young people it is more important to have the ability to do so, if they feel the need to do so (Holfelder/Ritter 2015, 31-33). Dutch media scholar José van Dijck notes the social importance of this timely negotiation of everyday images in the youth culture context. A younger generation, she writes, “seems to increasingly use digital cameras for ‘live’ communication instead of storing pictures of ‘life’” (van Dijck 2008, 58).

On the other hand, the “live” communication mentioned by van Dijck requires—aside from technical skills and digital literacies—the availability of the technology to record, play, watch and share video in a mobile and spontaneous way. Through their medial and technological foundation, the everyday situations of young people can be experienced in a more intensified form. A possible image or video always in mind, their bodies, practices and environments are perceived and evaluated from the perspective of an imagined audience. The appropriation of camera technology here also means to charge ordinary situations with extraordinary narrative meanings and integrating them into the construction of identity.

Against this backdrop, a cultural and media studies analysis is interested in how the appropriation of technology is inscribed in the context of aesthetic artefacts. This can be seen for example in the (often uncut) camera phone videos, when the filmed protagonists move towards and away from the recording device in order to start or stop the recording or the accompanying music, as illustrated in Figure 6.



Figure 6. Every step on video: a girl moves towards the camera to stop the recording (screenshot)

But these short sequences at the beginning or the end of the videos reveal not only the technical conditions of film production. They also encode the videos as non-professional productions in which such “irritants” are permitted. This suggests again that the producer’s focus is more on the adequate reenactment of the dance and less on the aesthetic, formal or technical qualities of the videos. Visible and audible in the examples is also how various technical devices and function are combined situationally. Figure 4 shows how a camera phone is used to record KathyCostta and her friends dancing while the music video by Michel Teló is being played on the PC in the background. This medial co-presence of global popular culture role models and their local reenactment can be seen as typical of the medial appropriation of popular culture.

As we have demonstrated, the possibilities of digital ICT communication do not necessarily lead to new, but to altered modes of appropriation. Rebekkah Willet describes the consumer citizens in the WWW as individuals who “consume as a way of marking their identity and form their identities in relation to what is on offer, but they also resist and create new consumer cultures” (Willet 2008, 55) The possibilities available to appropriate and create “culture” may have grown in the digital age, but Willet’s analysis also refers to relationships of resistance and creativity in everyday life, which were already outlined by the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies for youth and subcultural practices in the 1970s. From a cultural media and technology studies approach, it is less important which ICT communication practices can be identified as “new” – more important is how new and existing practices come together at the intersection between technical, aesthetic and social processes, and which specific situative potentials can be developed through this. Taking that into consideration, this



paper is to be seen as a contribution towards describing the current socio-cultural and socio-technical change on an empirical basis and in the sense of a cultural anthropology oriented towards contemporary societies.

## Conclusions

Starting from the examples discussed in this paper, we derived a model to understand the relationship between persistence and recombination on the level of today's media practices. On the one hand, the examples reveal how the appropriation of global media content extends the radius of youth cultural social relationships and how the use of ICT and camera technology can lead to (new) forms of social empowerment. On the other hand, it became evident how young adults negotiate and criticize, but simultaneously refashion and fortify, stereotypes of (female) bodies and gender roles. However, it is not only the relationship of persistence and recombination that is characterized by tensions and contradictions but also the correlation of the global and local dimensions of the discussed "Nossa Nossa" phenomenon. Regarding the idea of a collective and transcultural body of knowledge about images, bodies, and practices that is mediated by internet communication, our examples reveal that, rather than forming a critical "collective intelligence" in the WWW, hegemonic symbols and narratives are preserved and persist. If at all, it is more on the local level of everyday media culture where the collaborative production and consumption of camera phone videos actually leads to different and—sometimes—even new (youth cultural) meanings.

## Notes

1. Interview with E.B. (21 years of age), Baden (Switzerland), February 20, 2013.
2. As argued by media scholar Irina Rajewsky, the effect potential of media practices is to be found in how media boundaries and differences are dealt with. The notion of media boundaries, Rajewsky says, should be rethought and the borders or "border zones" between media should be understood "as enabling structures, as spaces in which we can test and experiment with a plethora of different strategies" (Rajewsky 2010, 65).
3. The socio-technical potential of internet und digital communication can be described as the sum of options for enabling or preventing individual, independent action (Schönberger 2007, 203 and Schönberger 2015, 205).
4. "Agency" is described by Fiske as "[t]he notion [...] that people can recognize their social interests, not necessarily articulate them, not necessarily be fully conscious of them, and can also work to promote those interests" (Müller 1993).
5. On the enabling potential of digital ICT and camera technology in popular culture and hegemonic media contents cf. Ritter 2014 and Ritter 2017.
6. Cf. more generally Schönberger 2015, English version to be published in 2017.
7. The project was realised by Christian Ritter and Ute Holfelder under the supervision of Thomas Hengartner (University of Zurich) and Klaus Schönberger (Zurich University of the Arts, now University of Klagenfurt).
8. GfK Entertainment: "600.000 Verkäufe: Michel Teló legt Download-Rekord hin," accessed January 22, 2016, <http://www.gfk-entertainment.com/news/600000-verkaeufe-michel->

- telo-legt-download-rekord-hin/2026-600000-verkaeufe-michel-telo-legt-download-rekord-hin.html.
9. "Michel Teló - Ai Se Eu Te Pego - Video Oficial (Assim você me mata)." YouTube video, 2:45. Posted by "Michel Teló," July 25, 2011. Accessed January 22, 2016, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hcm55IU9knw>.
  10. "Bastidores - Santos 1 x 0 Cruzeiro." YouTube video, 7:05. Posted by "Santos Futebol Clube," September 13, 2011. Accessed January 22, 2016, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BwdNHJQjyH8>.
  11. "'Ai Se Eu Te Pego' - Dance Routine Tutorial." YouTube video, 1:17. Posted by "MichelTeloUK," August 9, 2012. Accessed January 22, 2016, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6OcJMeMmaI>.
  12. "Fifa 13 nosa nosa." YouTube Video, 1:39. Posted by: "dieviedeomacher," November 29, 2011. Accessed January 22, 2016, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eko6lzhNlwQ>.
  13. "Michel Teló - Ai Se Eu Te Pego - (Planeta Atlântida) 03/02/2012." YouTube Video (no longer available).
  14. The bodily imitation and medial documentation of people, objects and ideas in images has from the very beginnings of photography been part of the development of (audio-)visual media. Artists, private citizens and various kinds of associations hired photographers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries to document staged scenes and tableaux vivant – living imitations of artistic or historical motifs (cf. Jooss 1999 and Folie et al 2002).
  15. Today such youth culture productions can (still) be easily identified vis-à-vis professional industry productions on the basis of the quality of technical aesthetic factors such as lighting and resolution. Barbara Klinger says that "in keeping with the aesthetic possible via the phone cam and inexpensive digicams most YouTube performances and the mise en scène, photography and sound are low quality," (Klinger 2003, 203). Considering current developments in mobile phone camera technology up to 4K resolution, these differences are slowly losing their relevance.
  16. These disco classics remain favourite dance motifs for flash mobs in countries around the globe, as a random search in YouTube shows.
  17. Susanne Regner and Katrin Köppert use the term "media amateur" (German: "Medienamateur") ex negativo to describe non-professional media producers, particularly on the WWW (Regener/Köppert 2013, 12).
  18. On adolescent gender performance on the Social Web cf. Schär 2013.
  19. Video collected on 12 May 2011 in Zurich (Switzerland) courtesy of Y. E., 15 years of age.
  20. "Ai se eu te pego - Michel Teló (Katty, Aroa, Albyta)." YouTube Video, 3:07. Posted by "KathyCostta," October 27, 2011. Accessed January 22, 2016, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q0WZMBMWEx8>.
  21. Ibid.
  22. Ibid.
  23. Ibid.
  24. "Ai se eu te pego -Sexy Chicks Dance." YouTube Video, 3:07. Posted by "Harry Bäcker," January 22, 2012. Accessed January 22, 2016, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDOH4K13CQ8>.
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## Green Jesus of Azeroth:

### Hero Myths and Fan Based Perceptions of Similarities Between Jesus of Nazareth and the *World of Warcraft's* 'Thrall'

A. Asbjørn Jøn

University of Canterbury  
New Zealand

#### Abstract

*Blizzard Entertainment's World of Warcraft includes a range of deep intertextual links. In exploring those links, as part of the fandom process, fans have widely developed a perception of similarities between Warcraft's character, Thrall, and Jesus of Nazareth from Christian faiths. Links between Thrall and Jesus have become so widely recognised, and openly acknowledged in fan discussions of Warcraft lore, that Thrall has been renamed 'Green Jesus' by the fan base. This paper explores those perceived links and considers some influences on the creative processes of Chris Metzen (the original Creative Director for the game) that may shed light on this perceived use of Jesus-like character types while exploring the ways that they may also represent links to Indo-European Hero Patterns and the elementary ideas of mythic archetypes.*

#### Key Words

*World of Warcraft; Thrall; Jesus of Nazareth; Virtual Worlds; MMORPG; hero; hero pattern; fandom; comparative mythology;*

It would seem that mythological worlds have been built up only to be shattered again, and that new worlds were built from the fragments. (Boas 1898, 18)

**B**lizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft* includes a range of deep intertextual links and borrowings that cover themes such as: popular culture, tributes to historical figures, and, mythological symbols, motifs and archetypal formulas / patterns. In engaging with that highly mythicized content, fans have interpreted and analyzed the role that it plays within the *Warcraft* plot and mythos, as well as the way that it adds depth to the setting—fleshing-out the creatively crafted cultures within it—, while helping to shape a shared interpretation of the central characters and plot. Among those shared interpretations lays fan based perceptions of similarities between the *Warcraft* 'hero' and non-player character, Thrall, and Abrahamic mythology's central protagonist, Jesus of Nazareth. Perceived links between Thrall and Jesus have become so widely recognised and openly acknowledged by the fanbase that in unofficial discussions of *Warcraft* lore Thrall has been renamed 'Green Jesus' (for examples see: Sinarda-Drak'Thul 2015, Orkling-Emerald Dream 2015, Ireken 2014). That use of the 'Green Jesus' name for Thrall is complex, often including negative or derogatory connotations—suggesting that, as a character, Thrall is too powerful and perfect.

Cultural Analysis 15.2 (2017): 82-106  
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Scholarly studies of *World of Warcraft*, and similar fantasy games, have most often focussed on aspects of: the social interactions between players (Bessi re, Seay, and Kiesler 2007, Williams et al. 2006, Chen 2009), an analysis of gamer subculture (J n 2010), and, aspects of the broad MMORPG phenomenon (Golub 2010, Smahel, Blinka, and Ledabyl 2008). This paper, however, sets out to explore connections in the tales of Thrall and Jesus, mapping the key overlapping elements that fan-led discussions of the Azeroth mythos and histories have identified, in order to present a case for deeper analysis of the way that the MMORPG blends elements of myth with creative story telling within the clothing of its twenty-first century interactive high fantasy setting through its stable narratives and uses of applied / adapted mythology.

In this way, the stable narratives of this ever-evolving game-world, and their links to folk narrative and mythic elements, are made central—positioning this study in an area of anthropology, game and folklore studies. This area of research is currently underrepresented and is much in need of scholarly attention so that our understanding of the intricacies of this form of applied and adapted mythology might be improved. Recent research into research methodologies for game studies, by Lankoski and Bj rk, has suggested that:

formal analysis [might] focus [...] on the different elements of a work, that is, asking questions about the elements that constitute the parts of the work and the role of each element in the composition as a whole. (Lankoski and Bj rk 2015a, 24)

Further, in keeping with the themes and content of this study, Lankoski and Bj rk noted that key sources for this style of analysis might include, and methodologies might mirror: Frazer’s comparative study of religion and magic in *The Golden Bough* (1983), ‘Campbell’s [significant] monomyth theory’ (Lankoski and Bj rk 2015a, 24)—as outlined in his text on the Hero Pattern, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1968), and Propp’s (1968) analysis of folktale morphology. Those prompts, particularly around Campbell (1968), provide an ideal climate for investigation of the hero pattern within the stable narratives of high fantasy MMORPG games.

The most exhaustive commentary of this particular topic, to date, was presented by Kenzuki, as a 373 word online bulletin board post titled: ‘Thrall is Jesus: A Study of the Orcish Messiah’. Kenzuki’s discussion piece was posted on the 18th of August 2007 in the ‘WarCraft Lore Discussion’ section of the *Scrolls of Lore Forums* (Kenzuki 2007). While Kenzuki was very insightful in the scope of connections presented in that initial analysis, the brevity of it has meant that the suggested similarities were unable to be explained or examined. This discussion will, in part, explore Kenzuki’s claims, and provide information about the way they relate to the narratives of Abrahamic mythology.

Many of the concepts and arguments noted by Kenzuki are, based upon the present writer’s many years of participant observation in the *Warcraft* community, theories that predate his post considerably. They are so widely recognised, and openly acknowledged in fan discussions of *Warcraft* lore, that in 2012 Fenton posted on the official Blizzard Entertainment forums that ‘when [as a Warcraft enthusiast] you read

the words “Green Jesus” you immediately know what they mean’ (Fenton-Dream Killer 2012). As such, several of the directly comparative points that are presented here are based upon collectively fan developed theories, and general conjectures, that are at times espoused - usually with no supporting evidence - within the ‘trade chat’ live discussions and forums of many *World of Warcraft* servers / websites.

Discussion will begin with an exploration of myth, and then the way in which similarities between Thrall and Jesus dovetail with what scholars refer to as the Indo-European hero pattern—a similarity not mentioned in fan discussions at all. The hero pattern is a theme that has been discussed by scholars of Folklore and Anthropology for decades now, sparking from the work of significant early studies (Raglan 1934, 1936, Rank 1909) which followed the pattern being proposed in J. G. von Hahn’s *Sagwissenschaftliche Studien* (1876, 340). Initially however, “the [... pattern] made very little stir in scholarly circles. In Germany and on the continent generally it was rarely commented upon” (Taylor 1964, 116). The most important early use of the Formula outside those core studies was by Nutt (1881), who contributed significantly to the way that we now interpret some events within its cycle. Since being adopted by scholars such as the highly influential folklorist Dundes (1976), and anthropologist / religious studies scholar Campbell (1968), the pattern has gained much wider acceptance (Nagler 1974, Connelly and Massie 1989, Olson 1989, Mbele 1982). After identifying the way that core events surrounding Thrall fit with the hero pattern—and the way that Dundes interprets that pattern through Jesus—the specific events recognized by Kenzuki and the fan base will be treated in greater detail.

It is important to recognize, and understand, the connections between Thrall and Jesus as they allow deeper insight into the structure and workings of the stable narratives of the game setting. Through that understanding, we can better see the way that individual narrative elements, across a broad web of stories, have shifted forms from traditional religious associations in the everyday settings to plot motifs within high fantasy digital worlds. That progression illustrates an example of religious folk motifs evolving as shifts take place within society.

