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Mario Schmidt

‘It Will Always Be with Us’: Corruption as an Ontological Fact among Kenyan Luo

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Open-Minded

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Abstract

Revolving around the gap between the emic judgement that corruption cannot be eliminated and the etic attempts to bring this elimination about, this paper looks at the ontological preconditions of Luo politics in western Kenya and the way in which these render both the objective measurement and the eradication of corruption impossible. By taking the statements of people on the ground seriously, the paper aims to expose the Eurocentric mind-set that lies at the heart of most discourses on corruption. Unless we expect the Luo to change the way in which they conceptualize sociality, our only course is to embrace corrupt behaviour—which goes to prove that cooperation is sometimes obliged to follow rather curious paths.

Keywords

Cooperation, corruption, development aid, gift, Kenya, Luo

Author

Mario Schmidt is currently a Postdoc Fellow at the Centre for Global Cooperation Research. His fellowship runs from September 2013 to August 2014 and his research forms part of the work of Research Unit 2: ‘Global Cultural Conflicts and Transcultural Cooperation’.

Glossary of Dholuo and Swahili terms

agwambo	the miraculous one (used to designate Raila Odinga)
asoya	bribe
chamo	eat, feat
chik	Luo order of life
chira	wasting disease, acquired by breaking *kweche*
chuny	gastromoral body, soul
dala	homestead
del (pl. *dende*)	body, skin
democracy mar adier	true democracy
dongruok	development, growth
harambee (Sw.)	communally organized fund-raising
jakristo (pl. *jokristo*)	Christian
jang'wono (pl. *jong'wono*)	merciful person (ideal politician)
jasiasa (pl. *josiasa*)	politician (often pejorative)
kech	hunger, bitterness, compassion, mercy
kwalo	steal
kwer (pl. *kweche*)	taboo
liel	funeral
luor	respect
mecho	rob
ng'wono	mercy
nyuandruok	confusion
pesa	money
pogo	share
riambo	deceive, lie
riwruok	unity, union, cooperation
siasa	politics (pejorative)
tich matek	heavy work
yiero	elect
wat	kinship
wuonwa	our father (used to designate Raila Odinga)

‘It Will Always Be with Us’: Corruption as an Ontological Fact among Kenyan Luo

Mario Schmidt

Introduction[1]

The picture might have been shown me without
my ever seeing in it anything but a rabbit.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953)

Western scholars and politicians tend to criminalize corruption. In recent times, institutions have ceased to be regarded as systemic actors and have come to be viewed as entities administered by human beings and thus subject to abuse. Since this shift took place, and perhaps even earlier, the elimination of corruption has headed the list of issues to be tackled by any scholar interested in global cooperation and by anyone involved in development aid.[2] The *United Nations Convention against Corruption* (UNAC), for instance, calls corruption an ‘insidious plague’, an ‘evil phenomenon’ and a ‘scourge’ (United Nations 2014: III). Similarly, the African Development Bank Group claims to be ‘determined to root out misconduct, fraud and corruption within its own ranks as well as in the implementation of the projects it finances’ (ADBG 2011: 6). Such bodies thus portray corrupt behaviour as a choice made by moral actors, thereby betraying an implicit belief in their own ability to eradicate it (cf. OECD 2011, MCC 2007).[3]

A very different picture emerged during my nine months of anthropological field-work among the Luo of western Kenya.[4] Speakers of Dholuo, a Western Nilotic

[1] I am particularly indebted to Sebastian Schellhaas, with whom I conducted fieldwork in rural western Kenya in 2009 and 2010, for the many hours he spent with me discussing Luo sociality. Thanks must also go to Martina Kopf, Volker Heins, and Jessica Schmidt for their valuable comments on the first draft of this paper, and to Morgan Brigg for interesting debates on fractality and relationality.

[2] The 1989 World Bank Report *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth* played an important part in bringing about this shift: ‘Ultimately, better governance requires political renewal. This means a concerted attack on corruption from the highest to the lowest levels’ (World Bank 1989: 6).

[3] Even ‘value-free’ science has begun to talk of corruption as a ‘virus’ (Habetemichael and Cloete 2010). The Kenyan government, meanwhile—always looking to please its donors—talks of ‘positive development in the fight against corruption despite the various challenges that inhibit [this] war’ (EACC 2014: ix).

[4] The Luo are the third-largest ethnic group in Kenya (at 4 million they make up 14% of Kenya’s population). They emigrated to western Kenya, north-east Tanzania, and eastern Uganda from the Bahr-el-Ghazal region of Sudan in a series of migratory movements that began 500 years ago. For a detailed account, see the excellent ethnographies by Shipton (2007, 2009,

language, the Luo live on and around the shores of Lake Victoria and are best described as a farming people with a major sideline in livestock, though the latter has declined in importance due to land shortages and disease. During my field-trip, I was lodged in a Luo homestead (*dala*) twenty minutes from a market-place on a tarmac road between the cities of Kisumu and Gisii. Sentiments similar to the ones expressed in the title of this paper were the ones I heard most frequently in regard to corruption: 'No matter what we do, corruption will always be there', 'I know Kenya—corruption cannot be eliminated', and so on. Given incidents such as the Goldenberg scandal and the problems with the construction of the Turkwel Hydro Power Plant,[5] and given the omnipresence of bribery in everyday life, I felt my informants[6] had a point. No matter what was done, corruption would remain. People accepted it as a major feature of their daily lives and a necessary part of their world.

Revolving around the gap between the emic and etic perspectives (the emic judgement that corruption cannot be eliminated and the etic attempts to bring this elimination about), this paper looks at the ontological constitution of Luo politics in western Kenya and the way in which this renders both the objective measurement and the eradication of corruption impossible. I begin by exploring the Luo concept of a good politician. This gives me the opportunity briefly to re-visit claims I have made elsewhere about Luo sociality, notably in regard to the blurring of biological and social bodies (Schellhaas and Schmidt 2014) (1). I then focus on electoral bribery and offer an explanation of the way in which Luo are able legitimately to view what appears, from an 'objective' outside perspective, to be a single, unambiguous action (a person receives money from another person in exchange for nothing during a political campaign) in a twofold way: as an innocent act going on within a single body or as an immoral negotiation between two bodies. This discussion demonstrates that corruption is a question of the view *on* rather than the view *about* actions (2). I then tease out the implications of this for Luo politics in general (3) and conclude by outlining the difference between my own approach to corruption and that of political scientists and policy-makers (4). Although, strictly speaking, my argument applies only to western Kenya, by taking my informants' statements seriously, I seek to expose the Eurocentric mind-set that lies at the heart of the general discourse on corruption. Hence, though my focus is limited ethnographically, what follows from it theoretically is universally applicable.

