VILLAGERS AND THE STATE AMONG THE BALONEY?¹

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Let me first explain my choice of title. Some years ago, I received a note asking me about the title of Haim Hazan’s book – The Limbo People. The book is a study of old people in the limbo between life and death, but the note asked who and where the Limbo are, as if they were an African or Melanesian people. Now as some of you may know, Baloney is a more intentionally created pun, invented by Isaac Schapera as a sharp poke in the ribs for some of his Africanist colleagues who were always ready in lectures or in seminars to expand upon the ethnographic details of society and culture among the Ba–somebody or other. Such discourse ends up as a list – a catalogue of 57 Heinz-like ethnographic varieties. “Among the Ba–watchamacallit they do this, and among the Baloney they do that.” In darker moments, I sometimes worry, after 35 years of working on material I’ve collected in four countries on two continents, that my own research life has been just a long tour from one lot of Baloney to the next, but I want to explore here the idea, or at least the hope, that this might not be wholly so. Marilyn suggested that these seminars might be used to explain ourselves a little to each other. So I thought I’d try to use the opportunity to examine some of the directions which my work has taken since 1957, when I managed to overturn my new landrover on my first trip to my first Baloneyland among the Banyamwezi.

My purpose then is to explore a few connections, both between places and times; and in both my own and others’ experiences. And if some of what follows is retrospective, it is largely for this reason. At the same time let me add a caveat at once, if only to myself. Chris Hann

¹ This paper was presented at the Departmental Postgraduate Seminar in November 1993. Professor Strathern had asked members of staff to give papers which would reveal something of themselves and their work to their colleagues. I have mostly retained the informal style of the original presentation. References have been added in subsequent notes to some of the main works referred to in the text, and these are listed in the bibliography.

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once said that he was more inclined to trust anthropologists' writings about other people than their pronouncements on themselves; and when I reminded him of this quite recently he said he thought he'd picked up the idea from me - so I suppose I ought to know better. Certainly, we seem likely to have more at stake in trying to make sense of ourselves than of other societies and cultures, and I am conscious that in seeking links between different parts and periods of my own work, I may be making more sense, and perhaps more contentious sense, of them than is justified. I must ultimately leave that judgement to others. But let me at least make it clear that I don't want to claim that my research career has been a well ordered pre-planned process of development, in which conscious foresight has markedly predominated over luck and hindsight. At the same time, I hope that this still leaves room for links which are not purely accidental and which derive from the effects of experience upon ideas and concerns.

This point leads me fairly naturally to comment briefly on two different readings of the question mark in my title, though there may well be more than these available. The first tries to ask about the extent to which localised research can tell us something interesting about the world outside the particular Baloney area one tries to study. The second questions the meaning of a label like 'the Baloney' as a unifying representation of a set of people among whom an anthropologist has done research. I have been interested in both these questions, but my focus here is on the first. As to the second, I would simply say that I am mildly predisposed to explore it with an expectation both that communities and cultures are neither as real nor united nor homogeneous as some earlier writers seem to have believed, and at the same time that they are not always as unreal, or divided or internally diverse as some more recent writers suggest.

Let me first briefly outline the main work I have done. I spent two years and a bit in Unyamwezi on my first research there. I suppose I took the idea of synchronic study rather literally, since I saw my main remit as the documentation of whatever was happening around me. Fortes once noted that he had refrained from paying too much attention, at least in his writings, to the non-indigenous ingredients in Tallensi social and political life. I myself in contrast paid lots of attention not only to things like Nyamwezi chiefship and other so-called "traditional" forms, but also to the activities of District Commissioners and their staff and to the burgeoning activities of TANU and other political parties. This is not to say that I ignored time in my study. I soon realised that the past mattered both to the people there and to me, if I wanted to make any sense of the present.
I particularly appreciated two things that were said about this first research, in addition to Fortes’ Introduction to my first book (1967). Jack Goody noted that there was little data on political events at village level in the last years of colonialism, because many anthropologists, despite their avowed commitment to “participant observation”, paid rather little attention to the major political processes going on around them. He then cited my analysis of villagers’ participation in the independence struggle as one of the exceptions. Aidan Southall made a different comment. He referred favourably to my suggestion that Nyamwezi political organization had never had time to become a well-integrated whole in the face of a constant stream of pressures from an ever-widening variety of sources. Both these points have, so to speak, stayed with me ever since.2