## Mythic structures

Individual myths, whether modern (such as the myths of Thrall) or traditional (such as the myths of Jesus), are socially and culturally located stories that explain natural and / or social forces. In that way, myths function as tools for their societies, allowing people to engage with a common understanding of the expectations of a society, and the way that society understands built and natural environments. Those environments can include elements that are: geographic, material, sociological, cosmological, or even virtual. Therefore, a strong interrelation exists between myth and constructed social reality (Malinowski 1954)—particularly when a myth is considered as part of a mythos. A mythos, is a set of such myths, which collectively tell the mythic stories of a particular group, society or religion - with mythoi being the plural of mythos. Then, through analysing the aesthetic of a mythos—and the common ideas within it, we

might come to “a description of the life, social organisation and religious ideas and practices of a people [...] as it appears in their mythology” (Boas and Tate 1916, 320) in an ethnographic sense—and that ‘people’ can be applied equally forcefully to both real world geographic communities and subcultural groups formed within virtual spaces (such as the *World of Warcraft*). Operating inside those mythic stories however, are a series of archetypes:

In abandoning the search for a constantly accurate picture of ethnographic reality in myth, [and focussing on deeper levels of meaning such as those of archetypes and structural patterns,] we gain, on occasions, a means of reaching unconscious categories. (Lévi-Strauss 1976, 172-173)

Joseph Campbell, extending the work of Carl Jung (1962), explained that “archetypes [...] are the common ideas of myth” (Campbell and Moyers 1991, 60)—or what might be considered mythic building blocks. Those core elements within myths, archetypes, ‘are biologically grounded. [...] All over the world, and at different times of human history, these archetypes, or elementary ideas, have appeared in different costumes” (Campbell and Moyers 1991, 60-61)—taking forms that match the needs and aesthetics of the cultures and societies that ‘spin them’ into mythic stories that construct intangible, cultural, layers of meaning upon all aspects of the human experience and environment. So “the differences in the costumes are [just] the results of environment and historical conditions” (Campbell and Moyers 1991, 61).

As the elementary, and even biological elements of myth, archetypes are thought to be very ancient—perhaps even pre-dating language (Cassirer 1957), which according to Jung exist in their most pure form within a ‘collective unconscious’. Therefore, myth can be considered “as a ‘language’ which, properly understood, will tell us things otherwise un-revealed” (Ryan 1973, 51). Further, scholars of folkloristics have discussed and developed a theoretical framework for understanding myth and folklore in terms of biological metaphors for some decades (Hafstein 2005).

Archetypal patterns, or stories, are then stories that are typical representations of those core archetypes—and which can access and stir those deep elementary, or even biological, ideas within readers / listeners who engage with them. This is not to suggest, however, that the patterns, and their corresponding archetypes and myths, are universal. Myths are clearly linked to, and have adapted or evolved because of, cultural and geographic environments. While they include elementary archetypal ideas, which scholars have identified as including biological elements, those elements have clearly been shaped by evolutionary processes based upon geographic settings and cultural factors just as other aspects of variation between human groups have.

Consequently, “archetypal patterns endure because they give expression to perennial dilemmas submerged in the collective unconscious” (Pratt 1981, 220) of those which they are culturally and / or geographically relevant to. As Joseph Campbell has noted, ‘it used to be that these stories [religious myths and their archetypes] were in the minds of people’ (Campbell and Moyers 1991, 2)—but as Western societies have moved towards a lesser engagement with religion, more modern archetypal stories



and myths, such as the tales of Thrall, have become an increasingly common way for people to engage with, and communicate, archetypal / mythic motifs. Structural analysis has shown that hero patterns form one of those archetypal elements that exist within myths, and which are found across mythoi.

### **How readers of the *World of Warcraft* engage with myth**

*World of Warcraft*, as a text, is presented as a persistent world MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game)—drawing on, and often trail-blazing, conventions for that genre. This means that players enter a world that carries on developing even when they are not playing the game, adding to the immersive properties of their experience. They can take part in just a few events of the stories of that world, or in most of them—depending only upon the amount of time that they can dedicate to the game and the level of skill with which they play. Within that format, players take on the role of a ‘hero’. Their hero starts with a reasonably mundane life then develops skills and powers to the point that they can not only help shape world events, but come to interact with and do combat against the very elements and divine beings of their world and beyond. Throughout those adventures, player’s characters remain closely linked to the region of their origin, and not only represent it in wars and conflicts, but are responded to with honorifics at times by the citizens and troops of that faction (such as ‘commander’ or ‘hero’).

Scholars such as Krzywinska have noted (2005, 3) that when we analyse that process in terms of anthropological theory it becomes clear that we are looking at a game system that provides players with an opportunity to enact the notion of the hero myth / pattern. Joseph Campbell wrote extensively about the mythological structures associated with hero tales, explaining that within their formulaic structure:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (Campbell 1968, 30)

Consequently, the experiences of the player, and his/her level of immersion within the game, is intertwined tightly with his/her engagement with the mythicization of his character and the development of his/her exploring this recrafting of mythic hero narratives to shape an interactive experience within the clothing of a modern high fantasy virtual world and society.

Bringing further depth to that textual structure, and the way that players experience it, *Warcraft* provides not only detailed histories for the regions of the game world (Azeroth), but also distinct cultures and religious traditions for the denizens of each of region within that virtual world. Cultures and traditions are varied, and their respective myth / legend hordes are crafted in keeping with the accepted notion that religions / mythologies are a response to both natural and built environments.



Figure 1. The monument to the defeat of Deathwing in Stormwind.

This is established through clear links between the mythic content of regions and their geographic, material and social features—demonstrating an adaptive example of Eliade’s argument that through myth man is able to ‘transform the landscape of nature into a cultural milieu’ (Eliade 1963, 140). Consequently each player ‘hero’ is able to engage not only with the broader structures of heroic myth, but also with the notion that their legendary / mythic actions can influence the way that all residents within the virtual world view / interpret the natural landscape—as their actions, at crucial plot points, can have real consequences for both societies and landscapes.

As an example of the way that each player ‘hero’ could shape the landscape, during the *Cataclysm* expansion Patch 4.3 (Blizzard Entertainment 2010), the residents of Azeroth (essentially all players and a range of plot characters) were encouraged to band together to fight the dragon Deathwing—who was threatening to rip the world asunder. The finale for that sequence of events was a ‘raid’, or group based challenge, called the Dragon Soul. In the Dragon Soul raid players were able to finally defeat Deathwing and free Azeroth of his influence. After Deathwing had been defeated on a *Warcraft* server a monument to his defeat appeared on the edge of the capital city for the player’s faction, to forever commemorate that victory. Another example being the direct actions of each player ‘hero’ leading to an individual garrison being constructed to aid in their hero-arc during the *Warlords of Draenor* (Blizzard Entertainment 2014) game expansion.

Arguably, the relationship between *Warcraft*’s player-centred hero-arc structure, and the place of Thrall within the broadly experienced stable narratives Azeroth, drives the in-game dynamics which have led to the ‘Green Jesus’ name and a set of negative connotations that surround it. This is as while each player is immersed in the process of developing an individualized hero arc for their character, the stable narratives continually implant Thrall in their stories, positioning him as a more powerful hero. In that way, the label of ‘Green Jesus’, as a derogatory term, can be seen to reflect Thrall’s near perfect role as a hero within the narratives of the game setting. Thrall is, in the eyes of many players, a plot character that appears too frequently (Brans 2012, Nihlus-Khadgar 2015), and like Jesus, one who can be interpreted as a sign of miraculous events that will lead to salvation for all. Consequently, the term ‘Green Jesus’ also indicates a general feeling that Thrall is too perfect, and perhaps over-powered (Volkán 2011). Therefore, through developing a better understanding of Thrall, and the structures and web of stories which drive his perceived connections to Jesus, we can unpack the way that players perceive their virtual setting and interactions with the hero pattern.