2010) and Geissler and Prince (2010) and the historical analyses in Crazzolara (1950) and Ogot (1967). For convenience, I have decided to use the term 'Luo' rather than a more relativizing one: 'being Luo' is a key notion for many Dholuo-speaking Kenyans and is one of the cornerstones of a specific self-understanding (Ogutu 2001).

[5] Wrong (2010) provides a vivid account of a number of the corruption scandals that had shocked my informants, and many other Kenyans, over the years.

[6] Most of my interviewees, but not all, were rural Luo. As far as other parameters such as income, gender, and age are concerned, my sample was very diverse. Although what I say here does not, of course, apply to every Luo I met, it does apply to a substantial proportion of them. By 'substantial', I mean too influential to be ignored by other speakers of Dholuo.

1 Good politicians and sociality as 'feating'

The walls of Luo homes are plastered with posters of politicians. These generally include posters of former ministers and future governors and individuals such as Raila Odinga (the well-known politician and unsuccessful 2013 presidential candidate) and Barack Obama. These figures are described as *jong'wono*—'merciful people' (from *ng'wono*, 'mercy')—who 'feel one's own pain [*rem*] and hunger [*kech*]' and have 'a heart of sharing [*pogo*]'. These ideas are mirrored in Luo concepts of sociality, in which people are seen as parts of one another. A prime example here is the relationship between mother and child, who are seen as 'one soul' (*chuny achiel*)—an identity also highlighted in regard to politicians and those who vote for them. *Chuny* is a term used to designate both the soul and the liver—in other words, the centres of both biological and socio-cultural reproduction. If your *chuny* is hurt (*chuny lit*), you feel bitter; if your *chuny* has died (*chuny otho*), you lose your enthusiasm; if your *chuny* is hot (*chuny liet*), your patience is at an end; and if you are examining your *chuny* (*nono chuny*), you are reflecting on your own feelings and on your identity with others. When Luo emphasize that mother and baby are *chuny achiel*, they are highlighting both their corporal integrity and the fact that their intentions merge. Because the term *chuny* transgresses the dichotomy between nature and culture (Masolo 2010: 210–14), the two individuals are seen as being both of one mind and of one body.

At the same time, as I have shown extensively elsewhere (Schellhaas and Schmidt 2014), the concept of *chuny* cannot be understood merely as a metaphorical transference of the idea of the biological body (*del*) to the social sphere. (*Del*, pl. *dende*, also means 'skin' and thus alludes to a perceptual resemblance between bodies.) That this is not a straightforward transfer is demonstrated by the way in which the wellbeing of the biological body (*del*) is linked with particular states of the social body (*chuny*). Following Raila Odinga's defeat in the 2013 general election, for example, I often heard people say they *could no longer eat*, or that friends had not eaten for some time,[7] explaining that the decline of Luo politics, and the failure to bring about a Kenya headed by a Luo politician, had led to a decline in their bodies' ability to digest. This causal connection echoes that made between the violation of various taboos (*kweche*, sing. *kwer*)[8] and affliction with *chira*, a wasting disease (Abe 1981; Parkin 1978: 149–64; Whisson 1966). Severe violations of the basic order of life (*chik*) impede reproduction of the biological body: people infected with *chira* become thinner; they suffer from diarrhoea and are unable to feed themselves. The general election (*yiero*) was seen by many Luo as just such a violation—a shameless exercise in large-scale vote-rigging that resulted in the death of 'true democracy' (*democracy mar adier otho*).

[7] People would often draw a distinction between this way of coping and active demonstration against the election results. One friend, for example, commented: 'This time we suffer silently. We cannot lose our children and relatives again.'

[8] These particular taboos exist to maintain integrity between family members, between the young and the old, and between the living and the dead. Others dictate in which houses individuals may sleep, with whom they may eat, and for whom they may cook. Yet others regulate sequences of marrying, house-building, planting, and harvesting. Examples of violation include what is essentially incest (*gath*) and adultery (*terruok*).

But what lies at the bottom of this apparently irrational belief in a causal connection between disruption of a social rule and reproduction of a biological body? In fact, once we learn that Luo conceive of biological bodies as being inhabited by worms (*njokla*, sing. *njoha*) that feed on ingested food (Geissler 1998a, 1998b), this belief no longer appears irrational. Rather than being warded off as destructive bacteria, the worms must be acknowledged as necessary and cared for accordingly. In other words, single human bodies are the smallest corporal entity in which sociality—albeit in multi-species form—is fully developed, meaning that although not every *chuny* is a *del*, every *del* is a *chuny*. It is this participatory identity *of* a single body and (for example) the corporal entity of the Luo nation (conceived of politically), together with the structural similarity *between* these two (both are based on processes of simultaneous feeding and eating[9]) that allows Luo to conceptualize causal influences between what, to them, are two parts of a single corporal entity. When basic rules governing behaviour towards parts of oneself are ignored—in other words, when confusion (*nyuandruok*) is caused—other parts also get disordered and the body loses its ability to feed itself. It follows that a person (*dhano*)—in the sense of a responsible, morally accountable entity—is not someone who is *compos mentis* (of sound mind) but one who is able to acknowledge and maintain his or her participation in parts of a corporal entity that simultaneously feed and eat. In a healthy *chuny*, the differentiation between feeding and eating is sublated through simultaneous enactment: by eating I feed the worms, by caring for my child I care for myself, by giving to my family I give to myself. As a translation for *chuny*, my colleague and friend Sebastian Schellhaas and I coined the term 'gastromoral body', in an attempt to highlight the transgression of biology and sociology which Luo enact—for example by positing the causal links mentioned above. Another of our coinages—'feating' (feeding + eating)—underlines the simultaneity of eating and feeding inside a gastromoral body.[10]

