

**Anthropology, Existence and Individuals**

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**Volume 2**

# **Musa**

**An essay (or experiment)  
in the anthropology of the individual**

**By**

**Jan Patrick Heiss**



**Duncker & Humblot · Berlin**

JAN PATRICK HEISS

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# Anthropology, Existence and Individuals

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*Jan Patrick Heiss*



## Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Introduction .....  | 13  |
| A. The Research Site – Kimoram .....  | 21  |
| I. Niger: Climate, Ethnic Groups, Administrative Structures .....                       | 21  |
| II. <i>The Canton de Garin Gabas, the Chef de Canton, Maire and Headmen</i> ..          | 23  |
| III. Kimoram .....  | 30  |
| B. The Research Process .....   | 45  |
| I. Methods for the Study of Individuals: Participant Observation and<br>Shadowing ..... | 46  |
| II. The Theories in the Researcher’s Mind .....   | 49  |
| III. Interaction with Field Subjects .....  | 51  |
| C. Musa – Daily Life in Kimoram .....   | 58  |
| I. Musa – Household and Family .....  | 58  |
| II. Musa’s Life History .....   | 60  |
| III. Daily Routine .....  | 61  |
| IV. People Close and Distant .....  | 74  |
| D. Musa – Relationships and Activities .....  | 77  |
| I. Mariama .....  | 77  |
| 1. Having a wife .....  | 77  |
| 2. Rights and duties .....  | 79  |
| 3. Power and authority .....  | 81  |
| 4. Man and woman .....  | 85  |
| 5. Intimacy and love .....  | 85  |
| II. The Children .....  | 91  |
| 1. Custody .....  | 91  |
| 2. The value of children .....  | 94  |
| 3. Providing for the children .....   | 96  |
| 4. Interaction with the children .....  | 98  |
| III. The Father .....   | 103 |
| 1. Splitting up the household .....   | 103 |
| 2. Power relations .....  | 107 |
| 3. A valued relationship and mutual affection .....                                     | 108 |
| 4. Diverging interests and conflicts .....  | 109 |
| IV. Other Household Members .....   | 115 |