I will pass very quickly over my year’s work in N. Uganda among the people of Labwor. This work gave me valuable insight into Nilotic culture, age grouping, and lineage organisation (which I had started to believe was a figment of other people’s imagination). I also learned some important lessons about social tensions and settlement patterns and the relation of these to external forces. In addition, I learned something about the cultural construction of individuality, through institutions such as levirate, and this recently resurfaced in a very different context in a paper on organ transplantation and its implications for understanding personhood and kinship.3

In 1974, I returned to Unyamwezi and I’ve been back several times since. The area has served me well by constantly producing new forms of activity and organization which nonetheless bear clear links to the past, and which also have resonances for contemporary developments in Britain and elsewhere. The 1974 fieldwork also gave me an opportunity to examine local ecological adaptations and to contrast these with governmental policies of enforced compact settlement. Here again the connection between social tensions and settlement patterns emerged sharply for me, and it has again resurfaced in a recent volume which I’ve edited on Tanzanian witchcraft.4

In 1980 I began a year’s research on family farming and rural life in Finland. Of course, fieldwork in Finland was very different from work in East Africa, though I remember responding sharply to a comment on Keith (Hart) in the early 1980s that anthropologists were

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getting soft and moving into Europe. As I noted then, there’s nothing soft (in more senses than one) about using an outside loo at minus 25.

At the same time, some points of contact did reveal themselves between my work in Finland and in Tanzania. One general issue which attracted my attention in both places is the way that villagers maintain their own agendas in the face of state institutions. In Finland, one particular aspect of this was the way that people manipulated the provisions of inheritance law and tax relief for their own social (rather than simply individual) ends. This included the use of complex legal documents which turned out often to be fictions. It was interesting in this context to discover fictive individualism rather than the fictive kinship which was so much in vogue at one time. Also significant was the common ground in both areas in attitudes to top-down collectivisation and voluntary grass-roots co-operation. Finland, of course, never suffered the former, but Finnish farmers and others naturally saw it as a long-standing threat from their eastern neighbour. I’ll come back to this later.

My work on issues of this sort fairly naturally led me south in the late 1980s to Estonia, where I did two summers of fieldwork in 1991 and 1992. Glasnost and perestroika, which led to the re-emergence of family farming and the collapse of the collective system, also gave me the change to get into the Estonian countryside and study these processes. The many similarities between Estonia and Finland made the project a particularly attractive one.  

I want now to say something about two aspects of my work which reflect some of the general trends I’ve tried to hint at, and which seem likely to pre-occupy me for some time to come. Despite the fact that I’ve become aware of them in local contexts, both topics raise wider comparative and theoretical issues. The first is my focus on the relation between local social and cultural resources and the wider society and polity. I retain a number of actively ongoing research interests in this area, including one in the phenomenon of vigilantism which I’ll say more about in a moment. The second is my developing awareness, as time goes by, of structural continuity and change as I and other anthropologists encounter them. I have explored some general aspects of this latter question in my paper on Chaos and Kachins, and I suppose the main drift of my argument there is nicely summed up in a witty comment I encountered recently to the effect that ‘history never repeats itself but its not for want of trying’. Naturally, some of my

5 On Finland see Abrahams (1991b) and on Estonia (1992 and 1994b).

understanding of this issue derives from a perusal of historical material on the areas I’ve worked in. But I am also aware these days of a different aspect of the situation, namely the possible value of a lifetime’s contact with an area – which is something one doesn’t necessarily envisage when one carries out one’s first research. At least in my own experience, this seems to offer some possibility of finding a way, as Leach himself was keen to do, between the fictions of purely synchronic analysis and the contingencies of history as just one damn thing after another.

