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MORAL DISTRUST: CONFLICT AND MUTUALISM IN A ROMANIAN VILLAGE

Abstract

This paper discusses the distrust between fellow villagers in a Romanian community as a form of moral attitude. I argue that distrust is neither a pathological inclination, nor a stable and indiscriminate feature of cultural representations, but an expression of moral relationships and folk epistemology in the village society.

Introduction

The social phenomena I tackle in my research may be understood starting from an ethnographic vignette. The story happens after the fall of socialism in 1989. Several villagers described to me the dissolution of the collective farm, in the village that I have studied for two years during my doctoral research. The CAP (*Cooperativa Agricolă de Producție* – the agricultural collective farm) was established more than a decade after the end of the WWII, by persuasion backed by psychological and physical coercion.¹ Virtually everyone in the village became a CAP member contributing all her land, except for a small plot allotted for subsistence agriculture. Despite generalised pilferage and lack of motivation on behalf of its members, the collective farm was a considerable advance in agricultural technique and productivity in comparison to pre-War levels.

When the end of communism removed the totalitarian state's control over social life in general and collective farms in particular, people faced the choice of handling the machinery and buildings accrued to the CAP. Rather than maintaining the stables and annexes as functional units, and either selling or using them as common goods, former collective members chose to divide them in a Kafka-meets-Kusturica manner. Each building was divided into two-meter sections, designed by chalk

marks, which were then distributed to particular members. The members physically dismantled their allotted section, down to adobe bricks and concrete slabs pried apart with crowbars, and carted the resulting pieces back home. Although most people had opposed collectivisation and its subsequent existence, villagers had just regained real (and not only nominal) ownership of the farm and its capital after the collapse of the totalitarian regime. Moreover, they were not unaware of the outstanding value of shares in an intact building, compared to a cartload of concrete fragments taken home to make a path to the chicken shed. Yet pieces they tore apart and used for trifling purposes.

This paper will propose a perspective aimed to explain this apparently irrational behaviour. On the face of it, the aforementioned situation may be described as, essentially, a “tragedy of the commons” (Hardin 1968).² But to make further sense of such absurd events, we must understand their anchorage in the profound distrust regarding the possibility of moral cooperation between unrelated villagers. People did not see possible an endeavour in which, in the absence of external enforcement, a group could collectively manage property without somebody gaining more (and conversely others getting less) than their fair share. They would not trust either managers or fellow villagers with the fate of their newly returned property. The precautionary decision was to gain something rather than nothing, or at least to get an equal and fair share to everyone else’s, despite the suboptimal result of generalised division. Such failure to cooperate, will be argued, is exemplary for a persistent state of distrust and moral fragmentation in a society such as Sateni.

The perspective I propose to understand such phenomena is that each villager in Sateni lives a dual social life. Each person engages in deep moral relationships with a particular set of persons, expressed in strong cooperative actions and symbolic representations of communion. However, outside this moral sphere she acts as a self-responsible agent in a world built on perennial competition and distrust.

This form of “moral parochialism” may explain why most cases of hostility and distrust are created by deep moral commitments, rather than wanton destructive inclinations. At the same time, many strong moral relationships depend upon the quasi-contractual necessity of consistent reciprocity. People may go in and out of moral contracts with other villagers. I will argue that an intersection of universal, evolved moral inclinations with local configurations of social institutions and ecology may explain this paradox as a prudent and stable cultural representation.

My argument, in a nutshell, is this: Apparently absurd failures of social coordination or cooperation and profoundly pessimistic representations of society may emerge not despite, but because people pursue deep moral commitments. Given certain social causal mechanisms, a zero-sum approach to social life may be the only moral thing to do. Moral relationships are social relationships conditional upon shared interests and fair behaviour.

In the next section, I will present a brief proposal of how distrust may be understood as resulting from a specific moral order. Further, I will discuss why the moral aspects of kinship may explain why kinship is constituted by both genealogy and reciprocity. Then, I will reflect upon the importance of reputation in the village I have studied. Reputation is both a matter of informing others of one's own, or third party's, cooperative inclinations, but also a way of communicating about the formidability of an actor in social interaction: from defensive capacities and revengeful attitudes to verbal prowess and intellectual skill. I will briefly describe the village tavern as the informational arena where these reputations are displayed, contested and culturally-reproduced, especially in the case of village men. The ethnographic material also assesses the culture of secrecy in village society, and its epistemic effect in collective action and individual morality. The stance of epistemic defence deployed by villagers creates a great deal of objective uncertainty, but also, paradoxically, ends up in wildly exaggerated (or entirely misled) representations about fellow villagers and strangers. The paper ends with a discussion over the interpretation of ethnographic material through the lens of classical theories of social order in the contractualist tradition.

Should We Trust the Trust? The Link between Trust, Morality, and Cooperation

This subtitle, and the fundamental question behind it, is largely inspired by Diego Gambetta's concluding remarks about the nature of trust in his influential book.³ One of his astute observations is that you cannot will trust, meaning that trust is not an outcome of a voluntary, intentional attitude. Trust is epiphenomenal, in other words it is the by-product of actions and beliefs directed at other ends. However, a sense of diminishing and loss of trust permeates the contemporary public sphere, with data provided by opinion polls and interpretation by political pundits.

Moreover, people themselves decry an absence of vital trust in everyday affairs, in Romania perhaps as much as anywhere else.

The sense of crisis of is largely informed by a distinction between two forms of trust, as "(...) researchers have usually resorted to the 'extremes in a continuum' metaphor: from 'thick' to 'thin' trust, from 'personalized' to 'generalized' interactions, from 'bonding' to 'bridging' social capital (Narayan, 1998; Putnam, 2000)".⁴ Especially the latter author, in a much celebrated analysis of American distribution of social capital, distinguishes between thick trust and thin trust, and emphasises the radical importance of the latter to create democratic, cooperative societies:

There is an important difference between honesty based on personal experience and honesty based on a general community norm — between trusting Max at the corner store because you've known him for years and trusting someone to whom you nodded for the first time at the coffee shop last week. Trust embedded in personal relations that are strong, frequent, and nested in wider networks is sometimes called "thick trust." On the other hand, a thinner trust in "the generalized other," like your new acquaintance from the coffee shop, also rests implicitly on some background of shared social networks and expectations of reciprocity. Thin trust is even more useful than thick trust, because it extends the radius of trust beyond the roster of people whom we can know personally. As the social fabric of a community becomes more threadbare, however, its effectiveness in transmitting and sustaining reputations declines, and its power to undergird norms of honesty, generalized reciprocity, and thin trust is enfeebled.⁵