In line with the concept of the *jang'wono* (merciful person or ideal politician), with its implication that politicians and their followers share an emotional, corporal, and intellectual unity despite inhabiting different *dende*, individual Luo, unsurprisingly, often conceive of themselves as being identical with a favoured politician. A politician is expected to care for his[11] followers in just the same way as a head of household (*wuon dala*) must care for the wives with whom he has become one soul. Speaking at a rally in Homa Bay, Raila Odinga thus likened the Cord Coalition to a polygamous family, thereby equating politics (*siasa*) with kinship (*wat*): 'Cord is like a polygamous family, where there is *mikayi* [first wife], *reru* [second wife] and *nyachira* [third wife].' This logic of conflating everyday life and politics is summed up in a remark in one governor's speech in which he claimed: 'I am not a politician (*jasiasa*), I am a Christian (*jakristu*)', implying that by being one with god he was one with others.

[9] Being a rational people, Luo use the term *chamo* ('to eat') for any form of appropriation or transaction which stabilizes or destabilizes biological and social bodies. This means that statements implying that money, land, or human beings can be eaten are intended literally, not metaphorically.

[10] We use 'feating' as a translation of the Luo term *chamo* in cases where the form of eating is morally approved of (e.g. *chamo luwo*, 'feating land', meaning inheriting land) but not where it is disapproved of (as in *chamo luwo*, 'eating land', meaning selling off ancestral land).

[11] Despite official efforts to redress the balance, the overwhelming majority of Kenyan politicians continue to be male.

A *jang'wono* is therefore best understood as a politician who is able to do justice to the fact that he constitutes a gastromoral body with other members of the body politic. If, in the course of a political campaign, a politician feats potential voters by slaughtering a few oxen, he is not thereby confusing the political and household spheres. What he is doing is 'fading out' (Sommerfelt 2014) the identity which the participants constitute with each other, in order to highlight their oneness with him. Where a politician is not a *jang'wono*, such an act will constitute a sin, because he will be 'fading out' wholes without demonstrating his own oneness with others, thus calling the very basis of Luo sociality into question. But how do Luo decide whether or not someone is truly a *jang'wono*?

2 Corruption or not corruption? A question without meaning

Whilst discussing with me the potential election of his relative, Martin Ocholla,[12] to the Kenyan parliament, William Ochieng, the head of a local clinic I occasionally visited, commented that he was sure Martin would take care of the area in question because he was 'a good person' and was aware of the need to care for 'his people'. The money Martin would have access to as an MP, said William, would be used firstly to tarmac the roads leading to his own homestead and then more generally to stimulate development (*dongruok*) in his home-area. Following William's laudatory account of Martin's ability to direct government funds to his own kin, I asked him what distinguished such acts from what would generally be viewed as corruption (*chamo pesa, asoyo*—'eating money', 'bribes'). This remark evoked laughter from an assistant at the clinic—Tom Onyango—who had come along whilst we were talking. With what seemed to be genuine surprise at the absurdity of my question, Tom interjected that Luo were not corrupt and that a Kenya led by politicians such as Martin Ocholla and Raila Odinga would become an honest, uncorrupt country (*Raila bi rieyo Kenya*, 'Raila will sort out Kenya').

As Ochieng launched into a tirade against the Kikuyu[13] and their propensity to steal (*kwalo*), rob (*mecho*), and deceive (*riambo*), I wondered how it was possible for him simultaneously to sanction and condemn what we (from a Western, etic perspective) would see as corrupt actions. How might we explain his astonishing neglect of what appears, from our point of view, to be a fact? How could he ignore what seemed to be the blatantly corrupt nature of the acts he anticipated Martin would engage in? Given that William had shown himself to be an extremely honest man, and that, in my experience, he and most other Luo are perfectly able to identify contradictions when they arise, we need to start looking for an explanation that admits of the possibility that there *is* no contradiction. In order to achieve this, so I believe, we need to take on board the fact that it is we—the scholars—and not the objects of our study that are lacking in intellectual capability here (Holbraad 2012). Indeed, as we shall now see, it is not possible to determine, for example,

[12] All names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

[13] The Kikuyu, numbering 6.5 million or 17% of the total population, are the largest ethnic group in Kenya and are concentrated in the centre of the country. For a historical account of the tense relationship between the Luo and the Kikuyu, see Odhiambo (2004).

what is bribery and what is not merely by 'objective'—in other words detached—observation.

Luo may regard cash hand-outs made during political campaigns either as *pesa nono*[14], 'money for nothing', and thus morally unexceptionable, or as *asoya*, 'a bribe' (also called *chai*, 'tea'), and thus immoral. As indicated previously, a *jang'wono* is a politician who is able to construct a stable gastromoral body with other members of the body politic. Like transfers of milk from mother to child, transfers of money during political campaigns must be viewed as 'intra-actions' occurring within a single gastromoral body (*chuny achiel*). Although at first sight an act of political bribery appears to involve two autonomous persons, the *jang'wono* is actually simultaneously feeding and eating: he is simply shifting money from one part of himself (his own *del*, one might say) to another (his follower's *del*). What goes on between the politician and his follower is the same simultaneous feeding and eating that goes on between mother and baby (or, one might say, within the 'mother-baby') during pregnancy. The politician is giving something to himself and the act he thus performs is more like adjusting his clothes than engaging in an economic transaction. Because he and his follower are seen as constituent parts of a single gastromoral body—in other words, as acting with one and the same intention—and are not two distinct autonomous individuals, they cannot be engaging in an act of bribery. However, the only monetary transactions defined as bribes in the Kenyan Elections Act are those that lead to a change in the voter's decision and/or those that are openly conducted with a view to influencing the potential beneficiary (National Council for Law Kenya 2011a: §64; see also National Council for Law Kenya 2011b: §47):