As I’ve implied, my first encounter with the relation between local social and cultural resources and the wider polity was in my first fieldwork when I began to study neighbourhood co-operation in agriculture and in the settlement of disputes. I studied these activities initially more or less simply because they were there. I also found their study rather therapeutic, since documenting who did what with whom provided a more fruitful inroad into understanding local social structure than interviewing people about kinship and other relationships in the abstract. The threshing season was one of particularly intensive work among neighbours, and the main principles of neighbourhood co-operation emerged very clearly from it. It was a happy choice. By 1959 the threshing groups had become de facto local branches of TANU, the party which led the country to Independence in 1961 and has been in power ever since. I began to learn about the shifts and conflicts of the political and legal relationship between villagers and the state, and I also learned a lot about grass-roots voluntary co-operation. Both have been abiding interests ever since and I will say a little about each of them.

In the late 1950s neighbourhood courts were commonplace in this area. They dealt with a variety of offences. Some but not all of these offences were also handled by the chieftdom courts, while others were recognised as falling only within the chief’s or District Magistrate’s domain. As local conflicts between TANU and government developed, some neighbourhood courts came into conflict with the state. One village group fined some of its members for breaking a boycott on an Asian-owned shop, and they were prosecuted for this. Others were prosecuted for dealing with adultery cases which conventionally fell within the chief’s domain of jurisdiction.

Independence created a certain awkwardness in the role of such courts. Village initiatives which conflicted with the powers above were no longer viewable as anti-colonial. Now they were anti-TANU, and I found such neighbours’ court activity much diminished in 1974. By the early 1980s, however, things had changed once again. A spate of cattle rustling and other crime had created deep dissatisfaction with the
official police and judicial system, and village vigilantism spread rapidly throughout the Nyamwezi and closely related Sukuma area. Neighbourhood 'justice' was riding again, or was at least – to be more accurate – afoot and sometimes riding on the local buses. In working on my material on such vigilante activities, both on my own and in collaboration with Sufian Bukurura, I have been drawn into examining this kind of development at a wider level.7

I realise of course that this begs a lot of questions which are in fact already rampant in my title. Terms like 'villagers' and the 'state' are at least implicitly terms of a generalising and comparative sort. As they stand they are not particularly heavily laden with theoretical and ideological baggage, as compared with 'peasants' for example, but they do assume that one can readily – and significantly – transcend the cultural and other boundaries of various Baloneylands. Again, as I noted at the start, this again also assumes that a term like the Baloney can usefully dump together the individuals and villages of a particular area on the basis of certain shared cultural and social structural features.

At the same time, I don't want to make too heavy weather of this here. Marilyn (Strathern) herself has deeply explored some of the problems of shifts of focus and scale which comparison and generalisation involve in a number of contexts, and there is a large theoretical literature on comparison which Leo (Howe) among others has contributed to.8 It is full of paradoxes and problems but one has to try.

At a pragmatic level, I consider that one can talk usefully not only about villagers and the state, but also more specifically and analytically about vigilantism. It is not easy to define vigilantism in a simplistic way, but one can cope if one proceeds with caution. There are various reasons for this difficulty. Firstly, vigilantism is not so much a thing in itself as a fundamentally relational or structural phenomenon. In this respect it is part of a broad zone in the world of law and politics which is comparable to the 'informal sector' in economics, or to the idea of civil society; and it is also rather like the concepts of a 'village' and of 'villagers' or 'peasants' generally which don't make much sense except in relation to – and often enough in contrast with – a wider setting.

Secondly, the unofficial nature of vigilantism tends to make it rather labile. It exists in an awkward borderland between law and illegality, in what I have elsewhere called 'the shadows rather than the bright lights of legitimacy and consensus' and it is always capable of

slipping and sliding in one direction or another. As such, any definition must be treated as an ‘ideal type’ to which the phenomena one investigates may interestingly approximate to some degree.

