

The Hunted and the Haunted: Death, Exchange and Spirits in Northwestern Ghana*

Cesare Poppi

University of East Anglia, Norwich

Indeed it is sinful for a man to die
laying down [...].

J. Goody, *Death, property and the ancestors*

[...] Killing has a price – being killed.

V. Valeri, *The Forest of Taboos*

The Vagla are a small group on Gur-Grusbi speakers whose ideology is strongly connected to hunting symbolism. The paper considers the special treatment reserved to hunters once it has become clear that they are about to die. While ordinary villagers ideally die in the arms of a close relative, hunters are locked in their room and left to die alone. This because it is held that the souls of the animals killed in the hunter's career enter the room and collect his soul. This will be presented to the Lords of the Animals in the bush, who will then release more animals to be killed in the hunting effort that will take place on a large scale at the hunter's funeral. The papers analyses the ethnography within the framework of the theory of exchange: the hunter's "bad death" constitutes a special form of sacrifice necessary for the exchange between humans and spirits to continue to the advantage of both.

The review of the anthropological literature concerning animals undertaken by Eugenia Shanklin for the "Annual Review of Anthropology" in 1985 concentrates on the relevance of domesticated species in the process of social production and reproduction at all levels of anthropological enquiry (Shanklin 1985). Although considerations concerning feral species found space in the survey, this is mainly in the context of analysis of the symbolical and taxonomic importance of animals cross-culturally.

While a sizeable body of literature deals with animals as “good to think”, as for instance in the work by Roy Willis (1974, 1994), with few exceptions (Bamony 2001; Dupire 1976) relatively little attention seems to have been devoted to the articulation of the cognitive with the socioeconomic and symbolical aspects of hunting outside the specialist field of hunter/gatherer studies (Lee, DeVore 1968). This study aims at re-grafting “the social” to the “symbolic” in understanding hunting as entailing *both* a specific form of cognition and a specific form of sociality.

In his classic study *Death, Property and the Ancestors*, Jack Goody demonstrated how death and devolution imply the reconstitution/reallocation of severed links of sociality as well as the reallocation of roles and functions within the social formation. Conductors and terminals of this process are the deceased’s properties. The public exchange of goods and services that occurs at funerals enables the process of sociality to start again, and move on from the apparent crisis to new exchanges and obligations (Goody 1962).

Taking the lead from Jack Goody’s general scheme, and working from a different though related perspective, this study proposes an analysis of hunting practices amongst the Vagla of NW Ghana in terms of exchange theory¹.

The ethnographic point of departure is an apparent anomaly in the treatment of the death of hunters. Like all practices which invert the culturally normative and mandatory order, leaving the hunter to die what otherwise would be qualified as a “bad death” in need of atonement, signals both an anomaly in the order of things and constitutes an attempt to put it right.

“Practices” I understand in a broad sense: matters of a sociological and of a symbolical nature come together in what I would like to call “the ideology of magic” in hunting. Hunting appears in the eyes of the Vagla as the outcome of the synergy between the technology of iron – guns – and the technology of magically induced processes. Control of – and access to both passes through bilateral kinship relations on the one hand and the individual achievements of the hunter on the other – the two forms of access being in constant state of flux.

The articulation of the social-hierarchical and the individual aspects of knowledge *qua* control upon a hunter’s fortunes, can be said to take the classic *form* of a developmental cycle (Goody 1958). An individual perfects his personal hunting equipment by progressively severing the umbilical cord that makes him dependent on his MB – or his “elders”, however qualified – for success. At the same time, in the process, he acquires the means to organize around himself a network of junior

“clients” who become in turn dependent upon his achievements for success. However, the achievement of knowledge and control is accomplished at a price. As a Vagla hunter friend told me once: «Each time we kill an animal we also kill ourselves»². This comment expands on the widely held proposition that, as a great hunter is about to die, the game in the bush dwindles until hunters cannot find any to shoot. Conversely, as soon as a great hunter has died, there begins a period of exceptional abundance lasting at least for the duration of the funeral celebrations.

My analysis will be based upon the concept of exchange articulated as debt and deferred reciprocity: a hunter’s career is structured in terms of an increasing control upon the game *via* the control of hunting technology, both in terms of guns and magic. But the growth of such control upon the game is ultimately exchanged against the hunter’s own vital force. His apotheosis as a hunter is reached in the funeral celebrations, when his death becomes the condition of the last, greatest hecatomb in his honour, «to make his name great», as it is said.

In the first part of this paper I will investigate the sociological context of hunting, knowledge and control. In the second, I will expand on the symbolical implications of hunting activities. In the third part, I will attempt to extend a structural notion of sacrifice as exchange to both the moral and the logical implications of hunting.

Kinship and magic: the sociological contexts of hunting

The Vagla are renowned amongst the neighbouring populations as particularly bad farmers. The “Lobi” (more accurately: LoBirifor and LoDagaa – or Dagaaba), who often share with the Vagla an attitude of mutual mistrust if not contempt, hold them as lazy workers, unwilling to do hard work on the farms.

As a matter of fact, the Vagla villages set in the proximity of the Mole Game Reserve in the Northern Region, where hunting still provides a substantial contribution to the diet, are conspicuous for the absence of the large granaries that are the unmistakable feature of “Lobi” settlements in the area. The Vagla store their meagre crops in makeshift baskets that usually do not last more than a season. Yams are not even stored in the village. So few of them are produced that they are brought back from the farm stores whenever needed.

The Vagla readily acknowledge that – as they say – they are not “interested” in farming. Farming is a necessary evil which must be practiced in order to avoid starvation – but just about³. While rejecting

charges of laziness, they proudly boast of their hunting skills. Hunting (*kpaani*) and warring (*laal*) are often used as interchangeable terms, so that the conceptual and practical proximity of the two props up – so to say – Vagla pride and identity. They hold the Lobi to be cowardly, spineless farmers, only good at fighting in ambush and even better at running away as soon as trouble breaks out. Besides, the continuing Lobi use of bow and arrows testifies their backwardness, compared to the long established use of firearms by the Vagla⁴.

In the multiethnic context of the region, my Vagla friends describe themselves as hunters *and* warriors. The tightly clustered, castellated villages, their social organization based on a kind of loose confederation of all the Vagla villages under the authority of the *Vaglakori* (village chiefs) within the frame of the Gonja overkingdom, the symbolism of their ritual activities conducted under the unifying *Sonnyo Kiipo* shrine and *Sigma* society of masks – all conjure up a picture of a society able to set up a fighting force at a short notice (Poppi 1985, 1993).

Muzzle-loading, general purpose guns (sing. *toto*) are manufactured by blacksmiths settled in villages placed at strategic points in the area. Occasionally, they are still referred to by the English trade-term of “Dane Guns”. In the past, blacksmiths also manufactured the hefty, long-barreled *nantazi* (sing. *nanta*) suited to shoot elephants. Amongst them, though, only the blacksmiths of Dabori – to my knowledge – still produce *totozi*. I suspect that nobody still manufactures *nantazi*, which are only fired at funerals to honor the ancestors, having been put out of business by modern rifles. Most firearms are, these days, purchased in Kumasi, the capital of Asante. Russian-made shotguns are made fit to hunt big game by melting – down the pellets of ordinary cartridges into a single ball. Old British Enfields and a few Mausers (from Togo?) carabines can be occasionally seen, named with the encompassing term *marfa*. Their bullets have to be often adapted – and dangerously – from all sorts of possible sources.

The poor quality of guns, powder and bullets entails shooting game from a very short distance⁵. Thus, the danger implicit in this enhances the importance of the other hunting device widely deployed by Vagla hunters: protection magic. A gun is still the most valuable item in Vagla villages, especially if it is a rifle. A new purchase is an event that activates a whole set of complex dealings with the blacksmith who is to build the weapon, or the dealer in the far-away market who must be contacted and persuaded to surrender the item for a decent price. The supply of locally produced gunpowder, and of imported lead pellets, cartridges and bullets for the rifles, also moves along rather complicated routes, along semi-legal networks under the control of elderly hunters⁶.

Money to buy guns comes mostly from the profit from the sale of dried meat on the Asante-controlled markets of Techiman and Kintampo⁷. But the sale of meat is also the major source of cash for the Vagla villages nearer the Mole Game Reserve, where poaching goes on unabated. Some young hunters are currently trying to cut-off the Asante middlemen that still peddle Vagla villages for dried meat by bringing their catch to the Southern markets themselves. They negotiate this autonomy with their own elders by promising – and eventually delivering – larger quantities of money from direct sales to the elders as well as keeping a larger share for themselves. However, many elders put up resistance against this trend, as they wish to keep control of the trading relations with the buyers which may involve much more than a market-like relationship. However, whatever the agent of the sale, the profit generated goes invariably to *the owner* of the gun. Gun-owners are, by and large, village elders who hand out the weapons to their junior subordinates – the actual hunters.