|       |  |     |
|-------|--|-----|
| V.    | Kin and Affines .....  | 117 |
|       | 1. <i>Dangi</i> .....  | 117 |
|       | 2. Abdu's and the Imam's kinship group .....                     | 119 |
|       | 3. Other kinsmen from Musa's <i>dangi</i> .....                  | 124 |
|       | 4. Affines .....   | 127 |
| VI.   | The Village, Friends and Relations in the Wider Region .....     | 129 |
|       | 1. Communal prayer .....   | 131 |
|       | 2. Ceremonies on the occasion of birth, marriage and death ..... | 132 |
|       | 3. Self-regulation .....   | 133 |
|       | 4. Village assemblies .....                                      | 134 |
|       | 5. Formal organisations: cereal bank and water pump .....        | 135 |
|       | 6. Self-regulation again .....                                   | 138 |
|       | 7. School and self-regulation .....                              | 140 |
|       | 8. Musa's community work .....                                   | 140 |
|       | 9. Friends and relations in the wider region .....               | 142 |
| VII.  | Labour Migration .....   | 144 |
|       | 1. Nimari .....  | 146 |
|       | 2. Fieldwork in Nimari .....                                     | 149 |
|       | 3. The migrant labourers' journey to Nimari .....                | 150 |
|       | 4. Getting started .....   | 151 |
|       | 5. Daily routine .....   | 154 |
|       | 6. Musa in different social settings .....                       | 158 |
|       | 7. People close and distant .....                                | 159 |
|       | 8. The villagers from Kimoram .....                              | 160 |
|       | a) The composition of the group .....                            | 160 |
|       | b) Rights and duties, cooperation, competition .....             | 161 |
|       | c) Patience and anger .....                                      | 164 |
|       | d) <i>Maula</i> .....  | 165 |
|       | e) Carrying on with Kimoram .....                                | 166 |
|       | 9. The bakery .....  | 168 |
|       | 10. Other relations beyond the bakery and the workplace .....    | 172 |
|       | 11. Relations at the workplace .....                             | 173 |
|       | 12. Earning and spending money .....                             | 176 |
|       | 13. Musa's relationship with his work and with Nimari .....      | 178 |
| VIII. | Religion and Magic .....   | 180 |
|       | 1. Basic tenets .....  | 181 |
|       | 2. Prayer .....  | 182 |
|       | 3. Fasting during the month of Ramadan .....                     | 183 |
|       | 4. The religious dimension of social norms and values .....      | 184 |
|       | 5. Divine sanctions .....  | 185 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| 6. Responsibility .....   | 186 |
| 7. Islamic learning .....   | 186 |
| 8. Religious lore .....   | 190 |
| 9. Qur'anic medicine .....  | 191 |
| 10. Religion, others and the self .....   | 193 |
| 11. Other religions .....   | 194 |
| 12. Spirits .....   | 194 |
| 13. Witches .....   | 195 |
| 14. Humans with extraordinary abilities .....   | 196 |
| 15. Medicine .....  | 198 |
| 16. Musa's religious beliefs in everyday life: Certainty of religious be-<br>liefs and confidence in the future ..... | 200 |
| a) Certainty of beliefs .....   | 201 |
| b) Certainty of the future: confidence .....  | 202 |
| E. Who is Musa? .....   | 206 |
| I. Desires .....  | 206 |
| II. Social Relations .....  | 212 |
| 1. Relations within the family .....  | 212 |
| 2. Relations beyond the family .....  | 214 |
| 3. The village community .....  | 217 |
| 4. Material goods in social relationships .....   | 218 |
| 5. Being among others .....   | 221 |
| III. Values .....   | 223 |
| 1. Conflict-avoidance and peacefulness .....  | 224 |
| 2. Patience .....   | 224 |
| 3. Reason .....   | 225 |
| 4. Self-control .....   | 226 |
| 5. Shame-sensitivity .....  | 226 |
| 6. 'Love' of others .....   | 227 |
| 7. Obedience towards one's parents and elders .....   | 227 |
| 8. Equanimity and freedom from bad mood .....   | 228 |
| 9. Accepting reality .....  | 228 |
| 10. Courage .....   | 229 |
| 11. Work .....  | 229 |
| IV. Some Tentative Remarks on Reasoning and Planning .....  | 230 |
| V. Mood .....   | 234 |
| VI. Self-Image and Relationship with Himself .....  | 236 |
| F. Actor – Person – Individual: Theoretical Aspects .....   | 238 |
| I. Tugendhat's Theory of the Person .....   | 239 |
| II. Anthropological Studies .....   | 241 |

|      |   |     |
|------|---|-----|
| 1.   | Lois Beck (1991): <i>Nomad</i> .....  | 241 |
| 2.   | Unni Wikan (1990): <i>Managing Turbulent Hearts</i> .....                     | 244 |
| 3.   | João Biehl (2005): <i>Vita – Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment</i> ....    | 245 |
| 4.   | Vincent Crapanzano (1980): <i>Tuhami – Portrait of A Moroccan</i> .....       | 247 |
| 5.   | Intermediate result .....   | 249 |
| 6.   | Overcoming bias .....   | 249 |
| III. | Theoretical Authors .....   | 251 |
| 1.   | Gary Becker (1976): <i>The Economic Approach to Human Behaviour</i> .         | 251 |
| 2.   | Giddens (1984): <i>The Constitution of Society</i> .....                      | 253 |
| 3.   | Piette (2009): <i>L'Acte d'Exister</i> .....                                  | 255 |
| 4.   | Intermediate result .....   | 257 |
| IV.  | Michael Jackson's <i>Existential Anthropology</i> .....                       | 259 |
| V.   | And this Book? .....  | 260 |
| G.   | Explaining Musa's Life .....  | 263 |
| I.   | Peasant Societies .....   | 264 |
| 1.   | What is a peasant? .....  | 264 |
| 2.   | The diversity of social forms among peasants .....                            | 266 |
| 3.   | The ecology, society and culture of pre-statal cereal producers .....         | 271 |
| a)   | Mode of production .....  | 272 |
| b)   | Kinship reckoning, the exchange of women and the desire for children .....    | 273 |
| c)   | Authority and power .....   | 273 |
| d)   | Commensality and adoptive practices .....                                     | 274 |
| e)   | The status of women .....   | 275 |
| f)   | Articulation of modes of production .....                                     | 275 |
| g)   | Values .....  | 276 |
| 4.   | Cultural models .....   | 278 |
| 5.   | The 'death' of the peasantry .....  | 281 |
| 6.   | Summary .....   | 284 |
| II.  | Individuals in Peasant Studies .....  | 285 |
| III. | Islam in the Region .....   | 286 |
| 1.   | Lower and higher levels of learning .....                                     | 287 |
| 2.   | Sufi brotherhoods .....   | 288 |
| 3.   | Religious influence of the elite on the common believers .....                | 292 |
| 4.   | The influence of religious doctrine onto Musa's thinking and behaviour .....  | 295 |
| a)   | The <i>Al-Kitab 'Ulum al-Mu'amala</i> by Uthman dan Fodio ([n.d.] 1978) ..... | 296 |
| b)   | The <i>tafsir</i> recordings .....  | 298 |
| aa)  | Ontological tenets .....  | 301 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| bb) Religiously motivated rules for daily life practice .....                         | 301 |
| cc) Behaviour towards God: fear of God and obedience towards<br>God .....             | 302 |
| dd) Behaviour towards God: acceptance of God's will .....                             | 303 |
| ee) Behaviour towards God: acting for the sake of God .....                           | 303 |
| ff) Behaviour towards God: repentance .....   | 304 |
| gg) Behaviour towards God: hope .....   | 304 |
| hh) Behaviour towards God: gratitude towards God .....                                | 305 |
| ii) Behaviour towards people: taking care of one's parents and<br>obedience .....     | 305 |
| jj) Behaviour towards people: social values .....                                     | 306 |
| kk) Behaviour towards oneself: self-control, reason and self-<br>transformation ..... | 307 |
| IV. Individuals and the Interaction of Societal Fields .....                          | 309 |
| H. Summary .....  | 313 |
| Bibliography .....  | 316 |
| Index .....   | 325 |



## Introduction

Society and culture are the main subjects of anthropology. It is a truism that the study of society and culture presupposes the existence of socially embedded and historically shaped individuals. Socially embedded and historically shaped individuals exist, relate to each other and build up society through their actions and interactions. Yet, as society and culture are in the centre of anthropology's interest, its focus of attention shifts away from these individuals, whose existence it presupposes. The anthropologist's attention instead turns to social practices, societal mechanisms, or commonly held beliefs, for instance. There is no reason to object to this. Yet, this shifting of attention leaves a void, precisely where the individual is. The individual ought to become, so I argue in this book, a subject of investigation in anthropology.

Anthropology seems to be unaccustomed to thinking about the individual. When anthropologists hear about the study of individuals in anthropology, they often think of a biographical approach (e.g. Shostak 1982, van Onselen 1996), which focuses on an individual's life-history rather than the individual itself. They think of ethno-psychological approaches which discover unconscious elements in individuals (e.g. Crapanzano 1980). Or they think of approaches where individuals serve to exemplify the impact of societal processes (e.g. Biehl 2005). All these approaches are valuable and important, but they do not replace the need to study individuals as such. *Anthropology does not select a person in the field, try to empirically research their life, describe it, analyse it in theoretical terms and, as far as possible, explain it. However, this is the main objective pursued in this book.* The field subject who becomes a theme in this book is Musa<sup>1</sup>, a Hausa peasant from Niger.

As the study of individuals is not a well-established theme in anthropology, I was not able to draw on any previous examples and needed to somehow grapple with the subject myself. I drew inspiration from anthropologists who had placed a special focus on individuals in their monographs and from writers who established theories about individuals.

### *Arguments against my study*

Whenever I explained my research, listeners were divided in two categories. They were either interested and supportive or rather critical, if not hostile. I

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<sup>1</sup> The names of people and places are anonymised in order to protect their identities.

learned to take it as a sign of having chosen a good theme that the number of those who were simply disinterested was small. Before introducing the reader to the structure of the book and explaining where I think the benefit of my study lies, I will discuss the arguments brought forth against my study. This appears to be necessary in order to convince those readers who take a rather sceptical stance towards it.