### **Thrall and the Hero Pattern within the *Warcraft* MMORPG**

Hence the hypothesis: what if patterns showing affinity, instead of being considered in succession, were to be treated as one complex pattern and read globally? (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 432)

There is, as yet, no single, agreed, Indo-European hero pattern—as the patterns proposed by the core studies all have some distinct differences in interpretation of

the sequence of events. Scholars have attempted to amalgamate patterns—such as Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1968)—but such approaches are often labelled as ‘a synthetic composite’ (Dundes 1976, 8) because they look primarily for broader parallels among the tale type. Consequently, when coming to work on the life of Jesus as a hero pattern, Dundes chose to engage with three major prior offerings: von Hahn (1876), Rank (1913—but originally published in 1909) and Raglan (1934)—a tactic that several scholars have since adopted. As Dundes noted, ‘it is difficult to compare the three patterns’ (Dundes 1976, 9)—and all three have particular merits and varying links to the Abrahamic Jesus myths. In applying Raglan’s pattern to Jesus however, Dundes was able to score 17 out of a possible 22 points for pattern matching events within the myths (Dundes 1976, 10)—providing the strongest parallel of those three patterns. The other patterns do however also provide an interesting spread of matches.

Drawing on the comparisons of hero patterns undertaken by Dundes (1976, 8-9), the following table outlines instances where the Thrall narratives fit within broader notions of the hero pattern—by providing matches to the patterns of von Hahn (1876), Rank (1909) and Raglan (1934). The table explores events 1 through 17 only, as events 18 to 22 of the hero pattern are set after the death of the hero—which has not yet occurred in the saga of Thrall. The life of Thrall fits closest to the hero pattern of Raglan—with 11 out of 17 possible events aligning. Notably however, there is only one event within the cycle, when drawing from all three versions of the hero pattern, where a match cannot be made—indicating that Thrall may represent a possible re-telling of the archetypal story of a hero. For many events in the sequence, Thrall’s life matches with more than one of the patterns. Therefore, noting links between the lives of Thrall, Jesus and these three interpretations of hero patterns, not only allows for a structured comparison of Thrall and Jesus, but also opens the possibility that similarities may in fact be the product of influence and engagement with the mythic symbols, iconography and archetypes of the hero pattern, instead of just representing borrowings solely from Jesus myths.

### **The costumes of myth and variations in hero patterns**

In considering the life of Jesus as a representation of hero patterns, Dundes found “that the life of Jesus must be understood as a version, a very special version of the Indo-European Hero Pattern” (Dundes 1976, 30)—with the variations that make it a special version occurring due to the cultural and historical influences that contributed to shaping its mythic and folkloric content. Those variations are then, in essence, located in the way that the mythic narratives, symbols and archetypes, have been both assembled and included and / or omitted, as elementary ideas, in response to the context within which they were formed. Therefore, they represent an application of myth through which man was able to ‘transform the landscape of nature into a cultural milieu’ (Eliade 1963, 140)—with the landscape being not only the geological location, but also the material, social and political elements of a society.



**Table 1.** Hero Pattern events and links to the like of Thrall<sup>1</sup>

Event #	Hero pattern matching Thrall.	Event.	How it applies to Thrall.	Dundes' match for Jesus with Raglan's pattern (1976, 10).
1	Rank (1909)	Child of distinguished parents.	Durotan and Draka ruled the Frostwolf Clan (of Orcs).	'Virgin mother'—matched.
2	Rank (1909) Raglan (1934)	Father is a king. Father is a king.	Durotan was the Chieftain of the Frostwolf Clan.	No match listed. However we might here consider the Abrahamic 'God' as the King of heaven.
3	No direct matches.			No match listed. In Von Hahn's pattern though event 3 is 'father is a god'—a definite match.
4	Von Hahn (1876)	Prophecy of ascendance.	During <i>Warcraft 3</i> (Blizzard Entertainment 2002) a prophecy of Thrall's ascendance to power is introduced. This however happens out of sequence as Thrall was already an adult—but not yet the leader of the Horde.	'Unusual conception'—matched.
5	Von Hahn (1876)	Hero abandoned.	Thrall was indirectly abandoned, alone in the woods as a babe, due to the murder of his parents.	'Hero reputed to be son of god'—matched.
6	Von Hahn (1876) Rank (1909) Raglan (1934)	Suckled by animals. Saved by animals or lowly people. Attempt (usually by father) to kill hero.	While not an animal per say, Thrall was suckled by a human woman—which is another species. While not lowly, Thrall was saved after being left for dead in the woods, by the human commander Aedelas Blackmoore. Thrall was left for dead, as a babe, in the woods to be eaten by animals after an attack on his family by assassins.	'Attempt to kill hero'—matched.



7	Rank (1909) Raglan (1934)	Suckled by female animal or humble woman. Hero spirited away.	Thrall was suckled by a humble human woman— which is another species. Thrall is taken away to the internment camps.	‘Hero spirited away [flight into Egypt]’ — matched.
8	Von Hahn (1876) Raglan (1934)	Is high spirited. (Nutt (1881, 2) interprets this point as ‘is of passionate and violent disposition’.) Reared by foster parents in a far country.	As a child Thrall was trained as a gladiator— where he proved to be an excellent warrior. Thrall was reared by humans in an internment camp.	‘Reared by foster parents [Joseph]’ — matched.
9	Rank (1909)	Hero grows up.	Thrall grows to adulthood.	‘No details of childhood’ — matched.
10	Raglan (1934)	Goes to future kingdom.	Thrall travels to Kalimdor.	Matched.
11	Raglan (1934)	Is victor over king, giant, dragon or wild beast.	Thrall is victorious over the murloc armies of the Sea Witch while travelling to Kalimdor, and is victorious over a band of wild centaurs after arriving in Kalimdor. Thrall was also victorious over demonic beasts at the Battle of Mount Hyjal.	No match listed.
12	Von Hahn (1876) Rank (1909)	Founds cities. Acknowledged by people.	Thrall helps found Durotar in Kalimdor (named after his father) and the capital city Orgrimmar. The Trolls and the Tauren acknowledge Thrall as a great leader.	No match listed. Jesus would however match with Rank’s ‘acknowledged by people.’
13	Rank (1909) Raglan (1934)	Achieves rank and honors. Becomes king.	Thrall became the War Chief (read King) of the Horde.	‘Becomes king (cf. the mock title of “King of the Jews”)’ — matched.
14	Raglan (1934)	For a time he reigns uneventfully.	For three years Orgrimmar grew and there were only minor incidents.	Matched.

15	Raglan (1934)	He prescribes laws.	Thrall and Jania Proudmore set out a revolutionary Horde / Alliance peace treaty. This leads to increases in peace. Thrall also negotiates to bring Blood Elves into the Horde.	Matched.
16	Raglan (1934)	Later, he loses favour with gods or his subjects.	Thrall loses favour with other important Orcs, including Garrosh Hellscream—who challenges him to a duel.	‘Judas’—matched.
17	Raglan (1934)	Driven from the throne and city.	While a slightly tenuous link - due to world events Thrall leaves Orgrimmar and joins The Earthen Ring—a neutral faction of shaman who protect Azeroth with their powers.	Matched.

