

## BOX 53.1 Doubt, Atheism, Non-belief, and Non-Commitment

We refer to *doubt* as a motivational force that leads one to reluctance or resistance to received wisdom and practices. If we take Russell's (1961) colloquial distinctions as a starting point, *atheists* accept two propositions. The first is that we can know if gods exist. The second is that what we do know points to their lack of existence. *Agnostics* reject the first proposition and the second by implication, positing that there is neither enough reason nor evidence to answer the question. In this view, then, agnostics doubt while atheists confidently reject. What brings people to these positions, of course, is complicated, particularly if we take Goody's views seriously, just as the processes that lead to a rejection of theism are manifold (Norenzayan and Gervais 2013), the kinds of rejection or resistance to religion are multitudinous (Blanes and Oustinova-Sjepanovic 2017). There are different shades of *non-belief* (e.g. atheism, agnosticism, and apatheism), and the ethnography of doubt or apathy, then, would examine how people variously express such states. As we have no a priori reason to suggest that a 'true' atheist is one who neither believes nor practices throughout some arbitrarily assigned span of time in his or her life, and there are no data on small-scale societies that reliably sample and measure such a position, we focus here on 'traditional' (i.e. pertaining to religions in small-scale societies) ways of expressing doubt and resistance to religious traditions in a variety of ways. *Non-commitment*, then, can vary between and include both *non-belief* (i.e. the mental processes involved in assigning truth value to something) and *non-participation*.

Here, we restrict our discussion to religious commitment – namely, individuals' beliefs about spiritual agents and the behaviours they associate with them (Wallace 1966; Spiro et al. 1987, 187–222; Purzycki and Sosis 2013) – and religious non-commitment. The foci have the benefit of avoiding issues of classifying social belief systems such as communism as a religion by virtue of its repressive ideological dogma. Similarly, we do not equate religious faith with 'ultimate concern' (Tillich 1957), thereby considering any target of maximal passion an object of religious devotion. Our focus is on popular beliefs and practices rather than targeting doctrine (see below). In what follows, then, 'religious doubt' refers to a lack of conviction or sense of uncertainty about spiritual beings and their associated practices.

While not crucial to our presentation, we do assume that belief and behaviour are dynamic. Behaviours can further stabilize ideological commitment and can contribute to forging beliefs as well, just as much as beliefs can harness the motivations to propel an individual to act (Sosis 2003). Acknowledging this dynamism highlights the weaknesses in some perspectives about what it means to be non-religious; one can be ideologically an

## Traditional Societies

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## Introduction

Anthropologist Jack Goody (1996, 679) noted that 'Both gods and doubts are widespread, transversal (if not universal) aspects of culture, the result not of inbuilt processes but of the interaction between language-using human beings and their social and natural environment.' There are two important points Goody conveys here. First, doubt – that is, reluctance or resistance to adopt received wisdom (see Box 53.1) – exists in all societies. Second, doubt does not exclusively spring from some internal faculty, but rather is the output of a complex set of inputs to an organism that produces, manipulates, and transmits ideas. In other words, doubt emerges as the product of a systemic process. One implication of this view is that doubt can express itself differently across contexts; if humans' social and natural environments vary, it follows that doubt – as rising from their interaction – should exhibit itself in a corresponding fashion. Here, we point to ways in which people variously express religious doubt across traditions.

While doubt may be universal, how ubiquitous atheism and scepticism are within and across small-scale societies remains unclear. This stems partly from a lack of data from appropriate samples; most research on secularization focuses on state-level societies (Solt et al. 2011; Norris and Inglehart 2012) and most research on religion (or its absence) in small-scale societies is anecdotal and thus lacks precise, comparable measures of commitment. Nevertheless, the ethnographic record makes clear that around the world, people express doubt in various ways. If we wish to come to terms with the presence and ubiquity of doubt in any precise fashion, we need a thorough sense of how people express it, how this expression varies, and ways of measuring that variation.

atheist, for example, but nevertheless a serious, devoted practitioner of the myriad behaviours associated with gods (see Box 53.1). Likewise, one can be a firm believer in the existence of gods and spirits, but without participating in any ritual activity or behaviours devoted to them. Indeed, anthropologists (e.g. Fernandez 1965) and social psychologists (e.g. Cohen, Siegel, and Rozin 2003) have recognized that different social groups value belief of religious ideas differently than they value participating in religious practices (Purzycki and Sosis 2011). Some emphasize ideological consensus (i.e. believing the same things) while others emphasize behavioural consensus, with beliefs relatively free to vary.

This chapter unfolds as follows. We begin by considering the universality of religion. Various scholars have argued that some traditional societies are devoid of religious commitments or even a system of religion; we contest these claims and look closely at several commonly referenced examples of societies that allegedly lack religion, specifically the Hadza and Pirahã. We then consider popular and scholarly claims that Buddhism is atheistic. Next, we examine ethnographic data on societies that foster religious traditions that challenge, subvert, and even resist the religious social order. These religions provide a very different model of religion than is generally familiar among western societies. We conclude with a discussion of directions for future research on non-belief and doubt in traditional populations.