**Argument 1:** Some people argued that I speak about a fair number of authors, but not about the essential ones for my theme. I would miss out Marcel Mauss, Brian Morris, Marilyn Strathern, i. e. the writers who are important in the anthropology of the person. However, the anthropology of the person is about the self, i. e. self-images and the way in which actors relate to themselves. It is not about the individual and its “real life”. Individuals have self-images and it is important to familiarise oneself with these if one wishes to understand them, even though their lives cannot and must not be reduced to their self-images.

**Argument 2:** Some people criticised me for using *the* Western notion of the individual. This argument implies that there is a single notion of the individual in the West. I don't think this is true. Instead, we rather have a diversity of ideas about the individual in the West. For some people, the individual is conceived to be forging his or her own destiny and as being largely in control of the circumstances of their life; others stress the dependency of man on its environment. Moreover, it is far from certain that one and the same person always uses the same notion of the individual. The same person might conceive of himself differently in different situations (cf. Hollan 1992); nothing forces man not to be self-contradictory over time. Hence, anthropologists are not able to draw on a single Western notion of the individual. Neither does it help to draw on non-Western notions of the individual, as they would probably have the same limitations, although it would be intriguing to write a monograph on an individual from the perspective of a Tallensi (if one was able to do so) who would attribute the vicissitudes of a person's life to spiritual agencies (cf. Fortes 1983). After all, Western notions of the individual presumably are not that fundamentally different from non-Western notions. LiPuma (1998) and Spiro (1993: 143–5) have shown this for Western and non-Western notions of the self. Given the diversity of models which define the self or – *mutatis mutandis* – the individual, there appears to be only one way out of this impasse. We have to focus on that notion of the individual that is the most convincing and encompassing and to try to develop it further by comparing it to other notions of the individual and by applying it to the empirical world. We can expect to find such a notion among those offered by Western science, as it has assiduously pursued the process of developing a notion of the individual for a long time (see chapter F).

**Argument 3:** Some people argued that I cannot plausibly contend that the individual I am writing about is representative of his society or status group. I cannot, therefore, produce generalisations about society. However, as I do not intend

to make generalisations about a society, I do not need to make sure that I study an individual who is representative of a society or status group. At the same time, I do not consider the production of general statements the only meaningful aim of science. I would even go so far as to contend that some developments in society or history can only be understood if we pay attention to individuals who are not fully representative of society at large, but nevertheless influential. To take a well-known example, it is an open question whether fascism in Germany would have taken the same trajectory without Hitler. Yet we cannot safely surmise that Hitler's extraordinary capacities to conceal his self and to manipulate others did not play an essential role in taking over political control in Germany and triggering a catastrophe that affected the entire world. Even though Hitler cannot be said to be representative of his entire status-group, we cannot and should still not ignore him when attempting to explain fascism in Germany. As a corollary of that, those anthropologists who expect anthropology books to portray the society and culture of a certain region will naturally be disappointed by this book, yet they would be measuring it against inappropriate criteria.

**Argument 4:** Some people argued that studying individuals is the equivalent of perceiving individuals as monads, without windows to their outer world. I would, according to the proponents of this argument, consider individuals as producing actions autonomously and independently from society. This argument has an inherent flaw in the fact that the notion of the individual does not imply its non-relatedness to other members of society, the denial of processes of socialization or the irrelevance of history to what an individual thinks, feels or does. Neither does it imply that different individuals do not share common beliefs or do not engage in common practices. The argument is all the more astonishing, since the anthropologists themselves, in the very moment that they are putting forth this argument, conceive of themselves as individuals, with identifiable minds and bodies, carriers of agency that are embedded in social and historical processes.

Hence, using the notion 'the individual' does not imply that one endorses the view that an individual can escape from the social and cultural forces acting upon him. However, at the same time, we do not have sufficient evidence to support the view that everything is indeed socially and culturally determined. The fields of sociology, history and psychology have not yielded theories that enable us to reliably anticipate people's inner states or actions; they have just increased the probability of our anticipations. The question of whether man disposes of agency irrespective of the social and cultural context he is in remains, at the very least, an open question.

**Argument 5:** Some have argued that such a study offers nothing new. Every anthropologist, so they say, knows that there are indeed individuals, but anthropologists just write as if there weren't any individuals and if they were all so-