Like ranges of mythic symbols and archetypal patterns, to those found in the Jesus tales, appear within various cultures, geographical spaces and time periods. Similarities between those culturally diverse mythoi, which use like ranges of mythic symbols and archetypal patterns, allow the development of recognisable tale types (including hero patterns), despite significant aesthetic and stylistic differences between them. The mythoi do remain as individual and distinct bodies of expression. In some functional terms though, the aesthetic and stylistic differences primarily position them ethnographically within their own societies, spaces and temporal periods. In that way, these tales use archetypes and mythic symbols to connect with particular concepts in readers / listeners on an elementary, or fundamental, level—a level of communication that can be witnessed in mythologically adaptive fantasy texts such as those of the *Warcraft* franchise. Notably, we can also see in the *World of Warcraft* an adaptation of the way that myth transforms landscapes into cultural spaces—with the events of the Thrall hero tale interlocking neatly with a range of social and political elements of the game world in order to craft a more cohesive set of cultural narratives.

The versions of the hero tale that we see in the lives of both Jesus and Thrall then, following Campbell, are ones that represent the “environment and historical conditions” (Campbell and Moyers 1991, 61) within which they were assembled, while communicating the elementary ideas associated with the hero, and perhaps also the sage and mystic. In turn, modern neo-mythological retellings of the hero pattern which are arguably influenced by / remnant of the Jesus narratives (such as the story of Thrall), still simultaneously represent both: the costumes of their own ‘environment and historical conditions’, and, the influence of their mythic and / or archetypal inspirations. In this way the fan identified similarities and links between Jesus and

Thrall can be seen as identifications of links to the broader hero pattern, through an archetypal and symbolic language of myth—perhaps with the Jesus myths being the closest ‘analogue’, the most obvious inspiration and most evident likeness, to Thrall’s modern digital and high fantasy clothing of that mythic formula / pattern.

The notion of manipulating archetypes and symbols within digital worlds to construct engaging environments and personalities has been commented on by a range of scholars (Maffesoli 2008, Turner and Bidwell 2007). Stefik even argued that participants in digital worlds are able to *better* access inner archetypes, such as that of the adventurer (Stefik 1997)—one of the ‘hero’ tales that players engage with in the *World of Warcraft* exemplifies. Myth, mythic symbols and archetypes, continue to hold relevance and engage people in this way—as Xianglin notes:

‘In the modern and postmodern historical and cultural context, myth hides in our spiritual and cultural activities in various altered forms. Having evolved into a mythic form in the contemporary sense, it continues to play a powerful psychological role and to act as a midwife of conscious activities and forms.’ (Xianglin 2010, 111)

### **The role of Chris Metzen and an acknowledgement of using archetypes**

When analysing possible uses of mythic patterns and archetypes in the *World of Warcraft*, and links between Thrall and mythic figures such as Jesus, it is important to consider the position and mindset of key individuals in the development of the *Warcraft* mythos, such as Chris Metzen (born November 22, 1973). Metzen is employed as Blizzard Entertainment’s Senior Vice President of Story and Franchise Development. Duties that he has undertaken over the years have include: being the voice actor for Thrall, creating settings for games, being the Creative Director for *Warcraft 3* (Blizzard Entertainment 2002), and, contributing to the script-writing and character development for the *World of Warcraft*. Metzen is important to this discussion because of both: his influential role in shaping characters like Thrall, and, the way that he identifies his creative process—relating it to being something like re-arranging archetypes and mythic symbols.

Speaking about his influences, and the development of his creative processes, Metzen commented in 2008:

I loved D&D [*Dungeons & Dragons*—I loved the big worlds, the big spanning themes, the big epic quests, the unfolding settings with ancient civilizations and ancient secrets coming back to haunt the present. I loved all that. I love mythology. (Chris Metzen in: Brodnitz 2008)

He also explained:

I think we soak in content. We chew on it. We digest it. What are the bits of these themes or these characters or these places that strike the chords within us emotionally? And our job is to spew back into the world. Spin the archetypes, right? Sometimes it’s a matter of mixing and matching different archetypes. Sometimes it’s a matter of just

paring an idea down to its most naked truth. I think spinning ideas back out with our own spin on it is really where the magic comes from. It's not necessarily from the innovation, although that's very striking as well. But I bet if you tracked a lot of innovative ideas, they're born from two or three other things that that person had seen already. We all stand on the shoulders of titans. (Chris Metzen in: Brodnitz 2008)

Consequently, in the hybridized hero pattern of the life of Thrall—and its close similarities to the Jesus myth, there is quite arguably a Metzen “mixing and matching [of] different archetypes” and “spinning [those] ideas back out” after they were “born from two or three other things” (Chris Metzen in: Brodnitz 2008). On some levels Metzen's stated approach is reminiscent of the classical literary device, *contaminatio*, which respected scholars have noted in the creation of other mythological high fantasy texts for some decades (Ryan 1966, 57).

Further to that idea, within the realms of *Dungeons & Dragons*—which Metzen lists as a large influence - the borrowing and blending of religious archetypes is commonplace, and, the personalization of, and active interaction with, the myth-like hero tale is the core business of the experience. Placing that within a tighter frame, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* books like *Deities & Demigods* (Ward and Kuntz 1980) and *Legends & Lore* (Ward and Denning 1990) would arguably have played a significant role in shaping the thinking of a young Metzen's creative processes regarding the blending and re-shaping of archetypes to gamify traditional mythological elements. Those texts take a range of real world religions, deities and heroes, and then present ways that they can be transposed into high fantasy gaming experiences for *Dungeons & Dragons*—perhaps providing a springboard for Metzen's later work with mythic archetypes and patterns.

### **Around and beyond hero patterns—the parallels stressed by Kenzuki and the *Warcraft* fan community**

Turning now to the similarities highlighted by Kenzuki and the *Warcraft* fanbase—these fan led arguments most commonly begin with likenesses between the narratives that extend around Thrall's and Jesus' births. Both sets of birth tales connect to a series of early hero pattern events, including not only matches with the pattern events themselves, but also a range of other ways. Unpacking the way that fans perceive those similarities, and explaining them through evidence from the two sets of narratives—beyond just the overlaps within a hero pattern—allow a deeper insight into how closely Metzen and his team have accessed motifs that are identifiable with wider known myths and archetypes as well as consider the way that this modern audience is interpreting, and constructing meaning from, the material.

Both Jesus and Thrall were descended from royalty and born amid serious social difficulties—yet both are left in the care, through different circumstances, of people with a much lower station. This similarity between the two tales conforms to Rank's definition of the hero's birth myth:

The hero is the child of most distinguished parents, usually the son of a king. His origin is preceded by difficulties [...]. He is then saved by animals, or lowly people (shepherds), and is suckled by a female animal or a humble woman. (Rank 1913, 65)

We learn of the belief that Jesus is descended from both Abraham and King David—the second king of the United Kingdom of Israel and Judah—from Matthew in the *Bible*. Matthew presents a line of paternal descent that is traced through three segments, each covering fourteen generations and spanning the periods between significant points of time within the Judeo-Christian mythos. While the genealogy presented by Matthew clearly possesses several historical difficulties, most obviously around the time frames spanned by each segment of fourteen generations and the omission of known historical figures, he presents a clear family tree for Jesus through Joseph in that format. However, while Joseph was the legal father of Jesus, he was not of any biological relation (see the *Gospel of Matthew* 1:18-25 and the *Gospel of Luke* 1:26-38). Culturally and historically that genealogy positions Jesus as a Jew who was descended from royalty and connected to the earlier interactions between Yahweh, the Christian god, and mortals.<sup>2</sup> The case of Thrall establishing links to royalty is less tenuous - as he is the son of Durotan and Draka. Durotan was the Chieftain of the Frostwolf Clan (of Orcs), a title gained through undisputed hereditary lines.

