

Editorial Foreword

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE Debates about ontology and an alleged “ontological turn” have marked anthropology for a full generation now, but in many ways such debates extend back over a century, at least to the armchair polemic of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl entitled *How Natives Think*, first published in French in 1910. While such debates have mostly centered on the kinds of “multinatural” worlds Indigenous peoples experience and inhabit and the question of to what degree those worlds are commensurable with “Western” worldviews, or even knowable at all to outsiders, in this our anthropocenic age there are surely additional pressing issues in play. Not least is the question of whether Indigenous knowledge-systems can be applied outside of their own sites of creation to address global crises, whether ecological, medical, or social, or all three bundled together. The two essays joined here consider such questions, the first at a more local ethnographic level, the second in broad comparative and theoretical terms. What is “earth”? What are “bodies”? Are there dimensions of local, regional, and even global “risk” that can be translated across ontological divides?

Olivia Maria Gomes da Cunha’s contribution, “The Earth Is Sweet. On Cottica Ndyuka (De)compositions,” studies the ways practices of earth-eating (*geophagia*) in Suriname mediate between colonial violence and ecological disaster, on one hand, and practices of recomposing spiritual substance and female community, on the other. Da Cunha offers at once an ethnography of a particular parcel of earth itself, and of those live on and with it, and even consume it. What is it like to taste sculpted balls of earth (*pemba*) as “sweet,” she asks, and what meanings are hidden within the earth’s “sweetness”?

In “Indigenous Knowledge and Ontological Difference? Ontological Pluralism, Secular Public Reason, and Knowledge between Indigenous Amazonia and the West,” **Christian Tym** opens with a serious criticism against proponents of the ontological turn, namely that it deepens the incommensurability between Westerner and Indigenous Other and renders the latter’s knowledge claims irrelevant, at least anywhere outside of their local, socially bounded sites of creation. At best, Tym argues, ontological turn theorists imagine a vague prospect of “civilizational change” that may miraculously emerge from the Amazonian mist. Tym proposes an alternative: what if Indigenous knowledges were to be studied as sets of empirical data and conceptual framing with real material effects, including on those dwelling outside of Indigenous worlds. Knowledge systems undergirding Amazonian ideals of physical flourishing and healing, Native Australian practices of fire management, and circumpolar Indigenous knowledge of wildlife management, may well offer actionable possibilities for even non-Indigenous dwellers on the planet.

RACE-MAKING “Race”-making and racialization are social and political processes that unfold over time and across a diverse range of situations, encounters, and events.

Often these processes of racialization are entangled with practices of gendering, sexing, economic hierarchy, and violence and so they are not always easy to discern or sufficiently isolate to gain analytical purchase. It is for that reason that the two articles paired in this section are especially valuable. Together they open a window onto racializing practices in Tahiti and in Nigeria, and present potent possibilities for comparison on an issue that remains pressing today.

Deborah Elliston's essay, "Navigating 'Race' at Tahiti: Polynesian and European Encounters," focuses on European encounters with Polynesians of the Society Islands in the late eighteenth century. She shows how the coding and ranking of skin color occurred in both Polynesian and European gazes, but with very different applications and outcomes—yielding values of rank and beauty for Polynesians, versus hierarchic racial difference for Europeans; values of "lightness" for Polynesians, versus "whiteness" for Europeans; and a shifting, malleable and adjustable code for Polynesians versus a fixed system for Europeans. Nevertheless, Elliston shows, the complexities of Polynesian color-coding long confounded European attempts to solidify any single version of racialization, and it was only under the twentieth-century French colonial regime that race was truly anchored in place.

Steven Pierce leads us to northern Nigeria in the first decades of the twentieth century to investigate the phenomenon of colonial flogging. In "The Suffering Subject: Colonial Flogging in Northern Nigeria and a Humanitarian Public, 1904–1933," Pierce situates flogging within the long history of corporal punishments used by colonial regimes, as by earlier regimes like the Sokoto Caliphate. British colonial law in the twentieth century imported racialization into law by arguing that flogging was necessary because Africans "were deemed not yet prepared for gentler modes of punishment." In this way, Islamic and colonial law presented overlapping disciplinary techniques. Critical responses to public flogging in the Christian south of Nigeria as well as in the diaspora abroad helped to generate a new "humanitarian public," leading to reforms of the criminal justice system but also leaving in place the figure of the whipped body as a uniquely "African" and racialized scandal.

ISLAMIC SECULARITY Secularization, secularism, and secularity have long stood as pillars in the study of religions and states (albeit in different ways), buttressing a byzantine temple of theories and hypotheses about the nature and trajectory of religion in modernity. The etymology of "secular" refers to a stipulated age in worldly history, like the hundred-year interval comprising the French *siècle*, but the career of secularization theory extends much longer, at least to Saint-Simon's *Le nouveau christianisme* (1825), now on the eve of being two hundred years old. In the meantime, "religion" has been multiply de- and reconstructed, and likewise "the state," and now (and not for the first time) it is secularism's turn in the sun. The essays under this rubric examine the very specific ways secularism works in distinct contexts. Resisting overly-broad theoretical generalizations, and both drawing on and pushing against the seminal work on secularism and secularity by Talal Asad, these two articles show how the secular is articulated for Muslims in Soviet Kyrgyzstan and in contemporary Egypt.

Usmon Boron, in "And I Believe in Signs': Soviet Secularity and Islamic Tradition in Kyrgyzstan," undertakes a close study of Central Asian Islam under Soviet rule and the alienation of many Muslims from key features of Islamic tradition. Islamic practice became circumscribed to life-cycle rites, occasional blessings, visiting

shrines, and brief Qur'anic recitations—in short, to a reduced “non-observant” form of Islam. Boron presents an incisive critique: Soviet secularism and liberal Western secularism shared much in common in the attempt to encompass and transcend the specificities of lived traditions. The attempt to abolish religion, in the Soviet case, and the attempt to reify religion as a generic, universal thing, in the West, were, paradoxically, two sides of the same coin.

In “Flexible States in History: Rethinking Secularism, Violence, and Centralized Power in Modern Egypt,” **Isaac Friesen** criticizes Asad’s conceptualization of secularism as grounded in the state’s regulation of religion, arguing that such approaches give too much emphasis to the agency of the state. Instead, he renders a complex portrait of secularism in everyday life in which state regulation is but one of many factors in play, and the state as often fortifies religious freedom as it restricts it. In fact, Friesen shows, the Egyptian state’s approach to religion is better characterized as an opportunistic *realpolitik* and state centralization than as attempts at secularization per se. A holy feast for thought.

ARCHITECTS OF CENTERS AND PERIPHERIES The article by **Gabriel Byng**, “The Architecture of Politics and the Politics of Architecture: A Comparative Approach to Parish Church Building and Civic Government in Late-Medieval Europe,” presents an intriguing comparison. Why did medieval Vienna have only a small number of churches, while London had over a hundred? The cases reveal two patterns of the politics of church architecture in medieval Europe. In cities like Vienna, all churches were under the control of a centralized mayoral office and city council; in London, churches remained outside of civic control, and were built by at the behest and patronage of wealthy families seeking to leave a mark. The “Vienna” and “London” models were replicated at different scales across Western Europe. Importantly, they announced not only particular political-ecclesial structures, but they extended outwards to inflect other domains of urban life well beyond the walls of the church, from trade and labor to contracts and tax administration. In that sense, the politics of church architecture helped to install an architecture of civic politics.

It may strike the reader as surprising that Turkish intellectuals would be among the most enthusiastic readers of an early twentieth-century book about Finland’s national development, Grigori Petrov’s *The Country of White Lilies*. **N. Yasemin Bavbek** and **Juho Topias Korhonen**’s selection in this issue, “A Country of White Lilies: Inter-Imperial Nation-Making and Development from the Russian Empire’s Periphery to Post-Ottoman Turkey,” shows how nation-builders in one place draw selectively, and strategically, on narratives of nation-building from elsewhere. Turkish nationalists seeking to distance themselves from the Ottoman found inspiration in the Finns’ story of separation and achieved autonomy from the Russian Empire. Drawing on a model case “from elsewhere” offered significant advantages for Turkish intellectuals, including the ability to gloss over discomfiting parts of their own national history, like violence and ethnic cleansing.

LANGUAGE OF EMPIRE In “Empires, Languages, and Scripts in the Perso-Indian World,” **Sumit Guha** expands our vision of language ideologies beyond the frequently studied model of linguistic nationalism. Guha examines linguistic diversity beginning in the first millennium of the Common Era to understand how

imperial regimes from the Persian Empire to Mughal sought to manage a diversity of spoken languages and written scripts. They did so, Guha finds, through coalitions of interest groups like scribal and archivist guilds, religious literati, and administrators, among other brokers of patronage and resources. Imperial regimes often coalesced around ruling languages that were not native to the founders or entrenched elites but instead drew on the prestige of putatively more ancient languages to grant an imprimatur of historical depth and endurance, such that Persian-writing elites endured even into the British colonial period in India, despite the broad shift to Urdu/Hindustani and English as the languages of the bureaucratic state.