### How 'Non-religious' Are Traditional Societies?

Rappaport (1999, 1) noted that 'No society known to anthropology or history is devoid of what reasonable observers would agree is religion.' Nonetheless, not all scholars agree, and there has been a recent influx and repetition of claims about the absence of religion, or some facet of religion, in certain traditional societies. These claims address the conceptual and/or factual aspects of the matter.

In terms of the conceptual, some scholars simply claim 'religion' is particular to only a few societies. Sperber (2018, 48), for example, doubts 'that all or even most human societies have had a religion in any useful sense of the term'. Boyer (2018, 121) elaborates: 'Religions appeared with large-scale kingdoms, literacy and state institutions. Before them, people had pragmatic cults and ceremonies, the point of which was to address specific

contingencies, misfortune in particular.'<sup>2</sup> For Boyer and Sperber, religion appears to be synonymous with spiritual traditions in large-scale social organizations and literacy. Despite the very high probability that all societies consist of individuals who hold beliefs about spirits and gods, perform behaviours thought to please them, and avoid and/or discourage behaviours thought to displease them, according to these authors, these do not qualify as 'religious'.

Political and religious leaders, as well as scholars, have also challenged observations asserting that traditional societies are religious or have religions. Small-scale societies, allegedly, are somehow less religious than large-scale societies. Christopher Columbus, for example, posited that the Canary Islanders 'would become Christians very easily, for it seemed to [him] that they had no religion' (Dunn and Kelley, Jr. 1989, 69). A century later, missionaries made similar statements about indigenous Caribbean traditions. One (Breton 1929 [c. 1635–47], 5) notes that 'After having lived without any knowledge of God, they die without hope of salvation. *It would be better for us to say that they have no religion at all, instead of describing as a cult of divinity all their trifling nonsense, superstitions, or more exactly sacrifices with which they honor all of the demons who seduce them*' (our emphasis). Another missionary (Bouton 1635, 1) suggests that 'they do not trouble themselves with knowing what becomes of [the souls of the dead]; at least we have never been able to draw this information out of them'. Note, however, that he readily admits to having little experience with the people themselves, and grants that he and his colleagues might 'learn more if we were to live among them or they among us. At the present time they are greatly separated from us by inaccessible hills, so that we see them rarely and only when they come by sea to trade with the French' (ibid.). So, in addition to sheer lack of interaction, missionaries might dismiss what they see as 'trifling nonsense', thus minimizing any association with 'anything heavenly'.

The assumptions or claims that traditional societies lack a genuine or 'full' religion have not gone away. For example, some social scientific discussions of contemporary small-scale populations make these claims, although they stem from different motives than earlier observations. Other researchers similarly characterize traditions such as Buddhism as a 'non-theistic' religion

2 Elsewhere, Sperber and Boyer discuss that the term 'religion' itself is useless and 'like aether and phlogiston, belongs in the ash-heap of scientific history' (<http://cognitio.nandculture.net/blog/pascals-blog/why-would-otherwise-intelligent-scholars-believe-in>). By sticking with our earlier conception, we are more aligned with Rappaport's sentiments.

when all evidence points to the contrary. In the remainder of this section, we discuss these examples and attend to some counterevidence to such claims.

### *The Hadza*

The Hadza are one of the most intensively studied small-scale populations in the world. Located in Tanzania, some Hadza communities have retained their foraging lifeways, while others have been incorporated into the market economy. But even Hadza foragers are increasingly influenced by market economies and tourism, and their territories continue to be pressured by neighbouring groups. Celebrated ethnographer James Woodburn (1982, 190) notes that: 'The Hadza link death and burial with their major religious celebration, the sacred *epeme* dance performed in pitch darkness each month ... Failure to hold the dance is believed to be dangerous. Performing the dance is believed to maintain and promote general well-being, above all good health and successful hunting.' He wagers that these traditions 'might provide a starting-point for elaboration into a set of systematic beliefs about fertility and regeneration in death but the evidence does not, I think, support the idea that such a set of systematic beliefs has already developed' (204). Here, Woodburn suggests a kind of primitive religion that does not quite yet have the degree of formalism in terms of beliefs that fully formed traditions would.

Following this, anthropologist Frank Marlowe (2010, 61) notes that after asking one man 'if there was only one god or several, he thought about it for a while, then said he was not quite sure. This sums up much about Hadza religion.' However, he continues:

I think one can say the Hadza do have religion, certainly a cosmology anyway, but it bears little resemblance to what most of us in complex societies (with Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc.) think of as religion. There are no churches, preachers, leaders, or religious guardians, no idols or images of gods, no regular organized meetings, no religious morality, no belief in an afterlife – theirs is nothing like the major religions. All the beliefs and rituals associated with the *epeme* dance and *epeme* meat eating are at the heart of Hadza religion. (Marlowe 2010, 61)

Here, Marlowe simply contrasts the religiosity of the major world traditions with Hadza beliefs and practices, as though what 'most of us in complex societies' know as religion is some kind of reliable measuring stick. However, posing a similar question about the nature of the Trinity, for instance, to a lay Catholic, is likely to yield a similar uncertainty if not a similar kind of verbal

shrug. In the same spirit, others have characterized the Hadza as being 'minimally religious' and 'having little belief in omniscient, moralizing gods' (Apicella 2018; Smith et al. 2018).