Building upon those hereditary links to royalty, Thrall himself, later in his life, held the titles of Chieftain of the Frostwolf Clan and Liberator of the Orcs. He also went on to become the Warchief of Orgrimmar and even the Warchief of the Horde - thus truly making him truly 'royal' in Orcish terms. While Jesus did refuse to accept earthly kingdoms (see for example the *Gospel of Luke* 4:5-8) he was declared the King of the Jews from the time of his birth (*Gospel of Matthew* 2:1-2). Furthermore, in the *Bible*, the title 'King of Kings' appears six times (*First Epistle to Timothy* 6:15, *Book of Revelation* 17:14 and 19:16, *Book of Ezra* 7:12, *Book of Ezekiel* 26:7 and *Book of Daniel* 2:37) including two uses in the *Book of Revelation*. Both uses of that title in the *Book of Revelation* refer directly to Jesus—which Kenzuki likens to Thrall becoming the 'king' of all faction 'kings' as Warchief of the Horde.

Often the most strongly highlighted parallel regarding these two birth stories focuses on the almost immediate mortal threat faced by both babes—and loosely covers events six and seven of the hero patterns (Hahn 1876, Rank 1913, Raglan 1934). Vis-à-vis Jesus, while 'most recent biographies of Herod the Great deny it entirely' (Maier 1998, 170), the *Gospel of Matthew* (2:1-23) tells us that upon learning of the birth of Jesus - the predicted future King of the Jews - King Herod the Great attempted to locate the babe and slay him in fear of his own position as ruler being usurped. When Herod's initial efforts to locate the baby Jesus were foiled he sent out soldiers to kill all boys, who were up to two years of age, within Bethlehem and the surrounding region. While we are told of the soldiers murdering several babes, Jesus managed to escape the massacre through his family fleeing the region before the soldiers arrived. *Warcraft* lore enthusiasts often argue those events as loose parallels to tales of assassins who killed Thrall's family while he was a new-born infant, leaving him with his slain parents to be eaten by the creatures of the forest. That tale tells us that the assassins



were employed by Gul'dan of the Stormreaver (Orc) Clan's spies—who had learned that Thrall's father, Durotan (and his ally Orgrim Doomhammer), intended to confront Gul'dan about the Shadow Council, the demonic bargain that he had struck, and the treacherous path he had set the Orcs upon. Like in the case of King Herod having people killed at the time of Jesus' birth, the assassination of Thrall's family took place through a desire to maintain Gul'dan's power base. What is more, Thrall survived certain death by 'luckily' being found and removed from the area (after his parents were murdered) by Aedelas Blackmoore—who took him to an enemy internment camp. The argument is that both events show Thrall and Jesus escaping certain death as babes by leaving the region within which murders occurred, perpetuated by the actions of men in the employ of leaders who feared the loss of their present power base at the hands of those they sought to murder. By extension, looking at this aspect of their lives, we could also identify here that they were both brought into a world where hostile powers had large influence over their immediate futures. These likenesses go well beyond the confines of just being matching hero pattern events.

An additional and significant parallel that the fanbase also highlights, around the respective birth narratives, is the poverty that both Thrall and Jesus were born into - with Jesus being born in a barn and Thrall finding himself orphaned and living in a prison-like internment camp as a babe. This also highlights links, in both the case of Thrall and the case of Jesus, to the archetypal image of a wise sage-like spiritual figure living with poverty. Many mythoi explore the notion of divine inspiration being gained through either ordeal or sacrifice, and that sacrifice can clearly include the sacrifice of worldly wealth and the ordeal of poverty and poor living conditions. Once again here mythic symbols are used to construct archetypal character types within both myths.

### **Fan cited links that step away from the hero pattern**

Fan-based commentary on the links between Jesus and Thrall also covers a range of factors that seem to be beyond the scope of comparisons usually made within discussions of archetypal hero patterns. The following paragraphs will highlight some of those links between the two figures—stressing the idea that while the creative force for Thrall's development may have been a response to archetypal hero patterns there is probably some level of influence from Jesus-like narratives as well.

The most interesting parallel within this category draws upon onomastics and names given to Thrall. Thrall was born with the name Go'el. Notably *go'el* is Hebrew, drawn from the term *ga'al* ('to redeem'), and meaning 'redeemer'. In some Christian teachings the label *go'el* is applied to Jesus, as he takes on the role of redeeming his followers through an act of personal sacrifice. Similarly in the *Book of Isaiah* the Abrahamic god is labelled as the redeemer of Israel - as he was purported to have freed the Israeli people from captivity and lead them to a more significant purpose. (The *Book of Isaiah* 43 in the New King James Version has the subheading 'The Redeemer of Israel'; also, the *Book of Isaiah* 43:14 reads: 'Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer'.)

This connecting link between Jesus and Thrall, and by extension broader Abrahamic mythology, through the name Go'el, has been commented upon extensively by the *World of Warcraft* community members (see for example the forum thread "Please don't call Thrall 'Go'el' in WoD"—and in those discussions animated comments such as the following even tend to appear: "every time he's [Thrall] in the room, I can't hear what he's saying over the I AM JESUS I AM JESUS I AM JESUS I AM JESUS I AM JESUS" (Gildà-Emerald Dream 2015).

Alongside the links suggested by names, fans also note significant visual links between the two figures. One strong visual image associated with Jesus, and propagated through both popular culture and Christian church based imagery, is that of a long dark haired man with a beard and clad in a brown / beige robe. In Blizzard Entertainment's depictions of Thrall after the *Cataclysm*—such as on the cover of Golden's novel *Thrall: Twilight of the Aspects*—he is shown wearing a brown hooded robe. Thrall is customarily portrayed with long dark hair and in many representations also possesses a well-groomed beard. Thrall further takes on the classic image of a wise metaphysical leader through that stylised appearance.

Links between events within the life stories of Jesus and Thrall have also been noted by fans that extend past the parameters of the hero pattern. Stepping away from some aspects of the hero patterns—yet keeping with event number eight for Thrall (as it is interpreted by Nutt (1881) in particular)—are fan comparisons of the later stages of their young lives, highlighting that both Thrall and Jesus worked with their hands in humble and physical 'jobs'. It is widely believed that Jesus began life as a carpenter or builder of some kind - and the *Bible* includes passages that identify him as the son of a carpenter, in a society where occupations were largely hereditary (see the *Gospel of Matthew* 13:55-56 and the *Gospel of Mark* 6:3). In comparison, Thrall also had a manual occupation - although one that unlike the carpenter trade, is very lowly - as he was trained in a prison internment camp as a gladiator. It can clearly be said that both gladiators (who survive) and carpenters (whose buildings do not fall down) are highly skilled. Obviously quite significant differences exist between those two vocations however the bow is often widely drawn by enthusiasts exploring the connection between these two mythic figures to make a link that they both worked with their hands and from the 'sweat of their brow'.