A successful, long-established elder who has been in his turn also a hunter, may be able to allocate up to three or four guns to his juniors. “Professional” hunters may be able to distribute even more – and better-quality – rifles⁸.

The nature of the “ownership” of a gun is very much like the ownership of land described in anthropological literature for the same area. Guns are not private, individual property disposable at will. They cannot be alienated by their custodians at will. In Vagla ideology, “guns belong to the ancestors” and once they have entered Vagla society from without, they can only be eventually circulated *within* along the web of kinship and down descent lines. Most often, the allotment of the use-value of a gun follows ties between *naara*, that is to say between the MB and the ZS.

The Vagla social formation is organised on the basis of a double-descent system. In the mandatory – if ideal – order of things, immovable property (land, houses, fishing rights etc., and new items of costly property [bicycles, hurricane lamps, etc.]) is devolved across to siblings and then down the patriline, whereas movable property (cows, clothing and guns) moves directly to individuals down the matriline. Women’s property is devolved from mother to daughter.

The crucial relationship, as far as hunting goes, is that between *naarizi* (sing. *naara*). This is the term of reciprocal address between MB and ZS. The relationship is ridden with ties of reciprocal obligation. A child (or more) per each household is – or rather was, as the practice seems to be fast dying off – sent to live with the MB from a very early age. There, as Vagla friends told me, «he lived as a slave (yom)», fetching water and firewood for the house as a boy and then working in the MB’s fields or herding his cows as a young man. He could be pawned in times of famine, sent to war

when the British recruited soldiers in the area, or even surrendered to go to school when the colonial authorities tried to requisition the chiefs' offspring to be educated. Advantages from the relationship between *naarizi* can benefit the ZS siblings too, but only by proxy, as it were. In fact, the reward of a ZS is that whatever his MB decides eventually to give him in return for his services, will belong to him personally.

My Vagla friends readily acknowledge that the life of a *naara* is tough, but it has its rewards. An effective MB knows how to make the most of it: he sets up his *naarizi* as hunters to enjoy the meat and the cash. He then sets up his *naara* with the first wife (often his own daughter, although many Vagla deny that this is their preferred type of marriage, some even denying it as desirable) and allows him to catch a glimpse of all the goodies he will one day inherit from "his mother's side". All this is said to keep a *naara* in good spirits, always willing to help out his MB and cooperate with the *naara*'s children. Thus, hunters often go out on a hunting raid with one of their sister's husbands – who often happens to be their father's (and by extension their own) *naara*⁹.

There are three ways to hunt. The first is conducted with traps by individuals. Large traps are owned and distributed in the same way as guns, although a young hunter might also set up his father's or even own his own light traps from an early stage in his career¹⁰. The second type of hunting is the collective hunt of grasscutters (*aabarazi*) and other small game that occurs yearly at the peak of the dry season. This is conducted with sticks and stones by all the able men in the village (women are rigorously excluded from any form of hunting – or killing, anyway) and does not imply the use of guns.

The true and proper hunting (*kpaana*), however, is done in long raids lasting up to a week deep inside the bush and into the hills. This involves the use of guns. A hunting party never comprises more than two or three (at most, exceptionally, four) hunters. They are in turn accompanied by a number of (usually) adolescent porters to transport supplies of food (yams) and cooking utensils and – eventually – smoke the meat. The porters might be *naara* to the hunters, whereas a positive prohibition is put upon the hunter's own children or siblings. A hunter walks barefoot, perhaps dressed in tight trousers and a loose-fitting smock. He carries, besides his gun, a small pouch made with animal skin, and perhaps a gourd for water. Inside the bag is the real stuff for hunting: *kpaanvug*, "hunting magic".

What makes a good hunt is the gun. But what makes a good gun is its *kpaanvug*. This axiom is the cornerstone of Vagla hunting ideology. There are two types of *kpaanvug*. In the first place there is the "magic (*vug*) of the gun" *strictu sensu*, while on the other hand there is the hunter's personal

vug. None of these *vuga* as a “magical” power in the commonsensical use of the term. I have never heard a Vagla hunter talk about a *kpaanvug* as something that “brings about” the game or even simply “draws it closer” – or the like. Their function is rather a strictly technical, collateral, subsidiary and functional, if I may say so. It belongs to the contextual domain of the hunt, it does not (and even less it is “believed” to) – “bring it about” – as all too often misunderstood by missionaries and anthropologists alike. This does not mean that *kpaanvug* is purely “passive”.

To feel well protected against danger and exposure means to succeed. This is because the hunter – it was explained to me – becomes bolder and more confident. My friend Kanitty added:

If you have *lurgi* (the “vanishing *vug*” which enables a hunter facing impending danger simply to disappear) and you see a herd of buffaloes out in the open where there are no trees to climb if they smell you, you go nearer. You are not afraid and draw near them. When you shoot you do not shiver and so you hit properly – and the buffalo falls down without ever hurting you.

Kpaanvug may not *produce* events – it rather makes carefully planned actions achieve their ends.

The magic of the gun is aimed at improving the weapon’s performance. It avoids misses (which are extremely likely given the constraints discussed above) and it prevents the gun from exploding in the hunter’s face.

However, gun-*vuga*, like all technologies, have their drawbacks. They are said to be extremely dangerous if not properly handled. They are highly secretive *vuga*. The knowledge of the periodical performances meant to empower the *vug* entails the observance of certain taboos, the choice of the proper sacrificial animals and the other avoidances of the case. Such knowledge is handed down from the owner to its usufructuary in bits and pieces, a process which a hunter friend of mine once described as excruciatingly agonizing and frustrating – and dangerous if handled irresponsibly. One of the most common sources of anxiety for Vagla hunters is that the owner of his gun’s *vug*, say his *naara*, dies withholding the knowledge of the “handling instructions” of the *vuga* connected to the use of the gun he will inherit. This would force the hunter – at least in theory – to depend upon the knowledge of other senior hunters, thus frustrating once again his desire for autonomy. However, even to find a senior hunter prepared to positively identify the *vug* in question and take up the chancy process of its handling is not easy.

The result of personal plans and desires maybe accumulated through generations, the investment of somebody else’s wealth and efforts, *vuga* can be likened to hidden landmines – only each of its own making and patent. Finding an expert prepared to handle a type whose only known

property is that – if left “unfed” and uncared for – it can easily turn against anybody within range, is both not easy and very costly.

In my hunter friends’ tales of reiterated failure in bringing home *ol* (meat, game already transformed into edible food), and even more likely in the tales of how a hunter died a “bad death” in the bush, I could always be sure that at some turn in the story there would be a *kpaanvuga* irresponsibly left “cocked up” – as it were – by gelous and inconsiderate owners. *Kpaanvuga* are – *an sich* – beyond morality. They can be bribed, seduced, conned and tricked into action against, even, their owner’s intentions and knowledge. In the sense of that “moral neutrality” – and paradoxically precisely *because of* that – their actions are determined by the conditions attaining at any given point in time in the world of moral (and power) relationships between people – and not by some intrinsic, “fetishized” power, if the oxymoron is allowed¹¹.

The “magical capital” of a gun is the sum total of the periodic “activations” of its *vuga* during sacrifices performed by its owner. Thus, the older a gun, the most power (*dabaare*: a term specifically referred to the effectiveness, the “power” of *vuga*) it has incorporated in terms of being “loaded” with subsequent performances of its *vuga*. The oldest guns in possession of a lineage, although well beyond the possibility of being of any effective use, acquire the quasi-magical status of ancestral relics and are displayed and sometimes even fired (occasionally with devastating results!) at the funerals of important elders.

Kpaanvuga also include an array of personal *vuga* the purpose of which can be anything from general protection to any number of micrological, idiosyncratic and painstakingly detailed effects. There is, for instance, the already mentioned, ubiquitous and fabled “vanishing *vug*” (*lurgi*) that enables a hunter to disappear as a situation gets too dodgy to bear, there is the *vug* that renders a lion’s fangs as soft as porridge, there is the equivalent for leopards, there is the *vug* against snake bite etc. There are, above all, *vuga* of a “sociomoral” kind. Against envy and jealousy, against the evil eye and against adultery. The latter is particularly worrying for Vagla hunters. It is commonly held that if a hunter’s wife commits adultery when the husband is in the bush hunting, he will loose his bearings, become lost and die a “bad death”.

A young hunter may start off by being equipped with *vuga* by his *naara* in the form of both gun and personal *vug*. As he moves up and establishes a reputation for himself, he will be increasingly more likely to be able to be offered and actively seek out for *vuga* by – and from senior hunters. There is, however, another way of acquiring a powerful *kpaanvug*, and this is directly linked to the hunter’s personal success. Like human beings, game animals have leaders. If a hunter succeeds in killing a leading animal

(say, a buffalo leading a herd), then he may find the *kpaanvug* hidden in its entrails as he is looking for the heart to dip his *vuga* and thus strengthen them.