> *A candidate who—(a) directly or indirectly in person or by any other person on his behalf gives, lends or agrees to give or lend, or offers, promises or promises to procure or to endeavour to procure any money or valuable consideration to or for any voter, or to or for any person on behalf of any voter or to or for any other person in order to induce any voter—(i) to vote or refrain from voting for a particular candidate; commits the offence of bribery.*

Thus, whereas bribery depends on the existence of two individuals—a 'candidate' and a 'voter', or a briber and a bribee—the handing out of *pesa nono* during political campaigns is something intra-acted within a single gastromoral body which we might term 'candidate-voter'.[15] In this sense, even from a judicial perspective, the Luo perception that the giving of *pesa nono* is not an illegal act is therefore correct:

[14] *Pesa nono* denotes money that has been acquired without effort and does not have to be spent immediately (*pesa mar kuon*). As something acquired without effort, it is often contrasted with *tich matek*, 'hard work'—meaning, in general, work in the fields or other forms of manual labour (*tich luete*)—but despite the suggestion of suspicion this casts on it, it is not regarded as morally wrong.

[15] Viewed in this light, 'corruption' is indeed an 'empty signifier' (Koechlin 2013), since it is only ever used to denote someone outside one's own world.

bribery can only take place where two autonomous persons interact with one another. In such cases, the transfer of money is not merely an *intra*-action, as it is when performed by the *jang'wono*, but a *trans*-action. By embedding money within the concept of feating, Luo are able to view their society as one in which money is constantly shifted between the various pockets of *one* gastromoral body rather than between the pockets of two *distinct* bodies. Certain inter-subjective transactions are viewed as intra-subjective and are not so much 'declarations of dependence' (Ferguson 2013) as declarations of *self*-dependence. By giving money to another part of himself, a *jang'wono* literally feats himself.[16]

That said, because the lines between perceptual bodies (*dende*) and conceptual bodies (*chuny*) are blurred, the final judgement as to whether a transfer of money takes place within one *chuny* (intra-action) or two *chuny* (trans-action) cannot be made on the basis of observation alone. When one person gives money to 'another', it is not certain that the two persons will be recognized as one and the same by outside observers. As in the case of reversible figures such as that of the rabbit-cum-duck (Fig. 1), where two, equally valid, perceptions are possible, the transfer of money during an election may, from a disinterested perspective, legitimately be viewed both as corrupt and as non-corrupt. However, although there is indeed both a rabbit (corrupt behaviour) and a duck (non-corrupt behaviour) present, it is often impossible for the actors enmeshed in the situation to recognize that, from an objective point of view, the entity in question can be viewed both ways. Just as some individuals are unable to see the duck in the rabbit, and vice versa, until they have learned to see both as aspects of a single 'rabbit-duck', so people enmeshed in a particular activity cannot even conceive of their actions as potentially corrupt or non-corrupt. At this point, it is useful to highlight the distinction between 'seeing something as something' and 'seeing something'. In order to be able to 'see something as something', we have to learn to construe the object of our perceptions as something that has aspects. As Wittgenstein commented in relation to the rabbit-duck: 'Seeing as … is not part of perception. And therefore it is like seeing, and again not like seeing' (2009: 207; see also Schroeder 2010). As long as a person sees only a rabbit, they do not 'see the rabbit-duck as a rabbit'; they merely 'see a rabbit' (in fact, they do not even need to 'see the rabbit as a rabbit' to 'see a rabbit'). In other words: 'seeing as' implies a knowledge of concepts. In the same way, Luo do not see actions in which they are enmeshed as having a corrupt or non-

Figure 1

[16] As the attentive reader with a scholarly interest in African politics may have noticed, the use of culinary metaphor is widespread in Africa (see e.g. Bayart 1996; Laurent 2000; Mbembe 2001; Schatzberg 2001; Socpa 2000). Cohen and Odhiambo's observations on Luo concepts of food therefore seem particularly apposite: '[F]ood is, pre-eminently, about power' (1989: 31). However, it would seem more accurate to posit that 'food *is* politics' rather than that 'food *is like* politics'.

corrupt aspect.[17] Indeed, the question of the corruptness or non-corruptness of their actions strikes them as nonsensical—as illustrated by the reaction of the clinic assistant Tom, who laughed at the 'absurdity' of my question about Martin's possible corruptness. This attitude is rooted in the fact that Luo, in their capacity as identical parts of others, are not able to view other parts of themselves, or definite non-parts of themselves, from a disinterested perspective. (The Kikuyu, for example, being assumed to be innately anti-social, are not even taken into consideration by Luo as parts of themselves.) Thus, it is not possible to determine whether someone is engaged in corrupt activity or not by observing the situation from a disinterested perspective, but it does not make any sense either for anyone actually enmeshed in the situation to talk of themselves as being engaged in corrupt activity. However, as soon as an objectifying change of perspective occurs—as a result of rumours about politicians, for example—a 'gestalt switch' may be triggered and one may begin to question the honesty of the other, in other words ask whether or not they are really part of oneself. However, the 'objective' judgement one makes here relates not to the other person's *action* but to their *relationship* with oneself (i.e. identity with or difference from). Thus one might say that Luo politics are under constant threat of gestalt-switching: both *dende* and *chuny* that are part of one *chuny* can become two or more autonomous *chuny* without anything else changing.

I will now explore the effects which this conceptualization of sociality has on Luo politics as a whole.

3 Politics as a control on constant 'gestalt switching'

Figure 2

Because any one action can legitimately be perceived as corrupt by one objective observer and not corrupt by another, any attempt to give an objective picture of Luo politics as a whole will necessarily result in a bewildering profusion of parallaxical impressions, transfixed snapshot-style. Just as the moon and street-lamp in the photograph (Fig. 2) appear simultaneously close (in reflection) and distant (in reality), gastromoral bodies, being both identical (conceptually, as *chuny*) and distinct (perceptually, as *dende*) can be viewed both as a unity and as a multiplicity without themselves changing. To appreciate the problem which Luo have in viewing their

[17] And they therefore have no word for a corrupt action or person. *Asoya* is derived from *soyo* ('to hide') and a corrupt person is often called a thief (*jakuo*), a robber (*jamecho*), or someone who *ketho* ('does evil', 'spoils', 'destroys').

own political structure, or the structure of the Kenyan state as a 'whole', one need only envisage a much more complex configuration of parallaxical impressions, in which a multitude of mirrors produces a multitude of moons, with no possibility of distinguishing between mirror-image and reality (i.e. between 'seeing' and 'seeing as'). Everyone is potentially identical with everyone else—and at the same time potentially different.[18]

The following story serves to illustrate how difficult—indeed impossible—it is for Luo to picture the political situation as a whole.