In a way, Putnam's model is the rehashing of an old idea with an illustrious history. In classical sociology, this story appears in some way or another in all the major theories of modernity. For Tonnies, the transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, for Marx the replacement of feudalism by liberal capitalism (soon to be, in its turn, replaced by socialism), for Weber the rationalisation and individualisation of society (and the accompanying iron cages of bureaucracy), for Durkheim the transformation of mechanical solidarity to organic sociality in modern states. In each of these classical theories, there is a fundamental transformation in social relationships, which may be understood also as a change in the regime of trust. In their fairly deterministic manner, they talk about a previous stage of sociality in which trust is thick inside tight-knit communities, employed to demarcate the boundary between "us" and "them", living the long duration of kinship rather than the short

duration of the market contract, personalised rather than impersonal, based on ascribed status rather than achieved social identity. Even more importantly, each of these theoretical perspectives emphasises the role of life in a anonymous, urban, industrial society, where the old ties are lost and new ones are ephemeral and dispersed. What Putnam argues, on the basis of survey data, is a stagnation or even a diminishing of thin trust, that “chicken soup of social life” as Uslaner called it.

This image of a crisis of trust ought to be taken, nevertheless, with a grain of salt. In her Reith lecture, philosopher Onora O’Neill shows signs of skepticism with the ontological nature of trust as employed in social sciences:

How good is the evidence for this crisis of trust? A lot of the most systematic evidence for the UK can be found in public opinion polls and similar academic research. The pollsters ask carefully controlled cross-sections of the public whether they trust certain professions or office-holders. The questions aren’t easy to answer. Most of us would want to say that we trust some but not other professionals, some but not other office-holders, in some matters but not in others. (...) In answering the pollsters we suppress the complexity of our real judgements, smooth out the careful distinctions we draw between different individuals and institutions, and average our judgements about their trustworthiness in different activities.⁶

Although this appears to be a rather slight criticism of the UK situation, it inspires a wider problem with sociological studies of trust, that may very well apply to my Romanian case study. Pollsters and academic scholars collect and interpret answers to questions about trust in strangers, or trust in people of other ethnic groups, or trust in friends or relatives. It is a question that only begs another question: “trust to do what?”, one that is left unanswered. What are we to make of the fact that Romanians exhibit low levels of generalised trust, but relatively high levels of trust in family and friends?⁷ What are the structures of social interaction which underpin this difference? What are the practices in which trust is actually created, tested, and deployed? What is the structure of opportunities and expectations that informs the trust or distrust in other people?

In a more general manner of exploring social relationships, the distinctions between different types of trust may be illuminating at a descriptive level, but what about their causal nature? What is the difference

between the mechanisms of thick and thin trust? At a more empirical level, how does thick trust survive and apply to a modern state society whose official rules and laws are based upon a different kind of sociality?

I will start from the following premise: when we talk about trust, we are in fact talking about morality. What I mean is that trust is an epiphenomenon, or by-product of morality. People trust, or distrust, people according to the nature of the moral relationship between them, not the other way around. Subsequently, when we are talking about morality, we are talking about cooperation. The second of these premises rests upon the naturalistic theories of morality as an evolved disposition to engage in and monitor cooperative, mutualistic social interaction.⁸ Rather than a normative theory of morality, these theories treat morality as a psychological disposition which has evolved under Darwinian constraints of natural selection. However, these theories, and especially the Baumard-Andre-Sperber proposal, do not exclude the importance of culture as mental and public representation. In other words, our moral actions and representations are the product of the intersection between evolved dispositions and a structure of ecology, history, and cultural transmission. The same psychological inclinations may develop differently in a two societies with a different division of labour, with different theories of personhood, or different modes of production.

I want to argue that trust is an epistemic stance towards cooperation expressed in terms of morality. Thus, when people do not trust another person (or they trust her less), it means that they do not perceive the possibility of mutually-beneficial social interaction and social coordination with another person. This may be due either to the reputation of the other person as non-cooperator, or due to risk-averse choices under incomplete information, or due to the impossibility of coordinating over a stable cooperative solution to social dilemmas. In representation, both mental and public, the presence or the absence of trust are expressed as moral terms. I will argue that my ethnography of trust and distrust is compatible with a model of psychological inclinations as proposed by Baumard, Andre and Sperber in their model of mutualistic, contractarian morality underpinned by reputation and enlightened self-interest, with some I have mentioned above that the survey-approach to the study of trust was evoked with skepticism in relation to its method of collecting and interpreting data. In a way, the sociological distinction between generalised trust and personalised trust seems to have a theoretical affinity with a dichotomy in cooperation made by Bernard Williams between macro-motivations

and micro-motivations for cooperation.⁹ The former is a general motive to cooperate (which could be strictly egotistical or not), while the latter is comprised by a particular motive to cooperate (either a special event, or with a special person). The distinction may be compared, in a naturalistic reading, with the difference between evolved adaptations for cooperation and actual, real configurations. To employ the biological terminology, we are talking about the difference between genotype and phenotype, between the initial endowment and potential of the organism and its eventual development under specific ecological conditions.

Here, however, lies the limitation of survey methods in the study of trust. Probing questions cannot directly access that general motive for cooperation, the generalised inclination to trust or mistrust categories of people at the level of psychological mechanisms. Survey answers offer a glimpse into mental representations of trust and distrust, but with the added pretense of generality. I am not convinced that such evidence adequately represents anything else but a crude summation of different social phenomena and personal experiences. It is not that the image is wrong, since there is something both intuitively and empirically solid about the fact that aggregate levels of thin trust are much larger in Sweden than they are in Romania. But we need to unpack the causal mechanisms of cooperation which underlie the representations of trust. Such an endeavour requires a foray into the folk notions of personhood that are tapped by questions such as “how much do you trust your relatives”. If we want to understand what trust in relatives means, we need to understand why and how do people cooperate with relatives, and what exactly is a “kinship” relationship for a particular society such as the village of Sateni.