Vigilantism presumes the existence of the state, and of formal legal procedures over which the state normally claims a monopoly. It is a form of self help which is activated by or on behalf of a group, instead of such formal procedures, against those whom such a group perceive as ‘public enemies’. It is, as such, not self help of the oppositional segmentary kind that operates between structurally equal groups. It may tend in this direction, and there may be argument about the extent to which it does so, but it moves away from the ideal type to the extent that it really has this quality. Its relation to the state is bound to be awkward. It typically emerges in zones where the state is viewed as ineffectual, and it often constitutes a criticism of state failure to meet the felt needs of the groups concerned.

The phenomenon of vigilantism, as I’ve just outlined it, is very widespread, and as we are all aware it is also looming large in Britain. I find that what I have learned in Tanzania is both enlightened by comparative study – of the American historical and current versions for example – and also throws light on developments elsewhere.9 Not that all vigilantism is the same, and indeed a number of variables can be isolated. As some analysts in Britain are also discovering, a main one is the extent to which those involved are members of relatively close-knit, small scale and homogenous communities or not. Important elements of heterogeneity in such contexts may include distinctions of class, ethnicity, and in some contexts gender. A partly related variable here is the extent to which one is dealing with urban or rural vigilantism. Connected with all this is the idea of vigilantism as a frontier phenomenon. Sometimes the frontier is simply a spatial one, with vigilantism operating on the literally distant edges of effective state control as in many of the late eighteenth and nineteenth American cases. Sometimes it is the frontier of the urban no-go area or the underworld. Sometimes too, along with this, there is what one might call a cultural frontier. In such cases the state and the vigilante often differ in their definition and/or recognition of a public enemy. In the Tanzanian case, both state and villagers fully agree that cattle rustlers are criminals, but there is much less accord between them on the question of witches. Another variable is the extent to which such communities have long experience or not of handling such matters for themselves. This marks a quite interesting difference between some ad-hoc spontaneous eruptions

9 For American vigilantism see Brown (1975).
of vigilantism (as in parts of contemporary Britain) and its emergence within Nyamwezi and Sukuma villages. I am not referring here to the quasi-traditionalism of Sungusungu who use only bows and arrows and wear fancy head-dresses, but to the package of know-how and the long experience which such villagers have of organising local affairs for themselves. One other variable is also perhaps worth mentioning, though I have yet to look at it in any depth. In the extreme case, this is the ‘death squad’ variant of vigilantism, in which the officers of the state are also the vigilantes, but it is arguable that the West Midland crime squad were also up to a form of such activity. Such activities often involve a disillusion with the state on the part of its own personnel rather than simply on the part of those who are on, or who would like to be on, the receiving end of its services, but they can of course also reflect a much wider range of political and economic motives.

Despite such variation, certain general points tend to recur. One, as I say, is the presence of the state against which vigilantism stands, by definition, as a kind of shadow system. The second is the state’s typical desire for a monopoly in the field of law and order and the use of violence. A third is the distinction between due process and crime control as fundamental elements in modern judicial systems, and with it a contested set of ideas about justice and injustice. And a fourth is the connected distinction – which recurs in other contexts – between individual rights and those of the community.

Let me turn now to a second topic which I am still actively working on in this broad area, namely family farming (another middle-range comparative term), and relations between farming families and their neighbours on the one hand and the state on the other.

I found on my return to Tanzania in the 1970s, that independence had also had a major influence in this area of villagers’ lives. Partly this was due to the disruption caused by the villagisation programme. And it also related to the fact that Nyerere and TANU were determined to establish collective forms of agriculture. Nyerere had argued that such forms were indigenous to rural Africa, and he supported his case by referring to much the same patterns of co-operation as I had done in the 1960s. As both I and some Tanzanians noted, there was a basic error here. Indigenous neighbourhood co-operation in farming had not usually involved the pooling of the product of collaborative labour. People worked on each other’s fields and in crop collaborative labour. People worked on each other’s fields and in crop cooperative. But the product of each household was its own. What was pooled was the revenue from fines on those who failed to co-operate when they should, and also the income which some groups got from work for non-group members. Two other important differences also emerged. One was the
season by season rather than the longer term nature of such collaboration, so that, for instance, group funds which had accumulated were typically consumed at the end of the year. This differed radically from the emphasis on longer term collective organisation marked by the establishment of permanent collective funds rather than the redistribution of all income. Secondly, co-operation in the fifties was a grass roots phenomenon between willing parties. With a few local exceptions, the state's attempt to encourage a similar voluntary collectivisation failed fairly miserably, and the state then turned to coercion of various sorts. This top-down quality - socialism from above as it became known - was of course also a radical new departure.  