Some Vagla friends have told me that old hunters also sell gun-*vuga*, but this has been disputed by others. The dispute was, I guess, about whether it was possible for an experienced, gun-owning hunter, to mess about, as it were, with another man's property of the importance of a gun by "adding" *vuga* to it. Once again the handling of *vuga* appears as a cognitive twilight and a practical nightmare. As Kanitty told me once:

In so doing, and not knowing what kind of *vug* a man has put in his gun, he would perhaps spoil the gun for good. *Vuga* do not like other *vuga*, and you can only add if you know what goes well with what. By not knowing what you do, you may die.

On the other hand, it must be surmised, gun-*vuga* *must* be circulating in some form to empower guns that have been newly produced and that enter the sphere of socially controlled allotment for the first time. In the context of the same discussion, a friend claimed that only old hunters can buy guns, because it is only elders who can empower them with *vuga* already in their possession. This might be true *de jure*. I am aware, however, of at least one case when a junior hunter purchased a gun with his own money, completely bypassed his outraged *naara* who promised all sorts of mishaps to befall him, bought his own *vug* from an old, quasi-mythical hunter from a distant village, and became a most successful hunter, greatly feared and revered precisely for his defiance of the rules.

At any rate, the *vug* a young hunter is most likely to acquire as soon as he has knowledge of its existence is more often than not of the "personal" type, since these are relatively easier to acquire, cheaper to buy and safer to maintain. The reason for that is that a "personal" *vug* does not entail the negotiation of the new purchase with the owner of the gun, but is done by personal initiative and "secretly". A gun owner will have then to balance his investment in "magical power" for his gun against the possibility that its usufructuary goes off his own way – so to say – and builds up a personal "magical capital" to support his hunting.

A hunter's continuing success, thus, moves in opposite and contradictory directions as far as control and access to hunting power goes, as it enhances at the same time the prestige and the power of the gun's owner *and* the hunter's own. The cumulative result of a relationship fraught with tension, mutual suspicion and often open, reciprocal accusations of foul play, leads to the progressive relapsation of the link of dependence of a junior hunter from the owner of the gun he uses. However, this is balanced up, on the other hand, by the possibility that

the gun owner has to recruit more usufructuaries. This is done on the very strength of his usufructuaries' success, which will also enhance the owner's reputation as the controller of powerful hunting magic.

The new recruits might be junior hunters at the beginning of their career, in want of a gun as well as of *kpaanvuga* of both the "gun" and the "personal" kind. It is easy to see, then, how the continuing relationship between a gun owner and a gun usufructuary depends on a delicate balance between control and investment (on the side of the owner) and of progressive "autonomization" (on the side of the usufructuary) towards gaining more independence, ultimately towards acquiring a gun of his own. This will eventually be accomplished through saving money from the sale of the shares of meat the gun owner will allow his subordinate to keep for himself as part of the attempt to keep his allegiance.

The purchase of a gun will set a hunter up, at a certain point in his career, as a gun owner in his own right. This would put him in the position of acquiring young clients while, perhaps, still acting himself as usufructuary to his *naara*. But in order to activate his gun, he would still have to depend on the elders (*naara* or other willing senior hunter) to equip him with gun-*vug*.

It is only old hunters, ultimately, who are both in full ownership and in "magical" control of a set of guns. Their strategy is to allocate them to as high a number of usufructuaries as possible, bearing in mind that a gun can be used by more than one hunter. Thus, a very senior hunter at the end of his career will be likely to be in control of three or four guns and up to ten or a dozen usufructuaries, all at different stages of development of their careers. This entails that a famous *digbuŋ* (a killer of elephants) will expand his network beyond the number of his *naarizi* (zss) and even (as it often happens) recruit junior hunters from far away villages. Each animal killed by his guns will still be considered his own kill, the result of his (by now) personal powers both as a *vugare* (performer of *vuga*) and as a leader of young men.

Such elders are greatly feared and respected. They have broken the shell of a pattern of leadership that otherwise – as it is the case with elders and chiefs – strictly follows kinship and territorial ties. Towards chiefs, they behave nonchalantly or even arrogantly. Hot-tempered, heavy drinking and smoking as they unmistakably are, they boast and misbehave at funerals, basking in the self-confidence fostered by the aura of awe and circumspection that surrounds them. They «hunt young women till they drop dead» – as it is said, and their marriage careers are often complex and fraught with difficulties, with the result that many remain childless. They are in control of an impressive miscellany of *vuga* in the

form of the shrine-pots of their hunting magic. Old hunters have seen *the wonderful things of the bush*, accumulating a capital of knowledge that they have dished out little by little, always parsimoniously, incompletely, menacingly and tantalizingly to their junior followers.

More often than not, their death is looked upon with suspicion: not one chance is missed to divine a hunter a witch *post mortem*, so that his capital of shrines – and guns – can be disposed of and the latter sent to *Sonnyo Kiipo*'s shrine (a centralized shrine whose power extends all over Vaglaland) both to prevent quarrels over the devolution of such riches and get rid of dangerous items such as unattended shrines.

Given such a picture, it is hardly surprising that the approach of a hunter's death must be treated in a special way.

The symbolical contexts of hunting: Death and the Spirits

The rainy season is the season when hunting is at its lowest. The bush is overgrown and game cannot be seen in the thick. Game herds are dispersed due to the abundance of pastures and water. At the peak of the rainy season, children and elderly people suffer from chest infections, and some will die. Faced with a dwindling supply of meat, coupled with a chronic shortage of staple food as the new crops are still to be harvested, rumors start going round as villagers begin to wonder whether an old hunter is about to die.

There is a mantic proximity between the dwindling fortunes of hunting and the death of senior hunters. It is said, in fact, that when a hunter is about to die, the *tinnannii* (sing. *tinnannaa*, "bush fairy"), "tie" the game and do not release it until after the old man has breathed his last. If death is not about to take place in the village itself, it is said that somebody must be dying somewhere nearby (which is by necessity sooner or later the case). But if a hunter is effectively ill in the village, then cautious and discreet investigations get under way as to his condition. When the death of Wiiziapara (a fictional name) approached sometime in July 1986, the whole village was quietly informed. An ominous, uneasy silence fell onto the settlement, punctuated by the incessant rain, for the several days his illness lasted. People were waiting.

Unlike every other ordinary person who should ideally die sitting in a relative's arms, a hunter must die alone. As death approaches – "*as the man is trying to die*" – the spirits (*kuntònzei*, sing. *kuntònⁿ²*) of the animals he has killed will come to carry away his *anima* (*duma*). When it becomes clear that the hunter is about to breathe his last, the door of his room is locked and the occupants of the compound leave.

The compound becomes virtually off-limits, and everybody keeps clear of the premises. It is said that the *kuntònzi* of the killed animals would carry off anybody they found inside the dying hunter's room. The term *kuntòn* denotes both the vital principle of animal life that the hunter takes away when engaged in killing and the capability the same has to harm the hunter unless special medicines are ingested. In this sense – and paradigmatically – *kuntòn* is both a concept and an active process.

Major game such as buffalo, elephant and hippopotamus possess special effectiveness in haunting a hunter's life, unless rendered inoffensive by the assumption of a special *muza*. *Muza* is a kind of medicine designed to avert mystical attacks. Elephant killers must ritually drink *choggi* (literally: “bad”), the same *muza* drunk by homicides. *Choggi* is prepared on the spot, mixing the meat of an elephant's ears with a mixture of roots and herbs. Certain lineages possess their own variant of *choggi*, and administer it to their “sisters” children’ in yearly ceremonies during which the medicine-shrine's power is renewed. *Choggi* protective power lasts until the time of death comes. «But when death comes – Kanitty explained to me – there is nothing that can protect you: you have to go».

The *duma* of the hunter is carried by the *kuntònzi* to the village of the bush fairies, and there it is presented to the *tinnannii* as evidence of the hunter's death. It is only at this point that the *tinnannii* are persuaded to “release” the animals they had “tied up” during the period leading up to the hunter's death. The death of a hunter, thus, inaugurates a period of unusual abundance of game in Vagla villages.

The announcement of a hunter's death on the talking drums starts the post-mortem procedures. As the women begin the funeral lamentations, the elders gather to conduct the divination session (*kuari vuga*) as to the causes of the hunter's death. It is the outcome of this session that will determine the fate of the hunter. Of all deaths, that of an old, powerful and famous hunter is the one that most calls for divination concerning its causes.

A hunter has accumulated throughout his life an impressive symbolical capital of *vuga*. He is known to have constantly mucked about with magic. He knows things other people do not know. His knowledge is not only personal and secret, but its socialization is conducted within a close circle of hunters each of whom has some idea – but only *some* – of the nature (if not of the technology) of the magical power he controlled. Yet, due to the personal nature of such knowledge, what exactly he did own remains a partial secret (*wolo* or *wisuablii¹³*).

In one word, of all deaths, a hunter's is liable to suspicions of witchcraft (*hiri*). This can be of a passive kind (i.e. the hunter has been killed by witchcraft) or, most worryingly and more likely since a hunter

takes precautions, almost by definition, against attacks by others, of an active kind – i.e. the hunter himself was a witch and was killed by one of the supernatural protective agencies scattered around the Vagla conceptual landscape. Thus, the nature of the death must be divined.

There is, in fact, a strong chance that the hunter has been killed by one of the numerous agencies active amongst the Vagla to prevent witchcraft, the chief of them being the powerful medicine-shrine of *Sigma* (on *Sigma*: Bravmann 1974, 1979; Poppi 1993). The divination session is conducted by slitting the throat of a fowl which is then “thrown” to the ground to flap about until it comes to a standstill. If it dies on its breast, the answer to the question posed by the diviner is negative; if it dies instead on its back, the answer is positive. The phrasing of the question, of course, is crucial in determining the outcome of the *kuari vug*, and since the question is known only to a very close circle of witnesses, the outcome of the divination session is constantly – often endlessly – negotiable.

If the dead hunter is confirmed to have been struck dead by an anti-witchcraft agency, then the *Sigma* masks are called into the compound. The corpse is stripped naked and then dragged to the bush, where it is buried face down in a shallow grave lined with thorns¹⁴. If the death is divined instead to have been a “good death”, then the funeral gets underway.

The talking drums (*timpanna*) call the village hunters to gather in the village square. Thence they leave as a group, accompanied by women’s trills. The hunters enter the bush together, and then disperse in pairs or threes to their customary hunting grounds to kill the game for the funeral. In the village, preparations begin to wash the body with lustral, doctored water.

The corpse is laid in the middle of the compound, head facing East and South. The *Sigma* masks come out and start dancing, as they will do daily, from sunrise to sunset, for up to seven days, the period, that is, that the wake for the death of an important village elder can last. Soon they will be joined by the *Sigma* masks coming from the nearby villages, accompanied by the crowd of relatives and neighbours – indeed anybody who wishes to participate in the funeral ceremonies. Later, the corpse will be wrapped in several layers of home-made cloth and laid in state outside, on the ceremonial square.

Out in the bush the hunters are busy searching for game. The collective start of the hunt in a public context of cheering and rejoicing is in sharp contrast with the highly individualistic, extremely secretive character of ordinary hunting forays¹⁵. This fact alone points at the exceptional character of the event.

As it has been said, Vagla seldom – if ever – hunt in groups. At most, two or three of them will join forces on a venture, but never more than

that. It is especially young hunters who hunt in somebody else's company. The older hunter is, the more he will tend to hunt alone. He will even dispense asking a young boy to accompany him to help in carrying the meat, often killed at one, or even two days' distance from the village. He will prefer to leave the game buried somewhere hastily smoked, come home and only then send somebody to collect the meat. Hunting is a dangerous, lonely business. As Kanitty told me: «I go hunting with Pentu. He is my brother (although he is not related to him by kinship ties) and so we go together».

In my understanding, Vagla hunters choose their companions from amongst their friends more out of a "lesser evil" attitude than out of an attitude of what one might call amity. Each hunter *walks* with his own *kpaanvug*, and no hunter would dare investigate *what my friend walks with*. Thus, Kanitty said: «I walk with Pentu, but do I know what he is walking with?». There are often suspicions raised as to just what kind of effect X's *kpaanvug* might have on Y's. «If my *kpaanvug* is more powerful than Pentu's, then he might get nothing for himself: I would kill and he would miss. But also his can be better than mine – and so I would not kill next time». On the other hand, a hunter knows that shooting must be ordered in a junior-senior relationship. The first shot is for the senior hunter, unless he "gives the shot" to his junior "brother".

However, "to take a shot" from somebody is again a matter fraught with chance and all sorts of double-edges. A hunter chooses a companion thinking that the latter might have a better *kpaanvug* than his own, and thus make the hunter luckier through his generosity in "giving shots". But the risk is also there that the partner is in bad luck with his *kpaanvug*, either through having neglected *to feed it* or through not having observed the series of mandatory prohibitions before he set off to the bush. The bush fairies hate dirt and pollution. Prohibitions on sexual intercourse must be observed before going hunting, as sperm and vaginal fluids are particularly abhorred by the *tinnannii* who can kill on that account alone. A hunter who dies in the bush either by losing his bearings and getting lost (a surprisingly frequent occurrence) or by being attacked by an animal is not given a proper burial, and will be never be treated and addressed as an ancestor.

Lack of success is particularly ominous for a hunter, as it means that he will find increasingly more difficult to find a hunting partner. The more a hunter comes back empty-handed, the more he will find himself alone. This condition might last until he finally strikes a lucky shot, and then, at once, his potential to attract a partner will be restored to its maximum since the spell has been broken – and the cycle will eventually start again. This is to say that nobody will be prepared to take a chance of failure once

it has been made clear that there is something wrong with the partner he usually hunted with.

In this way, the choice of a hunting partner often results in hunters joining forces with friends of roughly the same “killing potential”. The two share the odds, in a carefully considered choice of balances and counterbalances. But this also implies that a tension will be there all the time, with each partner at once having to trust the other in the hope “he is better equipped” than himself. On the other hand, a hunter will have continuous reservations as to his friend’s responsibility in correctly handling the magical potential of his hunting equipment. If “united we stand” holds true for the Vagla hunter, then the selfsame togetherness can turn into disaster. A hunter suffering a period of particularly bad luck will go to the diviner and find out – for instance – that his gun is “spoiled” because he failed to give a proper sacrifice to a dead ancestor (usually matrilineal) who passed over to him the *kpaanvug*.

However, on the other hand, the jostling and negotiating that takes place every time a sacrificial animal is to be found to restore the balance – and the Vagla are often weary of the demands of their *vuga* or cannot simply meet them for economic reasons – can lead one to suspect that it is his partner who has failed to take the proper steps. This is the case especially with younger hunters, who are still dependent on their *naara*’s proper care of the *kpaanvug*.

A stingy *naara* might neglect to perform the proper sacrifices to the *kpaanvuga*, and so try to argue with his *naara* that it is his partner that is bringing bad luck. Waiting to see which alternative is true might cost more than continuing bad luck: it might impair a fruitful partnership, spread bitterness and – ultimately – envy and accusations of witchcraft. Indeed, hunters are said to be constantly *challenging one another* to improve their own chances.

In the last analysis, the ideal hunting expedition is one in which a hunter is alone, his confidence resting entirely on his own technologies – his own gun and his own well groomed *kpaanvuga*. But the odds a hunter takes when going to the bush are not limited to the relationships he entertains with his partner(s) and to those they all entertain with their *kpaanvuga*. Each hunter carries in his hunting bag a few kola nuts and some rolled tobacco.

It is no easier to get hunters to talk about such items than it is to get them talking about the *kpaanvuga*. The kola nuts and the tobacco are offerings for the bush fairies that a hunter might encounter on his path. Woe to him who does not have anything to offer! The *tinnannaa* might suddenly turn into a vindictive, nasty *tinnanchoggi* (“bad fairy”). *Tinnanchoggi* must be avoided at all costs as they are the source of all sorts of illnesses and troubles, sticky and very difficult to get rid of.

The *tinnannii* are described – if at all – as small beings in human form. I have heard them said to have green or red furry bodies, capable to appear and disappear and change their shape at will. They inhabit invisible villages (*tinnannibol*) in the depths of the bush.

The “bad” variety (*tinnanchoggi*) haunts instead abandoned villages dotted all around the vast expanse of bush where the Vagla conduct their hunting expeditions.

The *tinnannii* are the depositaries of all sorts of knowledge. They were the first owners of the *Sigma* masks, stolen from them by a mythical hunter who stalked a fairy until she inadvertently revealed the ritual knowledge connected to the *Sigma* cult. One version of the myth claims that the revelation of the wonders of the mask induced the hunter to kill the fairy to steal the mask. He then took her skull and the first mask to what then became the *Sigma* headquarters, whence the central initiation to the cult is still conducted.

The bush fairies also train the *ejo*, a specialist diviner (very often the son of a famous hunter and occasionally his firstborn) who lives on the margins of Vagla society and runs possession-*cum*-divination dances at funerals of famous hunters. At such divination sessions, the *tinnannii* are dangerously *called into the village* to take possession of the dancers – especially women. The trance sessions are conducted under *ejo*'s supervision (trance is actually induced by him holding the wrist of the dancers). At the end of the third night of dancing, singing and drumming, as dusk approaches, *ejo* himself goes into a trance and publicly divines about troubles concerning the whole community.

In a bout of wanton generosity, a *tinnannaa* might reveal to a hunter how to prepare a powerful *kpaanvug* to grant him success. But, above all, *tinnannii* are the owners of the game. Without their consent, no hunter would ever be successful.

One must be kind to *tinnannii* – Kanitty explained – as if you do not give them kola nuts they might be angry with you and even kill you through one of their leading animals. But if you are kind to them, they may tell you their secrets.

Hunters are not allowed to tell their dealings with the *tinnanni* to anybody. Conversely, in the moral economy of “magical” knowledge, nobody would want to know what a hunter knows unless ready to enter the kind of tie that the sharing of such knowledge entails at all levels. Hunters cannot talk about the encounters they have in the bush, described by my Vagla friends as the place where «one sees all sorts of wonderful things». What one sees in the bush, one must never talk about: when hunters come back from an expedition, they do not talk to anybody until they have bathed «so that we do not take anything from the bush back home». When I

objected that one must *per force* talk about what he “has seen” in the bush should his hunting misfortunes require the intervention of a diviner, Kanitty explained:

Vugare (diviners) know what troubles you when you go and talk about your problems in hunting. They know already, you do not need to tell them anything.

Divination techniques amongst the Vagla help in making divination a kind of “silent trade”. It is only the interrogant who knows the kind of questions he is asking. The diviner, infact, limits himself to identifying the cause and the affecting agency of the trouble, and he needs not know the specific nature of the problem investigated. The wand-divining technique amongst the Vagla is not the domain of initiated professionals. It is often the case that the wand-diviner is also a hunter, and hunters prefer to go and see diviners who are senior to them in the same business. It is easily understood how, in such a situation, no need to be specific arises.

The knowledge imparted by the *tinnanni*, thus, cannot be socialized *qua* knowledge, but only – eventually – incorporated and objectified within *kpaanvuga*, its rules and regulations. In that form, eventually, it will be devolved to one’s heirs or passed over to clients. “Handling techniques” will have to be specified, but knowledge of the circumstances in which the *vug* was acquired will remain the hunter’s own.

Thus, in the last analysis, the source of a crucial portion of hunting knowledge are the *tinnannii*, either via the lived-through experience of a specific hunter or, *via* the ancestors, through the subordination of a junior to a senior hunter.

Let us now turn once again to the funeral ceremonies. As soon as the hunters have killed an animal in the bush, its tail is cut off and rushed back to the village. Here it is brought triumphantly to the hunter’s body. Excitement reaches a climax, with women trilling, drummers increasing the pace of their beats and everybody generally rejoicing in the success of the hunt. The tail is danced around the corpse three times anti-clockwise and then it is presented to the elders. This sequence will be repeated every time the tail of a head of game is brought to the village. The elders have congregated soon after the death has been announced under a makeshift shelter facing the “tree of hunting” (*kpaanadaa*). The *kpaandaa* is processionally brought into the village from the bush by an elder belonging to a lineage of warriors, i.e. by somebody whose ancestors «have killed human beings» (if not he himself did, that is). The *kpaandaa* is a pole stuck in the ground. Tied at the top there is a trident-shaped object carved out of a calabash. The Vagla elders say that in former times the ribs and jaws of enemies killed in battle used to be hung from the pole, but the British stopped the custom in colonial times.

At the base of the pole skulls of game animals are piled up, brought in from the outskirts of the village where they are thrown and scattered at random at the end of each funeral. Elephant skulls will come into play later. If the dead hunter was an elephant-killer (*digbuŋ*) then his body is brought out in the village square on the day of burial and laid to rest with the head propped up by an elephant jaw till sunset, when it will be buried. The mourners – men and women – will dance *kpaana* all day long.

At night, elders and junior hunters congregate on the roof of the room where the body is lying awaiting burial (and where he will be buried at sunset, if possible on the very day of death). In the case of famous hunters, *kpaana* singing can go on nightly for an entire week after burial. *Kpaana* songs are concerned with proverbs concerning death. References to hunting matters, often in the form of complex metaphors, are also part of the repertoire in which senior hunters figure prominently. *Kpaana* songs, on such important occasions, can be accompanied by *kpaana* dancing and drumming. *Kpaana* singing is not for all. It is considered a powerful and somewhat dangerous dance. Although I could not fully elucidate this point, I guess it is because it is evocative of both human and animals ghosts. As a friend commented (in English): «The songs are about “bad” (powerful) things, and if you do not have the *tinnannii* with you, you fear to sing such songs». Dancing patterns evoke hunting events: elephant hunters, young and old, brag about their exploits by mimicking dying elephants’ cries. Mimetic dances show elephant mothers defending their offspring and elephants about to fall mortally wounded. Women participate in the dances carrying the baskets they use to transport meat and brandishing cooking utensils. However, the climax of the funeral of a famous elephant killer is reached when *awa* is danced. *Awa* (literally: “he comes”) is perhaps the most solemn of all Vagla dances. It happens just before daybreak. The fast *kpaana* rhythm suddenly changes into a deeply *staccato* pattern, with the bass drums prevailing over all others. An atmosphere of both excitement and emotionally charged expectation becomes very tangible, as people know *awaa* is approaching: during *awa* the ghost (*lila*, also “corpse”) of the deceased is said to be present and join in the dance.

The *sinnaare* (sing. “He who can see [invisible things]”) present amongst the participants are said to be able to see the ghost milling in the crowd. *Awa* never lasts long – four or five minutes at most – and then the nightly *kpaana* session is resumed till daylight. *Awaa* marks the point of both closest and final contact between the deceased’s *duma* (*anima*) and his people. It comes across to the onlooker as a moving, dramatic farewell.

On the last day of the funeral, in fact, a final act of expulsion will take place to mark the end of the ceremonies. The iron torque representing

the deceased's *wiize* (his “spiritual soul”, as opposed to the “*duma*” as the principle of “animal life”) will be taken to the bush in a westerly direction and *thrown away*. This marks, amongst the Vagla, “the end” of one’s life in the village and the beginning of his life as an ancestor. The gesture thus marks the casting out of the deceased’s lingering ghost that appeared, hopefully for the last time, during *awa*.

The meat of all the animals killed during a funeral wake is distributed amongst the elders, who are allotted the forelegs of all game. They will consume it in front of the *kpaandaa*, on the same spot that is where the standard sacrifices of domestic animals offered to the deceased also take place. The remainder is shared out among the households related to the deceased (the latter’s own getting the largest share to feed the guests) in order of seniority. A major hunting effort is also conducted at the yearly festival to celebrate the end of the harvest. On this occasion it is strictly game meat that must be cooked in each lineage senior household (*diezen*), together with guinea-corn or millet porridge and a soup made of wild leaves. Each household then brings its food to the main village square, so that a large quantity is laid before the gathered village elders.

This time the focal point of the ceremony is not the *kpaan* pole, but the *kiah*, a small building where various items pertaining to death and burial (grave-digging implements, an ancient stool used in burial ceremonies, the jaws of killed elephants, etc.) are kept. The *beubh hij* (Priest of the Land) pours a libation to the Earth and to the ancestors. They are offered and called upon to take their share. Then all elders partake in the meal, at the end of which anybody can step forth and take his or her share. The *beubh hij*, lastly, topples each vessel over the ground. The food thus spilt is left for animals and anybody to eat or *rot and go to the Earth*.

The logic of hunting and the logic of sacrifice

The Vagla assimilate hunting to thieving. When accused by the game keepers of stealing the property of the State by poaching inside the Mole Game Reserve, they remain unmoved. «A hunter is a thief anyway – Kanitty commented philosophically and revealingly on one such occasion, as we were laying on the rooftop of our house bathed in the full moon of the hot season – if you do not steal from government you still from the bush, so... Can a thief ever stop stealing?».

Unlike farming, which requires a constant, regular and regulated input of human labour, hunting is a kind of activity which appears in the form of an immediate appropriation of nature in its most vital form: game. Sacrifices are given to the Earth before breaking the soil and

before and after harvesting. Piaculatory sacrifices are regularly given to all agencies who – human and not – who have a vested interest in the process of production. Due to the passivity of its object, cultivating the soil is a – *reasonably and relatively speaking* – predictable activity. Hunting – on the contrary – is neither mediated by labour nor – as a symbolical corollary – it is mediated by sacrifices inaugurating, closing and “fuelling” the period of intercourse. Chancy, fateful and random (and it is worth noticing that no “positive” hunting magic is ever deployed), hunting pitches the will, needs and desires of hunters against the will, needs and the desires of animals. Hunters are aware that they trick, con, trap and trip over sentient beings who, in turn, try to do the same to them. In one word, hunting is regulated only by transactions of a “negative” kind, designed, that is, to avert trouble: protective magic for the hunter and enabling magic for the gun.

Farms are conceptualized by the Vagla as somewhere in-between the village and the bush. They are a type of environment that can be transformed by labour. Such labour is highly socialized – the production and reproduction of a labour force being, in a sense, “sociality” in its essence. The activity of sexual reproduction itself is described as analogous to tilling the soil, planting and harvesting¹⁶. By contrast, hunting is a highly individualistic activity. The site of a constant power struggle between juniors and elders, its inevitable sociality fraught with an overload of mutual suspicions – hunting produces troubled, solitary personalities. Those who feed the community with the most cherished food are also problem-persons, examples of “what not to be like” if you wish to be a decent father and neighbour.

The difficulties and ambiguities inherent in the model of desocialization fostered by hunting also apply to the very status of the object to which hunting applies – to its “means of production”, as it were. Unlike a farm, the bush can only be approached and appropriated “like a thief in the dead of night”. The “labour input” of a hunter, thus, applies to the bush not as a means of production mediated by and – in turn produced – through all sorts of social and symbolical processes, but as an object of violent, unmediated appropriation. Under these constraints, the target of the investment of labour is, therefore, not so much *the game* as the object to which the hunter’s productive capabilities apply, but rather the “magical” tools he deploys in *stealing from the bush*.

Hunting practices are underpinned by a complex web of sociological and symbolical processes. The “hunting capital” of a given hunter appears as the accumulation of a technological wealth which includes the gun and the magic that goes with its proper functioning. Such capital is assembled *via* a set of mediations involving his MB (or senior hunter in an

equivalent “patronage” position) on the one hand, and the bush fairies on the other. Strictly speaking, these are the explicit agencies who hand over the knowledge of the correct deployment of the “hunting capital” to the hunter. But the ancestors are also involved in the process of acquisition of such knowledge, though in a more mediated way. They are in fact the first to have obtained the hunting magic to be devolved to their ZS at death. Thus, the primary exchange remains that between the fairies and the hunters, and the “sociological” aspects of hunting capital accumulation can be said to be – in a certain sense at least – a byproduct of that *ur*-transaction.

The progression of a hunter’s career can be described in terms of a progressive franchisement of an individual from the “sociological mediation” of his hunting endowment towards direct access to the ultimate “supernatural” source of power. A *naara* (MB) equips his ZS with the equipment for hunting (both gun and magic) in order to be supplied with meat. But in so doing he also sets in motion the process of the progressive autonomization of his *naara*.

Each expedition in the bush is a chance to gain more knowledge and power (the *tinnanni* might provide the hunter with a powerful hunting magic; a powerful hunting magic might be found in the digestive system of a leading animal). But also, at the material level, success in hunting might enhance the hunter’s chance to be requested to become the client of a powerful hunter who is joining junior clients to his circle. Thus, the very subordination of a hunter is *also and at the same time* the means of his growth as an independent entrepreneur: success in hunting might bring wives – and probably too many. Wives might bring wealth, and wealth might bring guns – or so recites social mythology. A hunter might soon find himself in control of the means – both symbolical and material – needed to sever his links with the initial source of his hunting capital.

The hunter’s relationship of subordination and indebtedness will never be dispensed with till the very end, though. The *tinnannii*’s lordship over the game can never be bypassed. In a certain sense, the junior hunter, the further away he is from direct contact with them: his control over the hunting magic is a function of his subordination to his junior patron.

A hunter’s success can thus be described as a way to get closer and closer to the *tinnannii*: the more he progresses, the more his encounters with the depositaries of all knowledge and power approach a “face to face” symmetrical positioning. The lonelier he becomes as he gains confidence in his own means, the more he “sees” in the bush and the less he is supposed to talk. The more he knows, the less he can reveal. The more he knows, the more he kills. As he takes from the fairies an increasing quantity of game, he also advances deeper into uncharted

and desocialized territories of knowledge – a process which increasingly isolates him from the company and trust of human beings.

There is an ominous dialectic implied in all this. In killing more and more game, a hunter also digs his own grave. The *kontònzì* (spirits) of the animals are kept temporarily at bay by the *choggi* (“medicine of bad killing”) he takes to avert immediate retaliation. This temporary protection notwithstanding, the medicine provides a kind of mystical protective shelter that becomes heavier and heavier as the life career of a hunter comes to a close. Right at the time when a hunter has reached the top of his power – he has guns and a number of subordinates “killing in his name” – the shelter finally gives way and crashes.

This can be described in terms of a *redde rationem*, a settlement of “credit allowances”: at some point nobody can kill any more game in the bush. Time to reciprocate has come. A great hunter has to die so that the circle of exchange can be kick-started again. The death of a great hunter constitutes the moment of closest contact between the spirits of the animals, the fairies and Vagla society. The unfolding of his fate brings together – for once – the actors of a drama that, until then, had seen the *dramatis personae* being kept as far apart as possible.

Animal spirits and fairies this time, literally, “come into the village” thus reverting the order of cultural things: the former come to collect the hunter’s soul and linger dangerously about the place during the *kpaana* songs. The latter appear in the form of the Sigma masks and bullroarers (Poppi 1993), while also bestowing collective and public knowledge through the *ejo*’s trance performances. But this conjunction is also paralleled by a renewed “close contact” out in the bush: the hunters are able to kill game at an exceptionally intensified rate. The summon of the hunter’s *duma* to the fairies’ village thus works as the repayment at once of the deferred blood debt accumulated through hunting. This reciprocation is necessary for the cycle of reciprocity to start again. A “credit” system sets at work anew and will in due course come to a standstill: then a new settlement will have to take place to restore the opening balance and start the cycle anew.

In his study of the relationship between human and animal worlds, Roy Willis says of the exchange system set up by hunting amongst the Lele of Zaire:

The success or failure of every hunting expedition is controlled by the spirits (*mingebe*). But their interventions are in no sense capricious. They withhold or deliver the animals according to the moral state of the hunting community (Willis 1974: 30).

His conceptualization of the exchange that goes on in hunting parallels and complements the explanations of sacrifice “à la Evans-Pritchard”

inasmuch as failure in hunting is determined by “sin” as much as its success is determined by “virtue” (e.g. the obeysance of certain prohibitions). A similar argument about the “cultural logic” inherent in hunting also informs (no doubt amongst other) Valerio Valeri’s study of the moral economy of hunting among the Huaulu of the Moluccas (2000).

To conceptualize success in hunting as a function of the “moral state” of the community is tantamount to theorizing the need of sacrifice as a kind of “purification” through atonement. Evans-Pritchard’s conception has been criticized by a more generalizing approach as providing only part of the explanation of more structural phenomena. Thus, Luc de Heusch sees in the “moral” dimension of sacrifice only part of a wider structure. In his view

[...] sacrifice often relates to a philosophy of offence and indebtedness of which “sin” could well be just one specific aspect (de Heusch 1985: 196).

This appears to be the case amongst the Vagla. In fact, if it is true to say that “sin” comes into the symbolism of hunting as a reason of its failure (hunters who are polluted by sexual fluids cannot enter the bush successfully; those whose wives commit adultery never come back from the bush), yet, if we were to apply this logic of punishment and reward to hunting symbolism in general, we would run into a paradox of both a logical and a cultural nature.

Amongst the Vagla – as much or as little as elsewhere – it is precisely the hunters who are most successful – i.e. those who are most “morally obliging” in their dealings with the bush fairies – who are most in danger from the mass of the *kontònze* progressively accumulating over their heads. Without the consent of the *tinnannii* they would never kill anyway. It is evident that – in this case – it is the *very virtue* of a hunter (and not the need to atone for his moral wickedness) that is at the root of his death being, at a certain point, the *condition sine qua non* a transaction can ever take place again in the bush.

Luc de Heusch (1985: 204) proposes a notion of sacrifice as a particular instance in the casuistry of exchange. He notes how the notion of debt «is at the core of many sacrificial systems» often in the form of a “blood debt” contracted by the humans *vis-à-vis* the nonhuman world in mythological times. Amongst the Vagla, the murder of a *tinnannaa* inaugurated the knowledge of “the things of the bush” with the appropriation of the *Sigma* masks by a mythical hunter. de Heusch then moves on in his analysis, and sets the symbolical function of the sacrificial act *qua* restoration of the “proper distance” between the human and the nonhuman worlds in terms of their “conjunction” and “disjunction” (*ibid.*: 213).

I suggest that the developmental process of the type of exchange that

goes on amongst the Vagla fits the coordinates of de Heusch's analysis. Taking animals from the bush sets up a "logic of deferred reciprocity". Each transaction is in itself *legitimized* by the hunters' observance of the rules set up by the fairies to release the animals under their control. This legitimization is only the condition for the success of the hunt, it does not represent *as yet* a reciprocation of the "gift": in respecting the rules a hunter simply shows he has "good manners" as a recipient of gifts. His debt increases as he perfects his "manners": the more he is successful in killing, the more his obligations grow in the form of a "blood debt". In this respect, the death of a hunter constitutes the apogee of the relationship of closeness and exchange: his *anima* goes to the bush fairies and the fairies come to the village. Inverting Maurice Bloch's (1992: *passim*) theoretical rendering of the "politics" implicit in initiation and sacrifice, the hunter must expose himself to the «rebounding violence» by turning himself into prey. At the end of his career, he who "sacrificed" animals for the benefit of his *kpaanvug* powers must sacrifice himself. By this "auto-sacrifice" the game is released in the bush and the "accumulation of debt" starts a new cycle. Following this transaction, the proper distance between the human and the nonhuman world is restored to the relative distance that renders intercourse and exchange possible once again. The outcome of hunting occurs anew, for a while, "in average quantity" – untilted towards extreme success or dismal failure.

From this perspective, positive "morality" (and/or its violations) only comes into the difficult equation of hunting as a condition of its success, and not as a reason for its atonement. The overall picture by which the hunter *must* at some point die is inscribed in the logic of exchange *by necessity* and is only secondarily dependent on moral *choices*.

Thus, the dilemma that Girard sets at the core of his *La Violence et le Sacré* (1972) is also set at the very core of the conundrum of reciprocity and exchange: it is the death of the innocent victim – and not the death of the guilty – which is a structural necessity (and, in Girard's terms, therefore "a scandal").

Willis and Valeri's arguments remain ultimately idealistic, as they both make the explanation of cultural attitudes to hunting dependent on moral choices and dilemmas. On the contrary, the present study has tried to take a materialistic stance by arguing that the particular conditions under which the circumstances of exchange appear to the actors in hunting are the result of the specific determinations of the technology of hunting as a mode of production.

The death of hunters, in conclusion, falls within a more general structure that also accommodates sacrifice as exchange. Amongst the Vagla, hunters are, ultimately, at once the agents *and* the victims of an "auto-sacrifice".

They have to deliver themselves to a lonely, de-humanized death for the appropriation of nature to be enabled to continue¹⁷.

Notes

* I wish to thank the participants to the VII Satterthwaite Colloquium on African Religion and Ritual – and especially Dick Werbner – for their comments on the earliest version of this paper in 1991. I also benefited from the comments of the participants in the Research Seminars at the Centre of African Studies, University of Louven (1998) and at Dipartimento di Studi Antropologici of the University of Turin (2002). While thanking my colleagues, and in the hope that they will share at least some of my views, I wish the usual disclaimer to apply.

1. The Vagla are one of several small Gur-Grusi speaking groups in NW Ghana. Related to the Sisaala, Chakali and Tampulma, they are estimated to number between 5,000 and 7,000 individuals, and consider themselves the original inhabitants of the area. They claim to have settled in their present territory well before the arrival of the Kwa-Guang speaking Gonja allegedly in the XVII century. The Gonja are now the Vagla's overlords, though the exact nature of their subordination is disputed (Barker 1986).

2. This was the phrase used by my friend Kanitty Deramani as he was describing to me the effort and danger involved in hunting sometime in 1985. Kanitty, my landlord and best friend, was one of the prominent hunters of the village of Jam (Jang, on the maps). This village, where I resided in 1985-86, was the *bête noir* of the Game Wardens of the Mole Game Reserve, as it was renowned for the efficiency and skills of its hunters-poachers. Though Kanitty was the principal source of my data on hunting, others also contributed to the ethnography presented in this paper besides my own observations. I have chosen not to name them for reasons which are both obvious and personal. I wish, however, to name Kanitty as he is now sadly dead. This paper is dedicated to his memory as a great friend and a great hunter: "E choso, Digbuñ!"

3. Such views – and practices – are even more extreme amongst the Chakali, another Gur-Grusi speaking group culturally very similar to the Vagla who strongly identify themselves with a hunting and warring image. Although for a variety of reasons the Chakali have even less access to game than the Vagla, yet they do not cultivate much besides cassava – "the lazy farmer's crop" as it is known in the area for its capacity to grow with very little care. As a consequence, the diet in Chakali villages is extremely poor, and they are known to be the first to begin starving when the new crops are delayed for whatever reason.

4. My Vagla friends told me that there is no memory of the Vagla ever having used bow and arrows. These they consider the wholemark of backwardness and poverty, as well as of certain defeat on the battlefield.

5. The implications of this cannot be overemphasized. I was once considering with Kanitty a leopard's skull which had had its backside completely blown off by a gunshot. Kanitty explained to me that if one wants to shoot a lion or a leopard, one has to go as close to the animal as possible. This to avoid both missing the animal and – what is worse – just wounding it. Ideally – as it had indeed been the case in question – a hunter should be able to keep his nerve, corner the animal in some tangle of vegetation, stick the gun in its mouth and only then pull the trigger. This can be done only with total reliance on one's hunting magic, Kanitty glossed matter-of-factly.

6. Old hunters produce the powder needed to fire the "traditional" guns from

charcoal, sulphur bought in the market in its unprocessed form and saltpeter gathered by certain drying pool in the dry season. The efficacy of this powder is notoriously dubious and unpredictable. Its strength is difficult to gauge from one batch to the next. Moreover, the tendency to overload muzzle-loaders especially when hunting big game, together with the occasional structural weakness of barrels often forged out of car steering rods if not bicycle frames, often results in them exploding in the face of the hunter. This problem can be obviated 1 – by firing the gun away from the hunters face, i.e. by holding it away from the body as far as one can (which of course decreases accuracy even further and may result anyway in the hunter's arm being blown off instead) – or 2 – by being conservative with the amount of powder used (which will eventually result in the shot being “weak like water”, as it was once described to me). These predicaments all work in favour of hunters preferring old guns – tested under a variety of circumstances as not to blow up – against new ones. This technical constraint, in turn, works in favour of the elders who control old guns: a young hunter who decides to franchise himself from the control of his “big man” by purchasing a new gun of his own, has this extra dilemma to negotiate too. Ignition cartouches are made by the hunters themselves by scratching off the heads of matches and wrapping the powder in tin foil obtained from packs of commercial cigarettes. Needless to say, such cartouches are prone to become wet or – at any rate – fail the hunter at the critical moment. It is easy to imagine how, due to such technological vagaries, the efficacy of the hunting magic is infinitely more reliable.

7. The regional trading network in guns was thrown into a sudden crisis with the appearance of automatic weapons (I believe Kalashnikovs) following the sack of army depots during the disturbances of the late 70s and early 80s. In one instance, a prominent elder insisted, against the strong protestations of his brothers, in selling the lineage cattle herd in order to buy one such gun that had become available and which – in his view – would have assured a steady flow of meat. He assigned the gun to one of his sons to use in hunting. Soon the weapon proved useless for the purpose and – sometime later – the hunter was arrested and jailed by the Game Scouts. Shame and pressure became so bad and unbearable that the old man poisoned himself with DDT and died. The case sent shock waves through the entire hunting fraternity and was talked about and discussed for a long time.

8. “Professional” hunters are nowadays few and far between, due to dwindling game stocks and stricter regulations. I actually encountered only one in Damongo, a large market town South of the Vagla area. He boasted to have killed one hundred and fifteen elephants in his career, and was well known for being both very rich (from the sale of ivory) and a dangerous womanizer still at his late age. It was only later that I became aware that the unlikely figure of elephant killed actually referred to the total killed by him personally and – especially – by the large team of younger hunters killing on his behalf and spread all over the region.

9. When my Vagla friends introduced me to “our naara” – meaning their FSZ, I was often struck by the fact that, although the person concerned could be considerably senior than his counterpart(s), their relationship seemed to be structurally constituted (and acted accordingly) as a senior (MBSS) – junior (FZS) relationship: affectionate and yet hierarchical, cordial and yet tinted with subordination.

10. A lucky and skillful young man may enter a hunter's career by selling the meat he catches with his traps and then – eventually – graduating as a “gun hunter”. Spring traps are made by local smiths and are baited with fermented urine taken to the bush in small calabashes and then sprinkled around the trap to attract game. Large game (e.g. buffalo) easily uproot such traps and limp away dragging them behind. A very

common occurrence is that such game is eventually killed by a hunter – or is found dead. In such cases it still belongs to the owner of the trap. Failure to trace and hand over such animals to their rightful owners was described by my friends both as a sure way to attract revenge from the trap owner’s magic and as an index of the corruption of present day mores.

11. The issue of “where exactly” the agency of power objects resides – whether in the “intrinsic” properties of the object or in the moral intentionality of its operator – the latter in turn often intrinsically connected to his or her status – has been recently raised (again?) by Dunja Hersak with regard to the nature of Kongo nkishi (Hersak 2001). While I am prepared to accept the historical-linguistical argument that “modernization” has – perhaps paradoxically – brought about in the actors’ own perception of the matter a sort of reification of magical powers (as it did, incidentally, in Europe with the witch-craze of the modern period), I am more inclined to subscribe MacGaffey’s notion of an intrinsic ambiguity – rooted in cognitive processes and eventually articulated as “philosophically” recurrent antinomies of the kind discussed by Jack Goody (1997) – in the perception of magical agencies, constantly wavering between an “objectified” and a “subjectified” explanation of the effectiveness of the nkishi (MacGaffey 1986). My own experience of the Vagla’s approach to such issues, however, seems to point in the direction of my friends’ holding a healthy Durkheimian attitude towards the issue. As Peter Pentu told me once, «it is through the badness of people that we must use vuga»: ultimately, it is not the gun that kills, but he who pulls the trigger.

12. Some of my Vagla hunter friends use the term “kuntòn” (or kòntòn) to denote the vital principle of animal life. This term is close – if not altogether borrowed from – the “kontom” of the LoBirifor, who speak a Gur language (of the Oti-Volta branch) related to – but widely different from Vagla. In Loor, the language spoken by the LoBirifor, kontomse are the bush fairies to whom, occasionally, shrines are dedicated. Some Vagla friends, however, denote the animal’s anima by the term *duma*, the same used for human being. I am as yet unable to ascertain whether this difference corresponds to a distinction between animal and human life, to the specialist knowledge of hunters, to cognitive ambiguities in handling such concepts – or indeed to the idiolectic deployment of a “foreign” term by the source of my information.

13. The term *wolo* also denotes “a weakness”, a sort of Achilles’ heel in both physical and “symbolical” terms (e.g. as in food and other avoidances contracted through some obligations). It seems to convey a notion of “subtraction from” – or “lessening of” the condition of wholesomeness, and as such it carries – if not altogether negative – at least “limiting” connotations.

14. I was told that in the past corpses were left out in the open to be eaten by hyenas and other predators.

15. It is a positive prohibition for a hunter to tell when and where he will go hunting. Coherently with the systemic set of prohibitions pertaining to hunting and communication, he cannot be seen leaving and cannot be seen coming back from the bush. I was often struck by the pretence of “not seeing anybody” by people sighting hunters coming back after days and week of absence. My naïve, enthusiastic greeting of Kanitty as soon as I saw him emerging from the bush was met by total indifference until he had taken the mandatory bath “to wash off the dirt of the bush”. Eventually, one day he lost his patience and, somewhat embarrassedly and coyly, educated me about manners with hunters.

16. Love making was described by my Vagla friends as *huma* – the same term

used to denote agricultural labour or any other activity where indeed an act of causal wilful input had an effect-related consequence. Huma was never used to describe hunting – always denoted by specific terminology. I think that this is also due to the structural difference (and the moral implications) in the cause-effect chain between hunting – as an activity which “destroys to produce” and other forms of “positively productive” activity. Also, the Vagla seem to differ from many other hunting social formations in that they do not – by and large – set metaphoric/symbolic relationships between hunting and sexual intercourse (as it is the case, for instance, of the Huaulu of Seram [Valeri 2000]). While they do not hesitate to attribute to hunters a “predatory” (and ultimately sterile!) attitude towards women, I have never heard my hunter friends setting parallels between hunting and sex. I think – but this is matter for further thoughts – that this difference is the result of the different weight and function that agriculture plays within different social formations.

17. This finale opens up the wider issue – long debated in anthropological literature – of the nature of “bad death”. Against the prevailing notion that “bad death” is caused by “sin” (however defined), one has to point out that – very often – “bad death” is mandatory (and not punitive) for certain social actors not by virtue of their “morality” but by virtue of their structural position within the social formation. Thus, for instance, amongst the Mamprusi of NE Ghana the king is left to die alone, unlike everybody else who is assisted by a relative who gives him or her water (Drucker-Brown 1992: 76). Similarly, the players of the mvèt recitations among the Fang are said to be approached at death by Esone Muwi, the “ghost” who dispenses the mvèt “medicine” – nobody can approach them then, lest they die (Boyer 1988). I suggest that such cases must find an explanation of the same order – if not of the same kind – of “morally induced” bad death, through a positioning of the actors of death within the system of exchange which frames their social structural position.

Additional Ethnography

NB: Amongst the Mamprusi the king is left to die alone unlike everybody else who is assisted by a kin or a relative who give them water. During the installation ceremonies the king is “desocialized” by symbolically severing all ties with his kingroup (Drucker-Brown 1992).

When mvèt players are about to die, they are approached by Esone Muwi, the “ghost” giver of the mvèt “medicine”, and nobody can approach them then (Boyer 1988: 101).

«These taboos, then, seem to point to an irreducible principle: the avoidance of the identical, the proscription of associating – at least with respect to eating, reproducing and having sex – two terms that are in some crucial respect considered the same this principle of avoided identity» (Valeri 2000: 83); «but – taboo is neither about the avoidance of identicals (per se). It is about what makes identicals and contraries incompatible under certain conditions» (*ibid.*: 85) – sex/war; menstruation/war; exophagy – hunters cannot eat their own meat (*ibid.*: 88); taboo also for Umeda (*ibid.*: 98).

«A subject that exists through its consumption of objects must itself become an object. [...] a subject conceived as feeding on its objects, as principally endowed with a corporeal existence like theirs, runs the risk of losing itself in them: they invade it and

undermine it» (*ibid.*: 101). In terms of the theory delayed reciprocity, such “invasión” can only be held at bay for a while, then it must occur.

«The embodied subject’s fear of disintegration through the body and by the bodies the ultimate basis for the notion of pollution» (*ibid.*: 111) [cfr. de Martino and “costitution of the self”]. Are masks polluting/not polluting because the stabilize/destabilize subjectivity?

References

- Bamony, P. 2001. Chasseurs aux mains nues et effiçience des pouvoirs infrasensibles dans l’art cynégétique. *Anthropos*, 96: 563-572.
- Barker, P. 1986. *Peoples, Languages and Religion in Northern Ghana. A Preliminary Report*. Ghana Evangelism Committee and Asempra Publishers, Accra, n. p.
- Bloch, M. 1992. *Prey into Hunter: the Politics of Religious Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boyer, P. 1988. *Barricades Mystérieuses & Pièges à Pensée: Introduction a l’Analyse des Épopées Fang*. Paris: Société d’Ethnologie.
- Bravmann, R. 1974. *Islam and Tribal Art in West Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bravmann, R. 1979. Gur and Manding Masquerades in Ghana. *African Arts*, 1: 44-51.
- de Heusch, L. 1985. *Sacrifice in Africa*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Drucker-Brown, S. 1992. Horse, Dog and Donkey: the Making of a Mamprusi King. *Man (N.S.)*, 27: 71-90.
- Dupire, M. 1976. Chasse rituelle, divination et reconduction de l’ordre socio-politique chez les Serer du Sine (Senegal). *L’Homme*, XVI, 1: 5-32.
- Girard, R. 1972. *La Violence et le Sacré*. Paris: Grasset.
- Goody, J. (ed.) 1958. *The Developmental Cycle in Domestic Groups*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goody, J. 1962. *Death, Property and the Ancestors: a Study of the Mortuary Customs of the LoDagaa of West Africa*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Goody, J. 1997. *Representations and Contradictions: Ambiguity Towards Images, Theatre, Fiction, Relics and Sexuality*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hersak, D. 2001. There Are Many Kongo Worlds Particularities of Magico-Religious Beliefs Among the Vili and Yombe of Congo-Brazzaville. *Africa*, 71, 4: 614-640.
- Lee, R. & I. DeVore (eds.) 1968. *Man the Hunter*. Chicago: Aldine.
- MacGaffey, W. 1986. *Religion and Society in Central Africa: the Bakongo of Lower Zaire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Poppi, C. 1985. The Vagla of Northwestern Ghana and the Activities of the *Sigma* Secret Society - A Preliminary Report. *Unpublished manuscript*.
- Poppi, C. 1993. “*Sigma!* The Pilgrim’s Progress and the Logic of Secrecy”, in *Secrecy. African Art that Conceals and Reveals*, edited by M. H. Noofter. New York: Museum of African Art.

- Shanklin, E. 1985. Sustenance and Symbol: Anthropological Studies of Domesticated Animals. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 14: 375-403.
- Valeri, V. 2000. *The Forest of Taboos: Morality, Hunting and Identity Among the Haulu of the Moluccas*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Willis, R. 1974. *Man and Beast*. London: Hart-Davis & MacGibbon.
- Willis, R. (ed.) 1994. *Signifying Animals: Human Meaning in the Natural World*. London: Routledge.