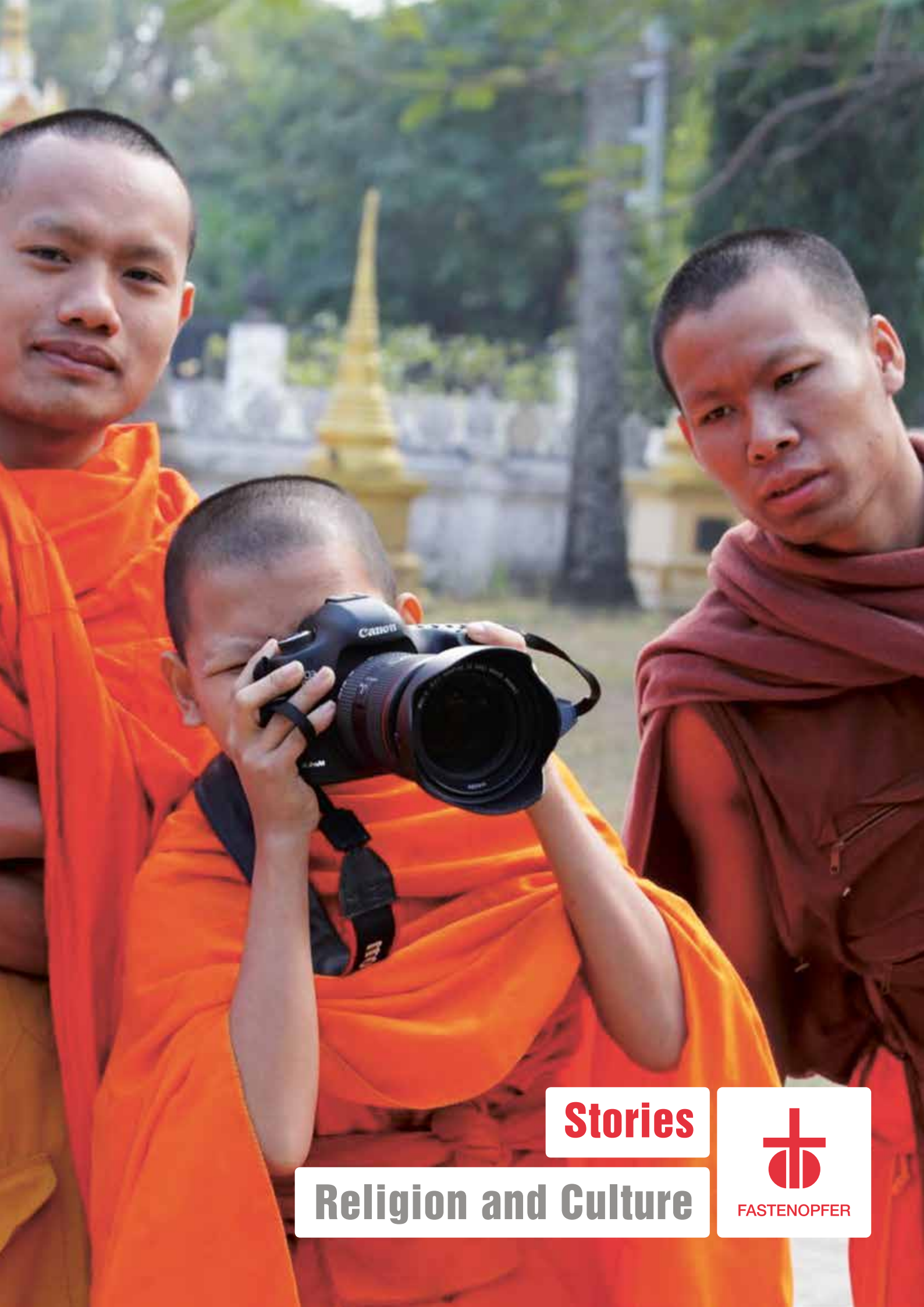

Stories

Religion and Culture

FASTENOPFER

Fastenopfer

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Lucerne (Switzerland), 2017

Cover picture: Buddhist novices in Laos, © Wim Reybroeck, 2015

CONTENT

Nepal: RSDC Meeting, © Teeka Bhattarai, 2013

Preface, approach and thanks

Preface

Let us have confidence that we will always be curious about the Other and want to learn. And that we remain flexible enough to constantly change perspectives. Just as the novices of a Buddhist monastery in Laos show us on the front cover. That is the purpose for which these stories were written.

Fastenopfer has addressed the issues of religion and culture since its foundation, aware that development cooperation never occurs in a vacuum. The aim of the previous theoretical policy statement[1] was to establish thematic cornerstones and to adopt a clear position vis-à-vis the seemingly ever more urgent issues around religion and culture. The present, complementary publication aims to give prominence to the voices from our partner countries. Here, the focus is on the real-life events from the local context and less about abstract knowledge or theoretical reflections. Because *Fastenopfer* is convinced that cultural and religious factors influence our work as well as the work of our partner organisations on a daily basis and, not least, shape all our understanding of 'development' and 'a good life'.

Individual stories or 'narratives' are used as a methodological principle. Although – or precisely because – story-telling is an unspectacular method of knowledge and value transfer that has always been practised by all cultures, this publication sees the significance of individual stories as central. This narrative method – often also known as 'story telling' – focuses on individual experiences, whether in oral or written form. The emphasis is always on listening respectfully and letting people tell their stories.

The wide range of exemplary stories in this publication reflects the breadth of religious and cultural experiences in our projects and programmes. The wealth of contributions underlines the importance of paying close attention to these dimensions and not to overlook them or even create a taboo around them. For this reason, this collection of stories illustrates the diverse and different living and working realities of our partner organisations in the field on the one hand, and on the other hand points to the challenges of intercultural cooperation which both the local staff and the colleagues here in Switzerland have to face. Precisely because in our daily work, we sometimes fail to understand what the partners want to tell us with one or another metaphor, euphemism or anecdote, it is worth taking the time to read between the lines and listen carefully.

[1] *Fastenopfer* / Büchel, Romana 2014: *Position Paper 'Religion and Culture'*. Lucerne.

Approach

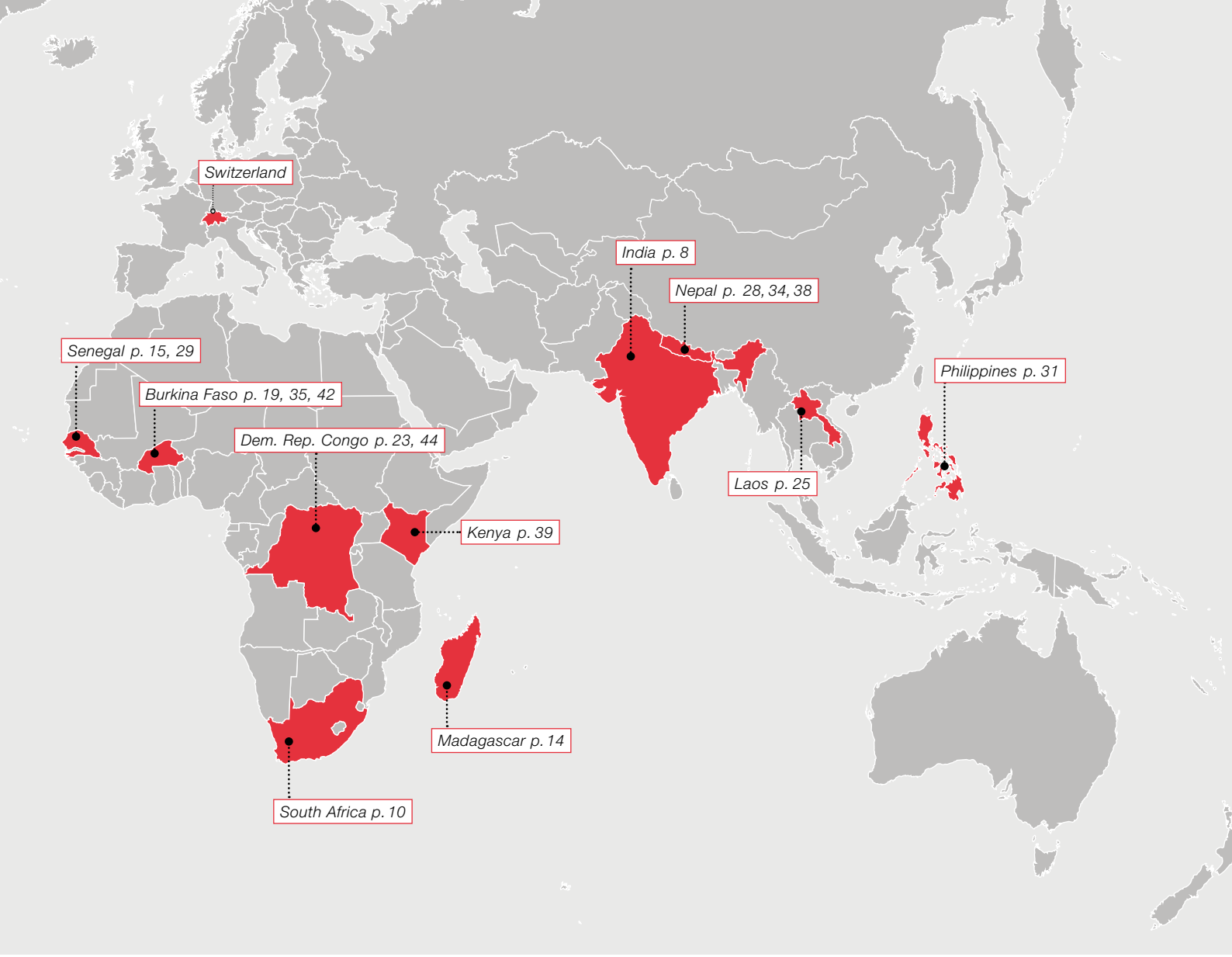
The stories are the product of cooperation between the coordinators, the programme officers and the policy officer for 'Religion and Culture'. The coordinators, as well as selected partner organisations, were contacted beforehand for this purpose and asked to describe, in short episodes, how religious and / or cultural factors influence their daily work. Without exception, all 14 programme countries contributed one or more case studies, sometimes with extensive general reflections about the topic, sometimes supplemented by constructive-critical comments on the issue. All stories were collected, read, translated into German, English, French and Spanish, grouped together and finally analysed. Each narrative is based on a lived experience.

All narratives were reproduced as true to the original as possible – in the words, the story-teller's perspective and the communication style of the respective writer. And although the author is aware that her own subjective perception filters come into play in the translations, she has tried to reproduce the meaning of what was said as faithfully and authentically as possible. The diversity of the stories is reflected in the heterogeneity of the stylistic methods used, the different narration techniques or the levels of activity. This also explains the non-uniformity of the text – it is not a text made from 'one casting', but rather a collection of different perspectives on one theme.

Where necessary, texts have been shortened, spelling mistakes corrected or titles – where not present – inserted. In addition, all stories have been made anonymous to ensure that the authors cannot be identified by their name. In a final step, all the edited and analysed episodes were checked by the respective programme officers.

Each story is followed by a short analytical section ('Observations and Recommendations'). Here, the policy officer has consciously tried to take a step back and to look at the narrations from an outside perspective. Of particular interest was who told the story, and how. Here, too, the author is aware of her own filters and makes no claim at all to 'the truth'. Although she has allowed herself some interpretative leeway, she hopes that this has not led to any unduly great distortions of the substance. Rather, the aim is to encourage paying even more careful attention to the unspoken, to be even more aware of what can be read between the lines, and to always have the courage to ask 'strange' questions. Because in the end, three factors are crucial to the success of inter-cultural dialogue: Respect towards the partners in the dialogue, the patience to listen to the other, and the capacity for self-critical reflection.

The 23 stories from the 14 programme countries of Fastenopfer have been grouped into seven chapters. This is solely for the purpose of readability and is not intended as a classification.



Thanks

I thank *Fastenopfer* for its willingness and openness to take the time, despite the often hectic daily workload, for the 'unassuming, quiet' stories from the field. It shows sensitivity and awareness that local realities – even where they cannot be directly checked and measured in terms of their impact, efficiency and effectiveness – have a considerable influence on a project's success.

I also want to thank my colleagues here in Lucerne for their cooperation. Despite their own workload, they have shown great persistence in some cases by repeatedly following up contacts with the coordination units and have contributed to the success of these stories with their constructive-critical comments. As programme officers, they are in a - not always comfortable – key position between the realities in the field and the institutional requirements in Switzerland.

My special thanks also go to Philippa Mund, who not only acted superbly as my replacement during my maternity leave, but also did important preliminary work on this publication.

However, my greatest thanks go to the coordinators and the partner organisations for their trust. They have participated in the discussion with great passion and have made this publication possible with their fascinating and colourful stories:

Mille mercis à:
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Religion and Culture for Mobilisation

Spiritual mega-event against large landowners: INDIA

The Society for Rural Resource Improvement SRRI[2] in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh cooperates with Adivasi[3] communities. These communities were driven out of the forests by state and private actors for commercial reasons. Until then, these forests provided a livelihood for the Adivasi from hunting, gathering and subsistence agriculture.

Robbed of their livelihood, the already vulnerable Adivasi became easy victims of debt bondage to the large landowners. While the restrictive contracts of bonded labour allowed the Adivasi to continue to live in the peripheral areas of the forests, they were forced, in order to ensure their very survival, to take out loans from the large landowners. The repayments made them effectively into the landowners' slaves, which was accompanied by humiliation, violence and sexual harassment of the women. Moreover, the Adivasi were often forced to distance themselves from their own culture and spirituality and to adopt the 'mainstream religion' of their large landowner.

In response to these abuses, the SRRI project initiated an empowerment process. By setting up grain savings banks at the community level, a liberation process was started – including in the village of Galsamvaripalli. Since 2009, 23 Adivasi families have joined the savings and organisational activities ('Sangam'). This allowed them to free themselves from the extortionate loans of the large landowners and to markedly improve their own situation. In addition, their organisational and leadership skills were strengthened. Gradually, the members of the community refused to be treated like slaves and freed themselves from debt bondage through their own efforts.

Galsamvaripall'i- Adivasi community celebrates its spiritual reconnection with its priest, © Ajoy Kumar, 2012

Fundamental to this empowerment approach taken by the community was the motivation to return to their own culture and spirituality. This new autonomy and the increasing cultural self-confidence that came with it enabled the people to re-enter 'their' forest. There, they were able to once again honour their own deity 'Chenchamma' and to celebrate communal cultural events with local instruments, songs and dances. The community priest 'Pujarayya' was able to resume his traditional key role in the savings and organisational activities. The restored traditional organisational structures, the links of solidarity with neighbouring Adivasi communities, and the strengthened cultural self-confidence led to the Galsamvaripalli community regaining their courage to cultivate 'unauthorised' millet in the forest again and to assert their right to land.

However, as was to be feared, the reactions soon followed: This took the form of an escalation of the conflict with the large landowners. They not only felt threatened by the new autonomous status of the Adivasi and the enforcement of their rights, they also saw their socio-political claims to

[2] SRRI: The *Fastenopfer* partner organisation 'Society for Rural Resource Improvement' – SRRI – has for several years supported the Adivasi communities in village development, in setting up grain banks and in regaining their cultural and spiritual identity.

[3] Adivasi (Hindi, m., आदिवासी, ādivāsī, lit.: original inhabitant) is the self-description of the indigenous population in the area of present-day India. Adivasi are also called tribals insofar as they traditionally live in small communities. They make up approx. 7 % of the Indian population. Together with the 'untouchable' castes (Dalits), the Adivasi are among the poorest people in India. As non-Hindus, they continue to suffer, alongside the Dalits, discrimination in Indian society – despite laws to the contrary. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adivasi, 24.05.2017)

authority and power threatened. Their response was to try and use the forestry officials and the police to back their interests.

The Adivasi responded to this with a petition to the competent authorities. When the Adivasi communities additionally commissioned an expert opinion to secure their land rights, the conflict escalated. People were physically threatened, women were raped, men wrongly accused of crimes, and twice houses were burned down. At this stage, the network of local Adivasi organisations decided to take a decisive stand against the violent acts of the large landowners. In

Chenchamma Jathra, the Mega-Adivasi event,
© Ajoy Kumar, 2012

Galsamvaripalli, they organised for the first time the huge spiritual event 'Chenchamma Jathra'. At the core of the collective festival of several Adivasi communities was the resumption, for the first time, of the public worship of their common deity – a passionate and identity-affirming event. The event had not been held for several years because of people's fear of the large landowners. All Adivasi in the region, as well as the media, local politicians and government representatives were invited. They were to be witnesses of the mega ritual and thus acknowledge the vulnerable situation of the Adivasi communities.

At last, on 30 August 2012, the moment had come: Around 1000 Adivasi from 60 villages in the region, as well as representatives of other Adivasi communities from the entire district, gathered, danced, sang, ate, prayed and jointly offered sacrifices to their deity 'Chenchamma'. As observers 'from afar', the large landowners and the local forest and police representatives were obliged to take note of the huge spiritual event and thus of the growing strength of the Adivasi. The event was a great success and was widely reported in the local media. As a result, government representatives and politicians were made aware of the situation. Even a local ex-minister strongly advocated an immediate response by the administration to the Adivasi petition. Thanks to the increasing pressure, the administration was obliged to act quickly and compiled a list of names of Adivasi who had a claim to land. Large landowners, local representatives of the forestry authority and the police had to withdraw from the area, which led to a significant de-escalation of the conflict.

The Adivasi communities of Galsamvaripalli were able, with a renewed sense of confidence and security, to cultivate millet on their original land. Twelve Adivasi families had their right to land verified by government representatives and were presented with a legal document at an official ceremony on 27 November 2012.

Observations and recommendations

The 'mega-event' of Galsamvaripall has set a precedent in the India programme in recent years. Thus, the *Fastenopfer* partner organisation TREND in central India initiated a similar process: In the Salkhan region, a similar Adivasi-


పేదల పెన్నిధి రాజన్న

Handover of the land titles in the local media,
© Ajoy Kumar, 2012

Mega-Spiritual-Festival was celebrated in 2014. Here, too, it was a sweeping success and found a huge response in the print media and TV channels.

The empowerment process, which each time culminates in a large-scale religious festival, is thus being used as a new advocacy and lobbying tool in the India programme. The event is now being staged in a correspondingly professional manner – for example, in 2014, invitation cards were printed and sent specifically to various local and regional government representatives, to the police, selected ministers, journalists and TV stations and other institutions. With the large-scale event and the presence of many representatives of official state institutions, the affected communities ensure that the officials become witnesses – more or less willingly – of their liberation process and thus must officially take responsibility. And what's more, with the collective worship of the local forest deity, the divine powers also become official witnesses of the legal claim of the Adivasi to their forest and so legitimise it 'historically'. While the deities must enter into close contact with the human beings by means of sacrificial gifts, the government and media representatives are forced to enter into an obligatory, morally binding relationship through the invitation to a communal meal. The fact that previously forbidden Adivasi foods from the forest are offered is another clear signal of a rekindled cultural self-confidence.

The case study demonstrates impressively how the Adivasi communities skilfully use the strategic potential that manifests itself in the spiritual festival to achieve their objectives.

Through it, they transform their years of experience of weakness as a three-fold marginalised group (economically poor, untouchable and tribal) into a strategic strength. Previously ridiculed or indeed forbidden rituals now become an effective, and perhaps soon a feared, advocacy and lobbying tool which delivers concrete, tangible results, such as freedom from debt bondage, but also in the form of land certificates or the suspension of forestry projects in the indigenous territory of the Adivasi.

The experience of recent years is an impressive testimony to the great potential of both strengthening the cultural and spiritual identity, and of establishing networks among many Adivasi communities. Local differences or conflicts of interest between the communities are set aside during the festival in favour of an overarching shared interest. Collective solidarity gives people the strength and self-confidence to fight together against years of widespread human rights violations. In doing so, they confidently make use of existing structures founded on the rule of law and successfully refer to the Indian forestry law (*Forest Rights Act*) which was adopted in 2006.

It remains to be seen whether the India programme will, in the post-mega-festival-era, successfully maintain the impact and the associated public pressure over the long term. The question of whether the locally developed 'culture-sensitive' advocacy and lobbying tool can be implemented equally successfully in other programme regions and thus trigger a domino effect also remains unanswered for now. What will undoubtedly be of fundamental importance is not to transplant such spiritual mega events unchanged as a one size fits all solution into other cultural contexts. However, the story around the mega spiritual festival of Galsamvaripalli is certainly stimulating and encouraging!

Against forgetting: SOUTH AFRICA

On 22 May 2013, the communities of Namaqualand commemorated the first anniversary of the Bontekoe mine disaster[4]. Ten mineworkers lost their lives in this tragedy, when the scaffolding inside the mine collapsed. Many more people suffered serious injuries. At the subsequent planning meeting of the Northern Cape Regional Network – NCRN, it was agreed that a part of our[5] activities for 2013 should be devoted to the memory of the victims of the accident.

Action: Immediately after the tragedy, different actors initiated various activities. First, the South African Human Rights Commission organised a meeting jointly with the Surplus Peoples Project. This took place on 1 August 2012 and brought together the surrounding communities and the government agencies in Bergsig, outside Springbok. At this meeting, a committee of community representatives was elected which was headed by the local organisation 'Namaqualand Action Group'. For various reasons, the committee never actually embarked on its work. The second initiative was also launched by the South African Human Rights Commission in the form of a public hearing. This meeting took place on 4 March 2013 in Komaggas. The event attracted a large media presence. Several follow-ups were organised by different institutions, but as far as we can tell, this process yielded relatively little. In April 2013, a meeting of the NCRN was held in Uptington. This investigated whether any plans existed to commemorate the Bontekoe mine disaster. It was agreed that Johann Magerman[6] would visit some communities and important representatives in Namaqualand. If plans already existed to commemorate the disaster, then the NCRN would examine what role it could play in these plans. If no plans had been made, the NCRN would formulate a strategy for some form of ceremony.

On 17 and 18 April 2013, Johann visited the communities and representatives of Nababeep, Komaggas, Hondeklipbaai, Okiep, Buffelsrivier and Steinkopf. Following these visits, it became clear that a three-pronged approach would be necessary: First, an event was to be held on the actual commemoration day, 22 May 2013. Proposals for this first phase included a ceremony at the place of the disaster, a mass rally including a prayer or the unveiling of a monument. The second phase envisaged a more broad-based campaign which would call all those responsible for the disaster to account. This would take the form of legal steps against the mining giant De Beers or of a court case to secure compensation for the victims' families. The third approach considered more far-reaching issues such as the land question. The community of Komaggas initiated a legal

[4] After the disaster, a solidarity campaign for greater justice in the mining sector was launched. A network of five *Fastenopfer* partner organisations supported the relatives of the victims in this.

[5] The narrative perspective in the text is written in the first person plural, in the 'we' form. This reflects the view of the Regional Northern Cape Network.

[6] Johann Magerman was the coordinator of the NCRN at the time and the director of the organisation 'You and Your Money'. The latter dissolved itself in 2015.

Mining area in Bontekoi, © Claudia Fuhrer, 2012

procedure in order to regain the land for its community. A discussion is currently taking place in the South African parliament about the resumption of land right cases[7]. This is against the background of the 100th anniversary of the repressive Native Land Act of 1913, which transferred 87 per cent of the land to the white minority.

[7] According to the programme officer for South Africa, Claudia Fuhrer, the resumption, or the possibility of resubmitting land right cases, has been approved by parliament. Numerous files have already been deposited.

Diamond-containing rocks, © Claudia Fuhrer, 2012

Bontekoe – the collective event to commemorate the victims: On 30 April 2013, the various community representatives whom Johann had met during his earlier visits gathered for a meeting in Okiep in the office of the partner organisation NAMKO. At this meeting, it was agreed to organise two separate events. The first one would be a ceremony at the place of the disaster, the second a mass rally in Komaggas. Various tasks were assigned during the meeting to cover the logistical and practical organisation of the day. On 20 May 2013, Johann travelled to Namaqualand to finalise the organisation of the event on 22 May 2013. The NCRN partners met beforehand on 21 May 2013 for a full briefing about the process and defined the activities.

On the bitterly cold winter morning of 22 May 2013, the members of the NCRN, community representatives from Komaggas, Nababeep and Hondeklipbaai, as well as several national media representatives met at the entrance to the Bontekoe mine. At the start, Johann celebrated mass and the traditional Khoi-San leader Xhau Petrus Vaalbooi performed a cleansing ceremony with the support of Kaptein Xhau Paul Swartbooi. During the ceremony, a traditional burial mound was erected in memory of those who had departed to the next life. As a sacrificial offering to the ancestors, a traditional fire was lit and herbs were burned. Xhau Petrus Vaalboi also blessed the former mine entrance, the place of the subsequent disaster, with holy water and the sound of the Kudu horn. For many of the victims' families, this was a very emotional moment and a dignified tribute in memory of their loved ones. For many, it was also the first time they were able to visit the place where their sons, fathers, partners or cousins had died. For many relatives, this also paved the way to being able, in time, to close a tragic chapter in their life.

Komaggas – the mass rally: On the same day, at 12:30 pm, around 250 members of the community of Komaggas and the surrounding region met in the hall of the Eerste Treetjies school for nurses for a mass rally. This event was recorded by a national television team and also transmitted live by the local radio NFM. Johann acted as the programme director. During the event, various cultural objects were officially presented and three letters of complaint were publicly read out to the audience. The first letter was addressed to the South African police and demanded an update on the current investigation and the identification of those responsible for the tragedy. The second letter was addressed to the mining giant De Beers. It inquired about the current state regarding a business agreement between De Beers and the company TransHex. The third letter of complaint was addressed to the Department for Minerals and Energy Resources. It demanded a national investigation into the disaster. The 22 May concluded with a reading from the Holy Bible and a brief homily by the local priest.

Review: In recent weeks, we have received numerous positive feedbacks about the events of 22 May 2013. There was wide coverage of the events in the media. Unfortunately, we were unable to further pursue all the issues. Nevertheless, our role as competent mediators and organisers in the region was strengthened. Our efforts also enabled us to bring various stakeholders and affected people around one table. At the end, we were congratulated on our inclusive approach during the organisation of the activities.

Observations and recommendations

In a very similar way to the first case study of India, culture and religion are also mobilised in a strategic way in the South African context. The mobilisation of media representatives and political representatives ensures that the concerns of those involved are given coverage at the local and national level. Both contexts were shaped by many years of discrimination and violence. Drawing on ancestors and spiritual authorities offers a way out of this situation of being disenfranchised. While the Adivasi in India underpin their interests with newly erected statues of deities in the forest, in the South African context a monument is unveiled before a broad audience, which stands as a material memorial against forgetting the victims. In both stories, the process runs through several stages. At first, it is expressed through articulated rage and the call for justice, then shared grief and finally a collective mobilisation and demanding of rights – in the form of compensation payments and land claims. In both cases, the climax of the mobilisation process is a large mass event with a big media presence and an array of religious authorities. In South Africa, this includes both a Catholic service as well as a cleansing ceremony by a local Khoisan leader. The official handing over of the letters of complaint is also accompanied by the handing over of ritual objects. Through this, the people affected refer to their legitimate claim to the land which was taken away from them around one hundred years ago by the 'Native Land Act'. Both in India and in South Africa, the large number of officially invited guests as well as the

Sign on the area of the Bontekoe mine, © Claudia Fuhrer, 2012

presence of the print media, TV and radio ensure that 'the world' bears witness and thus the pressure on the accused can be increased.

There are further parallels between the two stories from India and South Africa. Just as in India, where several Adivasi groups joined together in a huge network, so in South Africa, the people affected have organised themselves in the regional Northern Cape Network. They have thus found an effective means to move some way towards resolving their David-versus-Goliath situation and taking up the fight against powerful opponents such as Indian landlords or mining giants. The fact that they are supported in their endeavour by charismatic individuals – for example in the person of the ritual leader Xhau Petrus Vaalboi or by Johann Magerman, the network coordinator, priest and TV programme director in one person, gives their commitment additional weight.

When reading the South African case study, the chronological listing of the individual steps and their precise dating are particularly striking. This shows, on the one hand, the well thought-out approach of the organisers and, on the other hand, the reproduction of dates and times also serves so underline the significance of the events and to transform them, so to speak, into a historical process. At the same time, the careful planning and the cautious weighing of different scenarios illustrates the exposed and risky environment in which the network operates.

The precise dating is also an articulation of the need to preserve the memory of the dead and to grieve together. The process of collective grieving almost takes an exemplary course through the different stages of grieving[8]: While the first stage of grief, i.e. that of shock, has already been gone through, the second stage – that of huge emotions – is expressed in the present story by the anger articulated in the form of a mass rally and in the search for explanations. The third stage, of separation and the healing of wounds, is tackled collectively in the community: In the form of ritual coping with bereavement, sacrificial offerings to the ancestors, communal prayer, cleansing ceremonies, localising a memorial in the form of a burial mound, celebrating official memorial days and the erection of monuments to remember the dead. And only in the fourth stage of grief, that of acceptance, can those left behind look towards the future again and actively fight for their rights. They do this with their fight against the Native Land Act.

Even though the story from South Africa does not conceal the fact that the engagement for greater justice was accompanied by several setbacks and certain ponderousness, it nevertheless underlines the importance of a shared religious and cultural identity. Especially in times of crisis, an appeal is made to the collectively shared history, which is strategically mobilised. This helps to overcome differences within a group and to release liberating forces. This identity-generating and mobilising energy of religion and culture must continue to be actively promoted and supported in future in the *Fastenopfer* projects and programmes.

[8] Based on Kast, Verena, 2008: *Sich einlassen und loslassen*. Herder: Freiburg.

Members of a savings group cook together during a meeting, © Blanca Steinmann, 2015

Nomen est omen: MADAGASCAR

In Madagascar, the chronic indebtedness of farmers due to unscrupulous moneylenders is a huge problem which blocks any prospect of development. Permanent debt relief is therefore necessary, and to achieve this requires an effective solution. The *Fastenopfer* programme 'Tsinjo Aina'[9] proposes a way out that builds primarily on the efforts of the farmers themselves.

By coming together in grassroots groups and regularly contributing to communal savings, they can make use of their own communal funds in emergency situations. This enables them to gradually free themselves from the ruinous grip of the usurious moneylenders. Self-help efforts are also an expression of different forms of solidarity, such as working in communal fields or offering neighbourly support. Promoting social cohesion within the savings groups is therefore one of the key concerns of the *Fastenopfer* programme.

All grassroots groups adopt a name when they are set up, which often expresses quite specific expectations. For example, 'hope', 'solidarity' and 'unity' are frequently chosen as savings group names. However, one choice of name has struck us in particular: 'Toe-draza mitsanga' which means something like 'As if the ancestors / the forebears were upright again'. This name was adopted by a savings group in the Menabe region in western Madagascar.

In Madagascar, the ancestors are the cornerstone of traditional religion, which continues to be practised. And by speaking of the ancestors, a person not only makes a link to former, better times and experiences, but also hopes for the blessing from the ancestors for the present concerns. Cohesion and active solidarity are basic values that seemed to be taken for granted in the old times but which today are increasingly disappearing, and therefore have to be revitalised.

'Toe-draza mitsanga' is thus a name that underlines the cultural dimension of a possible solution. Debt relief is the economic side of the approach, promoting social cohesion by returning to one's roots and traditional values is the other side – the side with a deeper meaning, so to speak.

Observations and recommendations

While in the Malagasy case study, culture is not used for strategic interests to the same degree as in India or South Africa, the story told by the coordinator from the western part of Madagascar brings similarly identity-promoting facets to light, because the savings group's chosen name 'Toe draza mitsanga' is meant to express its close connection with its traditional religion. In times of insecurity, of political and socio-economic instability and increasingly frequent natural disasters, the symbolism of the ancestors becomes even more important. The choice of the name

[9] 'Tsinjo Aina', the title of the *Fastenopfer* country programme Madagascar, means 'securing life'.

'the ancestors standing upright again' suggests that their influence in the past was felt to have been weakened or even broken. By contrast, the nominal revival of the ancestors suggests a conscious return to their own roots, a re-awakened cultural pride and new self-confidence. In many rural communities in Madagascar, ancestor worship is of great cultural significance. Rituals around the ancestors mark the agricultural cycle, order social life and bind people into a regulatory framework of rights and obligations by means of 'fady'[10]. In rice-growing cultures, evidence of a long ancestral genealogy also legitimises land use or ownership claims of a family or group to certain rice fields. This is a resource which is coming under increasing pressure due to accelerating population growth. The choice of name of the once again upright ancestors 'Toe draza mitsanga' thus conjures up a hope-filled future and is intended to strengthen the cooperation and collective strength of the grassroots group.

However, while the savings group's adoption of a name seems at first glance to have a strong cultural aspect, this should not obscure the fact that the empowerment approach is fairly homogenous and is applied to practically all savings groups[11] in the Madagascar country programme. Nevertheless, through the individual choice of name, the grassroots groups make strategic use of the existing creative scope and occupy this with a cultural marker. They do this, on the one hand, in order to document their own identity. On the other hand, the savings group also expresses its emotional identification with the empowerment approach in this way and indicates that the ancestors themselves would support the development path taken. The local population thus finds an elegant way of integrating the mobilising, constructive force of culture with the successful, economic approach of debt relief. Leaving such spaces of self-creation (symbols, rituals, names) open is a vital element for the success of a project. It is worth considering in the future whether this particular cultural sphere of action could be expanded, so that the local ownership of projects or methodical approaches could eventually be placed more firmly or entirely into the hands of the target groups.

Although we hear the thunder, we don't see the rain: SENEGAL

Once upon a time there was a man who visited the people in the villages. There, they chatted with each other for a while until the man promised to give them a cow. He told them about the many benefits of owning a cow. Just the milk alone would cover some of their needs.

'But before I bring you the cow to the village, you must prove to me that you really want it. That's why I want you to participate in getting this cow. Because only then can I be absolutely sure that you will look after it well, that even after I leave, you will still get the benefit from it. My request to you is that you first make a rope, which you can use to tie the cow up. I will come and visit you again in a few days to see whether you have fulfilled my condition, so that I can be sure that it's a good idea to give you this cow.'

A month later, the man came back to the village and asked the people whether they had made the rope. The village people presented him with a rope which they had made. The man unrolled a section from the coil and pulled, and the rope broke. 'This rope is not strong enough to tie up a cow of the type I want to give you. You must make a stronger rope. I will come back soon to see whether you have succeeded.' The villagers were disappointed that they had not managed to make the required strong rope. They got entangled in excuses, offered him a coffee and slaughtered an animal in his honour.

After another month, the man came to the village again and the people presented him with a new rope. This rope was so strong that he could not unroll and break it. Now he could no longer criticise its strength. The villagers presented him with two, three men who had pounded the leaves needed for it, buried the plant fibres and finally twisted the rope. 'But that's impossible', the man exclaimed. 'How can I give you a cow that will benefit the entire village and the rope needed for it was made by only two or three men? I wanted you all to participate!'

So much for the story from Senegal. Are there similar problems regarding communal activities in your culture? Do you think it's an internal problem of the community or rather a problem that has arisen because of the nature of such development projects? In our daily work, we find very often that only one or two people become fully involved, while the others don't participate. We call this 'Doo tunu sos, denuydabe' – One doesn't create anything of one's own but rides on the success of the other. That is why we constantly encourage a community approach. Because that means that the support of the partner organisations can be used more effectively, for the benefit for the community and far removed from pure individualism.

[10] Fady (malagasy *fady* or *paly*) are taboos in Madagascar which regulate the daily life of the Malagasy. They exist for virtually every sphere of life. The *fady* are rooted in the family sphere of a village community and have the status of a religious commandment or prohibition.

[11] In 2014, around 13,500 groups in the Madagascar country programme pursued a very similar savings group approach.

Senegal: Meeting of BAMTAARE, © Rita Gemperle, 2015

Observations and recommendations

In contrast to the earlier stories, culture is not used as a strategic tool here in order to rebel against a powerful external opponent. In the present example, the point is to focus attention on an apparently acute problem from the daily work in the field, and to mobilise the target population. The author resorts to a popular method which is rooted in many African cultures: He tells his story in the form of a fable and so places himself in an African storytelling tradition. The genre of the fable allows him to introduce a moral appeal without having to directly criticise the listeners. The short story has a didactic agenda and even if animals don't play a major part, the story clearly takes the form of a fable: No exact place is mentioned, nor can the main protagonists be identified. The story wants to both entertain and instruct, and its drama moves to a conclusion which contains a generally valid moral. Clearly the author wants to refer in his story to a problem that concerns him, namely the low level of participation of village groups in project activities. Moreover, the story suggests being at a loss, frustration and also doubt about the meaningfulness of one's own engagement. It can be surmised that the author, the manager of a *Fastenopfer* project, is identical to the 'man who visits the villages'.

In response to my question of how one should understand the title, the author answered subsequently: 'I will try and explain it to you as follows: Often, the target groups demand tremendous support from us, but their participation and engagement in community development remain weak. Right from the start, only very few engaged persons can be found who initiate project activities and then carry them through. Yet the few active people are then envied by the others and are often even distracted from their responsibility. Of course, this has a negative impact on the projects. In this story, the thunder represents the great ambition of the population to achieve development. But their weak engagement and the lack of participation in helping to achieve this development is like rain that fails to come. The development organisations block out such important cultural aspects or don't take them into account.' Similar to the structure and content of the story, the title is a metaphor that describes the real problem. If the rain fails, the harvest will also fail – in this case the success of the project. It remains questionable, however, whether the target population's lack of participation can really be explained purely by cultural factors or whether it is really a question of basic human weakness.

The case study from Senegal also contains a quiet call for help addressed to *Fastenopfer*. Because at the end, the author poses the counter question – how is the problem of the growing trend towards individualism dealt with in Switzerland? We probably cannot answer this question …

Religion and Culture in Dialogue

Living symbols: HAITI

It happened in Les Cayes during the meetings from 17 to 19 May 2013. A person arrived who was participating in a seminar of the ecumenical movement 'Rezo Ekimenik Bib Ayit' (REBA) for the first time. When this man entered the room and saw all the symbols[12] on the floor, he immediately took a step back.

Although the others in the room warmly invited him to come in, he refused and continued to stand by the door throughout the whole prayer. On the second day, he came again and entered the room together with the others, but he didn't say a word. On the third day, he participated in the prayer like everyone else. When the time of evaluation came, he spoke. He admitted that on the first day, he was frightened when he saw the symbols on the floor. Because he was a Protestant, he thought it was a ceremony dedicated to the 'loas'[13]. That is why he had refused to enter the room. However, on the second day he had dared to go near the symbols in order to be able to observe them better. On the third day, he was able to participate like all the others because he had suddenly felt an intimate and very close connection between himself and the symbols on the floor. He had now understood that one could pray more intensely through these symbols. With these symbols, it was possible to better integrate one's own reality, one's own daily life, one's own history and one's own culture into

Members of all Haitian FO partner organisations draw a 'vévé' during a joint visit to a Voodoo temple, © Romana Büchel, 2008

[12] The 'symbols', which are not named, relate to 'vévé', symbols strewn on the floor with chalk or baby powder which serve the Haitian spirits and gods as a sort of 'invitation card' during the rituals, or also as entrance portals to this world.

[13] 'Loa' or 'lwa' is the collective Creole term for the different gods of the Voodoo pantheon.

the prayer. So on this third day, a very vivid and honest prayer had emerged which had brought him into direct contact with God, with nature and also with himself.

Observations and recommendations

Our partner organisation REBA is flying the flag of inter-religiousness in that its name reflects the call for inter-religious dialogue. That is why representatives of different religions[14] are explicitly invited to the bible reading sessions of the ecumenical network – including Voodoo believers or members of Protestant Free Churches. However, in recent years it has become apparent that the latter, in particular, have found it difficult that 'heathen Voodoo adherents' are invited to the bible sessions. This is because Voodoo is stigmatised by the US Free Church members as devil worship and fear is deliberately stirred up. 'Black magic Voodoo practices' were even held responsible for the devastating earthquake on 12 January 2010, and were accused of provoking God's anger. The case study from Haiti recounted here shows clearly that with such surreal assignations of blame and the blanket demonization of a local religion, around three quarters of the Haitian population are being labelled as 'superstitious'.

At first, the Protestant visitor to the bible reading session is deeply unsettled. The symbols drawn on the floor with chalk powder frighten the workshop participant to such a degree that he remains at the door entrance all day. Only on the second day, when he realises that nothing threatening has happened, he changes his passive position. He now changes from the position of the outsider to that of the observer and enters the room 'so that he can better observe the symbols on the floor.' With this statement of intent, the visitor immediately gives himself away. Because he indicates that for him, the symbols represent something alive, which can act and which produces a certain impact. On the third day, the Protestant guest can abandon his role of observer and participate actively in the prayer. This prayer is described by him euphorically as a happy, indeed a liberating experience which brought him closer to God and also to his cultural roots.

It is a tribute to the cultural sensitivity of the REBA bible reading team that they let the visitor join their circle with great delicacy and without any compulsion. The Protestant guest, too, first tries to understand the situation without judging it. His – literally – step-by-step approach to his own culture and history, without haste and without pressure, allows him to overcome his initial distance and to reflect about his own identity. The episode illustrates that the majority of Haitians was socialised in multiple religious identities and is at home in several religious contexts simultaneously. There are in fact many symbolic and substantive overlaps between Catholicism and Voodoo – whether the fact that virtually all Catholic figures of saints have a corresponding counterpart in the Voodoo pantheon, or that many rituals and ceremonies have similar elements. In many places, adherence to the Catholic faith is also the premise for an initiation into a Voodoo community. However, there is markedly greater scepticism among adherents of the Protestant faith towards the local religion. So the personal religious development of the workshop participant is all the more surprising. Here, inter-religious dialogue was able to create its effect, both in the group and in a person. This story underlines the elements set out in the *Fastenopfer* Policy Statement for greater cultural sensitivity. It recommends time, respect, flexibility and self-reflection – by all sides.[15]

[14] In Haiti, Voodoo is a state religion alongside Catholicism. It is estimated that approximately 70–80% of all citizens have been christened in the Roman Catholic faith, the rest belongs increasingly to a great many different Protestant movements, among them above all Protestant Free Churches, Baptists, Adventists, Evangelicals and Pentecostalists. Although only a minority gives their religion officially as Voodoo, around 80% of Christians also practise Voodoo.

[15] See *Fastenopfer* Policy Statement on Religion and Culture 2014, Chapter 6; Concluding recommendations.

Under the masks: BURKINA FASO

Asama is a partner organisation of *Fastenopfer* in Burkina Faso[16] and is involved in the field of food sovereignty in particular. In addition, Asama also dedicates itself to the protection of the cultural heritage, in particular masks. In the context of their activities, the mask societies are key institutions in the villages. The project village consists of several quarters, one of which can be called the actual mask quarter. In the other quarters, Christian religions dominate, a minority of inhabitants adhere to Islam. The mask associations consist mostly of people who belong to an animist religion. At the same time, they represent the majority of the project beneficiaries.

In accordance with *Fastenopfer*'s principle to cooperate with all beneficiaries without differentiating by religion, the Asama project was intended to include all the inhabitants of the village. However, a problem presented itself: The inhabitants of the Christian and Muslim quarters refused to participate in the project. Not even the specially organised information and awareness-raising sessions bore fruit. The project organisers were therefore confronted with a difficult situation for several weeks.

In order to understand the reasons for this resistance and find a solution, the project managers and the *Fastenopfer* coordination unit met up. From these consultation meetings between the coordinator and the village inhabitants, the following reasons for the deadlock could be identified:

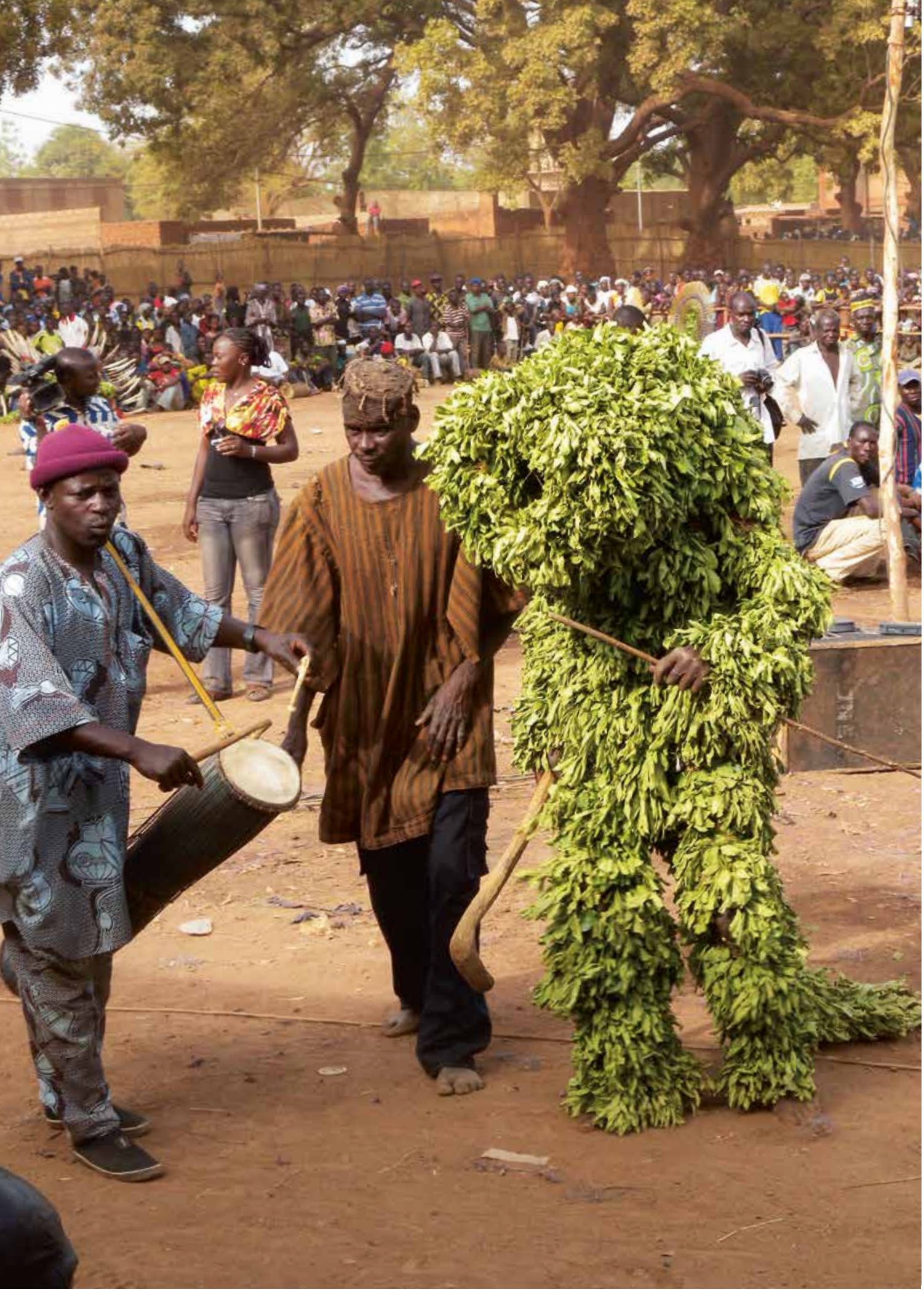
- The project managers were also mask wearers who practise animist rites, while mainly Christians live in the other quarters.
- It was suspected that the project activities might include animist practices which would be against Christian rules.
- The project meetings were hitherto held close to the mask house, where animist rites are also practised. By contrast, the Christian meetings must take place in the church grounds.

As a next step, the coordinator tried to explain in detail the identity and the Christian values of *Fastenopfer*. His arguments were decisive in removing doubts concerning the suspected animist nature of the project. By consensus, it was then agreed that in future, the project activities would be carried out jointly, taking into account the following points:

- A religiously mixed committee would be established in order to jointly manage the project at the village level.
- Project meetings would in future be held in a public place close to the village market.

Thanks to these solutions, it was now possible to reach the target groups in all the village quarters. At the same time, social cohesion between the quarters was strengthened.

[16] In 2011, *Fastenopfer* supported the partner organisation ASAMA in its endeavour to save the West African masks from oblivion with a touring exhibition in Burkina Faso. However, in the project described here and also supported by *Fastenopfer*, the aim is to restore and promote traditional, ecological cultivation methods that have been forgotten. Thus, by using small stone walls, the Zaï method and improved compost, the soil fertility is to be increased and a doubling of the grain harvests achieved. At the same time, the villages improve their self-organisation so that they can represent their interests more confidently and demand their rights.



Holding of the mask festival organised by Asama, © Johanna Risse, 2012

Observations and recommendations

In a similar way as in the previous example from Haiti, this episode from Burkina Faso also describes a development. It involves a move away from internal resistance and prejudices and a return to common roots and collectively shared objectives.

It is clear that the presence of the mask associations in the project evokes a feeling of suspicion and fear in the Christian and Muslim villagers, even though the project has neither a religious nor an explicitly cultural content but is focused on agriculture and works in the field of food security. The initial rejection by certain groups described here has not sprung from nowhere: In many West African cultures, full-body masks are used in many rituals - either in the evocation of spirits, in initiation and burial rites, in dealing with conflicts between groups, in harvest festivals or when making contact with ancestors. The sinister feeling which the masks clearly evoke has to do with the fact that, on the one hand, they are believed to have their own magic life, and on the other hand that the wearer of the mask remains unknown under his costume. For non-initiates (as in this case for Christians and Muslims), masks can be seen as an imminent threat because even just coming into contact could lead to illness or death for those present. That the mask associations – as guardians and wearers of the masks – are not really accepted as project managers is understandable in as much as they are suspected by outsiders of actually being some sort of secret societies which pursue magic practices.

In the present case, it is remarkable how the programme coordination unit succeeded in overcoming the existing fears and prejudices and involve the entire village in the project activities. This succeeded, on the one hand, because it was possible to refer to *Fastenopfer* and its Christian values. Here, *Fastenopfer* is so to speak the moral body which ‘surely has nothing to do with magic’. On the other hand, it was also a clever move by the programme coordination unit to transfer the activities to a geographically neutral terrain. Using a public place as the venue for future project meetings gave no party a home advantage. By creating a religiously mixed project committee, a kind of neutral monitoring body was established which ensures that everything is done properly.

The story of the Asama project is an excellent example because it shows how, with a lot of care and cultural sensitivity, fears within the target groups are perceived and taken seriously. The solutions that were found jointly in a type of consultation process are notable for their pragmatic character. This made it possible to ensure that from now on, the project not only reaches the entire village – including across the boundaries of the quarters segregated by religious affinity - but also that neighbourly coexistence is marked by less prejudice and suspicion, and social cohesion has been strengthened.

Religion and Culture – simply magic ...?!

Massive tombs made of cement prevent abuse through magic, © Christian Poffet, 2001

Zombies at the shop counter: HAITI

It was the 1st July 1978 when a girl from an eleven-member family died quite suddenly after experiencing stomach pains. The entire community broke down when faced with the mortal coil of this young girl.

The husband of her older sister was also the owner of a small shop. He was an excellent entrepreneur and his business did well. Around two weeks after the girl's death, rumours were already going around that her brother-in-law had taken on two zombies: One to attract customers to the shop counter, and another one to guard the store.

A month after the young girl's burial, the mother visited her second daughter, the shop keeper's wife, in her husband's shop. When she entered the premises, the mother saw her dead daughter at the counter and cried for help. Several people then ran into the shop, but they could not recognise the dead girl's face. In view of the whole tragedy, the businessman had no other choice but to temporarily give up his business for three months, until the day came when his mother-in-law stated that she had probably had a vision.

Observations and recommendations

When reading the story from Haiti, one wonders why the coordinator told us this episode in particular. Not only does it go back to around forty years ago, it also has nothing directly to do with a project. Despite this, the author clearly wanted to communicate something with the account. Even if the story seems to us scurrilous at first glance and could be categorised as 'superstition', it is worth taking a second look.

In the Haitian context, the phenomenon of the zombies has profound dimensions, while in our heads, it evokes gruesome images of the undead. These stereotypical images have their origin in numerous American movies and comics, through which the USA sought to process its historic defeat in Haiti[17]. They have, however, little to do with the local perception of zombies. According to the local population's belief, a male Voodoo priest *(Bokor)* or a female priest *(Mambo)* places a black-magic curse (or poison)[18] on a person if they have acted contrary to social norms. The person concerned will then die an apparent death. Thereafter, the (supposedly) dead person is brought back to life in a ritual manner (or by administering an antidote), only to be then abused as a work slave. Such zombies are called *Zombies cadavres*. The second form of zombie is the *Zombie astrale*. This depicts a lost soul that was separated from its body. A Voodoo priest can capture this wandering soul in a small clay vessel or in a bottle so that those left behind can keep it in an 'urn' at home. The fear that relatives could be abused as *Zombie cadavre* is so great among ordinary people that the deceased are often poisoned, stabbed with a stake, cut into pieces after their death, or the massive tombs made of cement are watched over by relatives for many days.

From a sociological point of view, zombies are people who have suffered a threefold death. They have died physically, psychologically as well as socially. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim would probably have called this phenomenon 'fait social total'. According to Durkheim a social fact is '… every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout a given society, while

[17] The occupation of Haiti by the USA lasted from 1915 to 1934 and ended with the humiliating defeat of the American troops by the numerically inferior Caco rebels. In this, Voodoo played a role in the Haitian resistance that should not be underestimated. It is no coincidence that during the American intervention, Voodoo was actively attacked as a 'satanic cult'.

[18] The curse is accompanied by the administration of the so-called 'zombie poison', which mainly consists of the ingredients of fou-fou (a globefish whose ovaries contain highly toxic tetrodotoxin). Ten milligrams are enough to dispatch a person. A much smaller dose brings about a state of apparent death. The victim's breath stops, the heart stops, the muscles are paralysed, all metabolic functions are impaired – coming very close to clinical death.

at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations.'[19] This external social constraint also leads to a situation where the shop owner has no other option than to close his business until his mother-in-law has publicly retracted her suspicion. Two pieces of circumstantial evidence are mentioned by the story teller which suggest that the businessman was not unjustly suspected. For one, the suddenness of the death of a healthy young girl in the Haitian context points virtually always to black-magic practices. Secondly, his economic success in a bitterly poor environment makes him a suspect per se.

The phenomenon of the zombies is socially relevant insofar as it continues to represent a social fact in Haiti today. On the one hand, this has to do with historical experience. The population of African descent was forced for centuries – and in the Dominican Republic partly until today – to labour as working slaves in the most inhumane conditions on the sugar cane plantations. They were socially, physically and bodily pushed to the limits of human endurance. This historical experience, but also the everyday reality of penury and of political and economic misery, puts the majority of the Haitian population into a collective state of paralysis and void.

What insights can *Fastenopfer* draw from this story? If we dismiss the episode as superstition with negative consequences that hinder our development plans, then we ignore the cultural reality of our projects. It cannot be denied that culture in Haiti has a huge influence on the project process. A look through the lens of the 'cultural realities' enables us to interpret the dynamic of the described events with an understanding of the local belief system. Only the inclusion of the strong roots of Voodoo will allow an outsider to make some sense of the circumstances. This requires continuous observation, a sufficiently flexible time horizon, empathy as well as critical discussions with the local population. With this approach, it becomes possible to understand apparently negative connotations of culture and to bear them in mind in the project reality.

The demons of wealth: DEMOCRATICE REPUBLIC OF CONGO

In a strongly missionized village in the south of Bandundu province in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a fish farmer succeeded in digging 24 fish ponds for himself and his family. Of these, he could empty two ponds every month. This meant that he had sufficient regular takings and over time became a rich man. Many people in the village suspected that he was involved in devilish goings-on and began to be frightened of him.

His wealth brought him trouble both with individuals as well as with whole groups from the village. The latter began to pray for him in order to free him from the demons of wealth. Over time, social contacts weakened and visitors became increasingly rare. After some time he left the village and settled in a different place with his family.

Observations and recommendations

The story from the Democratic Republic of Congo has several similarities with that from Haiti. Here, too, an individual's business success appeared suspicious to the village community and was immediately punished. As in Haiti, the economically successful individual was suspected of being involved in magical practices. Individual wealth is measured against the collective wellbeing. By spreading rumours and voicing suspicions, an individual who stands out from the community is pushed back into his traditional place. Accusations of witchcraft are used here as a sort of social catalyst with a levelling mechanism. If the suspect does not respond and does not immediately share his wealth with the community, he risks social death. Thus, the successful fish farmer is punished with social exclusion, which leaves him and his family no option but to move to a different place. By moving away, he has probably also been deprived of his economic base.

The title of the story is also interesting, since it suggests another component. What clearly shines through is the moral appeal to largely renounce worldly prosperity. Evidently, the historical experience of the Catholic mission still marks the region to the extent where collective prayers are said for the 'apostate' in order to free him from the 'demons of wealth'. What is remarkable here is that he faces two types of morally reprehensible accusations – with his individual prosperity, the fish farmer is accused of having both magical powers as well as economic demons. Catholic and local moral values are merrily mixed together.

What insights can this episode contribute to development cooperation? It would surely not be very helpful to accuse the village population that their 'superstitious accusations' hinder any development. Rather, it must first be understood what mechanisms play a role here and what purpose they serve. Even if it does not appear as such at first glance,

[19] Durkheim, Émile 1961: *The rules of Sociological Method*. Simon & Schuster (fr original edition: Paris: 1895)

Work at the fish pond in the Bandundu project region (DR Congo), © François Mercier, 2012

such levelling mechanisms primarily serve to promote social cohesion. The interests of the community are placed above those of the individual. In a second step, a discussion should take place jointly with the entire village community about how the collective can benefit from the experience of one individual. Is it conceivable that fish ponds could be established that are managed communally, so that the standard of living of the whole village can be raised? And with what – ritual and social measures – can an individual suspected of magic be readmitted into the community?

Magic fish breeding: LAOS

Despite its difficult past, Laos has experienced huge development in the last ten years. During the Indo-Chinese war, the country was so heavily bombed by the USA that it still holds the 'world record' of the most heavily bombed country per capita (one ton of bombs per person were dropped on Laos during the secret bombing missions). It is therefore worth giving a brief overview of the country's history.

After the end of the war, Laos gained independence in 1978 and began reconstruction with the help of the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The collapse of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany meant that the country could no longer rely on its former political allies. For this reason, the country became increasingly receptive to broader international development cooperation.

Delayed growth among children in mountainous Laos, © Filip Debruyne, 2012

The long geographic and political isolation means that one can still find a strong local and cultural identity in Laos. Thanks to the mosaic of different ethnic groups who live in the lowland plains, the hilly areas and the mountains, each group was able to retain its language, culture and tradition. The people in the lowland are mainly Buddhist, with strongly animistic rituals. The people in the mountains are mostly animist and partly influenced by Buddhism.

The latest positive developments are reflected in indicators such as a higher income, an improved literacy rate, a greater life expectancy etc. However, one indicator that has not greatly changed in recent years is the problem of malnutrition among children below the age of five. This chronic malnourishment is due to insufficient fat and proteins. This lack results in delayed growth in small children. In the mountainous regions, between 40 and 50 per cent of children under the age of five are today smaller than the norm. The consequences are disastrous: A weak immune system, which leads to increasing numbers of malaria cases, diarrhoea and other infectious diseases, and to low mental development. This means that the future of these children is already damaged at the start of their life.

The greatest source of protein and fat for the local diet is found in the local rivers. The Laotians love to eat fish, shrimps and snails. However, over time this has led to overfishing of the existing aquatic resources. Older people remember that there were a lot more fish in the past. One way of increasing the number of fish is to establish protected river sections. There, the fish stock can increase without interference. At the same time, fish may only be caught outside of the protected areas. After just one year, changes in the fish population inside the protection zones were noted. A greater species variety, a larger number, and generally bigger fish were found.

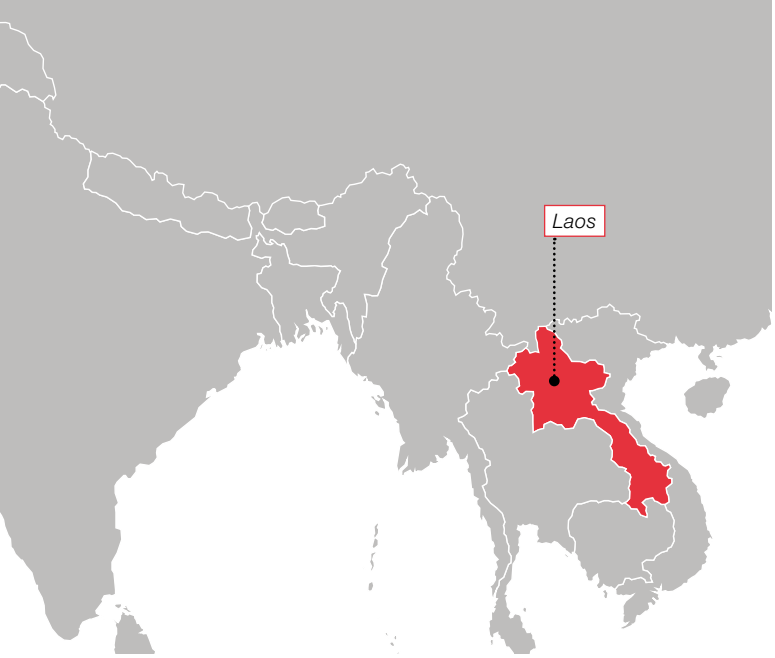
Nevertheless, it is particularly tempting for some people to fish in the protected zones. In order to prevent this, the local development partners have set up management committees which establish rules and make sure that they are effectively adhered to. Another approach to prevent fishing in the protected zones consists of mobilising the local Buddhist monks and animist healers. They were asked to gather their local forces and help in the protection of the respective area. They practised specific rituals and marked the protected zones with spiritual symbols; the result is that hardly anyone now dares to fish in the protected zones. People believe that if they were to fish there, they would be struck by misfortune.

This is just a small example of how culture can support development positively – in this case action to prevent malnutrition among children.

Observations and recommendations

The author of the Laos case study has recently also become the coordinator of the *Fastenopfer* programme. As an expat with years of experience of the Laotian context, he understands both the language of the Western donors and that of the local population, which clearly has a positive effect in the present story. In the introductory section, he provides a careful historical context in order to explain the causes for the development deficits of small children; a problem which has clearly preoccupied him and the project partners for years.

The account of the project process addresses a phenomenon which is all too well known to many successful projects: They become the victim of their own success. The local project managers find sensitive and creative ways to address the issue. By mobilising the religious authorities, they are able to construct a sort of magic protective space around the tempting fishing grounds which is respected by the local population. Here, the inter-religious team of leading spiritual figures skilfully exploits cultural elements that are familiar to the local population. The story from the Laotian context demonstrates impressively how, with a keen grasp of the cultural codex, and with the creative



use of the cultural toolbox, the project success can be sustainably secured. Not least, this was possible because both the local project managers and the Western coordinator have great cultural sensitivity and are able to resort skilfully to the cultural inventory. Because here, too, the aim is to protect the common good against a short-term, individual benefit.

A rope is stretched across the river to mark a protected zone. During the ceremony, ritual markings are attached to the rope.
© Filip Debruyne, 2012

The agony of choice: HAITI

During the years 1994-1995, I[20] stood as a candidate in the parliamentary elections in my electoral district. On 6 May 1994, on the stretch between Cap-Haïtien and Trou du Nord, I fell off my motorcycle after colliding with a big lorry. I was admitted to hospital with serious fractures and injuries.

My travel companions openly stated that it was probably one of my political opponents who had sent out a death squad after me so that he could win the elections. After my recovery, my parents, friends and supporters instructed me formally to never again shake hands with this character, who was suspected of witchcraft. One day, those close to me watched me in a public place as I sat next to my opponent and entered into a discussion with him. Several of them thought that this was too dangerous. But I am stubborn enough to sit next to the devil. On the day of the election, I was told not to leave the house for fear that I would be struck by magic. In fact, already on the previous evening, there were 'decorations' at nearly every crossroad which intimidated passers-by. But I pursued my activities undeterred and was elected.

There probably exists a certain protection for the keenest candidates and political companions so that they can successfully finish their election campaign and also win the elections.

Observations and recommendations

That the threat of magic need not always have the desired effect is illustrated by the second story from Haiti. The author – a former project manager and current coordinator of *Fastenopfer* – presents himself as a courageous actor who confronts the various attacks of magic. Despite this, it seems that the episodes have not left him unaffected. This is indicated by, amongst other things, the precise dating of the accident which is burnt into his memory, but also the dramatic nature of his account.

His choice of words refers to the magical character of the attacks. Just as with a sudden illness or death, accidents are often believed to have magic causes in Haiti. While readers without knowledge of the cultural context understand the mentioned 'death squad' to be a physically induced accident, the author sees it as a magic 'sent' attack. After the political candidate's recovery, the magic attacks continue unabated. Thus, the author cites as evidence the marked crossroads. Described euphemistically as 'decorations', their meaning refers to markings with magic warning symbols. In many cultures, forks in the road and crossroads emanate a magic threat. They are often the spot where magically charged markers are placed to intimidate opponents, as well as small sacrificial gifts to appease gods and spirits. The symbolism of forks in the road is obvious. Thus, a crossroad can be felt as a place of chaos, as an 'intersection' of place and time – if one stands

[20] He is the former manager of a *Fastenopfer* project and the current programme coordinator in Haiti.

at a crossroad one can forget where one comes from and not know which road one should take. At the same time, it is a place that is full of potential and possibilities, a place of transformation. The author interprets the fork in the road as positive – and does not let himself be intimidated by magic – and pursues his political path unwaveringly.

While his social circle warns him again and again, he proves his courage on several occasions, indeed, he would even sit 'next to the devil'. In the end, he is rewarded by his successful candidature and election. His personal conclusion: In the end, the courageous, the diligent, the morally upright win.

Although the author wants to make us aware of how his unwavering courage was rewarded, he does not deny the existence and potential effect of magic per se. On the contrary – he repeatedly underlines the real existing threat and his absolutely fearless response to it.

The story further demonstrates how, in Haiti, political and cultural realities are always closely interwoven and cannot be considered and understood separate from each other.[21] At the same time, the episode also demonstrates that in such a context, the individual certainly has room for manoeuvre, even if the social and cultural realities are not fundamentally questioned. For projects of development cooperation, both aspects must always be kept in mind – the socio-cultural context on the one hand, and the individual freedom of interpretation and movement on the other.

Presidential election poster at the roadside, © Felix Wertli, 2012

[21] It is not by chance that the former presidents Papa Doc and Baby Doc Duvalier as well as Jean-Bertrand Aristide, once the priest to the poor, were suspected of having acted as Voodoo priests from the presidential palace.

Religion and Culture are embodied in food

Nepalese 'basket of goods', © Teeka Bhattarai, 2012

About flying rice and goat legs: NEPAL

The *Fastenopfer* programme in Nepal works in the Karnali district in the field of food sovereignty. A specific feature of the region is its arid character, which is particularly suitable for growing fruit, nuts, beans and potatoes. At the same time, the region has for around thirty years been supplied with large quantities of imported, government-subsidised rice, which adversely affects the *cultivation* and consumption of locally produced food. Fastenopfer has now started a discussion with the partner organisations about the sustainability and effectiveness of the 'flying rice' and suggested that more indigenous agricultural products should be cultivated, which are adapted to local conditions.

However, the process of changing values goes back a long way. In 2006, when the programme officer for Nepal asked for the first time specifically for local food during his field visits, he was laughed at. One or two families in the district capital invited him 'secretly' for a local meal. At most of the meetings, the participants were offered instant noodles or at best rice flakes with meat. Rice flakes always had to be imported for this purpose, and meat from time to time. From then on, the Swiss programme officer, as well as the local coordinator, systematically ensured that the food on offer during the partner meetings and workshops consisted as much as possible of local snacks.

When the programme officer visited the district capital in the summer of 2013, he noted that instant noodles were no longer preferred as a snack as a matter of course. Rather, the versatile bean soup with goat legs, which is also known as 'Kol', had become a popular meal in the district during the meetings of the *Fastenopfer* partner organisations.

Thus, *Fastenopfer*, together with its partners, launched the discussion about imported foodstuffs and about the importance of local products in relation to health and economic efficiency. For example, a flyer was published in which local foods were compared with imported products – as for example instant noodles. This process was further supported at the district level with the distribution of a newsletter on the subject of nutrition. The initiative, which started six years ago, seems to be slowly paying off. A network of 80 people now exists in Kamali who advocate an appropriate agricultural policy, point out the locational advantages of the arid region and promote the cultivation and marketing of fruit, nuts and local grains. As a result, it is today no longer considered odd if local meals are served at public meetings.

Observations and recommendations

Sometimes it seems that an external impetus is needed in order to encourage an internal change of values, as the story from Nepal clearly demonstrates. While hitherto, the local hosts wanted to show their high regard for their guests with imported rice or instant noodles, they realised over time that they rather achieved the opposite. This is a classic cultural misunderstanding in which an attitude is imputed to the 'foreign visitors' which does not conform to reality. Some participants explained during a *Fastenopfer* partner meeting: 'Yes, we are embarrassed to offer local foods'. There was surprise when, during an information workshop on food sovereignty, people were told that in Switzerland, quinoa and amaranth are expensive niche products and that the programme officer and the coordinator much prefer to eat traditional grain varieties on their travels, rather than the high-prestige but boring white rice.

However, in many parts of the world, being economically able to serve one's guests imported and polished rice is still a signal of having arrived in the 'modern, globalised world', and of having acquired a certain prestige. The fact that the polished rice is mostly of poor quality and has little nutritional value is blanked out. In 2006, the Nepalese hosts wanted to be part of this globalised world by rejecting the local food in a public setting and by following the wider trends. When the *Fastenopfer* representative asked for a local meal, he was only invited to one in secret. Offering a 'simple' meal was clearly tainted with shame since it was feared that the host (or those who witnessed this) could interpret it as a lack of hospitality or as the hosts' weak economic status.

A further aggravating factor is that the target groups in the Nepal country programme belong to the very marginalised group of the so-called 'untouchable' Dalits. For centuries, they have experienced feelings of inferiority and stigmatisation. Their local food – an important part of their culture – is thus equally considered as inferior. Only constant requests, and the systematic *Fastenopfer* practice of preferring the local food during official meetings, finally bore fruit. After some years, the partners now offer the programme officer their local foods with new self-confidence. Thanks to awareness-raising campaigns and the work in the network, it was possible to address the topic as a whole, so that local products have found a new appreciation in the entire district and have become part of the people's own cultural identity again. 'Foreign' is no longer automatically equated with 'better'. Thanks to the persistence and credibility demonstrated by the support team, a process was triggered that goes far beyond their own catering.

The episode from Nepal illustrates clearly how the sensitive but also persistent attitude of individuals was able to trigger a far-reaching process which gave an impetus in an entire region for a new (old) value system.

Cooking competition: SENEGAL

Training women in the art of traditional cooking is a transversal activity of the Senegal programme. Its aim is to increase the consumption of local agricultural products in the area.

The training workshops took place from April to May 2013, with the participation of cooks from various school canteens. In the preparatory stage of the cooking competition – the 2013 event – a study was conducted on how the skills acquired in the training sessions could be validated. The ten best cookery students were to be identified and receive an award. The competition took place on 18 June at the Langomack Centre, with the participation of 10 solidarity funds from the zone. The event was presided over by the sub-prefect of Fissel. The population, as well as the teachers and students from the Ndimack region, also participated actively. In addition, the solidarity funds of the target groups contributed natural produce (foodstuffs).

In Ndondol and in Ndiaganiao, two cooking competitions were organised in May 2012. The aim was to promote the consumption of local foods and to fight against the 'soudure'[22]. The cooking competition in Ndiaganiao mobilised 64 people, including the local authorities and officials. The cooking competition of the savings funds of Mbampana, Gninguéne, Loumatyr and Ndadafakh focused on the four traditional dishes: 'Dugubu jën', 'Café dugup', 'Céré niébé'[23] and 'Beignets'[24] (with maize in Loumatyr and Ndadafakh and with manioc in Mbampana and Gninguéne). Ten women received awards because they were best able to use the skills they had learned in the training sessions.

[22] 'Soudure' is a reference to the 4–6 month period of food shortages – the time of empty grain silos, before the new harvest is ready. Thanks to the solidarity funds of the *Fastenopfer* projects and due to sustainable agriculture, it has been possible to reduce this period of shortages for the partner organisations to 2–3 months.

[23] 'Niébé' is a type of black-eyed bean that is widespread in Africa and Latin America.

[24] 'Beignets' are a type of doughnut baked in oil.

Participants in the cooking competition, © Asama, 2012

Preparation of a traditional meal, © Asama, 2012

Each received a diploma as well as the parts for a more energy-efficient stove (foyer amélioré)[25]. Sometimes, cleaning products (Javel, Cotol) were also given as prizes.

The competition in Ndondol, which was opened by the sub-prefect of Ngoye, brought together 135 people, including local government officials, religious leaders and village heads as well as the members of the solidarity groups in the zone. Also present were NGO representatives such as the Federation of Vegetable Growers, the UNESCO Centre in Ndondol as well as the *Fastenopfer* coordinator and the programme officer. Women from seven savings funds took part in the competition and in Ndondol, too, ten women were given awards.

Observations and recommendations

The Senegal country programme is clearly at a different juncture than the partner organisations in Nepal. While it also focuses on a new perception and promotion of the value of traditional foods, their consumption is not associated with the same feeling of shame as in Nepal. That is why the projects in Senegal do not focus mainly on strengthening identity and self-esteem, but rather on reactivating local knowledge. The aim is to shorten the period of food shortages and achieve food security throughout the year. Because not only are the traditional and local menus cheaper – most of the ingredients don't have to be bought in but grow in the kitchen garden or on people's own field – they are also much more nutritious and healthier than the imported food products, which are often industrially produced. Through large-scale training courses which lead to an official cooking competition, four selected traditional dishes are actively promoted.

Interestingly, male authority figures – and even religious leaders – are called on to launch the events in order to give them the necessary importance. However, only women take part in the competition. The most diligent students are then judged by a (male?) jury and awarded a diploma. In many countries of the South, the presentation of certificates and diplomas is of great importance, because of the weaknesses of the education system. The material prizes awarded are also remarkable: The *'foyer amélioré'* form part of a number of *Fastenopfer* projects in Senegal. These improved cooking stoves, which consist of enclosed stoves made of loam or clay, not only allow using valuable wood more sparingly, they also make cooking more efficient and produce fewer emissions.

[25] In Senegal, 'foyer amélioré' means more energy-efficient stoves which use less wood and produce less smoke.

Religion and Culture – a balancing act

crucifix in memory of the dead after the storms in 2004. The crucified Jesus is an Agta. © Antoinette Brem, 2006

Restful forest and forgetful climate: PHILIPPINES

In my[26] experience, the concept of the Agta[27] with regard to leadership and decision-making is fundamentally different from that of most non-governmental organisations (NGO). As a rule, the deciding and determining body in NGOs is the board. In this way, the traditional organisational structure or an organisation chart can function well in an organisation.

Among the Agta, however, deep respect for the elders as leaders counts for more – since they unite in their person the source of all wisdom. Consequently Ramcy, one of the tribal leaders of the Agta, will first of all always ask the advice of the elders and only then consult the formally responsible board. Before I understood this, I always wrongly judged their board negatively and as 'not functioning'.

Another example is the Agtas' local concept of rest and regeneration. Whenever one of the Agta staff from the

[26] The author is the Fastenopfer coordinator of the Philippines country programme.

[27] The indigenous groups of the Agta in the Philippines live in small communities. The total population is estimated at appproximately 70,000 people. Traditionally, the Agta were nomads who lived from fishing, hunting and gathering wild berries or engaged in slash-and-burn agriculture. At the beginning of the 1970s, when timber companies began to cut down the forests of the Sierra Madre, their traditional way of life came under pressure. Today, the marked decline in natural resources in the mountains and overfishing in the fishing grounds on the coast increasingly force the Agta into a settled way of life and permanent agriculture.

'Tribal Center for Development'[28] feels exhausted and tired, s/he simply disappears into the forest and it can happen that this person does not reappear for days or even weeks. For the Agta, rest is equated with the creation. If one is exhausted, one seeks protection in the forest, which in turn is equated with their god 'Makidiapet'. So if someone feels tired, it means that s/he is no longer in contact with 'Makidiapet'. The Agta are also very flexible in how they organise their work. They listen closely to their body and spirit. If they need to regain strength, they simply 'disappear' from their workplace. From the formal view of an NGO management, this can be grounds for terminating the working relationship.

Another point of conflict is the meaning of money for the Agta: For them, money (and that also includes the financial means of a project) stands for something one shares, and never something that is only controlled by a few people. The concept of sharing is thus a fundamental value held by the Agta. In contrast, control over money by individuals is equated with selfishness. This was the explanation given by Ramcy when I asked why they would also give loans to non-members of the TCD project. At one point in time, it happened that a lot of funds were lent out, resulting in a bottleneck for the organisation. But the amounts of money lent out were very quickly and fully repaid. So the communal principle functions well not only with loans, but also with repayments.

'Ako ay may isang
salop na bigas.
Hindi sapat sa isa.
Subali't kasya sa marami.'

I have a handful of rice.
It is not enough
to satiate a person.
But it is enough
to feed many people.

One of the most important sayings of the Agta touched me deeply.

And in conclusion, I want to mention one of my favourite expressions used by the Agta: 'Ulyaning klima' – the forgetful climate. The Agta use this expression to almost lovingly describe climate change like an old, somewhat confused person … The forgetful climate, which in recent years is no longer quite sure when the rainy season is supposed to come, and when it's the turn of the hot season. In my view, this expression describes the phenomenon aptly and perhaps it would also be a good approach to tackling the consequences of climate change differently.

In some instances – such as the ones described – I as the coordinator face difficult dilemmas. Things that are 'sacred' for the Agta are not necessarily so for an 'outsider'. Perhaps some mainstream concepts of the NGOs are not compatible with the values which are sacred and precious to the Agta, and cannot be brought into harmony with each other. How should we resolve these dilemmas and in future consider indigenous values not only as precious, but also acknowledge their importance for the future of our entire world?

Observations and recommendations

The *Fastenopfer* coordinator of the Philippines country programme gives a number of examples through which she illustrates how local concepts of the indigenous population collide with Western working principles. 'Sacred values' of NGOs such as punctuality, reliability, loyalty within the hierarchical structure, as well as the correct use of project funds, collide here with the sacred values of the indigenous people. These include an uninterrupted connection to God and nature, respect of the elders, harmony between soul and body, the balance between work and rest, as well as the importance of the community.

The local concept of rest and regeneration illustrates that the Agta place different emphasis on how they shape their working day than that practised by the broad majority of NGO representatives. For them, rupturing the connection to their god of creation is a more threatening scenario than failing to complete tasks at the workplace, or even losing their job. Because if they were to lose the spiritual connection, they would not only be unable to do their work, they could also get seriously ill or even die. The fact that the coordinator has identified this dilemma facing the indigenous project staff and respects their prioritisation is remarkable and essential for the project's success.

She has responded with equal sensitivity to the different understanding of hierarchy. Ultimately, the Agta will always listen to the natural authority of their elders and not take account of an artificially created organisation chart. For the Agta, only the council of elders has the necessary wisdom, experience and charisma. Insisting on the exclusive decision-making authority of the project management could jeopardise local acceptance and therefore also the success of the project. In terms of cultural sensitivity, the existing structures therefore should be understood, accepted and integrated into the project process.

The cultural gap is probably most evident in the use of project funds. While in NGOs which are guided by international standards and shaped by Western structures and values, a 'correct' use of the money is an absolute must, and loans are earmarked exclusively for members of the project, the local view of the Agta also includes non-members in the distribution of the project funds. They draw no formal boundaries of membership, since their solidarity principle of sharing obliges them to include all Agta who are in need. The Agta hierarchy of values places sharing near

[28] The *Fastenopfer* partner organisation, TCD, the Tribal Center for Development , is a non-governmental organisation which represents the interests of the Agta and works to promote their rights (as for example land use, access to health care, education etc.).

the top, and selfishness or individual control over material goods has correspondingly negative connotations. The cohesion of the community ensures the sustainable survival of the entire group, while the individual economic success of one person is more likely to threaten it. This principle of solidarity can be applied not only with regard to loans, but also for 'repayments' of loans. This view of the collective is underlined by the Agta saying about the 'nutritional value of a handful of rice'. If this locally embedded principle of solidarity is recognised in a project and not dismissed as weakness, then it can be of inestimable value for the project implementation.

Particularly striking is the individual learning process the local coordinator has undergone, as shown in the areas of tension described. Although she is not a member of the Agta group, she has, as the long-term Philippines coordinator of the *Fastenopfer* country programme, made a remarkable personal journey over time. While at the start of her work she was irritated or even angered by the 'undisciplined' conduct of the Agta, she was able to familiarise herself gradually with the cultural context and come to be impressed by it. As the cultural intermediary between the local culture of the Agta and the Western requirements of *Fastenopfer*, she sometimes finds herself in an awkward position. But thanks to her obvious sensitivity, her persistence and the transparent mediation between apparently irreconcilable positions, she was able to make a significant contribution to ensuring that the cultural balancing act has mostly succeeded and that the 'Agta Project' has managed to become a true *Fastenopfer* success story.

Openness is relative: NEPAL

The religious and cultural component in the country programme exists. However, we experience culture not only out there 'in the field'. Meeting deadlines, for instance, is among the most difficult aspects of reconciling the gap between two cultures – for example between North and South, or between Nepal and Switzerland. Moreover, problems arise in communication because in Nepal, language is used in an approximate way while in Europe, people speak very precisely and directly.

Openness is also relative For example, Swiss people speak more openly than Nepalese people. However, the more frequently people in Nepal come into contact with the West / North, the more open they become. But this should not hide the fact that those who distribute existing funds also have the right of disposal. From time to time, this leads to blockages. People on the recipient side are easily forced into lying, for example when they cannot comply with the contracts.

Observations and recommendations

Asked about any difficulties of a cultural origin in the cooperation with the 'head office' in Lucerne, the local coordinator first of all mentions different views regarding time and communication difficulties. The punctual adherence to deadlines – for example in completing project reports or monitoring and evaluation documents – is a challenge for him. Similar to his colleague in the Philippines, he has to act as a bridge builder between the two 'cultures' and ultimately be the 'lightning conductor' if the set deadlines cannot be met.

He also has to master the different 'languages' of the two cultures when difficulties have to be addressed. The coordinator describes the communication difficulties as being due to differences in the 'language character'. While he describes the Nepalese language as 'careful' or 'approximate', he sees the 'European language' as 'precise'. In this way, he alludes not least to the different handling of

Suspension bridge in Nepal, © Samrat Katwal, 2014

conflicts. In the NGO language, conflicts are addressed more directly and openly than is usual in the Nepalese context. This leads to blockages which he has to resolve in his function as coordinator.

Strikingly, the coordinator also mentions the question of power. The concentration of decision-making power and power of disposal in the hands of the donor organisation leads – according to the coordinator – to the project managers being forced to lie as soon as they can no longer meet the standards. Here, too, he is required to cope with these tensions and to mediate between the positions as the bridge builder. Nevertheless, it is a positive sign that he – as a Nepalese – addresses conflicts – in response to my question about cultural difficulties – in such an open way. This demonstrates not least an intact relationship of trust between him, the programme officer in Switzerland and *Fastenopfer* as an organisation.

Patience and false pride: BURKINA FASO

A meeting of the seed producers is called at their meeting centre on 14 July 2011. However, at the start of the meeting, the producer from Lefourba had still not arrived. When the group loses patience, it is decided to start the discussion without him.

A quarter of an hour later, the man arrives, completely out of breath and sweating. 'Soutong Nooma' means 'Patience is the golden way' in Mòoré[29]. It seems as if you still haven't understood the name of the organisation for which you work? If you have, then why did you start the meeting without me?' he asks those present. Then he gets off his bicycle and starts to unload the bag tied to it. After rummaging in the bag for some time, he collects together all the necessary documents and notes: 'I don't have the document which the agricultural management sent me. I would recognise it by the blue seal', he adds. Then he murmurs: 'I'll go and find it', and gets back on his bicycle.

About two hours later, he returns, completely drenched. 'What has happened?', asks Vincent, an organiser of the project. The man explains: 'I don't know whether the fetishes told me the truth this morning. I took a whole pile of documents with me and then I slipped just by the river because I lost my balance on the bicycle. My bag, with all my documents, my family card, my children's birth certificates, the receipt for my bicycle, fell off the bike … '

'Why did you pack all these documents? You only needed to bring the document for the certification of the seeds', an organiser asked him. 'Well, many documents have a blue seal. That's why I couldn't recognise which one was the correct one.' 'That is the disadvantage of not being able to read', the treasurer commented on the mishap. The whole team laughed heartily about the incident, and it was decided to ask the agricultural office to issue a duplicate.

This example wants to illustrate how illiteracy delays the implementation of our projects.

[29] Mòoré (auch: *Moose, More, Mole, Mossi, Moshi, Mooré, Moré, Moore*) is the language of the Mossi. It belongs to the Gur languag and is spoken and understood by about half of the population of Burkina Faso. Other groups in the regions of Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso and Ghana have adopted the language as their main language. https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/, 03.08.2015

Whether green bananas or blue booklets, everything is transported by bicycle. © Dorothée Thévenaz, 2010

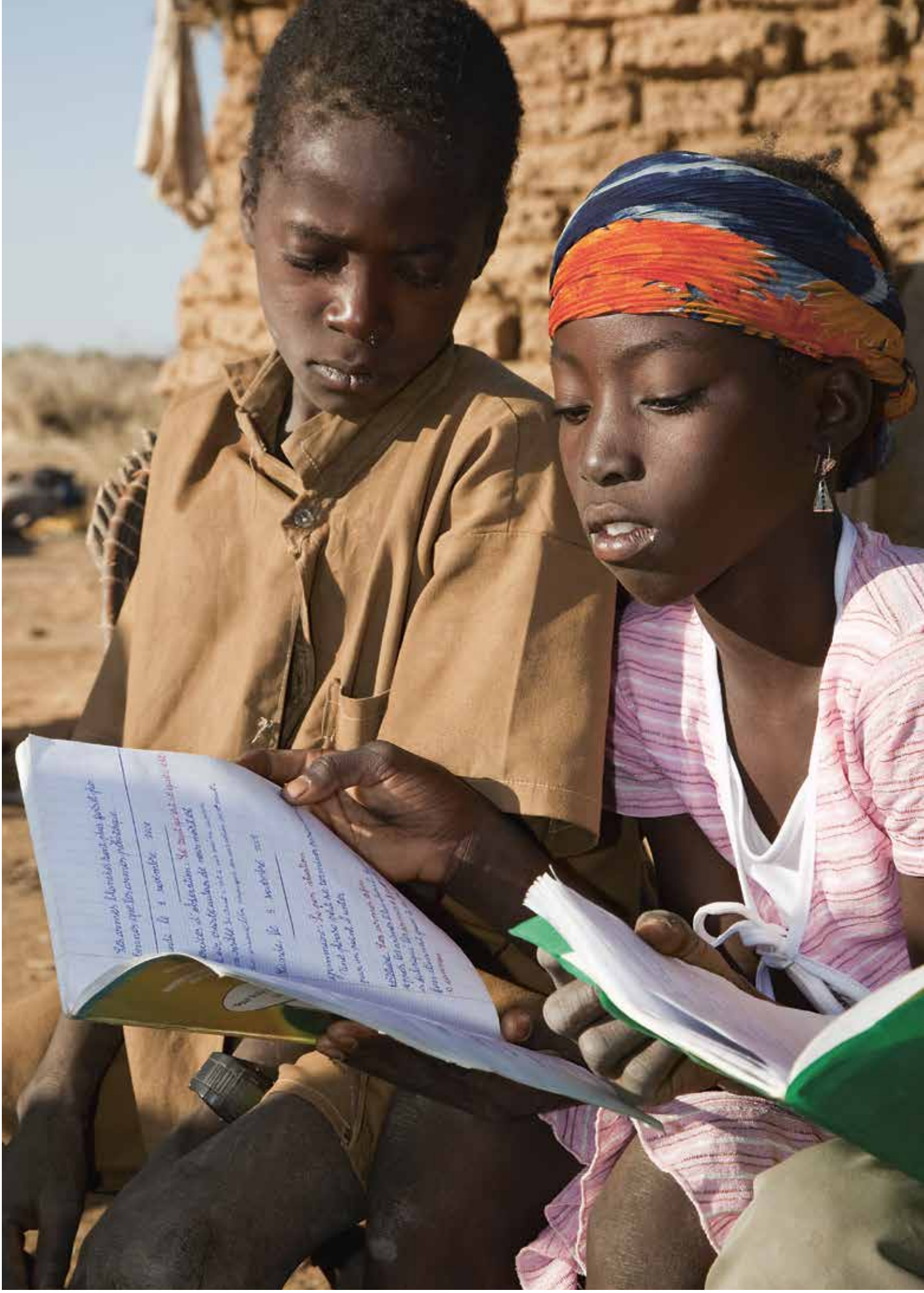
Observations and recommendations

The project managers of the organisation 'Soutong Nooma' have chosen the story to underline what difficulties they are confronted with in their daily project work. They want to point to the problem of illiteracy which is still widespread in Burkina Faso. It is indisputable that many members of our project organisations can neither read nor write, and that the project managers repeatedly experience this as a challenge. It is also not disputed that this can delay the project process or indeed jeopardise the project's success.

Despite this, the choice of words in the title irritates. Why does it talk about 'false pride'? Is it not rather about maintaining one's dignity despite the stigma of illiteracy? In fact, the episode of the seed producer who cannot read illustrates the creative strategies which the farmer uses to get around his problem. At the same time, it illustrates that he is clearly embarrassed to admit that he cannot read and write and does everything to avoid exposing his supposed weakness.

Since on that day, the fetishes were not well-disposed towards him either, one misfortune followed after the other. The degree of endurance and persistence he shows in looking for the missing document clearly proves his loyalty to the project. For their part, the project managers clearly face the challenge of meeting the official requirements – for example the completeness of documents – and the realities in the field. In this, they perform a similar balancing act as is often the case in intercultural cooperation between the donor and the recipient side.

In this story, the tense situation is resolved with humour. The seed producer excuses his initial lateness (or indirectly his inability to read) with a blink of his eyes and refers to the virtue of patience hailed in the project name. In this, the illiterate man uses language elegantly. And the slightly irritated atmosphere at the end of the episode is lightened with collective laughter. The story from Burkina Faso shows that difficult situations in particular are often packaged as humorous anecdotes. In inter-cultural dialogue, the use of humour often opens doors, but only as long as the humour used is understood and accepted by all participants. To develop a feeling for this requires deep background knowledge of the local context and a lot of time.



Children from the project region of A2N prepare for school, © Annette Boutellier, 2009

Religion and Culture
as powerful actors

Dalit women carry heavy loads, © Teeka Bhattarai, 2012

The burden of culture: NEPAL

In some situations, religion and culture support social change, but this always depends on their interpretation. A special area, for instance, is that of equal rights or of kindness. Some religions even have prescribed portions for sharing with the poorest. However, as soon as the interpretation of cultural factors is subject to power, problems arise. Religion and culture can then impede social change. This is the case, for example, with regard to the caste system or the subordination of women (they stem from a man's bone). Of course, many conflicts also arise from religious differences. Fortunately, this has so far not led to outbreaks of violence in Nepal.

In the *Fastenopfer* programme, our objective is to work with the 'oppressed'. But in the field, we encounter real situations of oppression, often legitimised by religion and culture. Dalits, for example, still perceive themselves as subordinate, despite the fact that in certain circles they are treated as equals. Culture burdens them with a feeling of inferiority. Even today, unpopular, lowly tasks are mostly done by Dalits. Thus, at certain festivals, they often have to perform tasks that let them appear as inferior in public.

Women, too, talk a lot about their freedoms and rights during the day and in public. But as soon as they are back at home, they are beaten by their husbands and punished by their family for their 'freedom'. The managers of the partner organisations come across women every day who have even been deprived of care and food.

In addition, there were some conflicts between newly converted evangelicals and traditional practitioners from the indigenous group of the Chepang. *Fastenopfer* tried to initiate a discussion by bringing the pastoralists and the spiritual healers around the table. The question of finding ways of reconciliation was explored.

Observations and recommendations

In response to the initial question about the supporting and inhibiting elements of culture and religion, the Nepalese coordinator gives several examples. He places particular emphasis on the continuing rigid, hierarchically layered social structures which especially marginalise women and the group of the 'untouchable' Dalits. In this situation, the coordinator, as well as the project managers, have to strike a balance between the universal application of human rights demanded by *Fastenopfer* and the claim to cultural self-determination. Day after day, they experience how cultural or religious arguments are used for the oppression of the target group and existing claims to power are legitimised. The gap between this social reality and the programme and project objectives is so wide that a certain feeling of impotence is likely to spread.

What is striking when reading the story is also the strong separation between the public and the private sphere. Thus, the role of the Dalits keeps being reinforced in public – as for example during cultural festivals – by lowly tasks. By contrast, women experience new freedoms in the public sphere such as during partner meetings or project meetings and are made aware of their rights. However, these rights are immediately trampled on in the domestic sphere. Coping with the tension between the practical experience of oppression and the theoretical idea of equal rights is a daily challenge both for the target groups and for the project managers. If this state remains permanently unchanged, then hope will change to frustration and the target groups will turn away. Therefore, a strategy of small steps should be used through which the reality in the project context gradually moves closer to the rhetorically demanded values. Numerous project successes in the Nepal country programme show that this has frequently been successful in recent years, which is a cause for optimism. The programme approach constantly counteracts the stigmatising thought patterns in a sensitive manner. The task is to constantly communicate that treating people in a degrading manner is not commensurate with the values *Fastenopfer* represents and wants to strengthen with its work. A dynamic cultural understanding is particularly helpful for such a consciousness-raising process, because change is only possible on this basis.

The cultural cloak: KENYA

Culture and development are perceived in the form of a dialectical relationship in the Kenya country programme. They influence each other. Most of the partners who implement projects in the field of gender and food sovereignty have stressed that the gender disparity has a negative impact on the socio-economic development of women.

Dupoto e maa, a partner organisation that works on land right issues, has also mentioned that women were not involved in the decision-making processes in the community, and that they complained about this. The ownership of land in the Maasai community remains the prerogative of men, and access to and ownership of land is only guaranteed for women via their husbands. Such factors must be taken into account in the implementation of food sovereignty projects.

Kenyan women are disadvantaged with regard to ownership and inheritance through customary law in particular. Girls are therefore expected to simply accept 'cultural facts' that they have not themselves chosen, but which correspond to the traditional way of life. Thus, in most Kenyan communities, girls do not have the same educational opportunities as boys. Violence in marriage is widespread. This is due to the fact that traditional cultures allow a man to use physical violence against his wife in order to discipline her. Such influences preoccupy in particular our partner organisations who work on gender and food sovereignty. But because a change in cultural values demands a lot of time, it often takes a long time to understand and document the cultural context of a project.

For me as a woman who is responsible for the coordination of a country programme, culture plays a vital role. This is particularly the case when we work in communities that continue to treat women like children. Therefore, as a coordinator, one has to develop one's own strategies of how to deal with such challenges. Moreover, as it happens, at least 70-80 per cent of our projects are managed by men, and thus the work policies are mainly focused on one sex. However, due to the fact that the *Fastenopfer* programme is managed by a female programme coordinator, such norms can more easily be questioned.

Moreover, Kenya is a country that has suffered a lot from cultural stereotypes. Although they are mainly exaggerated and are intended to be funny, the constant repetition of stereotypes can embed these in our thoughts. Here are some examples:

The Kikuyu (20% per cent of the population) have, like the Jews, a reputation of being fond of money. To confirm that someone is dead, one throws a coin on the floor. If the person had only simulated their death, they would surely pick up the coin! Moreover, the Kikuyu are also thieves and swindlers. The Luyhia (16 per cent) are known to like eating

Maasai women generate extra income with handicrafts, © Thomas Osmondi, 2009

chicken and *Ugali*[30] and to sleep with each other. It is said that, when they rob a house, the first thing they do is light a fire to cook Ugali and chicken. The Luo (14 per cent) have a knack of living a life of luxury that is beyond their means. After a serious traffic accident a Luo was told that he had lost his hand. He cried out: 'And what has happened to my Rolex?' The Luo are also said to be very well educated compared to other Kenyans. For example, they are very proud of speaking the 'Queen's English'. The Kalenjin (12 per cent) are reputed to be the best runners, because they grow up running in the Highlands. The Maasai are known to be fearless and proud. They are also reputed to be less educated than the Luo and the other groups. The Kamba are witches and magicians par excellence. The inhabitants along the coast are, by contrast, lazy and relaxed. They wait for a coconut to fall on their head so they can eat it. The Somalis and the Borana are garrulous und sullen. People believe that they always carry weapons of one type or another. The Indians are believed to be business wizards who can rely on their polytheism to get rich. The Whites[31] are reputed to be well-educated, friendly and wealthy. According to this logic, the Indians are rejected while the Whites are highly esteemed without any prior analysis.

This type of cultural stereotyping played a part in the eruption of conflict during the post-election violence in 2007. No doubt there is always a grain of truth in a cliché. But much of it is exaggeration that borders on ethnic bigotry. The stereotypes are not analysed but rather generalised. We find this above all in projects that are to be implemented across ethnic boundaries.

[30] Ugali is the name in the East African language Swahili for a grain porridge made from maize flour which is cooked to a relatively firm consistency. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ugali, 16.05.2017

[31] The author classifies West Europeans, US Americans etc. in the original version as 'Caucasian'. For better comprehension, the term 'White' has been used in the translation.

Observations and recommendations

The author, who is also the local coordinator of the *Fastenopfer* country programme in Kenya, starts by putting forward some theoretical thoughts on the relationship between culture and the concept of development. She then quickly moves to unequal gender relations in the project environment, which she puts down to cultural and religious factors. There is no reflection, however, about which types of discrimination are really inherent in the culture or of religious origin, and where they actually serve to obscure individual claims to power or economic interests.

The fact that the unjust treatment of women and girls not only concerns the author as the programme officer but also as someone directly affected becomes clear in the next part. She sees her lonely status as a woman in an environment that clearly continues to be male-dominated as a challenge, but also as an opportunity. Unfortunately, she does not elaborate on what strategies she uses to counter the male predominance. She interprets the fact that virtually all Kenyan partner organisations are led by men as 'coincidence'. To assume 'coincidence' and not 'system' in such male dominance leaves one to surmise that the author is expressing a certain cynicism. Otherwise this assessment would be rather too naïve. It is obvious that action is needed in the country programme to implement gender equality at the level of the decision-making bodies within the partner organisations. This is particularly true for the church-based partner organisations which have a high proportion of men (approx. 2/3) in their management structure, while at least the non-church partner organisations are managed at 50 % by women.

In the second part of her remarks, the author addresses many clichés which are predominantly expressed along ethnic lines. Even if we know such stereotypical attributions from our own culture, the quantity and specificity of partly very negative characteristics that are assigned to particular groups is nevertheless surprising. And although the suffering caused by ethnic conflicts is addressed at the beginning, the author only mentions it in passing. This is all the more surprising in that the violent conflicts between individual ethnic groups put Kenya in the limelight of international interest on several occasions in recent years. The system of government and administration implemented by the British colonial power led to a reinforcement, or the new creation, of ethnic groups, in which the policy of unequal resource distribution became a fertile ground for more recent ethnic conflicts. After independence, these inequalities between the individual groups were accentuated by the patronage system practised by Presidents Kenyatta and Moi. The reintroduction of the multi-party system in 1991 led to the formation of opposition political parties along ethnic lines.[32]

The stereotypes recounted in the Kenya case study clearly show that ethnic attributions usually hide economic motives – given that the various population groups are given attributes such as greed, meanness, swindling, a fondness for luxury, laziness. The fact that the unequal distribution of economic resources is the key factor in the construction of ethnicity is demonstrated by the political and economic reality of the country. In the elections, ethnicity plays such a strong part because many Kenyans feel dominated by the Kikuyu. After all, three out of four Presidents came from this population group. As in many African countries, in Kenya it means that the groups close to the government have better access to resources, in particular to land and government jobs in the case of Kenya.

Somali groups with a low population density also have huge land areas in the north which cannot, however, be used much for agriculture. This, too, leads to tensions with ethnic connotations. By contrast, the people living along the coast – considered as lazy according to the author – see themselves as being economically lagging behind and want to gain more control over the land and its resources. The brutally explosive force inherent in the political use of ethnicity was shown in the bloody unrest after the 2007 presidential elections, in which 1,200 people lost their lives. In the eyes of many Kenyans, the violent excesses were triggered by the fact that the desired transfer of power from the dominant group to an opposition group did not take place due to electoral fraud. In this, the ethnicity promoted by the colonialists played a particularly tragic role.

Questions of ethnicity and its socio-economic origins must also be addressed in the programme and project work. In response to the wave of violence experienced in 2007, several workshops on psychosocial conflict transformation were conducted with the partner organisations in the following years.

In conclusion, the use of the term 'Caucasians' in the original text should be mentioned. 'The Whites' are described as friendly, educated and wealthy. This generally positive image is qualified by the author in that she discreetly mentions that this depiction was not subjected to a prior analysis.

[32] See also Forcher-Mayr, Matthias and Pranger, Ingrid 2004: *Ethnische Heterogenität und Konflikte in Kenia.* In: *Petermanns Geografische Mitteilungen* (148/2): Gotha.

Shiny golden stoves: BURKINA FASO

The organisational structure of the Moaga associations offers few representation options for women in the decision-making bodies. Bam province, where we have a presence, is no exception to this tradition. This unfavourable power relationship for women is generally dictated by the low level of organisation among the women and their limited purchasing power.

I want to tell the story here about Emmanuel and his wife. This year, Emmanuel was unable to generate enough income from the traditional gold panning because this is now prohibited on the Bissa site. It means he has to seize the moments when the security staff are not paying attention in order to crawl into the deep holes that have been dug into the flanks of the hills and hope to find a few grams of gold. His only alternative source of income, the sale of poultry, is not enough to meet the family's needs. And especially not for his regular visits to Chantal, the *Dolo*[33] seller. So Emmanuel starts to look for alternative solutions. In his desperation, he turns to Psouga, a friend from his childhood: 'You know that things are not going well for me this year', he says. 'I don't know what to do anymore. I will have to go to the Catholic mission and entrust Irène, the daughter of my deceased brother Philippe, to their care. There, she will be able to learn the art of cooking.' 'We, too, only see a girl's future in the domestic sphere', Pousga encourages him. 'You know, I have exactly the same problem. I also don't know anymore what to do'.

The two men spend a few minutes in reflection. Then Emmanuel ruminates: 'Things look particularly bright this year for my wife Thérèse. Thanks to selling these famous, more energy-efficient cooking stoves *(foyer amélioré)*, with which she bothers us every day, she can get a good income. 'I could have asked her for help, but I am scared. Because each time she comes back from a meeting of the Soutong Nooma Association, she uses an unusual choice of words with me. After all, we as men can also be successful.' 'If I were in your place, I would think carefully before asking for such help. You know that your mother-in-law's funeral is planned for next Sunday', his friend advises him.

A few days pass and Emmanuel manages to rouse himself to ask his wife for help. He approaches her with the words 'you know that marriage also means giving mutual support'. 'Coming from you, such statements are rather surprising. What do you want from me', asks Thérèse sceptically and distances herself. 'Could you lend me 5,000 CFA? It would just a way of saving face. I will pay you back the full amount on the Kongoussi market day. I will sell my two cockerels there', asks Emmanuel in a hesitating voice. His wife replies: 'I only have 10,000 CFA left. That money comes from the sale of my improved stoves, about which you didn't want to hear anything until now. You have said more than once that you don't want a cent from this money'. 'Well, the same mouth that once said 'no' can now say 'yes', declares Emmanuel. 'I expect you on market day', replies Thérèse and gives him the 5,000 CFA note. However, at the end of the said day, Thérèse is at the end of her patience and asks her husband: 'Emma, where is my money?'. The drunken Emmanuel stammers: 'Even if I don't repay the money today, you are still my wife. We will always stay together.' (In reality, however, he came back that evening straight from Chantal's nightclub.) Which is why Thérèse replies: 'That's out of the question. Tomorrow, I'll go to Soutong Nooma. Give me my money or nothing is doing'.

The next morning, when Emmanuel can think a bit more clearly, he overtakes his wife on her way to the organisation's place and bombards the organiser with the following words: 'Thérèse will certainly arrive soon in order to talk to you about a loan that hasn't been repaid. Make it clear to her that something like this can always happen. It happens frequently between a man and his wife.'

This story confirms us in our plan to develop alternative sources of income in favour of women.

Observations and recommendations

The story from Burkina Faso reads like a script for a radio play. The arguments of the supplicant and the replies of his wife are reproduced in direct speech. One is struck, on the one hand, by a certain helplessness shown by the man, as well as by the obvious verbal superiority of his female counterpart. This is not at all consistent with the statement in the opening paragraph of the story, which laments the poor organisational skills and lack of economic capacity of the women. The *Fastenopfer* partner organisation has clearly made a vital contribution to improving the women's socio-economic position. This is evident not least in the increased self-confidence which – as Emmanuel complains to his childhood friend – is articulated in the new 'unusual choice of words' used by his wife.

The Soutong Nooma project works in Bam Province on the northern edge of the central plateau, one of the poorest regions of Burkina Faso. The land is barren and arid, there is little and irregular rainfall. The soil suffers from severe erosion due to overuse and deforestation. That is why the farmers have joined together in the Soutong Nooma organisation. By using locally adapted and ecologically sustainable cultivation methods, they have been able to increase their crop yields significantly in recent years.

The 'improved stoves' referred to in the episode are an additional project component which improves the economic situation of the women in particular and gives them additional income. Their men are clearly envious of this success. In order to avoid the project becoming a boomerang for the women concerned and generating additional conflicts in the households, the interests of both sexes must be equally taken into account and negotiated.

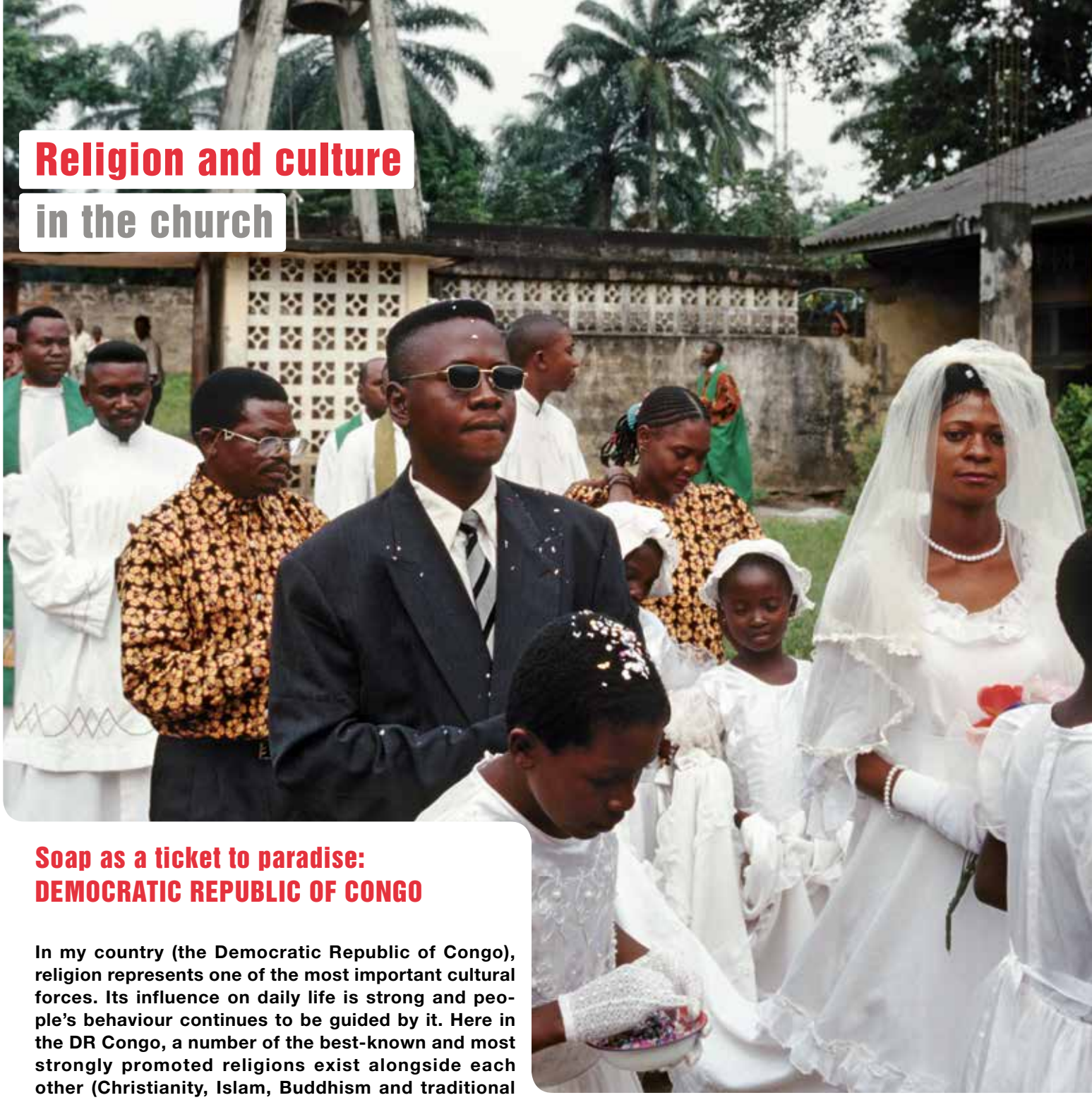
[33] *Dolo* is a type of beer that is made in Burkina Faso with tradtional methods from sorghum and millet. https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dolo, 06.08.2015

A cook presents her 'foyer amélioré' Soutong Nooma, Burkina Faso, © Vreni Jean-Richard, 2014

An empowerment process which is exclusively geared to women will inevitably lead to the disempowerment of men. The systemic gender approach[34] proposed by *Fastenopfer* therefore envisages supporting both men and women in adopting gender roles based on equality and to redefine their role as fathers, mothers, marriage partners etc. Each project intervention must keep the whole structure of relationships in mind. For this reason, the project managers of the example given here are advised, when developing alternative sources of income for women, not to lose sight of the male perspective.

[34] See *Fastenopfer* Policy Statement on *'Gender – Gender Mainstreaming'*, 2009, Romana Büchel.

Religion and culture in the church



Soap as a ticket to paradise: DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

In my country (the Democratic Republic of Congo), religion represents one of the most important cultural forces. Its influence on daily life is strong and people's behaviour continues to be guided by it. Here in the DR Congo, a number of the best-known and most strongly promoted religions exist alongside each other (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and traditional religions).

Catholic wedding in the DR Congo, © Daniel Hostettler, 2006

In our history, Christianity in particular was promoted as the best religion, which will bring eternal salvation. By contrast, the other religions were described as heathen, bringing death and destruction. The result was that our society lost a large proportion of its authenticity. Instead, a Western lifestyle modelled on European and American missionaries was encouraged. Therefore, one of the first challenges for the Congolese was the recognition that the West, too, could be wrong, and still can be. Here, white people are still called 'Mundele', which means model. Since this model relates to the Christian religion and ultimately to God, we were prohibited from questioning this or contradicting it. One simply had to accept this fact.

Before independence, (1960, author's note) the Catholic church focused on its dominant position without including the diversity of spiritual life. This went hand in hand with contempt for worldly goods. Worldly things – consisting of the vital and material things that shape life on earth, in particular food, clothing, shelter and of course money – were deemed to be without value. The esteem in which a person was held depended on their moral conduct. This focused in particular on the frequency of church attendance and activities in the parish, absolute abstention from alcohol, marriage to only one woman, regular bible reading, singing in the church choir, readings in the church, reciting the rosary etc.

By contrast, economic activities were part of this world and so appealed to few people. The population was wary because money was simply seen as the work of the devil

and wealth as an obstacle on the way to heaven. On the other hand, poverty seemed enticing and offered the chance to enter the heavenly paradise. This perception was supported by the biblical story of the rich man and the poor Lazarus.

This religious vision, which continues to shape Congolese society today, is one of the greatest challenges facing development cooperation.

The following story illustrates this:
In the not too distant past, development projects in the DR Congo tended to focus on maintaining the church rather than on improving the living and production conditions of the poor population. A striking example is that of the widows. In the past they would, in different parts of the country, hand over the major proportion of the food they grew to the priests, the sick and the prisoners. They only consumed a fraction themselves. Through this, they hoped to ensure their entry to heaven. If a widow fell ill or if she lacked food, she would go the priest – mainly to the missionaries – to ask for aspirin or food or a piece of soap for herself and her children.

After about a decade of project work, the widows now have their own funds and are no longer so dependent on the clergy. At the same time, the widows have changed their views regarding wealth, which is now seen as being given by God and not as coming from the devil.

In conclusion, the question arises of how we change beliefs which have penetrated our heads for generations and gone deeply into the autonomous nervous system. Many people are also unsettled because today, many different ways of thinking, ideas and ideologies exist side by side, and life could be different. Religions and culture can simplify life over time, but they can also tear it apart. These days, the people in the Democratic Republic of Congo are asking themselves such questions.

Observations and recommendations

Although the role of the Catholic church in the Democratic Republic of Congo underwent changes after independence, its influence remains and has partly even gained in importance. Thus, in many regions in Africa in which the state is barely materially present, the church network is taking on government tasks – whether in the area of health or education. It goes without saying that as a result, people's dependence on the clergy is maintained. Due to the strongly hierarchical character of the Catholic church in particular, a great deal of authority is attached to the priests.

However, the present example also clearly shows the change in values which Congolese society has experienced in recent years. While the members of the European as well as the local clergy, in a remarkable show of double standards, once demonised all worldly goods as a profane and despicable materialism which impedes the way to paradise, they had no scruples in accepting such goods from the people. What is particularly shocking is that widows – a particularly vulnerable group – played a central role and had to go without enough food simply in the hope of heavenly reward. The search for spiritual sustenance, combined with the longing for redemption and reward in the next world, was particularly tempting for people living in great poverty. Yet the condemnation of all material wealth, as well as the described selling of indulgences, are in stark contrast with the objectives of the Western concept of development. Until a few years ago there existed, in the African context in particular, a certain contradiction between the character of pastoral and development projects. However, for some time, this separation between church and non-church projects has gradually resolved itself. Today, the aim of the *Fastenopfer* projects is always primarily the empowerment of the target population and not the maintenance of church or state structures. This is shown clearly in the example of the widows. Thanks to the formation of savings groups based on solidarity, they are today no longer dependent on the favours of the clergy for better or for worse, but stand on their own feet. With this autonomy, their value system has changed and they no longer postpone their hope for a 'good life' to the next world.

The dissolution of the church's authority described in the example also goes hand in hand with the disintegration of one single valid truth. The author describes this as difficult – it has resulted in a certain lack of direction and a feeling insecurity that permeate Congolese society. In a society where a new religious and cultural plurality is allowed, which in some cases leads to conflict, the question arises with increasing urgency about generally applicable and binding values. What are the values now? Even the best development projects cannot give a conclusive answer to this. They cannot promise paradise on earth. But with simple development goals adapted to the local context, such as solidarity funds for widows, they enable a dignified life in this world, too.

Christmas in Amazonas: COLOMBIA

An example from our project partner 'Vicaria Sur' illustrates how religious factors enrich our work. People and organisations that attend our participatory bible reading activities give a new interpretation to the meaning of religion and link it to justice, the assertion of human rights, solidarity, liberation and emancipation.

That is why in the meetings on citizen participation, it was stressed that 'in order to be a good Christian, one also has to be a good citizen'. This contributed to the development of greater awareness of individual and communal obligations, of the defence of human rights, but also of the duty of each citizen to contribute to the building of a just, balanced and peaceful country.

The Christmas celebration, as a family and community celebration, was an appropriate place to revive cultural and religious traditions. Even though these traditions still existed in the collective consciousness, they were no longer practised in most families and communities. The first phase succeeded in transforming the celebration, which until then only consisted of a meal and an excursion by the men to the city centre (to enjoy themselves there at the expense of the family) into a family event with small presents for the children. Gradually, the Christmas celebrations took on a stronger communal character and the 'religious' part, with Novena, Christmas carols, a Christmas crib and a communal meal, spread to various rural areas.

Starting from the redefinition of religiousness, of new work priorities, but also of experienced difficulties, 'Novenas' were elaborated on selected topics. These enabled the organisers to celebrate Christmas in the Christian communities in a way which, on the one hand, gave a new stimulus to their faith and, on the other hand, established common social and ecological duties. Of key importance in this was that the 'Novena', which consists of nine days in which the families take time for conversation, prayer and song, was used as productively as possible.

The Novena 'We celebrate Christmas in the Amazonas region' is given here as an example: Christmas tells about the crib, which puts us into contact with nature: with the fields, the shepherds, the sheep, the paths which lead to the stable etc. With this crib, we also portray a part of Palestine – the country of Jesus, May and Joseph, its villages, paths and people, its sky and its earth. At the same time, the entire world can be interpreted as a crib, since Jesus came to earth to save us all. With this, he wanted to show us humans the path to God, a path of brotherhood, of love, of respect for nature and to a kingdom of justice, love, solidarity and peace.

During this Novena, we also make an Amazonian crib. This is a crib which is decorated with materials from the region and which is placed near our village, farm or quarter. Building a crib from our region is also intended as a gift for

Colombia: A woman calls for peace, © Jesus Abad Colorado, 2012

Jesus. We want to thank him for his birth, for his revelation to all humans, for the richness of the water, the forests, the fauna and flora and above all for the people. We the people promise to understand this wonderful world as God's project, which provides all humans with a happy life in harmony with God, with other people and nature. Each evening, we decorate another part of the crib and accompany this with a reading of a fable, a legend or a biblical text.

The choice of topic and the arrangement of these nine nights offers much dynamic scope for songs, discussions, gifts, games, anecdotes and agreements. We finish each event with the transcription of a Christmas carol which relates to the Amazonas region. All those present accompany the song with simple instruments, mostly made by children and young people. The text of the song can, for instance, take the following form:

Christmas in Amazonas

How great is the journey to Amazonia,
where one sees the plants, observes life.
One feels freshness, one feels joy,
one feels God, his great presence.

How beautiful is the earth, the gift from God.
May we not destroy it in terrible ways.
Let us protect life, the air and the sun,
let us protect the fast flowing river.

All the damage like fires and erosion,
the deforestation and burning of the forests,
the contamination of the rivers,
make the Son of God sad.

Oh God of Life: Where do we seek you?
Where do we find you? In the midst of the forest!
On each tree with fruits and flowers.
And in the clean water that we have still left.

Oh divine child, reborn Jesus!
Thanks to your presence we can continue,
because in each sown seed and tree
we see and defend life.

When Joseph runs through Amazonia,
he sees its beauty and values life.
He sees the rivers with great joy,
and he enjoys bathing together with Mary.

I thank you, child of God,
for your great love,
for Amazonia and its great greenness.
Help us to protect it and
to prevent destruction,
The good we have is a blessing.

Let us celebrate with love and sing with joy!
Let us protect our wealth, show courage and set a good example for a life in peace and harmony.
Because this year, too, Jesus was born in Amazonia.

Observations and recommendations

The *Fastenopfer* partner organisation Vicaría del Sur is an organisation of the Catholic church which works in the rural diocese of Florencia. The organisation encourages women, men, youth and children to get involved in their communities and to fight against the difficult living conditions. These consist of forced removals, of their coca fields being sprayed, of the presence of armed groups as well as of the lack of food. The work of the pastoral team of Vicaría therefore also focuses, in addition to a diversified sustainable agriculture, on the protection of the ecosystem in the Amazonas region and on demanding citizens' rights. The revitalisation of religious and cultural traditions – as illustrated in the story – is a popular method in this work.

Vicaría del Sur has recognised the potential inherent in the communal celebration of rituals. Rituals bind the community together and give meaning, structure life and promote social cohesion. The story also shows how the communal celebration of Christmas in the project region achieved a return to binding values.

Because the Novenas last several days, the experience is particularly intensive. The Novena, a Catholic custom in Advent which is widespread in Columbia, Venezuela and Ecuador, is celebrated on the nine days from 16 to 24 December and is a reminder of the nine months before the birth of Jesus. In families and neighbourhoods, prayers are said regularly at the crib, and sections of the Christmas story are read. This is repeatedly interspersed with short songs. The ritual nature is underlined by the repetition of certain elements, the communal meal and the shared communal spirit. Vicaria del Sur has skilfully managed to give new life to the ritual 'time out' of the Novenas, together with the community members, and to give it a new content. This success is due, not least, to familiar elements from the local culture being deliberately integrated. Thus, the Christmas carol, which is integrated in the context, includes an appeal for greater solidarity in the human community as well as for the human commitment to protect nature. Binding elements, such as the communal singing or eating, but also the use of local materials or the inclusion of traditional songs and instruments, further enhance the sense of identity.

The story from Columbia is a good example of how, through a sensitive grasp of the cultural context, locally integrated traditions and project contents can mutually enrich each other.

God Cocaine: COLUMBIA

'God Cocaine' is an interesting example. It helps us in Vicaria to show how the drug trade influences people's religiousness. Thus, on the one hand, the omnipresent violence leads to a collapse in values. Social cohesion breaks down. On the other hand, the constant presence of death increases people's need for religiousness. They turn more strongly to faith for protection and consolation and see it as means of processing and coming to terms with fear and grief.

Times have greatly changed with the arrival of coca. It has driven people almost crazy and fewer and fewer believed in God. Coca replaced him and became something like a god without law. For many, coca really represents God. Religious life is under serious attack due the massive drugs trade. People believe that with coca growing, they have found salvation in their daily struggle for survival. But coca has literally also led to social disintegration, because the illegal drug trafficking confronts people with the power of money, with revenge, prostitution, gambling and death.

An additional issue is the creation of a wave of migration, which in turn leads to a mixing of regions and cultures. Attracted by the 'white powder', some of the so-called 'hard dealers' exhibit a particularly religious fervour. Sometimes they go as far as appointing a different village head to demonstrate their devotion to a special divine figure. This happens without any opposition from the population.

I remember, for example, Don … a particularly hard coca dealer who, however, presented himself as very generous with money. He brought the picture of Our Lady of Fatima into the church and hung it up. So we started to celebrate the Novena for Our Lady of Fatima. Because it was a special worship devoted to her, it included a special mass and fireworks and everyone came.

Another woman brought an image of the Christ child so it would protect the village from the many dead. In this region, there have already been many dead. They were killed for motives of revenge, by debt collectors or by members of armed groups. The village was in chaos. In the midst of these chaotic times, money was collected during mass for the church and for the funeral of the deceased.

Today, these worships are in the past. Today, nobody celebrates the day of Our Lady of Fatima on 31 May any longer and the picture of the Christ child is neglected. Today, it is all forgotten.

The coca cult of the former farmers and cattle breeders who now grow coca has replaced religion. Its aim is to legitimise the new practices. Nevertheless, a part of religious imagery remains intact. And although many religious practices are affected, the population continues to participate in the traditional religious events.

Observations and recommendations

Before analysing the story of Vicaria del Sur, it is worth taking a brief historical look at the spread of the coca plant and set it in its context. It will help to understand the case study better

The chewing of coca leaves has been widespread in the Andes, as well as on the plain of the Gran Chaco, for centuries. The leaves are used as a stimulant, a food supplement or for cult and medical purposes. They help to alleviate hunger, tiredness and the cold, and are very effective for altitude sickness because they improve oxygen uptake. The chewed leaves, together with chalk and other auxiliary substances (for example plant ash, Quechua llipt'a), form a so-called 'bola'. No physical or psychological complaints or dependence are generally noted. Because of their spiritual importance; the leaves are considered as sacred by the indigenous people.

What is remarkable when reading the case study from Columbia is that the authors do not mention this original religious significance of the coca leaves. This is all the more surprising in that it is closely linked with their own cultural identity. It's not by chance that Pope Francis – at least it is rumoured – explicitly asked for coca leaves before his Bolivia trip in August 2015.

If we pursue the historical path of the coca plant further, then the colonial influence must not be ignored. The Spanish colonial rulers massively promoted its cultivation and made the once sacred cult object into a product of mass consumption. In vain did Philipp II then declare war on the drug dealers. The church intervention, which at the Council of Lima in 1567 tried to condemn coca as the 'mascot of the devil' was also unsuccessful. Because even in the monasteries, monks and nuns happily continued to buy it, while numerous Spaniards enriched themselves by smuggling coca and gold, as well as through the slave trade. The introduction of the coca tax became an important pillar of colonial rule, and until far into the 20th century, coca remained an essential part of the wages of the Indios and mestizos in the Andes. One of the reasons for this was that coca compensated for the lack of quality and quantity of food and could be used to increase the capacity for work of the enslaved population. From the 18th century, the state monopoly of coca was abandoned and from then on, private companies took over its commercialisation.

Today, the billions-worth business with the 'snow' in Columbia is concentrated in the hands of a few clans. The drugs trade has since affected the entire country with violence and permeates society. Because virtually no area of life – including religious life – remains untouched by it.

The reading of the case study reflects an ambivalent attitude towards coca – the same as is experienced by Columbian society. While the project managers of Vicaria del Sur observe a dangerous hollowing out of social life and regularly have to mourn new deaths, they also note opposite trends. This is because due to widespread fear,

Mary procession on the water, © Vicaria del Sur, 2013

insecurity and the ever-present threat of death, they also see a new turn towards religiousness. People are seeking support and consolation, and find these in the veneration of saints. Saints that are 'worthy of adoration' are chosen by the drugs bosses and deliberately used in their home parishes. The religious representation (even if only in the form of a holy picture) serves not least to consolidate the donor's own power. Even the celebration of the Novena is redirected and – as in the case of the adoration of Our Lady of Fatima – is accompanied by much pomp. However, the authors complain, in recent times, this splendour has also declined and the devotions (funded with drug money) rarely take place. The longing that is contained in these words appears a little strange at first glance. However, it reflects a social reality which has somehow come to an arrangement with the dark sides of coca. This is also the case because the positive aspects of the drug trade are not obscured. Because in a situation of poverty and unemployment, it should not be forgotten that around 4,000 Columbians are directly employed by the Medellín cartel and that indirectly, one million people live from the cocaine trade.

Cocaine thus represents a promise and a curse at the same time … and in this aspect, is not totally dissimilar from religion.

Faith in democracy: BRAZIL

Religion has always played an important role in our work at Iser Assessoria. It is no coincidence that our programme has the title 'Religion, citizenship and democracy'.

All our members come from a lay movement of the Catholic church[35]. Moreover, our team consists of individuals who have either been trained in the social sciences (currently five people) or in theology (currently three people). Another feature of our team is that almost all have additional training in sociology of religion. For more than ten years, we have taught the religious sociology course at the Franciscan College of Theology and the course 'religions in Brazil' jointly with the organisers from Pilar (diocese of Duque de Caxias). We organise seminars and publish books on this subject.

This is probably one of the reasons why we support movements that defend ecumenism and religious tolerance. That has always been one of the priorities of Iser Assessoria.

We have also always endeavoured to integrate political questions and perspectives of women and young people in the elaboration of church documents. We also prepare analytical texts on political developments which are frequently used by church bodies. We have always been concerned with the relationship between religion and society. In Brazil, religion and faith is of central importance in people's lives. Thus, a person's religious attitude also strongly influences their individual motivation and their decision-making. The influence of religion on political elections is thus obvious – although this does not always respect the principle of a secular state. For example, during the recent elections, issues such as abortion or homosexual marriage were taken up by certain Catholic and Protestant circles in order to discredit more liberal opposing candidates.

The relationship between religion and social change has existed in its present strength since the 1960s. The impetus came from the youth movements of the Catholic church[36] and some concerned bishops, whose greatest forerunner was Dom Helder Câmara. While at first the Catholic church had helped to legitimise the military coup of 1964 and the establishment of the civilian-military dictatorship, it increasingly distanced itself from the regime as the military government became more radical. At the same time, an increasing number of Christians actively supported social change from the end of the 1950s, and subsequently church-based grassroots organisations spread throughout the country. This also applied to pastoral social action. Since the 1970s and 1980s, these church-based grassroots organisations have played a major part in establishing or strengthening many social movements. It is thus no coincidence that liberation theology originates on this continent. It was born of the problems of poverty and oppression and continues to give courage to Christians who actively work for a society that respects human rights.

We would like to present two case studies of individuals as well as organisations that combine their faith with social action:

Dom Hélder Câmara was the most important leader in the Catholic church's shift towards social issues. He was primarily responsible for setting up the National Bishops' Conference in Brazil (1952), the first national bishops' conference worldwide. He became actively involved as auxiliary bishop of the archdiocese in fighting for a dignified life of the favela residents in Rio de Janeiro. During the coup, the new church authorities transferred him to a peripheral diocese in Recife. Henceforth, Hélder denounced the crimes of the dictatorship from there. It is also thanks to him that the torture practices of the regime against opposition members became internationally known. The reaction didn't take long in coming, and his house in Recife was attacked with sub-machine guns. But because state repression could not attack Don Helder Câmara directly, they murdered Padre Henrique Pereira Neto, the assistant of the youth pastoral in the archdiocese, in 1969.

In order not to limit ourselves to examples of bishops, we want to also point out here the importance of the work of CIMI (founded in 1972) and CPT (founded in 1975). They are key actors in the commitment to promote the rights of indigenous people and rural workers. During the military dictatorship, these two organisations were virtually the only ones to provide protection, because at that time, civil-society organisations such as trade unions were greatly restricted in their activities. The work of CIMI and CPT continues to be of great importance today.

[35] They include the Catholic Action, JEC (Juventude Estudantil Católica), JUC (Juventude Universitária Católica), the Youth Pastoral and former members of a religious order.

[36] These were in particular JEC (Juventude Estudantil Católica), JUC (Juventude Universitária Católica) and JOC (Juventude Operária Católica).

Observations and recommendations

The story from Brazil clearly differs from the previous case studies in that it deals with a noticeably more politicised environment. The authors of the *Fastenopfer* partner organisation Iser Assessoria set their case study in Brazil's historical context.

Steeped in a tradition of liberation theology, they always link personal and jointly experienced faith with social commitment. While in its early years, Latin American liberation theology was particularly involved in opposing the despotism of the various military regimes, it is now more strongly engaged in fighting social injustices such as poverty, hunger or racism. Added to this is that the strengthening of Opus Dei currents and the appointment of correspondingly right-wing Catholic priests and bishop has greatly weakened liberation theology for some years.

Nevertheless, many Brazilian grassroots communities and church-based organisations are guided by the close links between faith and action. This is reflected in the method they use, *Ver-Julgar-Agir*. Ver (see) starts from an analysis of the current state and the challenges of day-to-day existence. *Julgar* (judge / assess) describes the second step. This involves categorising the identified problems with the help of biblical texts and assessing them. Finally with *Agir* (act), the aim is to take one's fate into one's own hands and transform God's words into action, so that the living situation can be actively improved. The method of *Ver-Julgar-Agir* has influenced many Catholic movements in Brazil since the 1950s and 60s, including Iser Assessoria.

The organisation with head office in Rio de Janeiro is committed to strengthening democratic structures, above all in the south-east of Brazil. It does this by advising representatives of the population as well as individuals in the dissemination of knowledge about democratic processes and structures. The aim is, through advice sessions, courses, debates and discussions, to strengthen church-based and social groupings in their socio-political commitment. The opening up of the churches to social concerns is thus a key theme of the organisation. This includes furthering ecumenism in the daily practice of the different Brazilian churches – something that is also addressed in the case study.

CIMI (Conselho Indigenista Missionário), also a partner organisation of *Fastenopfer*, works in this same area The regional team of CIMI concentrates its engagement on building the civil-society strength of indigenous groups and supports them, for example, when they attend government offices in order to claim their rights.

Scene from a workshop by Iser Assessoria, © Fastenopfer, 2012

Key activities of the Land Pastoral CPT (Comissão Pastoral da Terra) – also mentioned in the text and supported by *Fastenopfer* – include submitting land claims for landless families on the one hand, and the promotion of sustainable, small-scale agriculture on the other.

All three organisations are examples of the practical aspects of Latin American social teaching, but also of the character of *Fastenopfer*'s Brazil country programme. They are distinguished by their wide networks, their integration in the Catholic environment and at the same time by a high degree of politicisation. The episode from Brazil differs clearly from the examples from Asia, Africa or the Caribbean because of its markedly political discourse and a relatively high level of abstraction. In contrast to the previous stories, however, this case study does not contain any personal experience in dealing with religious or cultural factors in the concrete daily project work.

The right to be different: GUATEMALA

Religious freedom also means the right to be different. I want to recount my own cultural-spiritual experience here as a Christian, but also as a Guatemalan Maya woman:

To this end, I refer back to the historical, religious context. In the 1970s, the Christian religion, with its liberation theology approach, embodied the illusion for young Maya women and men of achieving a dignified life for their own people. The Christian religion was not yet experienced as something that led to tensions with one's own culture, but rather as something that should have a liberating effect. However, soon various areas of intolerance became noticeable which went back to the historical suppression of Maya spirituality. Thus, the divine character of our ancestors was denied. At the same time, there were also efforts by some missionaries and indigenous people to interpret the gospel as a message from Jesus which does not reject or exclude any culture. This love of Jesus for the whole of creation is also found in the respect our culture has for women, men, children, plants, animals, rivers and forests, the whole cosmos. This is how a daily religious practice emerged which moved between these two realities. This practice is mainly guided by the daily prayer to and experience of God-Mother and God-Father. This experience of a divine mother and a divine father (Church Qajaw)[37] forms the basis of Maya spirituality and is expressed through various rituals and symbols. In a joint reflection between indigenous, Catholic priests and Christian baptised Maya leaders, ideas were shared on how Maya spirituality could be better used and integrated into Catholic practice. This was based mainly on 'Popol Wuj', the holy book of the Maya. Popol Wuj uses a symbolic and mythical language where the cultural meaning of the terms differs from their everyday use. In order to be able to understand the deep and symbolic meaning of the language in Maya culture, the superficial meaning of the words has to be overcome. The following table is intended to help categorise the different manifestations of God-Mother and God-Father:

Aj Raxa Laq	Master of the green sphere (Jícara Verde). Core of the earth.	God who is present and active in the cosmos, on earth and in history.
Aj Raxa Tz'el	Master of the blue sphere (Jícara Azul). God of heaven.	God who is present and active in heaven, in the transcendent.
Alom	God Mother	Divine essence which invokes its quality as the receiving mother.
K´ajolom	God Father	Divine essence which invokes its quality as the begetting father.
Tz'aqol	Creator / Builder	Divine attributes that are assigned to the creator
B'itol	Creator / Modeller	Divine attributes that refer to the actually present god.
Q'ukumatz	Feathered serpent	Divine attribute which surpasses itself in the concrete story. Links earth and heaven.
Ixmukane	The Old one / the grandmother	The wise and protective one. The oldest divine being of female origin.
Ixpiyakok	The Old one / the grandfather	The wise and protective one. Our oldest male god.
U K'u'x Cho	The heart of the lagoon	The strength of god lies in the life force and in calmness.
U k'u'x Palo	The heart of the sea	The energy of the god comes from impetuous life

[37] Term for mother and father in Maya-Quiché

In a multi-ethnic country like Guatemala, being Christian does not mean a simultaneous rejection of the values and spirituality of one's own culture. The range of our experiences as Christian Mayas reaches from making our Own invisible to the wholesale acceptance of the Other. Spirituality is always a living thing. Today's Mayan spirituality is thus closely linked to our general view of the world (cosmos-visión). For us Maya, God is simultaneously Chuchqajaw, Alom, K'ajolom, Tz'aqol, B'tol: Mother, Father, Recipient, Begetter, Creator and Maker of earth and heaven. For us, it is Mama and Papa in one. It is a divine being which comes from our everyday experience and manifests itself in our natural environment. Our earth is so to speak its face, as well as the face of human beings. As Christian Maya, we unite in ourselves the sum of these two spiritual experiences. That is why we must contribute to dialogue, respect and tolerance – just as Jesus says in the Gospel of John *'Yo he venido para que tenga vida y la tengan en abundacia.'* In Quiché, this corresponds to *'Le utz k'aslemal'* (the concept of *Buen vivir*).

Because of this historical experience of suppression and intolerance towards our indigenous spirituality, many indigenous people have in the past only lived their faith in secret and experience today's opening towards indigenous cultures as a great gift. But even today, we still experience painful actions by certain members of the Catholic church and the Pentecostal church, who want to systematically demonise and destroy our identity and spirituality and never tire of emphasising that these are not compatible with Christianity. However, the promise from Jesus of a 'Life in all its fullness' constantly reaffirms to us that God is also among us Maya.

This brief reflection, which places us Maya in the centre, aims to show that we do not seek pity or want crumbs of justice. Rather, we want respect of our collective rights, the right to our belief and the right to full participation. We want to emerge from clandestinity and fear and openly live our Maya-Christian faith. At the same time, we want a respectful dialogue with the church and with the movements which still call our faith in God satanic.

This is my personal experience of life as a Christian Maya. It has freed me, changed me and given me dignity. With this sentiment, I believe that a shared reflection and a dialogue about a reality which has set us apart and hurt us in the past, but which can also help us in the future to see ourselves as sisters and brothers of one human race, to be urgently necessary.

Observations and recommendations

Although the Guatemalan context is also shaped by the influence of Latin American liberation theology, it takes quite a different slant from the previous examples from Brazil and Columbia. The political discourse is much less strong here. All the more urgent is the reference to the historically painful experience of the Maya, whose indigenous religiosity was pushed to the margins by the colonial belief system.

The author unites in her person – as a graduate of Catholic theology, as a woman and as Maya – three identities that characterise the Guatemalan context. With her personal background, she has first-hand experience of threefold discrimination (female, indigenous, poor) and can understand the perspective of the target groups of the Guatemala programme with great sensitivity. She has to personally cope daily with the tensions that arise because of these multiple identities. At the same time, she unites in her person the different views and belief systems and can thus occupy a key role as bridge builder, as well as a religious and cultural interpreter. Thus, she describes the religious reality of the people in Guatemala as a living reality which is subject to constant change. Daily life demands of people a constant negotiating process between different, partly complementary but also contradictory religious poles. This daily religious practice is also marked by a high degree of syncretism. Different elements from two religions (Catholicism / Maya Religion) are combined in a new way. For example, concern for creation is shared by both belief systems, while in the Mayan belief system, God has motherly as well as fatherly features.

Maya ritual as part of a Fastenopfer workshop on psycho-social conflict transformation, © Fastenopfer, 2012

Despite commonly shared elements, the author insists firmly on the right to cultural and religious difference. Because the wounds from the personal as well as the collectively shared experience of oppression have not yet healed. It is therefore even more important and valuable that the coordinator, as a Catholic theologian and a Maya, unites these different perspectives in herself and contributes a corresponding sensitivity and openness for cultural and religious themes. It is thus essential that in future, the target groups in the Guatemala programme are given appropriate support in their efforts to strengthen their cultural and religious identity.

Invocation[1]

Heart of the sky (Corazón del Cielo),
heart of the earth (Corazón de la Tierra),
your holy path goes from east to west,
you are born and die – each day anew,
to teach us the way.
You are the star,
that will show us the ascents and the descents,
that we pass through.

Creator and shaper of our paths,
give us the strength and energy
to start on this journey today.
Show us the means, the forms and the conditions
of this march,
in the search for a level, white path,
so that it can give answers to our people.

Mother and father of all generations,
you, who guides us in our pathways,
we beg you to accompany us so
that we find our fate,
that the different visions unite into a new one,
and that the innovative strength is always that of unity

Cleanse and adorn our paths with the blood of our martyrs,
guided by the experiences of our ancestors,
protected from confrontations by the wisdom of our wise ones.
(Maltiox)[2]

[1] This is an invocation that was used at several meetings of the national, indigenous pastoral committee of the Bishops' conference in Guatemala. The author of the prayer is unknown.

[2] Many thanks to Maya k'iche'.

Nepal: Dance, on the occasion of the partner workshop, © Teeka Bhattarai, 2017

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