Similar distinctions have proved crucial for my attempts at understanding co-operation in the villages of northern Europe and they are often recognisable elsewhere. Finnish farmers have long seen their family farms as archetypical opposites of the soviet collective system, yet they co-operate actively with each other and even own machinery in common. They jokingly referred to such arrangements in the early eighties as their 'kolhoos', but they were only too well aware of the radical difference between the two forms. Predictably, the same is also true in linguistically and culturally related Estonia. There family farmers used to co-operate and collaborate before they were forcibly collectivised under soviet rule. Since Independence, many family farms have re-emerged and their owners once again collaborate and share the ownership of some machinery. At a recent conference, a fiery Bulgarian sociologist - with the apt name of Draganova - was asked whether recently revived forms of collaboration in Bulgaria were a spin-off from the days of Soviet-style collective farming. She answered rather sharply in terms which a Nyamwezi, Finnish or Estonian villager would readily have understood. This was, she said, co-operation and it was bottom up rather than top down. Yet, care is also necessary here.

Even in Estonia, some poorer villagers appear to have welcomed the small village collectives which were established in the 1940s, before the Russians co-erced everyone into the system, and not all contemporary Estonian villagers want to be family farmers. And Deema Kaneff, in a recent presentation at a workshop which I organised, brought out interestingly how current Bulgarian attitudes to the old collective structures in fact vary considerably. Many people are not so much opposed to collective organisation itself as to the large-scale Russian model of it, which was imposed at the end of the 1950s. Indeed, many of them look back fondly to the forties and fifties when they were

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organised in small scale village collectives which they had been persuaded, through a mixture of pressures and incentives, to establish at that time. It appears that many of those who had previously owned growingly inviable small farms found these so-called 'co-operatives' attractive, while some of those with larger holdings only entered them under duress. Overall, however, and although it is hard to quantify, it seems clear that Estonian attachment to the idea of voluntarily collaborating, landowning farming families approximates more closely to the Finnish than to the Bulgarian case. And I suspect that, interestingly, there may be more similarities in this context between many Tanzanian villagers and those I have encountered in north-eastern Europe than there are between either and some other eastern Europeans. And this, even though the Tanzanian villagers in question cannot hark back to a time when they enjoyed full private ownership of their fields.

Much of what I have been describing about my current work on villagers and state relations links up closely to the second theme I mentioned – that of structural continuities in the medium durée. In 1989, in a paper on law and order and the state in the Nyamwezi and Sukuma area, I set out how the kind of potential for conflict between villagers and state authority which I had seen in the threshing groups and neighbours' courts of late 1950s was in fact a recurrent theme in the area's history from pre-colonial days right up to the present.

My current work on rural transformations in Estonia also yields a series of broadly comparable recurrent themes. Two main ones, which the actors often link together in, at times, confusing ways, can be outlined here.

One, which Chris Hann has also been interested in, is the recurrent interplay in one form or another of different aspects and meanings of land. On the one hand, there is the idea of land as a productive resource whether for individuals and families, or for communities and society at large. But there is also a second aspect, that of land as a form of property owned by individuals or groups or by the state. Partly, as historians have shown, this idea of land as property has changed historically as part of the European and, ultimately, worldwide ideological and legal shift towards the definition of the human person as an individual right-bearing actor, and of society as a collection of such individuals. Of course there are and have been many sticking points in this general process – including the various socialist revolutions, and also the many attempts to resist the game changing into one that women could play – and it seems clear that a variety of attempts will be made in

11 Hann (1993).
different contexts in the future to resist it and establish a different equilibrium in which jural responsibilities and the rights of "society" (so called) in one form or another will be given more weight.