Turning further from the patterns—and instead perhaps mimicking the folkloric patterns of tales of gains in shamanic wisdom, Kenzuki and fans have noted parallels in the processes undertaken by Jesus and Thrall to begin their respective ascents to positions as mystical leaders. Jesus went through a 'gateway' life experience in meeting with John the Baptist. During that gateway process Jesus was baptised by John—which can be seen as ritualistically providing him with insights due to the highly spiritual nature of baptism and the significance of that event in the awakening of Jesus' deeper mysticism. That process of spiritual awakening is arguably best illustrated by the appearance of the 'Spirit of God' at the baptism and the way that the gospel explains that the spirit descended into Jesus during the ceremony (see the *Gospel of Matthew* 3:13-17). Following his baptism Jesus embarked upon an arduous journey into the

desert (for 40 days) where he sought wisdom and overcame temptation. This kind of ordeal - and exposure to nature - is typical in texts that explore gateways towards shamanic wisdom. Soon after that journey we see in the *Gospel of John* (2:1-11) that Jesus went to a wedding in Galilee and performed his first miracle by turning water into wine. This was the first real show, by Jesus, of miraculous mystical powers.

Similarly, in the *Warcraft* mythos Thrall also passed through a 'gateway' meeting with Grom Hellscream. After gaining Grom Hellscream's trust Thrall was taken into his confidence, and taught the Orcish language. Eventually Grom explained Thrall's lineage as part of the exiled Frostwolf Clan to him - after recognising a significant swaddling cloth that Thrall carried. It could be argued that the act of learning Orcish was a ritual which, like Jesus' baptism, unlocked a deep and powerful connection to important knowledge and ancestral wisdom / power- which took place with the revelation of his own past. That significant revelation was what inspired Thrall to undertake an arduous journey seeking his roots in the snow-capped Alterac Mountains - and ultimately to discover his destiny and mystical powers as the first real Orc shaman after the corruption of the Horde. In both tales we see a protagonist who goes to a keeper of wisdom, undergoes a process unlocking knowledge and connections to their hereditary powers, and then embark upon significant journeys into hostile natural environments before beginning to perform powerful supernatural acts. Notably that process also has a plethora of parallels in the tales of shamanism globally—where enduring arduous journeys into hostile environments is a central motif in the process of unlocking deeper spiritual and mystical understandings.

A further parallel that fans highlight, which still ties to the supernatural powers of both figures, is that both Jesus and Thrall have become venerated and spiritually powerful leaders of organisations with significant followings. Jesus, as the ultimate earthly embodiment of the divine within the Christian mythos—and in essence the leader of an entire faith; and Thrall, as the first new shaman since Gul'dan's corruption of the Horde—and therefore the first and foremost of a new generation of shaman. In that position as a spiritual and mystical leader Thrall took on a pivotal role with The Earthen Ring (a society of powerful shaman who seek to restore balance within the world of Azeroth) and then helped lead a band of heroes to save the entire world of Azeroth from certain destruction at the hands of the great dragon, Deathwing, during the events of the *Cataclysm* (particularly in *World of Warcraft's* Patch 4.3 (2011))—the sites of which have been encoded with cultural meaning from the myths and hero stories (both regarding player characters and non-player characters) of those myth-like events. Further, those events, and Thrall's struggle through the conflict with Deathwing, including the place of the events within the broader mythos of Azeroth, were explored deeply in Golden's 2011 novel, *Thrall: Twilight of the Aspects*.

Strengthening that position, both Jesus and Thrall can be seen to have freed their respective people from corruption through their supernatural, or divine, powers. For Thrall that is achieved by freeing the Orcs from their demonic blood curse, and for Jesus it was to free his true followers from the bonds of sin. Referring primarily to the crucifixion the *Epistle of Galatians* (1:4) explains that Jesus "gave himself for our sins

to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God.” In *Warcraft 3* (2002) fans learn that, whilst on Draenor, Grom Hellscream and many other Orc chieftains chose to drink demonic blood—knowing that it would bring the blood curse upon the Orcs and enslave them to the Legion (an evil demonic army). That choice has been likened by many fans to the human choice to indulge in sin as in both cases an act bringing immediate gratification is chosen in spite of the long lasting horrible consequences that it will bring. While confronting Grom Hellscream, Thrall managed to capture the very essence of Hellscream within a ‘soul gem’. Through the use of ritual magic, that involved elements of shamanism, Thrall managed to purge the demonic corruption from the ‘soul gem’ and save not only Hellscream’s, but all of the orc’s souls from the demonic blood curse.

Finally, we can clearly identify that both figures led their respective peoples back to prior traditions of worship or sacred practices. Jesus championed the process of direct communication for his people with their god through direct prayer as opposed to priestly avocation. Thrall returned his people to their traditional shamanism. (Notably here there are also several distinct similarities between the tales of legendary shaman and those of Jesus.) This is a significant link because it underlines the way that both figures were highly influential over the culture and *weltanschauung* of their followers—to the point of generating shifts in religious thinking and practice.

Links to nature, constructed through like narrative elements in the Thrall and Jesus stories with clear shamanistic overtones, further help the two mythoi to construct a layer of cultural meaning upon their respective geographical landscapes—thus providing a further similarity in the function of the two characters. Eliade stresses that common understandings of myth help construct cultural meaning for landscapes (1963, 140)—a process which the digital landscapes of *World of Warcraft* have undergone at the sites of major acts of shamanic power by Thrall—while the earthly landscape is marked by several now touristic and spiritual sites (for example see: <http://walkwherejesuswalked.com/places-of-interests/>).

### **Parallel mystic abilities—still beyond the hero pattern**

Modern anthropologists, such as Pieter F. Craffert (2008), have argued that gospel depictions of Jesus, including both: significant life events and their sequencing, and, his mystical abilities; can be seen as meeting the broad characteristics of a shaman. Furthermore, it can be argued that the development of his shamanic powers following the ‘ordeal’ of his baptism and trial in the desert further meet with the generally accepted process of gaining shamanic wisdom and power. Consequently it is very interesting that the powers ascribed to shaman, and representations of powerful archetypal shaman (such as Thrall), match many of the mystical powers of Jesus. Thrall is listed as a Shaman within the *World of Warcraft*. This is a parallel that Kenzuki made some mention of, but did not explore in any depth. Within the *Warcraft* franchise’s framework shaman are viewed as spiritual guides who are deeply connected to, and able to influence, the elements.

Arguably the core mystical power attributed to Jesus is that of healing. In the *Gospel of Luke* (18:35-43) we are presented with the well-known story of Jesus passing by the town of Jericho and encountering a blind man—who he heals and restores the sense of sight to. As early as level seven in the *World of Warcraft* shaman gain an ability called ‘Healing Surge’ which enables them to heal themselves or their allies—and later in the game signature abilities like ‘Chain Heal’ (level 44) and ‘Healing Rain’ (level 60) are added to the shaman’s healing arsenal.

To further the theme of being a healer, Jesus is often characterised as a divine figure with the ability to cleanse the body and cure diseases. The *Gospel of Matthew* (4:23) provides us with a tale of Jesus curing sickness and disease as he travelled through towns and villages. Furthermore, in the *Gospel of Luke* (17:11-19), the *Gospel of Mark* (1:40-45) and other segments of the *Gospel of Matthew* (8:1-4) we hear tales of Jesus cleansing people who were afflicted with leprosy. Turning to Thrall and his abilities as a powerful shaman—prior to the *World of Warcraft* patch 3.2.0 (released 4 August 2009), ‘Call of the Crusade’, shaman had two significant cleansing abilities; ‘Cure Poison’, and, ‘Cure Disease’. Those abilities are reasonably self—explanatory and could be used either upon the shaman himself/herself or upon an ally. In the 3.2.0 patch those two abilities were combined into a new power titled ‘Cure Toxins’ (or ‘Cleanse Spirit’ in the case of Restoration Shaman—a shaman class subtype who are totally focussed on healing) which cleansed both poisons and diseases. The ‘Cure Toxins’ ability was then removed from the shaman class patch 4.0.1 (released 12 October 2010) for the launch of the expansion *Cataclysm* while ‘Cleanse Spirit’ has remained a core shaman ability gained at level 18.