However, others whose research efforts have focused specifically on Hadza religion suggest a rich religious life including multiple rituals, spirits, cosmological beliefs, and practices (Power and Watts 1997; Power 2015; Skaanes 2015; 2017a; 2017b). The solitary study (Apicella 2018) that collected discrete quantitative data on the topic suggests that the vast majority of the sampled Hadza believe in – at least – two deities (only two were asked about, however) (Figure 53.1). Of the believers, 82 per cent also said that *Haine* (represented by the moon) and *Ishoko* (represented by the sun) are the same god, only 7.4 per cent of the sample claims that these gods do not exist, and 5.9 per cent claimed not to know if either exist. A total of 85.4 per cent of those who answered ( $n = 48$ ) claimed to engage in rituals devoted to *Haine*, whereas virtually the same proportion (85.7 per cent;  $n = 35$ ) reported engaging in rites devoted to pleasing *Ishoko*.

A more specific look at beliefs suggests that most responses about these deities are largely conceived of as punitive, moralistic, and knowledgeable (Apicella 2018). Figure 53.2 illustrates the distributions of these data (see Purzycki et al. 2016 for the codebook). Here, modal responses for both deities are positive for the knowledge and punishment scores, whereas the mode for moral interest questions are positive for *Haine* (dark grey) but negative for *Ishoko* (white) and the distribution is roughly uniform across answer options. Furthermore, there is no reliable indication that exposure to Christianity is associated with such beliefs (Purzycki et al., n.d.; Stagnaro et al., in press).

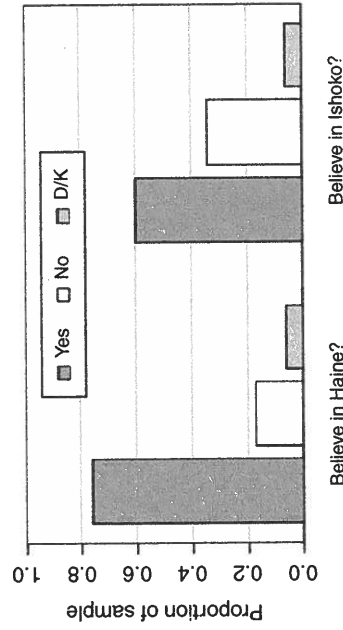


Figure 53.1 Distribution of belief in *Haine* and *Ishoko* among a Hadza sample ( $n = 68$ ). D/K refers to 'I don't know'. Values are from Apicella (2018).

The Pirahã of Brazil have gained some notoriety through the various efforts of ethnolinguist Daniel Everett (2005, 2008, 2009). In a chapter entitled 'Material culture and the absence of ritual', Everett (2008) characterizes the Pirahã as having a 'relative lack of ritual', which he refers to as 'a set of prescribed actions with symbolic significance for the culture' (71–84). Even if we maintain Everett's definition, he provides various points of evidence to the contrary. For example, the Pirahã make necklaces 'to ward off spirits and to look more attractive' (74). The Pirahã also bury their dead. According to Everett, however, 'there is little [ritual] that we can describe with this term' associated with the burials. Yet, Everett acknowledges that the Pirahã have 'loosely followed traditions surrounding the burial' and sometimes 'the dead are buried in a sitting position with many of their belongings placed beside them' (82). While both the necklace and burial consist of sets of 'prescribed actions with symbolic significance for the culture', Everett distances these practices from 'ritual'.

Everett ponders that 'the activity closest to ritual among the Pirahã is their dancing [which brings] the village together. They are often marked by promiscuity, fun, laughing, and merriment' (2008, 83). There is also a 'dance in which live venomous snakes are used'. In it, a man dresses up as an evil spirit and emerges from the jungle while singing about his lack of fear and dwelling place in the jungle. He then proceeds to throw the snake at observers who 'scramble away quickly' (84). Everett suggests that 'Such dances might be classified as a weak form of ritual, in the sense that they are witnessed and imitated and clearly have value and meaning to the community' (84). Yet, Everett also observes that 'On many rainless nights, a high falsetto voice can be heard from the jungle . . . it is taken by all the Pirahã in the village to be a *kaotibogí*, or fast mouth [spirit]. The voice gives the villagers suggestions and advice, as on how to spend the next day, or on possible night dangers' (139). Everett entered the jungle to confront the man doing this, who on the following day denied it, under the assumption of some form of spiritual possession. This description ends with Everett musing: 'Very puzzling, I thought' (ibid.).

Elsewhere, Everett (2005, 139) claims that the Pirahã 'have no creation stories or myths'<sup>3</sup> (632). However, there is evidence from ethnographers (Gonçalves 1990, 2000; Everett 2009; Nevins et al. 2009a, 2009b), including rituals conducted under the auspices of spirits, and an active shamanic

<sup>3</sup> Here it is unclear whether or not Everett claims they have no creation stories at all or neither creation stories nor myths. See below for how the conversation develops.