Distrust in the Village Society

Sateni is a village of about a thousand inhabitants in NE Romania, in the historical region of Moldova. I have spent there two years doing ethnographic research for my PhD thesis, acting as a construction apprentice, and then associating with various people in participant observation of the social life of the village. As far as I could tell from comparing it with neighbouring villages and many other Romanian villages that I know, there was nothing particular about Sateni, at least nothing that would suggest an anomalous structure of distrust and cooperation. In fact, Sateni could be said to be one of those “arbitrary locations” whose

particularities matter less than their capacity to be explored in search for more general theoretical considerations.¹⁰ Bearing in mind my aim to explore cross-cultural patterns, it is worth mentioning that my ethnography of the village of Sateni uncovered a society very much in line with portraits of peasant cultures across the world.

During my first lessons in social pedagogy, my Sateni associates taught me the importance of self-reliance, personalised kinship networks, generalised mistrust and particularist morality. In political science, Edward Banfield summarised “the ethos of amoral familism” in his famous quote, “maximize the material, short-run advantage of the nuclear family; assume that all others will do likewise”.¹¹ Banfield’s description of a South Italian locality was not received kindly in anthropology. Critics have attacked his inference that ethos causes underdevelopment,¹² the causal direction between values and social structure,¹³ his ethnocentric definition of family and morality,¹⁴ while his work was better received and developed by his political science colleagues.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the amount of attention given to a rather cursory analysis by a non-anthropologist is remarkable. There are even opinions that Banfield was making a correct diagnostic without providing a good explanation for South Italy and other similar societies,¹⁶ Moreover, I find myself in the awkward position of claiming that Sateni villagers tacitly and sometimes explicitly agree to principles superficially similar to “amoral familism”.

I believe that Banfield came across an important pattern of mental representations, but his approach was neither theoretically illuminating nor descriptively accurate. His critiques agree to the trivial point that people do not see themselves as morally obliged to everyone in the same way, but amoral familism is at most an epiphenomenon that hides underlying causal processes which Banfield had largely ignored.¹⁷ The problem lies in the relationship drawn by Banfield between individual perspectives and social mechanism. Although he overtly embraces a form of methodological individualism, he is actually making a holistic statement about Montegrano society. What is worse, he neither develops the theoretical affordances of the holist and individualist perspectives, nor does he correct their respective weaknesses.

An example of Banfield’s haste is that a universal postulate of amoral familism makes people appear individually irrational, in direct contradiction to the author’s own assumption. He describes Montegranesi as broadly rational, with the exception of their amoral familism ethos. If family welfare is centrally valuable, why are Montegranesi not improving

it in the long term? If short-term inclinations harm their benefits in the long term, it seems that Montegranei don't even care for their families. Moreover, since Montegranei are said to assume that everyone else is an amoral familist, what happens when this assumption is not met? Such fundamental questions cannot be answered by simply postulating moral principles – with essentialist undertones–, without paying attention to their practical employment in social life.

I consider that there is a non-trivial aspect to Banfield's work which was obscured by his botched attempt to link values with economic development: differences in moral reasoning are not only quantitative, but also qualitative. Simply put, an actor's perspective of morality is unique given a particular definition of who is included within the moral sphere and who is without. Thus, moral fragmentation can co-exist and be determined by a single moral orientation shared by everyone in a social locality rather than relative moral values. As Barth puts it, people can "live together in differently constructed worlds".¹⁸ I argue that a theoretically reliable form of methodological individualism must account for the intersection of these individual perspectives in practical action and intentional communication. A discussion of morality is thus possible only by paying attention to mechanisms which link folk representations with existing behaviour and its consequences, often unintended.

An alternative way of studying morality in social relationships is to understand opportunities in and constraints determining moral behaviour rather than deriving social configuration as amoral familism writ-large. The point I am trying to make is that similar moral commitments can be associated with different social relationships, whether amoral "familists" meet each other as butcher and baker, as Adam Smith envisaged the emergence of enlightened self-interest, or as reciprocal cattle rustlers.¹⁹ As Merton advised, causal chains between holistic social structures and individual reasoning and practice should be approached as social mechanisms described by empirically testable middle range theories.²⁰

The kind of worldview that Banfield suggests may be better understood as not so much an "ethos" but as a response to social dilemmas. Montegranei, villagers in Sateni, as well as Swedish taxpayers or Nuer pastoralists, each face one form or another of collective problems, and each have some sort of institutionalised response. The problem is how to achieve cooperation at a social level when cheating or exploitation may provide sufficient individual incentives? In its simplest form, the problem comes as the Prisoner's Dilemma, where two individuals have certain

benefits if they cooperate, but each could gain more if he alone is cheating the other. In a perfectly rational at individual level – but suboptimal at social level, each chooses to defect and both are worse off.²¹ The Prisoner's Dilemma may be one of many kinds of collective problems that people face in real life. Many of these do not have cooperative solutions that are simple and easy to maintain. But many other do, and people can coordinate on certain choices for mutual benefit. In more than passing remark, the transition from non-cooperative equilibria to cooperative equilibrium may be what made us human in the first place, at cultural and psychological level as argued by Boyd and Richerson²² and respectively Tomasello.²³

In the case of peasants, social anthropology brought an inspiring example of collective dilemma and the cultural representation associated with it. George Foster argued that peasant society is governed by an “image of limited good”, based on his ethnographic work in Tzintzuntzan, Mexico – but said to apply to a more general category of social organisation which may be called “peasantry”.²⁴ In short, this worldview informs that all social life is based on a zero-sum game.²⁵ If one individual will have more of something, then someone else (may be more than one) must have less. There is no plus-value in such society, no social interaction which might leave both actors better off than how they were before the event. Much has been said about this perspective,²⁶ which – in a simplistic reading – may be seen as a retelling of Banfield's maxim (it is, but there is more than this). At the very least, it may be said to be the opposite of the ideology of capitalism and liberalism, where perpetual growth is possible if non-zero interaction develop.²⁷ The corollary to this worldview is that each social relationship carries with it the potential for exploitation and unfair division of good.