Whilst walking round on market-day, I was approached by a young man who said he would like to talk to me in private because he needed the help of someone foreign to carry out a 'politically dangerous' project. Always eager to help—particularly where there is a chance of a good ethnographic story—I set off with him and he began to tell his story. Some time before, whilst studying information technology in Nairobi, he had met a South Korean scientist who had invited him back to his home-laboratory. The scientist had presented him with three metallic balls which, when placed next to one another, rose some inches above the ground and began glowing with a blue light. By connecting this 'alien machine' to a laptop, the scientist was able to gain access to, and control of, any computer in the world and any satellite in space. These balls, said the student, had been given to him by the South Korean, who was later detained and shot. An attempted meeting with a Russian military expert named Milosevic, who was interested in buying the balls, had failed, because the expert was unwilling to travel to Kenya. He was now offering me the chance to arrange a link-up with Angela Merkel and she would then buy the balls. Afterwards, he and I would split the proceeds, which he estimated would total at least 3.5 billion dollars.

This story, though easily dismissed as quirky, or perhaps even pathological, illustrates the degree to which Luo feel lost when they try to get an overview of the workings of politics. The three glowing balls give one single individual the power to view everything and thus to control the gestalt-switches: 'We can see everything from every angle.' 'We can show you your mother by satellite—you can see what she's doing right now.' 'We can even find the missing Malaysian plane.' But because every actual enactment of Luo sociality takes the form of a 'reversible figure', and in real life there are no blue balls to help us, Luo sociality, viewed from an objective perspective, remains a bewildering host of parallaxical possibilities. The potential of an individual to turn out to be just another greedy politician and not a *jang'wono* is therefore not an innate and immoral *potentiality*, as assumed by Western critics of corruption; it is a perspectival *fact*, because, from another point of view, he is indeed a greedy politician. And what makes the situation even more problematic is the fact that the politician's own movements may alter everyone else's perspectives.

A successful politician—not to be confused with a good politician (*jang'wono*)—is one who masters the tricky art of inhibiting changes in supporters' perspectives and at the same time preventing other politicians from bringing such changes

[18] This ontological state of affairs may account for my feeling that Luo, particularly when moving in unknown territory, tend to remain shy and reserved until they are able to establish whether the other is 'one' with them or 'other' to one.

about.[19] The concrete strategies employed to signal one's identity with others in such situations are illustrated by the story of a friend of mine, Robert Okiny, and his rival for the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) ward candidature in the primaries of January 2013.

It was estimated that Okiny's rival, Richard Okech, had spent roughly 4 million Kenyan shillings (40,000 Euros) on his campaign. Okiny, meanwhile, informed me that he had had only 40,000 KSh (400 Euros) at his disposal but repeatedly stressed the difference in the ways he and Okech had spent their money. Okech had set up an office next to the market and people had queued up here almost every day to put in requests for favours—mostly small sums of money to cover hospital fees and routine debts. Okiny, being one of the main local suppliers of iron gates and windows and actively engaged in various forms of community service, was well known in the area and used to pass through the market every day on his way to his workshop (*jua kali*). He had given money to people mainly during pre-organized *harambee* (Swahili: 'pulling together')[20] to which he had been personally invited—thus he had, he stressed, gone out to the people rather than getting the people to come to him. A friend of Okiny's commented that '[h]e was hunting votes with his legs without a vehicle' and thus likened his campaign to *tich matek* (hard work). By contrast, it was clear that many people I talked to viewed Okech's wealth as suspect. The feature they mostly homed in on was that no relations of simultaneous eating/feeding were visible: he had appeared out of the blue, dishing out huge sums of money without either setting up a homestead or building a simple house in the area.[21] Rather than being built up through the transfer of goods and favours within a gastromoral body, his wealth seemed to appear from nowhere, just as he himself had done.[22] Among many people I talked to, this raised the fear that, once elected, he would immediately return to Nairobi, as countless other politicians had done before him. To these people, and to Okiny himself, it seemed that a majority would vote for my friend.

In the end, however, it was Okech who won. Commenting on his rejection at the polls, and the reasons for it, Okiny told me: 'You can be as good as gold—without money you are nothing.' Listening to this, I realized that, just as an individual who fails to obtain enough food to survive is viewed as not being able to take care of themselves, so a politician will not be viewed as a *jang'wono* unless he has enough money and other assets to care for other parts of himself. In this connection, the degree to which Okech involved himself in people's funeral arrangements (*liel*) is particularly indicative. Funerals are of especial significance in Luo life and are

[19] Rumours are one of the prime strategies for bringing about 'gestalt switches'. The paradigmatic relationship under threat from perspectival change is that between guest (*wendo*) and host (see Jenkins 2012 on the political appropriation of the 'immigrant–guest metaphor'). As a result, many Luo terms relating to moral behaviour are highly ambiguous. They have to be, since situations switch suddenly and dramatically (*kech*, for example, means both 'hunger' and 'mercy'; *chamo* means both 'eat morally wrong' and 'eat morally right'; and *luor* means both 'to respect' and 'to be frightened').

[20] *Harambee* are communally organized meetings at which the person or institution issuing the invitation asks for financial assistance. They are generally planned long in advance.

[21] Building a house within your father's homestead is the first step to becoming a respected man, the second is establishing a homestead of your own.