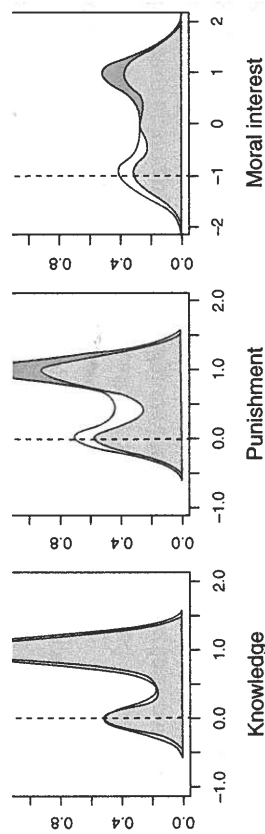


Figure 53.2 Density plots of Hadza claims about the breadth of knowledge, punishment, and moral interests of *Haine* (dark grey) and *Ishoko* (white). Scores for knowledge and punishment are the means of two binary questions (no = 0; yes = 1) and the moral interest scores are means of three (no = -2; I don't know = 0; yes = 2). Reference lines denote the minimum possible values. Sample sizes vary across questions and deity (min. = 32, max. = 44).

As for their Hadza behaviours, *epeme* and the *mutioko* are of central importance. *Epeme* can refer to the ritual, individuals who have been successfully initiated into the otherwise secretive rituals, prestigious parts of meat surrounded with taboos and norms regarding its consumption, and a deity. According to one account, individuals can formally express others' transgressions during the *epeme* ceremony (Skaanes 2017a, 107). Some of Apicella's informants suggest that the Hadza engage in this tradition 'for themselves, not a god . . . [Moreover,] nothing bad will happen if they do not do the dance, it can be used to bring rain and good fortune, to heal the sick, and to make people happy' (Apicella 2018, 137). However, Skaanes (2017a, 108) details how people dance for spirits where 'a dancer communicates for whom it is that he is going to dance. This makes the spirit of the person he dances for enter the body of the dancer through his head, and the dancer becomes a vessel for the spirit of the one in whose name he dances.' Participation in these rituals requires a certain level of maturity, and there are ritual specialists who have exhibited specific behaviours of initiation. Relationships forged in the *epeme* ritual predict sustained cooperative behaviours (Hill et al. 2014).

In summary, then, contrary to some portraits, Hadza traditions – many of which are conducted in secret – are demographically structured in important ways, they create and maintain relationships, and are deeply intertwined with the Hadza cosmos and social order. In other words, the Hadza are indeed a religious society with many indicators of spirits and practices that can foster cooperative relationships that help maintain their communities.

tradition. According to Gonçalves (2000), the Pirahã religious worldview includes a multi-tiered cosmology, including an afterlife in which spirits 'compete for the responsibility to appear in [a] shamanic ritual' for naming people. The Pirahã spiritual landscape is full of various spirits and mythical beings. Other sources suggest that there are two major festivals that take place and both have the 'intention of provoking sounds, making a noise, sufficient for the demiurge Igagai, dwelling on the second celestial level, to hear them, becoming aware of their existence and of the exact place where they are found':

The Pirahã's [sic] worry that they may not be being located by Igagai can be interpreted as a fear of a repetition of what is contained in a mythic fragment narrating the destruction of the world. This destruction was due in the final instance to the fact Igagai was unaware where the Pirahã were. It was only through the crying of women, who were alone and without fire, that Igagai was then able to hear and locate them and start reconstruction of the world. (Gonçalves 2000; cf. Nevins et al. 2009b)

By Everett's (2005, 632) estimation, Gonçalves' work is 'the most reliable ever done by an anthropologist, but one simply cannot come to the best conclusions about Pirahã meanings working through the medium of the very poor Portuguese of Pirahã informants. Gonçalves based much of his research on work with two Pirahã informants whose Portuguese was somewhat better than that of most Pirahã.' Gonçalves acknowledges that he had to piece together what he calls 'a cosmology without myths' and 'where the ideas of the Pirahãs about the cosmos gain consistency in ritual and the dreams that are in fact [believed to be] lived experiences. It is this thinking that they elaborate via ritual discourse and dreams that would be the equivalent of myths in other Amazonian cultures' (cited in Everett 2009, 43). Everett (*ibid.*) concludes: 'the Pirahãs are repeating back amalgams of many of the stories that they have "pieced together" over the years from caboclo [ethnically mixed] traders who share in the myths that pervade almost all Amazonian societies. These are not indigenous.' Here, Everett concludes that the Pirahã had to learn these myths from outsiders, but the requirement that myths be exclusively indigenous is entirely arbitrary. The Pirahã do entertain such stories, and having them suggests how embedded they are in a greater Amazonian tradition (see Nevins et al. 2009b, 392-4).

If we focus on beliefs in spiritual beings and rituals devoted to them, the Pirahã are far from non-religious. Moreover, their ritual lives strongly suggest patterned behaviour under the influence of spirits, including possession and

transformation. These rites are not merely 'a set of prescribed actions with symbolic significance for the culture' as defined by Everett. Rather, they are practices that are clearly linked to influencing spirits' temperaments. In summary, the Pirahã, too, are religious.