If everyone is exclusively pursuing narrow, egotistical interests, and the amount of good and welfare are limited in this world, what is the reasonable attitude for an individual in, say, Sateni? Their dominant inclination, in a nutshell, is to go it alone. It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that several dominant peasant values are emphatically non-cooperative. Even in relation to relatives and friends, villagers put above all characteristics such as independence and autarchy, with an emphasis on self-reliance and self-interest to rival the Robinson Crusoe of literature and many economic models. Thus, a villager achieves a status of esteemed householder (*bun gospodar*) by accumulating enough land, animals and tools to avoid any reliance upon other individuals, without the need to borrow or buy, nor the desire to lend or sale. From my experience of Sateni, I was puzzled

to see that being entirely independent and self-reliant (an ideal almost never realised) was put above other considerations (such as efficiency or interdependence).

To summarise briefly a complex cosmology, a householder who does not need others (to borrow something, to buy or to sell their labour power or their produce) avoids the perils of social interaction with people who are unreliable or who might prove even outright exploitative. This gives social life a subtle sense of “everyday siege”, where you are not sure who might be out to take advantage of you, either as direct coercion or indirectly through deception. After all, this is what zero-sum games are about, having more on the expense of others. Distrust, thus, is not a pathological state,²⁸ but a rational response to a state of epistemic uncertainty, competition for scarce material and symbolic resources, and a society centered around the family.

But notice that peasant societies, such as Sateni, are organised along two dimensions. On the one hand, you have the zero-sum-game approach that is described above. But this does not characterize relationships with the kith and the kin,²⁹ which are based on mutualism and community of feeling and action. Sateni villagers live a double life. In both deed and word, there is a solid (if negotiable) distinction between two social spheres. My ethnographic materials shows that folk models of society in Sateni carve social configurations into meaningful categories of persons between the axiom of individualism and the axiom of amity. Each individual in Sateni represents other people in his village as belonging to either of two domains of society. One sphere includes people committed to and respecting norms of mutual responsibility and reciprocity with Ego. The other sphere contains everyone else in a social organisation of private responsibility and individual autonomy. The social life of the village of Sateni, as I understand it, is an emergent phenomenon of everyone thinking and acting towards others according to this dualism.

However, I am not convinced that the causal relationship between trust and kith-and-kinship is unidirectional and constant. If we are to understand why people trust relatives and friends more than others, we need to understand how “relatives and friends” is a flexible and negotiated category of people, whose membership is the result of relatedness as well as mutualism. We could, thus, get closer to the idea of trust as barometer of cooperation.

Given and Made: The Flexibility of Kinship as a Cooperative Principle

For natural sciences, especially those concerned with the evolutionary perspective, the great enigma is not “why don’t people cooperate?” but “why do they cooperate, and why in such extensive manner”? Starting from a similar realist assumption, we could turn the tables on the structure of Sateni distrust, and ask ourselves how is trust and cooperation possible given such representations of individualism and zero-sum approach to life.

For a biologist,³⁰ cooperation has three roots in nature. The first is kin altruism towards individuals genetically related. The second is superior survival rate of social groups which cooperate in contrast with less-cooperative groups. The third is the relative competitive advantage accrued to cooperators in contrast with non-cooperators. Since I take the second to be relatively an insignificant factor in Sateni and other mono-ethnic villages,³¹ I will focus on the first and the third origins for morality, respectively kin altruism and mutualism. The former has a simple Darwinian explanation: helping others who share our genes becomes an indirect benefit for our gene-replication organisms.³² In the latter, we act morally because we expect other to act morally towards us. If we are allowed to chose our partners in social interaction, we will pick those who proved to act moral (and expect them to prefer us if we have a reputation for being cooperative).

Analytically, the two roots of cooperative inclinations have a distinct evolutionary origin, and should apply to different social domains – kinship, respectively a market of cooperation. But here is the rub: a lot of what anthropologists and the people they study call kinship, is actually a phenomenon which fuses the two origins of morality. The principles of evolution incline human beings (as well as any other gene-replicating organism) to favour other individuals whose genetic make-up is (at least partly) similar. In other words, by helping out your daughter, grandsons, or cousins and their grandsons, you indirectly favour the replication of their genetic material – and implicitly yours. Kin altruism should thus be a misnomer, since there is very little altruism involved.³³

But there is something else about kin that makes them special: they are the people with whom you interact most closely, people who know your life, and you know theirs. People with whom you share, you partake at each other’s moments and emotions. People with whom you are publicly associated, and reciprocally acknowledged. Taking a step back, a classical

debate in anthropology asked what is kinship really about?³⁴ On the one hand, we have claims that kinship is about the facts of procreation which establish genealogical relationships on natural basis but with different social arrangements. To summarise this position, kinship is about the facts of biology, no matter how skewed the interpretation might be in a particular culture.³⁵ On the other hand, other arguments are that kinship as such does not exist as a general human category, that each culture has its own mode of kinship which may involve biology (as in the American kinship system),³⁶ or not.³⁷ Rather than facts of nature, facts of kinship are cultural facts which build upon sharing each other's lives. Few phenomena fit this metaphor than cooperation with people who promote and are sensible towards each other's well-being.

From a genetic point of view, there is no wonder that kinsmen cooperate. As long as there is an increase in inclusive fitness, individuals should be inclined to act generously towards relatives, and they expect the same. But crosscultural evidence complicates the matter. It is true that genetic kin are often deemed as relatives, but not always, not all of them, and not exclusively. In a society with unilineal descent, one of your parent's blood relatives are not your relatives in a sociologically important way. Nurture and ritual may create kinship where there was none before. Phenomena as adoption or assisted reproduction further complicate the meaning of "kinship" even in modern societies. It seems the latter approach also has something going for itself.

I propose that both perspectives may be right in the same time if we conceive them not as exclusive modes of society, but as cultural attractors.³⁸ In this perspective, kinship-as-biology and kinship-as-mutuality may co-exist at the level of psychological inclinations and at the level of the evolution of social institutions. The inclination to favour kin and the inclination to choose interaction partners which are cooperative and reliable, may each contribute a push-or-pull impact upon how people think and act in relation to relatives – or better said, what is culturally considered as "relatives". Sateni kinship arrangements could serve as ethnographic material for my modest proposal. In the village I have studied, kinship is informed both by nature and morality. Kinsmen are the epitome of moral agents towards ego, and the main recipients of morality from ego. But genealogical kinship may be erased by a history of unrequited altruism. Moreover, a villager may create kinsmen from previously unrelated people – mainly through ritual kinship. Trusting and cooperating with kin may be more about shared experiences and mutual knowledge (building up to a

good management of reputation) than blood ties. Blood may be thicker than water, but mutuality and cooperation might be thicker than both.