In Estonia, the process has involved the shift over two centuries from a system of baronial estates and serfdom to the establishment of land-owning farming (and for that matter non-farming) individuals, families, and corporate units. The process has included the development of new ideas of ownership, and a variety of programmes of land allocation and re-allocation both to individuals and from them to collectivities and back again. In the current situation, the restitution of ownership rights to the former owners of pre-collectivised holdings or their heirs has been high on the legislative agenda.

Reactions to such changes over time have partly been phrased simply in terms of arguments about rights of ownership themselves, but the changes have not surprisingly also often been supported or opposed in terms of interestingly recurrent arguments concerning the efficiency and productivity of different forms of ownership. Barons partly defended their ownership of large estates in these terms, as did those who wished to establish collective enterprises after the Russian revolution and, more successfully, after the Soviet occupation. Similarly, one finds recurrent arguments at different junctures extolling the effectiveness of family farming with its emphasis on personal initiative and responsibility.

The second area of continuity I want to highlight is a closely related one, which can be looked at as a sub-theme of the broader issue of land seen as a productive resource. This is the persistent tension in Estonia between large scale and small scale agricultural enterprise. This dates back at least to the special mix of (mainly) German baronial feudal estates and peasant smallholding which persisted until the first half of the nineteenth century, and which was followed by the gradual emancipation of the peasant serf population and the beginnings of free family farming. This process was temporarily disrupted by attempts at collectivisation in the wake of the Russian revolution followed by the further establishment – through land re-allocation – of many small family farms in the nineteen twenties and thirties. The Second World War and a see-saw of Russian and German occupations culminated in the Soviet collectivisation of agriculture, and the eventual establishment of large scale collective and state farms each of many thousand hectares. The glasnost and perestroika of the nineteen eighties then saw the regime entertaining the idea of a return to small scale family farming, which had in any case been able to persist to a limited extent in the so called individual plots of collective and state farm workers. Now we have a
situation in which the government has committed itself to the dismantling of the collective and state farms, but there remains a great deal of uncertainty whether the future lies in large scale co-operatives and agricultural companies or in family farms. Moreover, even among family farmers conflicts are beginning to emerge between larger scale farmers and smallholders.

The people themselves have been clearly aware of some of the persistent comparabilities in such changes and developments. The first large peasant landowners after the dismantling of feudalism were known as 'grey barons' – the grey was due to the colour of their clothing – clearly evoking their similarity to the old German barons even though they were Estonians. When collectivisation began in the Soviet period it was again immediately compared explicitly to the old feudal days, and during fieldwork I found the term Red Baron still current as a nickname for the leaders of collective and state farms. Of course, in Estonia, as in Hungary where the term Green Baron is similarly used, there is also a strong element of rhetoric and point scoring in such usage which cannot be added up simply as evidence of structural continuities. But the continuities do seem genuinely to exist, and the tensions and tendencies they represent seem to be among the main features of the longer term historical map of agriculture in Estonia.

I might add here that there are also evocations for me in such local usage of the term ‘black European’ which I first heard used about the first batch of black District Officers in late colonial Tanganyika, and which has persisted to the present day in the name for the old European quarter which now houses their post-colonial administrative successors in a town like Kahama. Notwithstanding the rhetoric in both cases, it is interesting that both present plausible folk efforts at structural comparison across the boundaries of culture, time and social space, which is of course what we are often up to ourselves.

I hope that this gives some of you at least a glimpse of what I have been up to for the last 35 years and what I hope I will be up to for some time to come. I hope I have persuaded you, if you have needed persuasion, that work in Europe and Africa can reveal interesting similarities as well as differences between the two. Certainly I think it is a useful way to try to avoid the cardboard cut-out type of picture of one or other of them which one sometimes encounters. I also hope that some of you will take on board the idea that long term connection with an area can be valuable. As I said, I can't claim that I saw such points clearly throughout my research career, rather than stumbling on them as I've gone along. But this in itself need not, I hope, make them less worth noting or sharing with others.
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