### Are Small-scale Societies Lacking 'Moralistic' Traditions?

These examples are not unique (e.g. see Johnson 2003; Izquierdo et al. 2008 for similar discussion of attitudes towards the Matsigenka of Peru). Moreover, a related debate concerns not whether some small-scale populations lack religion, but whether these populations lack some specific *component* of religion. In fact, one of the most contested current debates in the evolutionary science of religion concerns whether or not small-scale societies had 'moralistic' or 'prosocial' religions prior to contact with the Abrahamic or other world religious traditions (Boehm 2008; Beheim et al., in press; Purzycki 2011; Johnson 2015; Watts et al. 2015; Norenzayan et al. 2016; Whitehouse et al. 2019). On one side of the debate, Norenzayan (2013, 127) suggests that 'ancestral religions did not have a clear moral dimension'. On the other side, Johnson (2015) rejects the idea that the gods of small-scale populations lack moralistic supernatural punishment.<sup>4</sup> Both draw upon the same cross-cultural work (e.g. Swanson 1960; Boehm 2008; Peoples and Marlowe 2012), yet arrive at different conclusions. If we define morality as norms of prosocial behaviour that entail a cost or benefit to others (Alexander 1987; Purzycki et al. 2018), do traditional religions truly lack 'a clear moral dimension'?

The San peoples of the Kalahari are often purported to maintain a religious tradition that lacks morality. Marshall (1962, 245) writes that 'Man's wrongdoing against man is not left to *Gaohúá's* [a deity] punishment nor is it considered to be his concern. Man corrects or avenges such wrong-doings himself in his social context' (cf. Katz 1982, 30). This oft-quoted passage (e.g. Wright 2009; Peoples and Marlowe 2012; Norenzayan 2013) portrays the San

4 The debates stem from whether or not religion can push prosociality beyond cooperation with kin and reciprocal relations. Norenzayan posits that moralistic, punitive, and omniscient gods can help promote the kinds of cooperation seen in state societies. As small-scale societies lack such gods, the reasoning goes, they are not as likely to become large without other mechanisms in place. Johnson, however, denies that small-scale societies lack such deities, and that general supernatural punishment can work well enough (though his focus is on general cooperation rather than its expansion beyond traditional boundaries). See discussion below describing how religious ritual facilitates cooperation between foraging camps.

as ultimately self-regulating and therefore a punitive moralistic deity is functionally unnecessary. However, there are a few compelling lines of evidence that warrant scepticism of this claim as a whole.

First, *#Gao/na* is reported to punish people both directly and indirectly. In the same article, Marshall (1962) reports that this deity can punish people for demonstrating their own dominance, taking honey, and accidentally shooting and eating a gemsbok that was *#Gao/na* in disguise. While these might not be construed as 'moral', it is evidence that this god is thought to punish people. Moreover, the San regularly plead with this deity to end suffering and to bring food and water to the community (Katz 1982, 30–1). Despite little evidence that *#Gao/na* is explicitly concerned with the kinds of moral expectations found in the Abrahamic traditions, he is a dominant agent that commands respect. As there is no reliable evidence beyond the speculation of ethnographers, the question remains open as to whether or not dominant, powerful deities that are explicitly moralistic are more effective at increasing cooperation than dominant, powerful deities associated with other forms of behaviour.

The second line of evidence is the fact that *other* San spirits are reported as caring about human moral behaviour; they intervene in order to reduce and/or exacerbate moral relationships (Lee 2003, 129–30), are the subject of a rich body of mythical morality tales (Guenther 1999), and are the targets of rituals conducted in an 'emotional climate of "dense moral interaction"' where local conflicts are resolved (Guenther 1979). These spirits, the *//gawwasi*, are either the children of the gods or spirits of deceased San. During the San trance dancing rituals, a 'dancer may pointedly address himself to issues of tension in the group, and berate individuals or the group collectively for their quarrelling and urge them to reconcile' (Guenther 1999, 195).

In addition to facilitating this intragroup harmony, aspects of these rites also build bridges between camps and – as these rituals are thought to be quite effective in healing by non-San – other South African ethnic groups. Katz (1982, 207) reports one dance that was attended by neighbouring camps 'despite the fact there is a major, ongoing argument between the two larger camps over a prospective divorce, the wife coming from one of the camps, the husband from the other'. This dispute was acted out, replete with name-calling and debate between the two camp members. After a while, 'they agree[d] to resolve their differences, at least for a time', then proceeded to sit together, ultimately laughing and dancing in unison (208). In sum, not only do the San have very clear moral dimensions to their religious traditions, but

there is evidence that their traditions can forge bonds beyond parochial boundaries.

### *Atheistic Buddhism?*

Similar – and old – claims exist regarding Buddhism's alleged lack of deities, moralistic or otherwise (see Kavanagh and Jong 2019 for a review). From general theorists William James (1958 [1902]) and Émile Durkheim (2001 [1915]) to generations of scholars of Buddhism (de Bary 1969; Rahula 1974), many continue to maintain the view that Buddhism is somehow an 'atheistic religion' or lacking in spiritual agents. While much of the contemporary scholarship accepts that Buddhism is replete with spiritual devotions (Obeyesekere 1991; Orrù and Wang 1992; Pyytiäinen 2003), some maintain the stance that Buddhism lacks gods 'in the Abrahamic sense' (Schlieter 2014), calling contrary claims 'merely an invention of 19th century Buddhist modernists' (Stausberg 2005, 150). As discussed earlier, the difficulty with making progress in such conversations is that scholars appear to be focusing on different analytical levels ranging between doctrine, the laity, and religious specialists.