Take the example of creating kin ties from scratch. Marriages and baptisms are events of “making kin” in the guise of spiritual kin, i.e. godparents and wedding sponsors. In Romanian, both categories have the same name: *nași*, m. *naș*, f. *nașă*, although the Orthodox Church sometimes uses an archaic term for wedding sponsors – *nuni*. In order to differentiate between them in utterances, one adds wedding or baptism godparents. Baptismal godparents and parents proper are in a relationship of *cumetrie*, while godchildren are *fini* to the godparents and their offspring. Ideally, the godparents should have a solid social and economic status without already being close relatives to the married couple. The selection of godparents is largely informed by the candidates’ social and financial standing, given the costs of ritual and gifts given to newlyweds and godchildren. Local politicians often figure as such ritual kin, due to their advantageous social position.

Nevertheless, a household looks for more than an instant fix for a single event. Entering into a relationship with godparents is a way of creating kinship outside the existing sphere of relatives. A shepherd justified his choice of another sheep-owner as godfather to his daughter thus: “we were such good friends and we got along so well, that we wanted to make ourselves *neamuri*”. But godparenthood is much more than dyadic friendship adorned with the garment of kinship. While a godparent starts out as a friend to one or both parents, spiritual kinship creates a bond between families. It is a family and not a person who baptises a child or confers spiritual parentage to the couple. This implies a multi-stranded relationship between two corporate groups with complex commitment. A spouse can reject a proposed godparent if his family is socially flawed, over and above the particular characteristics of the individual. Just as with marriage, godparenthood is a total fact of relatedness, involving more than the directly acting parties. Mutuality in cooperation is the key element institutionalized by the newly established kinship relationship.

But making kin is just one part of the pattern, because people may “lose” kin in just as regular fashion. By losing kin, I mean the gradual social isolation between actors, leading to mutual (or unilateral) dis-acknowledging of relatedness. The causes of rupture can be traced to the nitty-gritty of everyday life. First, the division of a larger piece of the estate could leave room for disagreement. A family could feel disadvantaged in receiving a smaller or poorer quality plot than another

inheriting family. Long-term conflicts started from boundary management. Some families complained that their relatives pinched a couple of furrows from their field during early ploughing. In other cases, fences between house plots were moved in secret, by a few centimetres each year. Perceived imbalance between dowries, endowments for grooms or parental gifts also led to clashes between siblings.

Potential for conflict may remain even beyond the partition of wealth. Animals could wreak havoc on the garden of a kin neighbour, and weeds spread from a relative's fallow plot. A large tree blocked out sunlight from a neighbour's tomatoes. Accusations of petty theft or damaging negligence also targeted the close relatives that surrounded one's property. If one's neighbours, at home and in the open field, were predominantly close relatives, if transfer of property through partible inheritance would pit relatives against relatives, the seeds of conflict had been structurally planted in genealogical kinship. The household-centred form of kinship makes it irrelevant if Ego is fighting with consanguineal or affinal kinsmen. His interests are identical with his family interests, and conflict can sever genealogical ties on either side, due to similar inheritance-related quarrels. As predicted by the idea of trust as barometer of morality and cooperation, it is fascinating to observe that the highest distrust is not attached to anonymous, distant villagers – but towards those that lost (or are in the process of losing) their attachment to Ego as relatives. Distrust beckons kin rupture.

Sometimes, the denial of relatedness can begin as a unilateral attempt to sever ties with unwanted kin. Mihai, my local apprentice, was approached by a dirty, drunk and stuttering herder with: "Hey, cousin, how are you?" Mihai ironically imitated his lisp, and sent him away. He then turned to me and whispered that, despite appearances, that pitiable fellow was indeed his second cousin. Some of Mihai's friends knew about the genealogical link, and repeatedly taunted Mihai to acknowledge and treat his "co-co-co-cousin" to a drink. Many villagers were angry with their better-off relatives who "didn't hold us as neamuri anymore" once they got rich. One of those who found relatives to be something of a burden was the woman rebuking her uncle's claims to be neam with her son, especially after her recent increase in status and wealth, due to migrant remittances from another son. To a prosperous and reputable villager, poor relatives can be a source of public embarrassment and annoyance, given their recurrent demands for assistance without plausible prospects of reciprocity. In the process of "unmaking" kin, the active party stops

visiting and inviting undesirable relatives, avoids interaction in everyday or ritual contexts and, finally, tacitly obscures or expressly denies relatedness.

As Maurice Bloch suggests,³⁹ this can be understood as the tactical use of a moral concept, only in a different direction. Rather than extending morality, a denial of kin recognition means withdrawing it. Things are not that simple, though. I asked people if brothers who no longer “hold each other as brothers” are still brothers, and the answer was positive.⁴⁰ Even if they killed each other, they would remain brothers no matter what. The facts of ‘brotherhood’ cannot be changed by individual agency, not even mutual misrecognition. The same reasoning applies to cousins, brother-in-laws and other collaterals, but seems to diminish the longer the genealogical tie and the stronger the reciprocal denial of relatedness. I take this evidence to speak for the presupposed effect of the cultural attractor of genetic kinship. Facts about biological relatedness remain relevant for other reasons except cooperation (for example, incest avoidance). But the effect of the cultural attraction (or better said cultural repulsion in this case) makes less relevant for human cognition those relatives with whom cooperation has proven difficult or costly. They may still figure as relatives in the semantic memory, but hardly in episodic memory.

Returning to the issue of trust, we may observe a further development of why we trust relatives. We could do it, on the one hand, because they share our blood and our genetic chances. As Fortes put it with wonderful precision:

There is a fiduciary element in amity. We do not have to love our kinfolk, but we expect to be able to trust in them in ways that are not automatically possible with non-kinfolk.⁴¹

But there is an implicit *caeteris paribus* in this axiom of amity. We could not trust our genetic kinfolk no matter how they acted in the past (what if they cheated us of our inheritance?), while we could very well trust our godfather in matters in which no blood relative could be expected to be trusted. A model of cultural attraction would suggest that folk theories of kinship would be informed both by mutualism and by genealogical considerations.