One other notable mystic power of Jesus is the ability to walk on water. In the *Gospel of Matthew* (14:22-33) we see an episode where Jesus walks out across the sea to a group of his disciples who were in a boat. In that episode Jesus was able to confer that ability, temporarily, upon Peter as well—although after walking across a notable span of water Jesus did need to ‘catch’ Peter after he began to panic about the situation. Comparatively, Thrall—as a shaman—also has the mystic ability to walk upon water through a spell known as ‘Water Walking’. (‘Water Walking’ is a spell gained at level 24.) Notably, as with the case of Jesus sharing the ability to walk across water with Peter, shaman (such as Thrall) in the *World of Warcraft* are also able to confer their ‘Water Walking’ ability upon allies.

A further, yet crucial, feature of the myths of Jesus is the narrative of his rising from the death after the crucifixion (Matthew 28:6). Comparatively; Thrall, and shaman generally, possess a mystic ability in the *World of Warcraft* called ‘Reincarnation’. (‘Reincarnation’ is a spell gained at level 32.) The ‘Reincarnation’ ability allows shaman to resurrect themselves upon death.

Finally Jesus is loosely depicted to have the ability to raise, or resurrect, the dead and gift upon them an eternal form of life. In the *Gospel of John* (11:25-26) Jesus states that he is: ‘the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.’ This provides a parallel to another of Thrall’s shaman powers—‘Resurrect Spirit’. As early as level



14 shaman gain the 'Resurrect Spirit' spell, which allows them to resurrect fallen allies. Consequently the shaman (and hence Thrall) is able to, loosely, offer eternal life through the use of 'Resurrect Spirit' upon his followers and 'Reincarnation' upon his/herself when the need arises.

### **The flux state of *Warcraft's* Applied Mythology**

Azeroth's applied mythological landscape, and the narratives of Thrall, were complicated by the 2016 release of the motion picture *Warcraft: The Beginning* (Jones 2016). In that film the director, Duncan Jones, used a range of visual and oral language techniques to emphasise story arcs that re-shaped Thrall's characterization to align him more strongly with Abrahamic Mythology's Moses. Notably, the story for *Warcraft: The Beginning* was written by Chris Metzen—so the notion of the text being one that blends archetypes and mythic figures / tales is in keeping with his stated creative process (Augustine 2012, Brodnitz 2008).

Fans of the *Warcraft* franchise have noted similarities between Thrall and Moses both before and after the release of the film (Trassk 2013, Rollonthefield 2015), at times even suggesting that "Thrall is [both] Jesus and Moses" (Diamondwolf 2016), as 'in the book *Lord of the Clans* (Golden 2001) he looks like Moses cuz he got found by a strong lord and then he run away and then he set his people free to go to the far promised land like Moses'. Consequently, it is fair to say that there is some contention among fans in identifying the closest mythic parallels to the web of stories surrounding Thrall—with Moses being the other most commonly identified mythic figure that seemingly sparked Thrall's character. Notably here, along with Jesus of Nazareth, scholars have also considered Moses when exploring both general notions of the hero figure (Coats 1986), and found his character to provide a parallel to the Hero Pattern (Rank 1913)—so the identification of Moses as a possible parallel further reinforces the links between Thrall and the Hero Pattern. In analysing the parallels, Moses does not appear to link as neatly to Thrall as Jesus, and fan perceptions of links between Thrall and Moses have not been strong enough to spark a Moses—related name.

### **In sum**

Starting from the premise that: 'more than just rules and play, all games involve a series of cultural structures against and within which the play of the game occurs' (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 509); scholars such as Salen and Zimmerman have recognised that 'the game designer only *indirectly* designs the player's experience, by *directly* designing the rules' and settings of the game world (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 316). Metzen and the *World of Warcraft* design team have openly included a wide range of intertextual elements, popular cultural references and symbolic mythological borrowings within their designs—unquestioningly including a representation of the hero pattern through the deeds / tales of Thrall. That much, is clearly a design feature.

Those elements help flesh out an immersive environment, and have encouraged players to connect more deeply—bringing prior knowledge from their everyday lives and going beyond the text in interpreting the game and the *Warcraft* mythos. There is then a point at which the borrowings of the content creators cease, and additional similarities that are not intended, but none the less exist on some level or other, are noticed and given meaning by dedicated fans—as the fans take ownership of the *Warcraft* texts through engaging with both intertextuality and the use of elementary, or archetypal, ideas.

With that line, between the sphere of content intentionally created and the additional sphere of fan—based interpretations and extensions of meaning through accessing either intentional or unintentional memory prompts, recognised, *World of Warcraft* blends a range of mythological elements from diverse spiritual traditions and accesses the archetypes associated with clear mythic formula—such as the hero pattern. Clear parallels exist in the official story arcs and class abilities of Thrall to elements within the biblical stories of Jesus of Nazareth. While the tale of Jesus is interpreted as one that focuses upon a virginal birth, a devout life and a sacrificial crucifixion to redeem others, within broader Western society, fans of the *World of Warcraft* have highlighted many parallels between Thrall and Jesus—to the point of demonstrating that the story of Jesus arguably must have, to some extent, been among the myths that Metzen and his team had in the back of their minds when it was time to “spin the archetypes” and “spew [them] back into the world” (Chris Metzen in: Brodnitz 2008) to shape the tales of Thrall in Azeroth. “The differences in the costumes are the results of environment and historical conditions” (Campbell and Moyers 1991, 61)—not just when such similarities exist between mythoi, but also in the similarities between these two versions of the hero pattern. In this way, we might consider *World of Warcraft* as a neo-mythological piece of applied folklore which draws on both hero patterns and the Abrahamic myths of Jesus in the construction of Thrall.

In 2012 Metzen discussed the power of characters like Thrall, and the extent to which the *World of Warcraft* fan base, as an active audience, connected to Thrall on an emotional level.

So many players have come up with these NPCs and these characters like Thrall [...]. We can move these characters around the board and create a lot of emotionality and create a lot of engagement with people who know these characters. Even if you're not a hardcore story person, or into the lore or whatever, you live in this virtual space, you know who these people are, you've done quests for them and such. That's an amazing place to be, to be able to pull these levers and dials after all these years and have it count. (Chris Metzen in: Augustine 2012)

Critical analysis of fan responses to texts and the fandom process, have recognized that active audiences like this not only embellish the stories and worlds of their fandom, but also take on a ‘form of cultural ownership’ over the brand or particular elements of the story, characters or traditions that it represents (Crisp et al. 2013, 324). In that light these fan based perceptions of links between the characters of Thrall and Jesus become

more significant even beyond concrete and symbolic links, or even through Metzen's thought processes regarding the use of archetypal material, as they are an integral part of the formation of a subcultural group's shared experiences. The fan discussions of links then become an almost standalone part of the lore and community identity.

### Notes

1. The events draw on Dundes' (1976, 8-9) collations of hero pattern events.
2. The Gospel of Matthew (1:17) in the New King James version of the Bible reads: 'So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations, from David until the captivity in Babylon are fourteen generations, and from the captivity in Babylon until the Christ are fourteen generations.'

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