Spiro (1982), for example, describes the Theravada Buddhism he encountered in villages of upper Burma (now Myanmar) as atheistic. Yet, he acknowledges that '[t]here are, to be sure, numerous gods in Buddhism' and that 'Buddhism might be called polytheistic' (Spiro 1982, xii). Indeed, he argues that gods become necessary in Buddhism because Buddhist explanations for suffering, which place 'responsibility for suffering exclusively on the sufferer', are 'less than satisfying emotionally' (Spiro 1996, 4). Consequently, offloading personal pain into the supernatural realm provides a more appealing and compelling account of human suffering. Spiro's extensive ethnographic work in Burma (1982, 1996) details widespread beliefs in witches, nats, ghosts, and demons, and corresponding ritual activities that engage with these supernatural agents, including festivals, exorcisms, and possessions. Other traditions explicitly treat Buddha(s) as god(s).

For example, East Asian Pure Land Buddhists (Mochizuki 1999; Stevenson 2007) are committed to a doctrine of a post-life salvation through devotional practices explicitly devoted to Buddhas associated with heavenly domains. Among many of the Buddhist laity in the Tyva Republic (Siberia), Buddha is a moralistic, punitive deity that has a hand in what happens to people after they die. In one study (Purzycki and Holland 2019), when participants were asked to freely list things that anger Buddha, most listed violations of moral behaviour and lack of virtue. A majority claimed that Buddha knows more

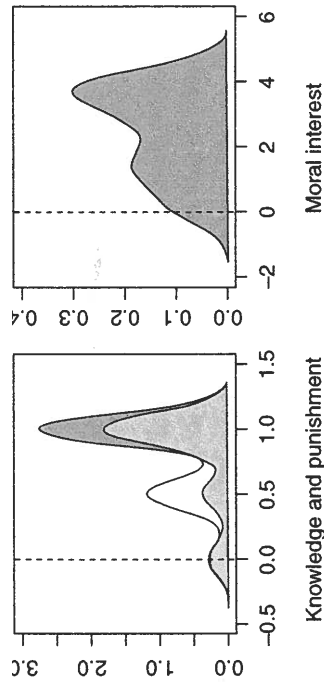


Figure 53.3 Density plots of Tyvans' ( $n = 81$ ) claims about the breadth of knowledge (left panel, dark grey), punishment (left panel, white), and moral interests (right panel) of Buddha. Scores for knowledge and punishment are the means of two binary questions (no = 0; yes = 1) and the moral interest scores are means of three items on a five-point scale (0–4). Reference lines denote the minimum possible values.

than normal humans, which technically is not far from doctrine, since he attained Enlightenment. However, Tyvans also claim that he actively punishes people and maintains an interest in humans' moral conduct. Figure 53.3 illustrates the distribution of responses to these questions. Out of a sample of seventy-nine individuals, sixty (76 per cent) reported that they performed rituals devoted to Buddha. In summary, while Buddhist doctrine may posit no deities, devoted Buddhists nevertheless may engage in rituals directed towards spirits, and even conceive of Buddha as a punitive, morally interested god who is the target of rituals.

#### Doubting, Subverting, and Resisting Tradition

Despite the questions lingering as a result of the within- and across-group variation exhibited in the ethnographic record, the above examples suggest that it is unlikely that religious traditions – especially traditions that modulate interpersonal and intergroup relationships – are absent from traditional contexts. In order to reach something more substantively conclusive, we might learn more if we actively examine such questions with fieldwork and listen to what traditional people have to say about such matters. Nevertheless, as Goody suggested, doubt and resistance remain equally universal. What varies across groups is how people express doubt and resistance to tradition. In what follows, we examine evidence of resistance to religion in small-scale societies in the ethnographic record.

Consider, for instance, Evans-Pritchard's (1976) observations of the Azande, where scepticism towards witch doctors was quite common: 'Absence of formal and coercive doctrines permit Azande to state that many, even most, witch-doctors are frauds . . . Faith and scepticism are alike traditional' (107). Resonating with Goody's sentiments, Evans-Pritchard finds that commitment and rejection coexist, but in a curious way: the Azande do not reject witchcraft *in toto*. Quite the contrary; while the Azande are well aware of ritualized sleights of hand and therefore sceptical about the abilities of many witch doctors, they nevertheless believe in witchcraft.

Much like popular notions of 'luck', what help maintain witchcraft beliefs are the vicissitudes of life; general misfortune and illness, coupled with the inevitable strife that comes with being a hypersocial animal, provides enough 'evidence' of witchcraft. Yet, few if any Azande claim to know precisely how witchcraft works (Evans-Pritchard 1976, 31); they just know that ill-will between people can cause misfortune and illness and that witchcraft is made possible by a specific fluid in witches' bodies. The Azande can see this fluid only upon an individual's death during processing the bodies of the deceased, thus prolonging the possibility of obtaining 'evidence' of being a witch.