But there is a problem: in the absence (or the presence in insignificant manner) of biological kin ties, what would promote cooperation (and thus trust) in kin rather than any other villager? The answer, I believe, lies with the fact that social cooperation is largely built upon reputation.

If direct proof of a possible partner's cooperative disposition is absent, any information about previous behaviour (witnessed first-handedly or not) could provide relevant inputs to adjust one's cooperative stance. One thing that relatives in Sateni do is know a lot about each other. They visit each other a lot, they act in minor cooperative acts (even such banal events such as spinning yarn with little productive value). They even gossip a lot, perhaps even more about other relatives than about unrelated villagers. They exchange stories, news about distant kinfolk, opinions and interpretations of events, and what-not. As Sahllins would put it, they partake to each other's existence.

One ostensive effect of this pattern of interaction is a web of knowledge and reputation which doubles up and even constructs the web of kinship. People know more about relatives than about others, and they use it in order to engage in successfully cooperative actions. This fits right in with Baumard-Andre-Sperber's model of morality as fairness.⁴² Their argument, in a gist, is that humans have an evolved disposition for fairness in human cooperation, which helps them build a reputation as honest partners in a market of potential cooperators. Fairness, in their models, is the reaping of benefits (or the retribution of sanctions) equivalent to each partner's contribution to common goods. A reputation for fair collaboration (i.e. neither a sucker nor a predator) makes one a stable partner, everybody reaping the mutually-rewarding benefits of cooperation (rather than non-cooperation). Cheaters and exploiters either select themselves away, or change they ways in order to remain as potential cooperators.

We can see how this is played out in Sateni kinship. Stingy, greedy, deceiving kin are avoided, and very likely erased from the map of practical kin, at least in cooperative manners. With the rest, mutual knowledge vastly decreases transactional costs, with each party knowing when and how to negotiate, bargain over inputs and results, enter or leave a joint activity. Successful mutualism in the past guarantees a string of cooperative endeavours. Those relatives who manage to fuse biological relatedness with cooperative affinity remain dead on the centre of an individual's mental map of kinship.⁴³ However, there are more chances for a cousin to gently disappear from memory and action if social interaction with him is costly and unfair, than for a "fictive" but mutually-rewarding kin relationship.

If trust is representation and behaviour regarding the reputation and identity of other people, the sphere of kinship provides an individual with a ready-made map of cooperation. Some relatives might be better for this

project (e.g. women for helping out with funeral rituals), other relatives for something else (godparents from the city to help out with finding a job for their spiritual sons). The information is more easily accessible, the facts better understood, alternatives more clearly spelt out. Trust in kin appears, thus, as part inclusive fitness-oriented altruism, and part informational stability. We may contrast the cooperation-oriented mode of sociality with the kith and the kin, with the competition-oriented way of approaching village society, to have a better grasp on the trust-distrust dichotomy.

Secrecy and Reputation: The Communicative Sources of Trust and Distrust

By and large, social life in Sateni may be said to be informed by a “culture of secrecy”. Sateni villagers make strict considerations about the social distribution of knowledge, which makes information vital, yet hard to obtain. Basically, one should be cautious in public representations, carefully control the flow of information, but should conversely acquire as much evidence as possible from others. Within private spheres, amity creates a dense network of information which must be kept as much as possible “in” rather than “out”. The group which freely shares information (along with reciprocal prestations and gifts) has the family living within a united household in the centre, and further allows different levels of intimacy with kin, friends and neighbours. Outside this safe sphere, one has to cultivate an intensely controlled public image, from physical impression and participation to discussions, to the appearance of households, crops and graves.

The reversal of the attempt to minimize and control information disclosure is the education of attention⁴⁴ to material cues, unwittingly shared thoughts, bodily aspect and any other relevant tokens. Noticeable interests are the evolution of markets for agricultural products, local political activities, the state of affairs between kin, friends and neighbours, evaluations of wealth, opportunities for local business and external migration. As information is precious and restricted, one has to master the art of inference and deduction from little available signs. As often as not, erroneous inferences lead to botched interpretations and subsequent miscalculated behaviour. Runaway rumours might prove false, but escalation of gossip is bound to happen when there is no way of getting

to know the inside story. Often, the “truth” of the matter is besides the point, replaced by the management of reputation.

The separation between the ‘safe’ private spheres and closely-watched public spaces in this informational game of hide-and-seek is borne out in physical configuration of households. Spaces are divided between publicly visible areas such as front gardens, fences, roofs, façades, courtyards, and the intimate spaces of houses and barns. In general, impenetrable fences for courtyards and graves are interpreted as a sign of social standing in protecting one’s property physically and symbolically. The visible items’ appearance is keenly scrutinized by the inquisitive eyes of visitors, neighbours or passers-by, thus severely restricting individual behaviour. An example is the social taboo against working on Sundays or other holy days. Few invite gossip by overtly breaching it, yet it is an open secret that many people do work in indoor privacy, as long as the secret is made inaccessible. We may add that the fact that everyone is a hypocrite does not increase public trust.

The importance of this “culture of secrecy” appears forcefully in the explicit instructions given to children regarding the protection and management of information. From an early age, parents and elders teach children to never give away the secrets of the family. They should dodge inquiries from unrelated people or give misleading answers. Children are praised when they manage to avoid unwanted intrusions or scolded when they do not protect the integrity of the household. A child who speaks too much about what is happening at home is said to “*a da din casă*”, i.e. “give (knowledge) from the home”. Adults are aware that children have easy access to spaces which are not easily penetrated (such as other people’s courtyards) and often ask them to relate what they have seen in their daily wanderings. On the other hand, lies told by children to parents or consociates are severely punished. One of the most serious offences is a lie told to protect a stranger in the detriment of the child’s family. Therefore, a clear distinction is made between who should be treated to the truth and who does not have a right to truth due to potential harm. Arguably, this pedagogy paves the way for the attitudes that a proficient adult should present in a successful social life in Sateni, given the duality of the folk model of sociality. The proper inclination should be for epistemic cooperation inside the sphere of the kith and the kin, and epistemic competition outside it. Distrust appears, once again, as an epistemic stance backed by moral considerations.

The quintessential space for epistemic competition is, from my ethnographic perspective, the village tavern. This is where men collect information by observing patterns of social intercourse in the pub and use this evidence in everyday life when thinking about the elements of social groups or about the status of social relationships. Social hierarchies and individual rivalry are tested and reproduced in competitions of skill and power, ranging from shows of physical strength and gamesmanship when betting, to cunningness when deceiving. Everyone's alertness is geared to tracking patterns of individual agency and social affiliation, and men seem particularly vigilant towards those individuals who influence (or have the potential of influencing) their own situation. All these practices define a social setting in which men act, and are considered to act, as individuals primarily responsible for securing their welfare and position versus others. The stability of roles is underplayed in tavern life; today's friend can become the tomorrow's foe; the mayor is just another individual who has to prove his worth in front of the others; authority can be challenged and displaced; a set of moral contracts will change its configuration according to the individual's actions. Here, power is linked with practical performance. Authority does not come from any transcendental dimension but is created through interaction and the matching of individual fitness and group support, and of these two, only the former is beyond doubt.

There is something specific about coming to the village tavern to do something in particular – such as beating up a rival villager. It is not merely the act of violence, but the communication of the act. The individual engages in ostensive communication, making clear that he is communicating that he is communicating. Thus, much of what goes on in taverns may have originated as the intention to communicate something. From my observation of tavern life, I would insist upon the communication of “formidability”: how powerful really is this social actor i.e. how capable of doing real harm to others?⁴⁵

But why should a villager display costly signals about his formidability? He could use it to keep his political followers under his command, making costlier their defection or challenge. Or to advertise their capacity to protect their animals and their goods from potential intruders. Or just simply as a signal of one's capacity to hold one's own in any conflict. The latter may even be said to have a morally-sincere undertone, since one does not just defend himself, but also family, relatives or comrades if need be. The name “formidability” has a certain sounding which suggests physical prowess (and in Sateni, violence is part of the playing deck), but

it need not be. In a recent article,⁴⁶ I have described how villagers use the fool's errand to demonstrate in humiliating ways who can deceive others most proficiently. The use of lies and coordinated manipulation is socially legitimate in the tavern, and the painful outcomes are seen more as the victim's fault for being unprepared to avoid deception, than the perpetrator's.

Between them, the reputation for physical or psychological formidability manage to squeeze cooperation out of the public sphere. It is not that people advertise their inclination for anti-cooperative behaviour. In fact, they advertise quite the contrary when they act in defence of relatives and friends.⁴⁷ However, the situations that develop in taverns are mainly competitive, almost never cooperative. Games of cards, gin rummy, arm-wrestling, gambling, competitive lying, each and every one of them is a zero sum-game, in which the win of one comes at the price of the loss of another. The winner ranks higher than the loser in a hierarchy of prestige and status which guides everyday life. What these games do not communicate are the actor's competence and inclination in cooperative settings. Even more, an individual who is revengeful, not forgiving, cunning, powerful in muscle and skill, may divert the choice of cooperative partners to kinder actors even if he would have suited.⁴⁸ To sum up, the default epistemic stance towards the wider world is secrecy, and public displays advertise the individual skill of actors, rather than cooperative inclinations.

I believe there is, however, a particular social phenomenon which combines the two forms of reputation as cooperator and as competent individual. In Sateni, mortuary rituals follow a dual system of transcendent moral duties. On the one hand, rituals are aligned with the Christian ontology of universalism, equality before death and before divinity, and social openness towards the weak and the distant. But, underneath and ultimately prevailing in the long term, the rituals pursue another worldview, that of particularistic morality, of competitive individualism between unrelated villagers and of strong solidarity with the kith and the kin.

Two ethnographic examples are illustrative. At each funeral, the bereaved family hands out alms: the poor receive the generic ones, such as ritual cakes and towels. But the family, the friends, and the good neighbours receive specific, individually-nominated gifts under the same guise of alms. Older women pay special attention to wrapping and labelling these items well in advance of their (or their spouse's) death.

Furthermore, anyone can attend the ritual meal after the burial, but, with each cycle of commemoration, the circle gets smaller. After some time, the kith and the kin are the only ones invited to remember and pray for the dead. The sharing of spiritual participation and worldly goods is still present, but the sphere of people is clearly delimited. If we are to define that sphere, the best way would be to include all the people who would, in their turn, invite the dead man's relatives for their own funerary rituals.

In the end, the most salient image associated with the mortuary ritual is, again, a representation of trust. But, unlike the culture of secrecy which engulfs the other social interactions, here the event is ostensibly public. Funerary rituals are different from the flow of everyday life in that they are final and unrepeatable. One of the greatest moral anxieties of old people is whether their relatives will remember them, will perform the proper rituals, will take care of their graves, and, above all, to bury them. To be buried by the village instead of your relatives is perhaps the worst shame and fear in the village society. The "kindness of strangers" is something of a curse in matters of funeral arrangements. Once an individual has died, it is to her circle of consociates to perform according to expectations: for the closest ones to arrange the funeral, for the ones a bit further to help out or perhaps just to be there, showing to the village that they are carrying out their part in the logic of moral social relationships. And I say "showing" although the presence at a ritual is more than just signalling commitment: being there is what morality is about. Fulfilling the mortuary rituals is partaking to the cycle of reciprocity which extends far back in time and extends indefinitely into the future.⁴⁹ I could speculate even further, in seeing funerary rituals as credible displays of cooperation: even when the dead are not around to notice or to punish, yet the living keep their covenant for all village society to bear witness.

If moral commitments are one end of this transcendent plane, the other is distrust and separation. Because death can separate as well as unite, and expectations of mutuality may be confounded. Relatives may quarrel and may not speak to each other for years, they may compete in public and private affairs, they may stretch and bend the expectations of reciprocity. But not attending a funeral where one is expected is an index of moral separation and a signal of perennial distrust. However, attending the ritual for the dead may breathe new life into the social relationship with the living. Simply being there, seen by everyone, is the kind of communicative intention which may reinitiate trust and develop it further.