[22] The fact that he had built his office next to the local mortuary reinforced the rumours of a shady past.

expected to be as lavish as possible (Kisiara 1998). The death of a family-member marks a moment in social life when feating relations between relatives are interrupted and previously neglected moral ties can therefore be renewed.[23] Okech's intervention in local funeral-arrangements is therefore best understood as an attempt to distract attention from the fact of his not being a real *jang'wono* and to compensate for his not being embedded in local gastromoral bodies. It was rumoured that no sooner had a person died than Okech would suddenly appear, offering to buy a coffin or provide chickens, catering utensils, chairs, marquees, and other requisites. This, and his ample resources, seem to have been the main reason for his victory over Okiny.

I believe it is awareness of the difficulties associated with becoming a *jang'wono*—in other words, of the need to combine personal charisma and judicious material largesse—that make Luo hanker after strong political leaders such as Raila Odinga (known both as *wuonwa*, 'our father', and *agwambo*, 'the miraculous one'), or Raila's father, Oginga Odinga, or the charismatic Tom Mboya, assassinated in 1969. It is only by conceiving of a politician as a person endowed with the tremendous capacity needed to obviate constant gestalt-switching that Luo are able to extend the logic of gastromorality to the level of national politics.[24]

By gastromoralizing the national state, Luo push to its logical limits a concept of democracy that is overlooked in many of the historical accounts of political thought. This is the concept espoused by Carl Schmitt (1988), who views democracy as identity between ruler(s) and ruled. Luo and their politicians are not *like* one but *are* one. Unlike Schmitt, however, the identity which Luo posit as existing between these two entities is based on the notions of gastromorality and *jang'wono* described above.[25] As one politician commented during a communal fund-raising event, 'Unity [*riwruok*] is what we cannot lose if we want to remain Luo.' This means that, in an ideal Kenyan state, headed by a Luo president, the state would be positioned not *above* individual Luo but *alongside* them. The clinic assistant Tom—and many other Luo—are convinced that in such a state corruption would be eliminated. The fact that no Kenyan president has ever been drawn from the ranks of the Luo only serves to idealize this possibility even more.[26] By contrast, in a Kenyan state headed by a non-Luo president, the state, though similarly not *above* individual Luo, would at the same time be *against* them—a perception exemplified in social-media calls for the proclamation of a 'Nyanza Republic' or 'Luo Nation' and in the vilification of President Uhuru Kenyatta as a 'thief' (*jakuo*).[27] The two modes

[23] As one informant told me: 'My brother won't give me a shilling as long as I live, but when I am dead, he will bring 10 cows.'

[24] Playing on the anthropological notion of the trickster, one might suggest, also trickster-fashion, that Luo politicians are the only tricksters who aim, not to transform themselves into other persons, but to transform other persons into themselves. Revealingly, in a video featuring his celebratory song 'ODM', the Ohangla musician Papa Onye Jey juxtaposes images of Bugs Bunny and Raila Odinga.

[25] One of the earliest anthropological accounts of electoral activity captured this succinctly: '[E]ven if elections are understood, the idea of representation is not' (Austin 1961: 16). This is what makes elections in Kenya into the zero-sum game familiar to us.

[26] Particularly given the widespread narrative that they are the most highly educated group in Kenya (Morrison 2007).

[27] See the Facebook groups 'Nyanza si Kenya' ('Nyanza is not Kenya') and 'Luo Nation'. Of course, a 'non-Luo' president is not necessarily an actual non-Luo president but rather a president who is unable to act as a *jang'wono*. By essentializing what it means to be Luo (i.e. to behave

of presence of the state described by anthropologists Ferguson and Gupta (2002)—'verticality' and 'encompassment'—are here carried to their extremes: antagonism and identity. The state is acting either as part of a gastromoral body involving all Luo or as predatory in the literal sense. Similarly, a politician is either a *jang'wono*—i.e. part of oneself and not a politician—or he is an asocial individual, an enemy of Luo sociality in the sense of gastromorality, and not a politician. If a political entity fails to do justice to other parts of its gastromoral body, it immediately loses its legitimacy and anyone else may step in to take its place.[28] Combined with the problem of definitively proving one's identity with others, the conceptualization of democracy as identity between rulers and ruled leads to a situation in which political violence and unrest, and the fusion and fission of political parties, become uncontrollable—as demonstrated by the outbreaks of violence during the 2007 general election and the primaries of 2013.[29] In more fashionable terms, one might say that, because triggers to outbreaks of violence—notably the corrupt behaviour of politicians—are always present in abundance, these outbreaks occur in a non-linear way (Damon and Mosko 2005, Taylor 2005). The 'disorder of politics' (Chabal and Daloz 2001) is not a moral or epistemological problem: it is an ontological one.[30]

4 Embracing corruption, not fighting it: On transontological drilling and transcultural cooperation

Standard corruption-barometers such as Transparency International (which ranked Kenya 136th out of 175 countries in 2013) attempt not only to measure corruption, and thereby provide an incentive to reduce it, but actually to eliminate it completely, at least in the long term (for a post-colonial critique, see De Maria 2008). Political scientists, meanwhile, look for the roots of corruption in colonial history (Mulinge and Lesetedi 2002) or view it as deriving from the greed of individuals seeking to acquire or retain power (Rose-Ackerman 1999; on Kenya, see Mwangi 2008). By contrast, this paper has proposed that we view corruption as

according to gastromorality) and at the same time allowing everyone to choose to behave as Luo, Luo enact a form of sociality that cuts straight through 'primordialist' and 'constructivist' conceptualizations of ethnicity. A comparison of this kind of 'fractal-segmentary' system—in which every part is virtually the same as the whole—with traditional segmentary societies, as explored by anthropologists since the 1940s, would prove extremely fruitful (see Evans-Pritchard and Fortes 1940 and Middleton and Tait 1970).

[28] I believe this accounts both for the arrogance of police officers, who see themselves as 'the state', and for the prevalence of Luo vigilante sects such as the Baghdad Boys (Katumanga 2005).

[29] Southall (1952) and Evans-Pritchard (1949) offer classic anthropological accounts of fission and fusion inside the Luo segmentary lineage system.

[30] In light of the omnipresent threat of gestalt-switching discussed here, the recent constitutional changes (National Council for Law Kenya 2010) should be viewed with a degree of suspicion. Devolution creates and reinforces the potential for viewing others as engaging in corrupt activity for the sake of their own county or constituency.

something inscribed in Luo sociality itself and based on the perceptual difference and conceptual sameness between *dende* and *chuny*.

While the contributions to Blundo and de Sardan's seminal volume *Everyday Corruption and the State* rightly emphasize the way in which corruption is enmeshed in the cultural logic of everyday life (in the form of gift-giving, solidarity networks, predatory authority, and so on), they fail to extend their thinking to allow for the possibility that corruption is actually a necessary part of that logic—in other words, a transcendental condition. It is not about 'double-speak' (Blundo and de Sardan 2006: 7); it is about the fact that two transactions that are identical from a Western perspective are *actually* different, not just talked about as such. In other words, it is about 'double-see'. Corruption—at least as Western scholars understand it—is thus inscribed in the Luo conceptualization of sociality and the world. In line with this, the present paper has sought to demonstrate that corrupt activity cannot be eradicated, because Luo themselves are ultimately unable to determine whether or not someone is engaged in such activity. No matter how sophisticated we make our 'oversight tool kit' (MCC 2009), it will never be able to spot corruption. Hence, it is futile to ask whether corruption in Kenya is functional or dysfunctional (Debiel and Gawrich 2013): it merely is. Even if all corrupt activity were banished, Luo would continue to accuse each other of corruption (Pierce 2013). Corruption is not just a 'cultural' or 'moral' problem (de Sardan 1999): it is an ontological fact that cannot be eliminated.

Current scholarly approaches to peacebuilding and intercultural relations seem to focus on the 'opportunity of cultural differences' (Brigg 2014: 23) and the need to take the local into account (Richmond 2011). All these approaches share the assumption that human beings are united in each possessing a unique, distinct culture[31] which can be exploited as a 'tool-kit' to solve problems in the world 'out there'. But the present analysis of corruption among Kenyan Luo has shown that it matters enormously whether we have cultural or ontological difference in mind when we talk of 'the other'. Getting rid of corruption as an ontological fact would mean, before all else, forcing Luo to view the deeply human *fact* that I and others are equally part of each other as a matter of cultural *choice*. In other words, we would not just be seeking to persuade Luo to change their cultural perspective on something (such as eating pork); we would be attempting to convince them to change their ontological presuppositions (in other words, to convince them of something epistemologically equivalent to the proposition: 'Apples do not fall if dropped').[32]

A critical 'objective' observer might still argue that corruption has negative consequences for the Kenyan economy and, in the long run, for Luo themselves. This holds good as long as no attempt is being made to truly understand or respect

[31] Brigg (2014: 13), for instance, writes: '[W]hat makes all people human is the fact of not being the same humans.'

[32] The anthropologist Roy Wagner famously urged us to take on board that what the other has is not different solutions to problems 'out there' but different problems to begin with: 'The problems of recruitment, participation, and corporateness (economics) are *our* problems, but we take them with us when we visit other cultures, along with our toothbrushes and favorite novels' (1974: 103; see also Wagner 1986: xii). The anthropologist and development worker therefore need to be reminded that, whereas toothbrushes either have to be bought, or, in the wild, are not available at all, problems are given out for free. Scientists and aid workers can indeed leave their problems at home.

the Luo—in other words, if they are not taken seriously. However, once one does try to understand and respect them, it becomes clear that it is not possible for them to conceive of a causal link between their own behaviour and the decline of the Kenyan economy, because their own behaviour is not a choice. In many situations, 'not being corrupt' can at most be conceptualized as a choice against one's nature. By way of example: not giving to a needy relative (Luo ontology) is equivalent to not eating despite being very hungry (Western ontology). The only way out of this dilemma is to dismiss the Luo as stupid—in the sense of not realizing that the world is made up of individuals rather than of a gastromoral body whose parts 'feat' each other.

In more instances than is generally acknowledged, what development aid should be doing is choosing not between 'liberal peace' and 'relational sensibility' (Chadwick, Debiel and Gadinger 2013) but between 'liberal peace' and 'recognition of radical alterity' (see Heins 2014 for a discussion of recognition in development aid). To put this another way: 1) either one recognizes that Luo ontology is a liveable alternative, and thus that economic liberalism and liberal democracy are not universally valid (making the notion of corruption meaningless), or 2) economic liberalism and liberal democracy are universally valid and Luo are therefore wrong (making the notion of corruption meaningful). Alluding once again to Wittgenstein, one might say that honest development aid would not talk of mutual transcultural 'understanding' (shifting from 'seeing the duck' to 'seeing the duck as an aspect of the rabbit-duck') but of one-sided transontological 'drilling' (shifting from 'seeing the duck' to 'seeing the rabbit': 'Abrichtung', 2009: 7). What seems to be missing in an age of encompassing global cooperation is an effort to accept the possibility of incommensurability and non-bridgeable difference—in other words, an effort to accept that cooperation often forces one of its participants to make an irreversible choice to become like the other in order to have any chance at all of getting the talking going.

Once again I would like to emphasize the differences with cultural relativism which this focus on ontology implies. Cultural relativism has the cosy but suppressive potential to encompass the possibilities to which it accords space, thereby promoting the very notions of liberal democracy which it claims to disown (Chandler 2013). Because it always sees the other as an other of the same type,[33] it differs radically from the current 'ontological turn' approach, which proposes that our relation to the other should be analysed as an aspect of that other rather than analysing the other as an aspect of our relation to it. In terms of the 'rabbit-duck', one might say that the cultural relativist sees the duck as an aspect of the rabbit-duck whereas the ontologist sees the rabbit-duck as an aspect of the duck. Whereas the relativist analyses the other as an aspect of anthropological concepts, and thus overlooks the other, the ontologist does the opposite (analysing anthropological concepts as an aspect of the other). The ontologist thus also overlooks the other, but in the 'right' way, i.e. within the other's concepts.[34] Such an

[33] As Viveiros de Castro has argued in his criticism of social constructivism (2008: 258), what is 'given' is not a specific content (i.e. human nature's tendency to develop unique cultures) but the formal necessity of something having to be conceptualized as the content in the first place.

[34] One might therefore justifiably describe the ontologist as sculpting the other (in that he cuts away at it) whereas the relativist decorates it (in that he adds to it). For a similar argument, see Holbraad and Petersen (2009).

approach allows for the other to remain an other of another type. It thus—causally, as it were—forces the anthropologist to conceptualize this fact and thus depict the other as differing both from ourselves and from itself (Viveiros de Castro, Pedersen and Holbraad 2014).[35]

As I too have 'overlooked' the Luo, I feel slightly uncomfortable concluding this paper by putting forward political proposals. However, since even those who overlook the other 'in the wrong way' are bold enough to make suggestions, I hope that I, as someone who has overlooked the other 'in the right way', may also venture to do so.

One gentle way in which we might deal with the problems to which the Luo conceptualization of sociality gives rise—and at the same time avoid falling back into cultural relativism or colonial hubris—would be to universalize the concept of *ng'wono* ('mercy') by introducing a national policy aimed at ensuring care for all citizens. In effect, this would mean attempting to conceptualize, and thereby alter (and contest—Hobart and Kapferer 2012) the state along the lines of Luo gastromorality rather than conceptualizing, and thereby altering (and contesting), Luo in line with Western liberal democracy (contra Lindberg 2006). Given the current global political and economic situation, the resources needed for such an enterprise are not likely to materialize in Kenya or to be volunteered by donors. However, what donors and think-tanks such as the Centre for Global Cooperation in Duisburg can do is lend their support to parties and policies that show more redistributive and unifying tendencies.[36] In terms of the Kenyan political scene, such a departure from neo-liberal policy, with its overriding interest in structural adjustment and reform, would chime well with the agenda of the Coalition for Reforms and Democracy (CORD 2013), led by the ODM and Raila Odinga. In contrast to the agenda of the Jubilee Coalition (Jubilee 2013), led by Uhuru Kenyatta's National Alliance Party (TNA), it favours a strong state and focuses on redistribution to poorer people and poorer countries.

Contrary to the claims of various journalists and political scientists, the differences between these two agendas are considerable[37] and I therefore do not share the view that African parties automatically focus on ethnic issues rather than

[35] Strictly speaking, the ontological turn thereby both underlines and sidelines 'liberal peace' approaches. It opens up the potential for radical choice without deciding a priori which of the alternatives is better—which would be impossible anyway, as the latter differ radically. By contrast, 'relational sensibility' replaces meaningful principles with attempts to be responsive to whatever changes occur outside (Brigg 2013). However, 'making a choice' or 'sticking to principles' does not imply a belief in a 'god's-eye view' (Brigg 2013: 15); it is simply a product of the realization that belief in the capacity of human beings to face up to consequences and assume responsibilities is indispensable if human beings want to engage with each other meaningfully—and therefore peacefully.

[36] Bukovansky (2006) argues in favour of viewing corruption from a republican perspective. A different—admittedly highly controversial—trajectory such an approach might take would be to return to the discussion on one-party states and why they may be more suitable for African forms of 'communalism' (Nyerere 1965; Nkrummah 1970; Odinga 1967; see also Karlström 1996, who opts for this course after analysing Buganda politics).

[37] A detailed comparison is not possible here, but one or two examples may be enough to illustrate my point. The word 'growth', for instance, appears 35 times in the Jubilee manifesto but only 3 times in the CORD manifesto; again, the Jubilee document does not contain a single occurrence of the word 'redistribution' but is brimful with references to the need to liberalize the economy and reduce public spending.

programmatic ideas. What is more, such a cut-and-dried division does not do justice to the complex links between ethnicity and political strategy. Ethnicity in Kenya is so closely enmeshed with the history of the country as a whole that political ideas can often be inferred by the voter without having to be spelt out in detail by politicians (contra Elischer 2012[38]).[39] And even if it were true that Kenyan parties merely said what their ethnic bloc expected them to say, NGOs and bodies such as foreign political foundations could remind them of their programmatic ideas.

By adopting an approach based on *ng'wono*, we would not fight corruption but endow it with a national-level Siamese twin—intra-action based on mercy—and thereby work towards the point at which every Kenyan felt in a relation of 'mutuality of being' (Sahlins 2011) with every other Kenyan (i.e. in *riwruok*). But acknowledgement of Luo ontology is not the only factor that makes such a strategy worth following: by acknowledging corruption as a rational act, development workers, for instance, could convince Luo to embrace the corrupt acts of the other—which, in the case of the Luo, would mean, among other things, accepting the corrupt activities of the Kikuyu. I have quite often been astounded at the way in which urban Luo and Kikuyu have joined together to ridicule and criticize the economic situation in Kenya—precisely through mutual acknowledgement of the need to act corruptly.[40]

If we do not want to see the Luo change their conceptualization of sociality as a result of our push for liberal reform and structural adjustment, our only course is to embrace corrupt behaviour—which goes to prove that cooperation is sometimes obliged to follow rather curious paths. The good thing about embracing corruption, however, is the chance it gives us to dispatch it with a kiss of death—or at least to move on into a different kind of world.

[38] Viewed from the perspective of the cultural anthropologist, Elischer's argumentation defies all logic and points up the limitations to which quantitative analysis is subject when undertaken before any attempt is made to gain a qualitative understanding of local categories. Elischer uses a scheme of coding that was developed in the Western world to analyse non-Western manifestos. The most absurd application of this is the attempt to analyse Kenyan parties along the left–right divide by designating categories such as 'peace' and 'anti-imperialism' as left-wing and categories such as 'traditional morality' and 'social harmony' as right-wing. Turning this around, a Kenyan would find European parties surprisingly 'a-programmatic' given the lack of references to polygamy, ethnicity, and corruption in—for example—German party manifestos.

[39] This becomes very clear if one talks about party strategy with individuals who do not belong to the ethnic group generally identified with the party in question. They often allude to programmatic differences.

[40] This exemplifies what the anthropologist Michael Hertzfeld has described as 'cultural intimacy' or 'the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality' (2005: 3; see also Smith 2006).

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