Evans-Pritchard noted that upon asking an Azande if he were a witch, he would not respond with righteous indignation like he might if asked if he were a thief or murderer. Instead, an Azande might express hope that it isn't him who is causing misfortune to others and might point to the lack of evidence of the witchcraft fluid in his deceased ancestors. When witchcraft becomes especially troubling – for it is always afoot – rather than confidently take matters into their own hands, people consult a variety of oracular devices to provide hints as to the source of witchcraft. Azande might make a public appeal, noting the oracles informed them who the source of witchcraft was, but they do not publicly state who it is out of a courtesy they hope will be reciprocated by the witch (Evans-Pritchard 1976, 39). When the alleged witch is confronted, he typically apologizes and expresses that if he is a witch, he does not mean to intentionally cause harm and proceeds to ritualistically 'cool' any witchcraft fluid inside of him. Despite widespread belief in the tradition, it remains saturated with the acknowledgment of ignorance and suspicion of ritual experts.

#### *Ilahita Arapesh*

Like the Azande, the Ilahita Arapesh of Papua New Guinea evince a curious coexistence of commitment and rejection of the supernatural realm. In

a series of extraordinary ethnographies, Donald Tuzin (1976, 1980, 1997) describes the Tambaran, a secret male cult of the Ilahita and other Arapesh communities. The Tambaran consists of a brutal five-stage male initiation rite, lavish male feasts, and various sacrifices to the spirits. For Ilahita males, the Tambaran is 'a total way of life' (1980, 325). The Tambaran cult terrorizes both women and young male initiates, and often denies them much-needed food, especially meat. Tuzin documents that the men were fully aware that the Tambaran was a fiction and its spirits were not real. Indeed, the men expressed considerable guilt and remorse about deceiving the women. Husbands, to alleviate their guilt, would often secretly provide their wives with meat that should have been offered to the Tambaran spirits, telling their wives that the spirits were no longer hungry.

The Tambaran cult was ultimately dismantled by the Ilahita. Specifically, the men publicly admitted to the women that the Tambaran spirits were not real and that the entire cult had been an elaborate deception. Given the misogynistic inclinations of the Tambaran, the men feared the women's response, but the response they received was more surprising than anything they had imagined. The women claimed that they were well aware that the Tambaran had always been a hoax, yet they played along to satisfy the men. Thus, we are presented with a remarkable spectacle: a religious system in which all adult parties involved seemed to understand it as a fabrication.

However, the situation was not so simple. As Tuzin describes, '[t]he men's confession also carried a warning, which was that in a truer sense the Tambaran was not a hoax at all. The spirit venerated in the cult was and is real; its power was lethal in the past, and it could kill again' (1997, 1). The death of the Tambaran was partially fuelled by a Revivalist movement, whose Christian beliefs and doctrines ultimately reordered Ilahita lives. The Revivalists did not claim that the Tambaran spirits were not real; rather, they were depicted as quite real, but Satanic. As is often the case, religions create the problem and offer the solution: Jesus was superior and would protect the Ilahita from the Tambaran's demonic spirits.

#### *Clowns, Tricksters, Fools, and Their Festivals*

Many traditions around the world incorporate a certain level of tolerance for rejection – if not outright desecration – of their own values and customs in the form of mythical tricksters, sacred clowns, and festivals of disorder. In myth, tricksters are clever-but-foolish taboo-breaking-but-likeable anti-heroes who are typically responsible for the creation of humans and their

more important cultural developments, like language, hunting technology, and ritual traditions (Hyde 1998; Erdoes and Ortiz 1999).

In practice, ritual clowns disrupt sacred ceremonies, defile sacred artefacts, violate norms, and generally represent agents of chaos and disorder. Among the Mexican Mayo, for example, clown behavior involves a fascination with oral behavior, eating bread, feces, etc., and with anal behavior, with goosing or jabbing other [clowns] in the anus and with "defecating" upon sacred objects' (Crumrine 1969, 7). Throughout Polynesia, ritual clowns traditionally ridiculed chiefs and ritual specialists with impunity (Heremiko 1994). Many Native American traditions include clowns who disrupt ritual orders, perform rituals in reverse fashion, and adopt contrary lifestyles in everyday life as part of their sacred roles (Plant 1994; 2010). As Bricker writes of the Native Americans of highland Chiapas, although they 'do distinguish between sacred and profane acts and have a clear sense of what is sacrilege and what is not, this distinction is not equivalent to a distinction between the solemn and the comic, as is often the case in our own society. Thus humor and religious ritual need not be mutually exclusive with respect to setting' (Bricker 1973, 10).