Death separates in one final way. The village graveyard is the village society writ-small. For example, you have the fenced compounds, this time protecting the inviolability of the grave. Their purpose is doubly symbolic: on the one hand, they are a marker of moral commitment. They show that the dead are not forgotten, that their relatives care for their graves, protecting them. The protection motif leads to the second symbol, one of separation this time. Graves without fences, which are abandoned or look abandoned, are taken over by other villagers, who will quickly occupy any good spot which is not fenced and properly signaled as being cared for by anyone. The fence is the response to the generalised distrust in the benevolence of others to leave undisturbed an unkempt grave. I left the image of the graveyard as a representative “limited good” in the economy of prestige and power in Sateni. It may be just a sideshow to other social realities that I do not describe here, such as political or business life, but the failure to find a collective arrangement to distribute and manage scarce resources is expressive of a wider cosmology. Fences criss-cross the graveyard, and threaten to engulf any patch of land left unclaimed. Paths are lost to generalised appropriation, trust extending only as far as the fence can reach.

The Moral Contracts and the Social Contract

There is nothing eternal about the dual state of trust and morality that I have described. In fact, there is evidence pointing to a flexible adjustment of cultural representation regarding trust and cooperation given a historical or ecological shift. For example, people claim that there was more trust during communism – the dreaded party and its operatives were a constant presence against which, by means of opposition, the villagers had reasons to be solidary and reliable. Elsewhere, in my doctoral thesis, I have explored how even current phenomena such as migration and division of labour are slowly changing the structure of trust versus distrust due to the shift in economic exchanges from subsistence and delayed reciprocity to commercial economy.

Taking even a longer perspective, we could notice the affinity between the dual mode of sociality that I have described in Sateni, as two forms of articulating trust and cooperation, with the classical notions of the social contract. Anglo-Saxon moral and political philosophy was earlier on concerned with the issue of trust. In one passage of *Leviathan*, distrust

seems to be foundational rationale for the existence not only of the state and absolute government, but also the very idea of justice itself.

Therefore before the names of just and unjust can have place, there must be some coercive power to compel men equally to the performance of their covenants, by the terror of some punishment greater than the benefit they expect by the breach of their covenant, and to make good that propriety which by mutual contract men acquire in recompense of the universal right they abandon: and such power there is none before the erection of a Commonwealth.⁵⁰

If you go beyond the simplistic reading that Hobbes is merely talking about absolutist monarchy, this may be said to be the reason of governance itself. Yet it need not be centralised, nor based around a state. It may even not require violent enforcement even though Hobbes famously thought that '(...) covenants, without the sword, are but words and of no strength to secure a man at all.'⁵¹ My ethnography, however, comes closer to another perspective:

There needs but a very little practice of the world, to make us perceive all these consequences and advantages. The shortest experience of society discovers them to every mortal; and when each individual perceives the same sense of interest in all his fellows, he immediately performs his part of any contract, as being assured, that they will not be wanting in theirs. All of them, by concert, enter into a scheme of actions, calculated for common benefit, and agree to be true to their word; nor is there any thing requisite to form this concert or convention, but that every one have a sense of interest in the faithful fulfilling of engagements, and express that sense to other members of the society. This immediately causes that interest to operate upon them; and interest is the first obligation to the performance of promises.⁵²

Hume offers us the possibility of morality without top-down governance. Rather, people are self-governed by their interests and enter into cooperative engagements for mutual benefit. Again, "force is not essentially different from any other motive of hope or fear, which may induce us to engage our word, and lay ourselves under any obligation". Yet there is something strikingly different between the motivation to cooperate in a small scale, rural, peasant society as Sateni, and the modern, large scale-society of the city and the state.

Perhaps the association between trust and different social orders in history follows a certain trend. Thick and thin trust are in an inverse relationship. Their respective levels are negatively correlated, meaning that thick trust will decrease when thin trust rises, and the other way around. A possible causal mechanism (perhaps not causal, but conjectural) is this: Thick trust is associated with personal bonds that can enter in conflict with universalist principles underlying thin trust. In other words, when your nephew (neighbour's son, brother-in-law's cousin, etc) and a stranger compete for a public job opening, as mayor you should give the position to the latter if she is better qualified. The restriction of the range of possibilities chips away layer after layer of thick trust, leaving it with a wide-ranging social layer of thin trust. But above all, the major societal transformation is also a change in morality. Yet this may come not as a change in trust, but a change in matters of cooperation. When economic and political life offer more than a zero-sum game, when the structure of everyday knowledge allows for consistent and accurate monitoring of social partners, the premises of mutualism are created and a rearrangement of trust and distrust is possible.

Until then, people will demarcate a significant sphere of society, and meet the rest with righteous distrust, and expect to be treated similarly. Moral distrust comes off as less of a pathological or a given and fixed inclination for villagers in Sateni and other small-scale, face-to-face (or better said back-to-back as Srinivas once wryly remarked about Indian villagers) communities. Moral distrust is the outcome of a moral contract with a specific sphere of individuals that is denied to the rest of the world which is seen with distrust and engaged with on a zero-sum basis. The social arrangement derived from this form of social particularism is not rigid, as moral parochialism, or at least the kind found in Sateni, constantly adjusts and redefined the boundaries of the "parochy". What remains stable is a persistent state of categorising people into moral and nonmoral social relationships, allotting them to epistemic spheres of trust and distrust, and building a social life in which no-one is purely a solitary individual, nor do all people find themselves inside the same moral domain. Rather, everyone navigates the murky waters where distrust is moral, and morality ever changing in process of pursuing the social contract.

NOTES

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- 22 Boyd, Robert, and Peter J. Richerson. "Culture and the evolution of human cooperation." *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 364, no. 1533 (2009): 3281-3288.
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- 40 Holding each other as relatives means having an acknowledged and active social relation of kinship.
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- 42 We need to distinguish between folk models of morality and our scientific models of the same phenomenon. People may often talk about the morality (or, more probably, the "goodness") of something when referring to a set of analytically distinct phenomena, amongst which fairness and kin altruism may appear within the same domain of representation.
- 43 This is not to deny that folk representations of kinship may be inaccurate about the source of relatedness. For example, a third-cousin once removed may be said to be a nice person because "she is kin" with biological undertones, although the real cause is a history of reciprocal amity rather than a minute element of genetic relatedness.
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- 45 Sell, Aaron, John Tooby, and Leda Cosmides. "Formidability and the logic
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- 46 Umbres, Radu. «Chasse au dahu et vigilance épistémique», *Terrain. Revue
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- 47 Often stimulated or even caused by the public character of tavern interaction.
It is shameful and leads to bad gossip if you failed to stand up for a relative
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cooperative partner is very strong in ostensibly open spaces such as watering
holes.
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