

19. Conflict and Resilience in Hunter-Gatherer Religions

16080 - The Birhors: A Case Study among the Adivasis of Jharkhand (India)

Presentation type: Oral presentation

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Within the greatly diverse Indian tribal context, the State of Jharkhand stands out for the abundance of Scheduled Tribes present in the area, the remarkable presence of hunter gatherers and the relatively low influence of Hinduism and Christianity on traditional religions. If State religions do not seem to represent a serious threat to hunter-gatherers' animism, the same cannot be said when it comes to the capitalism-oriented public policies which are currently transforming Jharkhand into a major pole of the Indian industrial sector. Possessing 40% of the mineral resources of the entire country and substantial forest coverage, Jharkhand is sacrificing its environmental and cultural heritage to pursue economic development. Profit-oriented forest policies and social policies aimed at cultural homogenization are causing profound changes in the lives of hunter-gatherers, affecting their lifestyle and their worldview. Based on the assumption that the elements of the natural environment in which these communities live, represent a significant part of their cultural systems, this contribution analyzes the specificities of Birhor religious resilience. Nomadic hunter-gatherers until they were settled by the government in the 1950s and encouraged to take up employment as farm laborers, the Birhors have dramatically readjusted their material and spiritual lives to a State-imposed way of life. They have been deeply affected by their displacement from the forest in which they lived, and which shaped their identity. Economic development is creating a culture-nature dichotomy where none previously existed and the Birhor are determinedly trying not to lose their ties with the more-than-human world they have always lived in.

16079 - Shamans, Bulldozers and Tsunamis: Batek Religion in a Global World

Presentation type: Oral presentation

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This paper examines the contemporary and historic roles Batek Dè' and Batek Tanum shamans have played at the interstices between the visible and invisible worlds where local, national, international and cosmic agents collide in danger-fraught encounters. Since the 1970s huge areas of the Batek's formerly-forested landscapes have been transformed into palm-oil plantations and their sacred sites are increasingly threatened by quarrying and mining activities. Although many forest-fringe communities have been coerced into nominally converting to Islam and Christianity, daily life is still structured around their animistic religions which invest agency into a wide array of other-than-human beings. Any transgression of taboos causes the Naga' — an enormous snake who resides in the underworld — and her sky-dwelling counterpart the thunder lord (Gobar / Karei) to respond by meting out devastating punishment in the form of floods and thunder storms. Distrustful of the State and their Malay neighbours, Batek communities have increasingly recounted their fears of the world's imminent end to visiting anthropologists, environmentalists and other members of civil society. Batek fears revolve around the destruction of the rainforest and their sacred sites, and the perception of increased violence on a global scale. New technologies and increased flows of global imagery mean that the Batek are very familiar with international catastrophes and wars reported in the media. This paper examines the role of shamans in negotiating, preventing and resolving conflicts and crises locally and globally through actions in the invisible world which manipulate and reconfigure hidden reality. The paper moves beyond concepts of localism and dwelling into a more nuanced perspective which examines the resilience of Batek religions and their transformation at the intersections of unequal power relations at multiple scales.

16077 - The resilience of Baka and Gyéli from Cameroon: A contemporary challenge

Presentation type: Oral presentation

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For several years, the majority of studies conducted on the hunter-gatherers of Central Africa have focused on descriptions of their lifestyles and the contemporary challenges (citizenship, education, etc.) which they face. The Baka and Gyeli of Cameroon are currently being pressured to become farmers and move to towns. This paper analyzes these societies resilience to environmental and social transitions. In the forest, the Baka and Gyeli lived according to the principles of the Great Spirit called Jengui who provided them food and protection. Today, these hunter-gatherers are no longer in harmony with Jengui because they have been displaced from their ancestral lands by the State of Cameroon for economic reasons (logging, mining, and creation of forest-agro industries) and policies (creation of protected areas, sustainable development). Environmental and social changes have also led the Baka and Gyeli to settle in villages and convert to Christianity and Islam. To better understand the resilience of these communities, a dozen villages were selected in the eastern and southern regions where in-depth interviews and observations were carried out. Despite these groups' efforts to maintain their socio-cultural forms, which are closely connected to the environment, many factors, including: alcohol abuse, marginalization, discrimination and neglect by the state and civil society, are threatening the lifestyles of these peoples.

16046 - From bows and arrows to crowns, crosses, hammer and sickles. Threats and resistance in Chepang shamanism (Nepal).

Presentation type: Oral presentation

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The Chepang, one of the more disadvantaged minorities in Nepal, were nomadic or seminomadic hunter-gatherers until about four to five decades ago. In the 1980s, they practiced shifting cultivation (khoriya, slash-and-burn) alongside some hunting and gathering. Due to new government policies and consequent restrictions on hunting, gathering, and the clearing of forest patches, their subsistence is now based on sedentary agriculture which is insufficient to fulfill their basic needs. Most Chepang live well below the poverty level and their literacy rate is among the lowest in the country (about 23%). Hindus, the majority religious group of Nepal, consider this acephalous and egalitarian Tibeto-Burman group as untouchables. However, the Chepang do not recognize any kind of social hierarchy. This is one of the main reasons why the Chepang have been particularly attracted by messages of equality and social justice from Nepali Maoists and, more recently, foreign Christian missionaries. Despite numerous national and transnational tensions and pressures, the Chepang still maintain the main characteristics of hunter-gatherer social organization and hold deep bonds with the forest. Their animistic worldview is passed to new generations by the still very numerous pande (shamans) who are in charge of personal, social and cosmic wellbeing. This paper, analyzing the Chepang case, discusses the impact of social, political, economic, and religious threats in hunter and gathering communities and/or groups maintaining hunter and gatherers social organization. The paper also examines forms of resistance in which the continuation of indigenous religious practices play a seminal role. Over the last two decades the Chepang have shown remarkable resilience in the face of threats from the Nepali Hindu monarchy, Maoism, secularism and Christian proselytism. Chepang identity is maintained through a challenging and constant process of negotiation, based on alliances and conflicts in which shamans often play a seminal role as leaders of their communities.