In a similar way, many festivals celebrate disorder, indulgence, and the rejection of normalcy. The western European 'Feast of Fools' consisted of chaotic church masses replete with cross-dressing, singing obscene songs, eating blood sausage, and gambling at the altar, and the throwing of animal excrement at passers-by (Bourke 1891, 11–23; cf. Harris 2011). Writing about the corrosive quality that humour had on the hierarchy of medieval Europe, Bakhtin (1984, 88–9) writes that 'laughter make[s] no exception for the upper stratum, but indeed it is usually directed toward it . . . One might say that it builds its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state . . . [laughter has an] indissoluble and essential relation to freedom.' The fact that there was a persistent and deeply historical repression of humour in the western religious traditions suggests that even the powerful can fear mirth (Sanders 1995; cf. Resnick 2016).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> While the Hebrew bible and Rabbinic literature are replete with humour including wordplay and examples of humans besting and entertaining God (Friedman and Friedman 2014), scholars also recognize the tension between the god of Abraham and humour, and point to a common pool of indices. For example, Ecclesiastes 7:4 states that 'the heart of fools is in the house of mirth'. Luke 6:22 notes that 'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh [in heaven]'. Benedict of Aniane (747–821) writes that 'the Lord condemns those who laugh now' and 'there is never a time for laughter for the faithful soul' (cited in Resnick 2016, 93; Sanders 1995, 130). Writing in the 1120–40s, Hughes de Saint-Victor (1648, 100), a Christian priest and theologian, observed that expressing joy may be good or bad, depending on its source, but laughter is always evil (*risus omnimodo malus est*).



Such figures and events may reinforce adherence to the very norms they violate (or conversely, normalcy may reinforce the importance of rebellion; Turner 1995). They are demonstrations of how *not* to behave normally; they exhibit or are exhibitions of excess, gluttony, indulgence, sexual freedom, and the violations of general expectations. However, clowns and tricksters who have licence to be critical of the otherwise infallible, and to point out the folly in taking things and people – including one's self – too seriously, may function more to equalize others and humanize those in power rather than reaffirm their roles (Hereniko 1994). As these figures and events represent novelty, creation, and evolution, they are widely recognized as catalysts for change rather than maintainers of the status quo (Hyde 1998).

### Future Horizons in the Study of Traditional Non-belief

In this chapter we have discussed the question of religious non-commitment among societies that largely fall outside the common sampling schemes of most social scientists. We argued that contrary to long-standing narratives, there remains no society that lacks religion; even the prototypical examples of non- or minimally religious societies or atheistic traditions show the contrary. When researchers privilege targeted inquiry over casual observation it is clear that these societies exhibit forms of religiosity. We also discussed some ways in which people variously express doubt and resistance to tradition, showing that the two appear to go hand-in-hand. Resistance and doubt in traditional societies certainly has room for further inquiry.

In fact, we think it is no exaggeration to say that just about every aspect of the social science of (non)belief in traditional societies needs more attention if it is to be of use to understanding the human experience. While ignorance, doubt, and apathy are ubiquitous, atheism, and agnosticism as formal identities are not likely to be present among traditional societies; atheism as an organizational identity probably exists primarily as a response to, and therefore in competition with, theism. If traditional societies primarily emphasize behavioural over ideological commitment, atheism is not likely to arise if people are already relatively apathetic about believing in the existence of gods. Rather, incentives and ideological motivations in a context of competition are likely to contribute to the rise of atheism or non-commitment.

Take, for example, one ethnographic case study of atheists in India (Copeman and Quack 2017). In response to the religious tradition of cremation and the expenses of mortuary rites (including the feeding of upper caste

Brahmins), atheists have organized to donate their bodies to science and rhetorically package donations with signals of how much more virtuous and selfless the act is in comparison to the religious alternatives. Moreover, when benefits from a secular source outweigh those from a religious source, we should expect a reduction in religious commitment, unless religious systems acclimate to the novel conditions. Among the Shuar of Ecuador, access to secular medicine appears to be decreasing the likelihood of soliciting shamans as a first choice of healthcare (Blackwell 2009). Additional cross-cultural work is needed to explore the impacts of secular medicine on traditional healing practices, with particular focus on the impacts that reliance on secular medicine has on religious beliefs and practices.

Future work must also assess the ubiquity of religious non-commitment in traditional societies. Despite sophisticated and well-coordinated survey apparatuses, we barely have reliable rates of belief in state-level societies, let alone in traditional populations. Recent attempts (Gervais and Najle 2018) use clever methods to uncover the more reliable estimates of the prevalence of atheists in the United States (where admitting doubt is relatively taboo), but how useful these methods would be in traditional contexts remains unexamined.

Research will also need to ensure that such measures of commitment reliably account for variation in how people express a lack of commitment. If the target of inference is individual-level *general* non-religiousness, one must take any taboos or restrictions into account, otherwise it may be incorrectly assumed that people aren't committed to particular spirits or lack religion entirely. In other words, having a better grasp of the religious landscape in communities is necessary to assess how commitments vary. Many reasons abound as to why one would express non-belief in gods, ranging from taboo, irrelevance, competition in religious markets, and actual non-belief. This complicates the ability to obtain accurate estimates of non-belief across populations and traditions within those populations (e.g. people might secretly not believe in God, but have an unshakable faith in the existence of ghosts). Yet, to advance the study of non-belief in traditional societies, such information is essential. We are hopeful that careful and creative ethnographic work can begin to provide the appropriate data.

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## PART VIII

EMERGING ATHEISMS IN THE  
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY