

The bandit and his myths

The collective production of violent charisma [Introduction]

Lucia Michelutti et David Picherit

<https://doi.org/10.4000/terrain.21604>

TRANSLATION: Le bandit et ses mythes

Abstract:

From Pablo Escobar to Phoolan Devi, myths featuring bandits (more or less socially-responsible) have grown in popularity and reach and are disseminated through digital media. Constructed through processes of transcultural bricolage, these myths celebrate bandits, gangsters and mafia politicians, dead or alive, as effective weapons in the present. At the same time, they project an uncertain posthumous future for the bandit. In these myths, fact and fiction are fused to give birth to powerful fictional realities that exceed the life of these figures, giving them sometimes unexpected post-mortem careers. This introduction reveals how these fictional realities are elaborated through a process of ‘myth scripting’ that becomes constitutive of bandits’ authority. This concept is also our ethnographic object: we explore an everyday fabrication of seduction, fascination and terror indissociable from the bandits’ capacity to spur others to action that is essential to the criminal political economy.

“People come from all over to perform *puja* [worship] at Veerappan’s grave. They even make their babies ingest soil from the graveyard. This is supposed to give them courage and strength ... it is the same ritual they do for Kattabhoman [a regional hero of the anti-colonial struggle], Veerappan is like a god for many. I am his daughter, and she is his widow. Veerappan belongs to us, too. So many films and books have been written and produced without our permission. ... We did not get anything in return. It was my mother who suffered. ... So please as soon as you go back to Paris or London, take pictures [of Lush products] and then my mother will file a complaint to get our rights back.”

David met the daughter of South India’s most famous bandit fifteen years after his death in 2004. While in his lifetime Veerappan had been a bandit known across his region, posthumously he has achieved an international standing. We find a striking illustration of this in the slogan promoting *Killing Veerappan*, the most recent film on his life: as the movie’s tagline put it, “It took ten years to catch Bin Laden, it took twenty to kill Veerappan.” But how did a sandalwood and ivory smuggler, credited with the murders of around 120 police officers and Forest Department agents, become the muse of an ethical natural-cosmetics multinational like Lush? While today Veerappan is celebrated as a Robin Hood figure, surely he could never have imagined his post-mortem metamorphosis into the face of a moustache wax, and into a fragrance called “Smuggler’s Soul”. Nor that he would become a demi-god for part of the local population.

A claimed kinship with Veerappan has long extended far beyond his family itself. According to Kumar (the local photographer who introduced David to the bandit's wife and daughter), "Veerappan belongs to the people, he's public property. They want to make money to get into politics." But not only his loved ones have their eye on the bandit's possible inheritance. The TV series *Sandhanakaadu* — with some 170 episodes dedicated to his life, broadcast in 2017 — was financed by Makkal TV, the channel belonging to the political movement for the caste to which he belonged. The programme celebrates the bandit's strength and bravery, which it presents as particular qualities of Veerappan's caste. The four strongmen who burst into David's hotel room late one night had no doubt about Veerappan's inherent caste-based qualities. They immediately asked him, in intimidating tones, "What do you think of Veerappan?"

Fortunately, one of them, Ravi, prompted David with the right answer: "He's a hero and a model for us all." Determined to remove any ambiguity as to the real circumstances of his hero's death, Ravi whipped out his phone and proudly brought up a clip from the TV series on YouTube. The scene showed Ravi himself acting the part of the murderer poisoning Veerappan: and here, TV fiction is used as proof. Even years after his death, this figure continues to feed regional political economies of crime, with "junior Veerappans" popping up all over the place. In 2015, in a forest far from Veerappan's own former sphere of influence, twenty migrant woodcutters were murdered by special police forces combatting sandalwood trafficking. According to the regional government, their real crime was their supposed ideological affiliation with the bandit (Picherit 2019).

Fiction, myth and reality seem to merge into one, giving rise to powerful "fictional realities" that embrace both bandits and the mafia-like environments in which they operate. Take also the example of another boss we met in North India – locally known as Lady Dabang. This politician and fearsome economic godfather proudly told Lucia of her connection to the bandit queen Phoolan Devi:

"I was a friend with Phoolan Devi. I visited her often in prison when she was in jail. We were supposed to go to New York together – President Clinton invited Phoolan to the White House and she asked me to go with her. But then she was killed. I am still in touch with her husband. These are some pictures of me and her together, wait and I will send someone to fetch them. We used to campaign together."

The term *dabang* has entered common parlance via Bollywood cinema thanks to two eponymous films, *Dabang* and *Dabang 2*, released in 2010 and 2012, respectively. Indeed, it has become the term of choice for referring to this region's gangster-cum-politicians. When Lady Dabang lays claim to this title — captivating the public imagination through the fear and respect it inspires — her connection with Phoolan Devi only strengthens her authority. Over the last fifteen years, the bandit queen has been transformed into a defied heroine of international renown. Long described in regional culture as a goddess (*devi*), a bandit (*dacoit*), a low-caste heroine (*bhaghi*) or a feminist, she became a global icon with the 1994 film *The Bandit Queen*. Two years after the film's release, she was elected as a member of parliament — a role she continued to occupy until she was murdered in 2001. The fascination with Phoolan Devi endures to this day, by way of biographies, films, plays, cartoons and video

games, translated into multiple languages. One Indian journalist's comments after her death spoke for themselves:

“Phoolan Devi had a larger-than-life image – of a victim of caste oppression and gender exploitation who fought back first by resorting to acts of gory revenge and later by moving on to the political plain. After her death, this image is sought to be metamorphosed into that of a phenomenal leader who waged a persistent struggle in the cause of the weak and the downtrodden, with a never-say-die spirit. ... Her life and the manner of her death have the makings of a myth.”¹

“Fictional realities”, as Begoña Aretxaga’s insightful formulation puts it (2002, 2003), now pervade the careers of bandits, gangsters and criminal politicians, in both their lifetimes and post mortem. Aretxaga uses this term to refer to how states’ fictional power can take on a life of its own — one able to sow terror, no matter how real their power actually is. This issue reckons with the pressing need to take these fictional realities seriously, in the production of (more or less social) bandits’ charismatic authority. Eric Hobsbawm (2007 [1969]) defined the “social bandit” as an outlaw active within a rural society, supported by populations who consider him a hero, a vigilante or a righter of wrongs. Embodying the virtues of Robin Hood, the social bandit for Hobsbawm is a universal figure of social rebellion, historically present throughout the world. Hobsbawm’s argument, based on the hypothesis that bandit myths echo the social reality of banditry (Wagner 2007: 356) has been widely critiqued. On this view, the social bandit is purely fictional and based on popular legends more or less fabricated by the state, in total contradiction with the violent practices of the mafias that really existed (Blok 1974). While the boundaries between fiction, truth and reality are ever blurred (Caïra 2011), our line of argument stands apart from debates that get lost in the dichotomy between myth and reality or which neglect the power of the imaginary in (often strictly categorized) criminal practices.

In this introduction, we instead consider fictional realities as realities in their own right and fully constitutive of the authority of these individuals operating within criminal political economies. These realities are moulded by the “collective myth scripting of bandits” — collaborative assemblages which bandits draw on in order to produce a reverential sense of respect and fear. This collaborative scripting, with its uncontrollable agency, helps produce a sense of awe toward criminal politicians, mafiosi and bandits. We will further elaborate this concept; for now, we shall just note that there is a need for an empirical observation of myth scripting and with it of the production of awe that is at the heart of establishing personal sovereignties in today’s world. And as Jason Pine (2012) reminds us, these sovereignties rely on both fear and the power of seduction. From this point of view, bandits are a case study of the power of such scripts in the emergence of charismatic authorities.

An art form

Our perspective draws on our detailed ethnographies of the art of being a chief or a boss across India (the “art of bossism”) (Michelutti *et al.* 2018). And yet South Asia is no exceptional case. As much research on Africa (Bayart *et al.* 1997), South America (Jaffe 2013; Arias 2016) and elsewhere shows, assemblages of licit and illicit, legal and illegal, and even legitimate and illegitimate, sustained by globalized production

¹ Purnima S. Tripathi, “The End of Phoolan Devi”, *Frontline*. India’s National Magazine, 4 August 2001

chains, criss-cross today's capitalist economies. The "bandit" figures on whom this issue focuses operate in economies which are neither marginal nor underground nor external, but deeply rooted in capitalism and the cogs of state machinery. They profit from financial crime, the illegal extraction of raw materials or the exploitation of labour in illicit economies which are essential to the fabrication of goods and services at the global scale (Van Schendel & Itty 1999). These criminal political economies are populated by strongmen who have become popular models of authority, indeed ones attributed extraordinary qualities and even divine origins. Considered Robin Hoods, mafiosi, terrorists or criminal outlaws by states and populations, they are distinguished by the mix of admiration, fear, hatred and fantasy which they inspire. From *dacoit*, *goonda* and *dabang* in India to *badmash* in Pakistan, *banditos* in Guinea-Bissau, *armas*, *premans* and *jagos* in Indonesia, *malasos* and *dalasosa* in Madagascar, *narcos* and *malandros* in Colombia and Mexico, *dons* in Jamaica, *k'ano- nieri kurdebi* (a translation of *vory v zakone*) in Georgia and *zu'ran* and *qabadayât* in Lebanon, the figures addressed in this issue are at the heart of the social, economic and political practices that govern these populations' everyday existence. In some cases, they even reach political power — not despite, but thanks to, their capacities to exercise predatory violence, to build up fortunes, to dispense justice and to solve populations' problems. Above all, their intrepid acts grant them a potential for seduction: these larger-than-life figures become authoritative because they inspire fear and respect. The bosses in question are sovereign (or are becoming so) across territories of varying scales.² This art of being a boss can be defined as a continuous performance of personal sovereignty, indissociable from popular aesthetic practices and living mythologies which embrace both illegal practices and their configurations in a globalized world. An intimate understanding of criminal lives, acquired through detailed transcultural ethnographies, thus sheds unprecedented light on the collaborative production of bandit myths.

From Pablo Escobar to Phoolan Devi, these myths grow exponentially and spread in real time via digital media. They celebrate bandits, gangsters and mafioso politicians (whether dead or alive) on the basis of transcultural, *in situ* patchworks of rituals, traditional ballads, videos and photos, text and music, video games and apps. The multiple fabrication and circulation techniques able to spread "belief in" or "knowledge of" (Luca *et al.* 2019) these criminal lives are now easily accessible. And there is an endless list of myth scripters who can potentially be recruited by these bosses' seductive power: film producers, journalists, artists, lawyers, political party leaders and police officers collaborate with YouTubers and indeed anyone armed with a mobile phone. Moreover, the protagonists work to produce their myths in their own lifetimes: an effort that their criminal activities require. But if myth is a weapon for the immediate present, it is also a date with eternity. For if each draws on a varied pantheon of criminal figures, none can be sure what place will be reserved for them therein. From this frenzy there emerges an irreducible swell of compositions, their agency only heightened by their instant propagation. It would seem pointless to try to establish any fixed truth.

Collaborative forms of myth scripting are characterized by the immediate assemblage of a galaxy of elements which each have their own flexible temporalities and transcultural genealogies. These scripts come from multiple actors — from the bandits

² On sovereignty and the body as a site and object of sovereign power, see Agamben 1998.

themselves, and from society, both in their lifetimes and afterward. The mythologies that today impose themselves on gangsters and states are neither folkloric constructs nor floating abstractions. Rather, these forms of myth scripting are ethnographic objects: we can examine their logics and temporalities, but also their mobilizations within criminal political economies. They circulate, set populations in motion and prompt action. There was a fine example of this in France in 2020 when a video that showed a drug deal taking place during the shooting of a rap video prompted the deployment of an entire police and judicial arsenal — the French state proving unable to work out whether this was fiction or reality. The anthropological concept of myth thus proves extremely valuable in closely tracing the fluid relations between belief and reality and between reality and action. Never fixed, myth is distinguished from historiography by its capacity for propagation (Wagner 1986: 34), today facilitated by social media and the compression of space and time.

Repeat offenders in love with justice

The protagonists of this issue do not always behave like saints or patrons. However they do have a common connection with cultural figures celebrating social banditry and the honourable criminal. They control neighbourhoods, markets, businesses and political groups — taking care, by violent means, of the conditions of insecurity or economic exploitation which their business activities require. These men (and, more rarely, women) are also skilled in leaving their mark on bodies and minds, capturing the imagination through extraordinary, flamboyant and terrifying feats. Sources of patronage and protection from the violence that they deploy, their actions provide the population with a striking demonstration of their authority: they kill, they intimidate, they protect, they act and make others do their bidding. Their personal interventions in even routine events of everyday life, such as pigeon fighting on the roofs of Beirut, Lebanon — admirably described by EMMA AUBIN-BOLTANSKI and illustrated by THIERRY MAGNIEZ's photographs — require that those who rub shoulders with them engage in “social transactions [which] demand a constant labour” together with these strongmen and their taste for humiliation.

The fictional realities in which the authority of these strongmen is embedded are populated with both universal and regional, traditional and honourable criminal figures (from the *pehlwan*, wrestler, in India and Pakistan, to the *vory v zakone*, “thieves in law”, in Russia). These figures provide outlaws with imaginaries and role models of conduct, but they also reflect the expectations of justice and morality among the groups for whom the bandit is supposed to take responsibility. Those subject to their authority do not hesitate to draw on these figurative reference points to classify the moral forms of criminality, set them in hierarchical order and impose obligations on their leaders. After all, it matters less that banditry is illegal than that the actions should at least partially fall within “the limits of the moral order” (Blok 1972: 494).

PAUL ROLLIER provides an exemplary explanation of the form taken by the figure of the “honourable criminal” (*sharif badmash*) in Lahore, Pakistan. He explores how the figure of this outlaw guarantor of order and social justice appears in the everyday life of these strongmen, involved in criminal activities, including even murder:

“Don't treat me as a criminal (*badma'ash*), that's offensive. . . . I'm not a criminal: I'm honourable (*sharif*) among decent people and a thug with thugs. I never behave badly

with the poor, I never hurt their rights. I only pick on those who go beyond what they have any right to do.”

The translation of these cultural idioms into criminals’ lives establishes the principles of honesty and rectitude which must be fulfilled if one is to break the law or uphold social conventions. Bandits’ narratives often tell us that they are compelled to engage in illegality against their will in order to uphold justice. This reminds us that the act of violence may not be pathological, immoral or a source of pleasure (Vidal *et al* 1994). Bandits’ readiness to sacrifice their own lives should, in return, provide the basis for public belief in and loyalty to them, both in the present and posthumously.

The perception of bandit honour is not necessarily bound to the moral character of the criminal act itself. In Madagascar, DOMINIQUE SOMDA describes how the fact that bandits are risk-taking can change the value of such acts, rendering them honourable: “To steal an egg was shameful, but burgling a bank was proof of bravery.” Similarly, in his online article, RAPHAËL VOIX shows that yogis’ ascetic practices in India do not stand in contradiction with their illegal and violent interventions in politics and business. These variations on honour turn drug barons into virtuous patrons and criminal economies into moral economies centred on protection and the don. In Colombia, the narco-trafficker Pablo Escobar has been deified as a leader of the oppressed.

The reputation of Dudus, a famous Jamaican *don*, was long fuelled by popular songs and stories celebrating him as a “social bandit”. As RIVKE JAFFE and TRACIAN MEIKLE show, “His success as a governance actor, businessman and political liaison — and, relatedly, his successful ability to engage in criminal activities without being captured by the state or harmed by rivals — was bolstered by his reputation as a virtuous outlaw, a Robin Hood-like protector of the poor rather than a self-interested drugs kingpin.”

Many mafioso circles around the world also boast of their “social endeavours”, for example the *ndranghetisti* in Calabria, Italy, or the Kyrgyz *vory v zakone* (“thieves in law”) in Russia. The expression “thieves in law” refers to a caste of outlaws that first emerged in the Stalinist gulags in the 1930s, organized around a strict “law” dictating a quasi-ascetic set of obligations and prohibitions. MAROUSSIA FERRY perfectly illustrates the importance of the figurative reference to the Soviet (and then post-Soviet) criminal for Georgian-immigrant burglars in France: it provides meaning to the Beka group’s way of life and their practices as burglars. Ferry describes the terrible disarray afflicting these Georgian cat burglars, now stripped of all possibility of transcendence by the crisis of legitimacy and recognition that has struck the *vory v zakone* in Georgia. As if stripped naked, they become common thieves. These references thus now serve to paint a picture of decadence.

In Guinea-Bissau, the political legitimacy of the PAIGC party, linked to the independence movement, owes a great deal to the discourse and popular imagery connected to social banditry. In his online article, HENRIK VIGH deciphers this party’s declining noble status, today lost in a grey zone between the (il)legal and the (il)licit. In Creole, the name *banditos* refers to predatory figures focused on individual gain rather than collective well-being.

The management of honourability and moral economies involves intensive and essential labour. Indeed, the methods and labels of bandit, gangster, mafioso or even criminal politician intersect throughout their careers, both in their lifetimes and posthumously. We see this in Indonesia. There, a new form of activism in social organizations explicitly distinct from NGOs combines bandits' "social" and democratic community strategies with other strongmen's strategies for defending indigenous rights and the land rights of the poor. These new "social bandits" feel closer to the figure of the *jago* than to that of the *preman* (crook). As LAURENS BAKKER tells us, "A *jago* is likely to be an intelligent person who has morality, uses his brain, and follows his religion conscientiously. He has muscles and a sense of responsibility, but he also knows how to plan, develop a strategy, and be diplomatic."

In death as in life

The "mythological" labour which is needed in order to establish personal sovereignties relies on visual cultures which often play a prominent role in the social bandit's figurative power (Jaffe & Oosterbaan 2019). This is all the more true for figures whose criminal activity compels them to take to clandestine life in so-called wild spaces or forests in certain stages of their careers — hiding the bandit away, to the point that some people even doubt that he really exists. Snatches of detail about their lives thus offer a mass of scripts, liable to being forgotten, revitalized and assembled in indefinite combinations and rapidly propagated around the world. Other criminal politicians expose themselves online or on social media, conscious or otherwise of the seductive power of their weapons, their tattoos or their works of patronage among deprived populations. For instance, in Italy, southern India and elsewhere, the COVID-19 crisis has provided a priceless opportunity for mafias to produce images showing off their protective capacities by distributing masks and food among the public.

The role that the visual arts and fiction have in the scripted writing of gangster myths is nothing new. This even seems to be the source of the term "mafia". According to Diego Gambetta, the term *mafiusu* — "arrogant, pretentious, audacious" in local dialect (2009: 10) — was popularized by a play, *I Mafiusi della Vicaria*, staged in Palermo in 1863. The relationship between the mafia, patrons and the arts is particularly intense in Mumbai, long described as the mafia capital of South Asia. In this city, where the first gangs appeared in the 1960s and 1970s, solid links were established between mafiosi and Bollywood. Godfather sponsorship was useful for money laundering, but they were also of use in writing film storylines and financing cinematic and then political careers.

Films and TV series are obviously a powerful element in producing regional-scale scripts — as in the case of Veerappan — or even global ones, as in the case of Joaquín Guzmán in *El Chapo* or Pablo Escobar in *Narcos*. They help to fashion popular heroic models, like the Panjabi criminal hero described by Rollier, or make it possible to counter official narratives. These TV series do not only offer a promise of enshrinement for gangsters concerned for their place in the historic pantheon of outlaws: for they also feed the fictional realities in which these men are immersed. It is hardly incidental that El Chapo, the boss of a Mexican drugs cartel, was arrested by police as he made contact with film producers. That in his hideout he was reading Roberto Saviano's book on the cocaine trade, *Zero Zero Zero*. Or that he asserted his rights over the Netflix series inspired by his life.

As Rivke Jaffe and Tracian Meikle show, in Jamaica these depictions of the social bandit are also put on display in public space, through murals commemorating gangsters. The representation of *dons* — of whom it is sometimes hard to find good-quality photos — legitimizes models of masculinity, and more widely the system of *donsmanship*, at the same time as producing a collective popular knowledge. If these portrayals are fragile, this is because they are also marked by the ambiguity of the images involved: “When photographs of dons do emerge in public culture, how do they contribute to myth-making? How does power over images connect to power through images? And how do both the suppression and the intentional dissemination of very specific images connect to models of masculinity in these processes of legitimization and delegitimization?” Meikle and Jaffe then decipher Dudus’s fall by retracing the history of the visibility — and invisibility — of his authority, which had its grand finale in government authorities’ circulation of photos showing this *don* in feminized and humiliating positions.

In Georgia, too, the government long searched for the image that would finally shatter the supposed foundations of belief in the *vory v zakone*. And success came quickly. Having installed hidden cameras in prison cells, the government could publicly broadcast the antics of these crooks, standing totally in contradiction with the rules of loyalty and honour which they had long invoked in order to legitimize their criminal activities.

While bandits help to produce their own legends, their post-mortem careers are more uncertain, owing to the peculiar agency of the scripts being crafted. The inventiveness of the scriptwriters — and the infinite variety of ways that fragments from the bandits’ lives are interpreted — drown out any possibility of establishing a unitary myth or maintaining control over myth-scripting practices. The gangsters’ careers, bodies and souls are dissected and offered to the public as relics or objects of scientific study — as in the case of Cartouche’s skull, whose fate MARC RENNEVILLE retraces in his article. For its part, Badiraguato town hall is happy to provide guided visits of the sites frequented by El Chapo, as ADÈLE BLAZQUEZ describes in her account; tour operators also offer walks surveying Veerappan’s forest locales.

MARTIN LAMOTTE takes the case of the Ñetas, a Puerto Rican gang in New York, to illustrate the processes by which post-mortem myths are written. The 30 March 1981 murder of Carlos La Sombra in a Puerto Rican prison set off a power struggle which gave rise to the Ñetas, a gang specializing in the New York drug trade in the early 1990s. One of its lieutenants, Bebo, set to writing the history of the Ñetas’ founder, a myth carefully pieced together and codified in a book entitled *Liderato*. Its publication would enshrine Bebo’s authority over the gang, as guarantor of the model of conduct that Carlos had supposedly prescribed. Beyond the internal power struggles, the scripted writing of the myth of a penitent and politically radical Carlos — and then its circulation among the world of the Ñetas — profoundly altered the gang’s authoritarian structure and its criminal activities, colouring its members’ most heartfelt beliefs. Yet even the rigidity and fixed status of the myth conveyed by a quasi-religious book did not manage to hold back the emergence of another scriptwriter in Spain.

While there can be no guarantees as to his post-mortem life, El Chapo — a narco-trafficker with two Netflix series to his name — has had a head start on his predecessors, whose notoriety he has far exceeded. In Mexico’s Sinaloa region, there is no sign that the local population has been enriched — or that exploitation in the drug

producing fields has in any way been mitigated. Yet El Chapo managed to capture the attention of the media, which worked to depoliticize the violence of the narcotics trade and its predatory character. Adèle Blazquez brilliantly illustrates how a trifling “basket of baked goods” prepared by El Chapo’s mother and offered as a gift to the town’s mayor became an element of the scripts humanizing these figures and rendering them as ordinary people. Subsequently, the pressure the media faced from local municipal agents turned them into professional scriptwriters who themselves contributed to the myth:

“Each judicial event and its offshoots drew national media attention to Badiraguato municipality. When Rafael Caro Quintero was released and then became a wanted man again, the mayor was interviewed. When El Chapo escaped, a newspaper ran the headline ‘Badiraguato celebrates El Chapo’s escape’. When he was extradited, the mayor was interviewed. When he was sentenced, it was ‘Badiraguato weeps and prays for El Chapo’.”

The anodyne character of these interviews, describing El Chapo’s closeness to the local population, contributes to the mythification of these narcotraffickers.

Deification

If these men are supposedly ordinary, this does not stop religious repertoires being used to convey their authority. The myth of Babu Fahari may be conspicuous for its exclusively local impact, but it also seems characteristic of these worlds where the boundaries between the divine and the human are fluid. In his online article, TOMMASO SBRICCOLI artfully retraces this legendary history by interviewing multiple generations of villagers, the oldest of whom supposedly caught a glimpse of the famous bandit. It quickly becomes apparent that “No longer a mere thief, Babu is now depicted as a god-like man. His strength, height, size and appetite resemble those of Bhim, the giant hero of the Mahabharata. His deeds in protecting the village from predatory outsiders resonate with those of North India’s beloved type of hero-god, the *jhunjhar*.” *Jhunjhars* are heroic warriors who died decapitated on the battlefield while protecting the local community, often from thefts of village cattle.

Where each human being is potentially divine, religious complexes like the *akhara* and the *dera* (wrestling arenas) or even yogi sects also become spaces where the ethics of goons and “honourable criminals” can be modelled. As Raphaël Voix describes, these can even be used as fronts for arms trafficking. For instance, in South Asia the charismatic figure of the wrestler is, more than a sportsman, the embodiment of a way of life and a tradition, where muscles and morality meet (Michelutti *et al.* 2018). Hence this regional socio-cultural idiom and religious traditions play a key role in transforming bosses into heroes and, after their deaths, into divine figures. Grasping how kinship intertwines with the divine allows us to understand the power of the intimate links between extraordinary leaders, strongmen and their communities. Despite the government ban on any shrines or memorials being created in his honour, a deification of Veerappan is today underway through a ritual in which children ingesting the earth from the bandit’s burial site thus absorb the values of courage. This ritual seems to be inspired by the one practised at the grave of Kattabomman (Ramaswamy 1994), an anti-colonial hero in southern India himself popularized by a 1959 film on his life, *Veerapandiya Kattabomman*.

- 4 Hugo Chávez, a follower of such cults, has himself been incorporated into them as a demi-god and he (...)

The particular power of earth, collected in the cemeteries where the heroes are buried, is also mobilized in the logics of bandit deification in other parts of the world. Such is the case of the grave of the narcotrafficker Pablo Escobar, also famed for his involvement in Afro-Cuban rituals. As KATERINA KERESTETZI and LUIS CARLOS CASTRO RAMÍREZ describe, in *palo monte*, believers carry out their rituals with the assistance of the spirits of the dead, the *nfumbis*. These dead are chosen with great care, for their protective capacity is proportional to the success they had in life. From this point of view, for some followers of Pablo Escobar he has all the qualities to make him the ultimate *nfumbi*: power, tenacity, boldness, virility, success and versatility. According to the *paleros'* beliefs, spirits who suffered a violent death remain attached to their bodies and go on living around their grave site, waiting for a ritual to bring them back to life. The popularity of these Afro-Cuban religions among drug traffickers is well known, as is the link between religion and drug trafficking in Colombia. Indeed, a distinct narco culture has emerged, combining moral codes peculiar to each cartel with religious principles but also a particular aesthetic that goes hand-in-hand with the sanctification of certain outlaws. Obviously, Hinduism and Afro-Cuban cults are not structurally linked to criminal groups. But they do have certain peculiarities which may help explain their current dynamism among very heterogeneous social circles and populations: namely, their extreme adaptability and, most importantly, their ethical and aesthetic malleability. As Kerestetzi and Ramírez emphasize, they constitute “cosmologies in development”. As such, they are highly versatile resources for producing authority in the contemporary era.⁴

The collaborative production of seductive power

32 Strongmen’s ability to make others act relies on a tireless effort to produce and maintain the potential seductive power of reverential terror. Such production is at the heart of the mythification process that fashions environments favourable to the spread of fear, love, admiration and respect between gangsters and populations. These environments resemble a form of spectacle. The genre of spectacle, we suggest here, is what Jacques Rancière (2011) calls the “theatre without spectators”, that is, a performative space where the gap between actors, spectators and the stage is blurred so that spectators become actors in a theatre that can be performed without spectators (Kaur & Hansen 2016: 269). Lady Dabang’s seductive authority has become a matter of deep conviction, through the cult of Phoolan Devi, films like *Dabang* and videos celebrating this heroine. This participatory dimension strengthens this fusion between art and politics, fiction and reality. It immerses the spectator in a frenetic, willing desire to be seduced and enchanted by the aesthetic force of a promise of effective violence. As Mazzarella *et al.* aptly note, “we have all, in one way or another, being drafted into the liturgical labour that animates this space and thereby sustains the effects of sovereignty in its new forms and configurations” (2019: 2). Fictional realities exercise fascination and provide pleasure. Thus their frenzied, uncontrollable circulation makes violent charisma’s collectively moulded seduction mechanisms decisive in the recruitment of the public.

Anthropologists are themselves sensitive to the “art of bossism” and the quest for personal sovereignty pursued by the multiple actors who populate criminal political

economies. Day-to-day engagement with fictional realities is indispensable in these extremely vibrant worlds. For these are worlds immersed in rumour, accusation, lies, silences, warnings and threats, and ones coloured by narrations of these figures as violent, heroic and honourable. The point is not to shake off this seductive influence. Rather, it is to ethnographically study the mechanisms on which these strongmen rely and to examine them as essential elements of their power. In laying our hands on the collaborative scripts for gangster myths as they are being produced, we can empirically document at close range the fascination for violent figures, and the modes by which reverential terror is produced and managed.

This perspective offers new pathways to explore — together with Weber — not only the social conditions that allow for submission, but also the awakening of the right to dominate, or the emergence of these strongmen's personal charisma. Precisely what the ethnographic study of collaborative myth scripting allows us to decrypt is the mythological labour invested in this awakening, in the attribution of superhuman properties and in the precarious processes of public recognition of personal charisma and authority. Often, criminal politicians will continue to perpetuate violent and illegal methods and the scripts that awakened this charisma, even once they have been democratically elected. They are unable either to resign themselves to the bureaucratization of their charisma, or to abandon these criminal worlds, for this would risk their repudiation.

Idealist approaches to the legal sovereignty supposedly inherent in states have a hard time capturing the fragmented sovereignties sustained by both the formal and informal forms of delegating power to local authorities in postcolonial societies. As Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat (2005) remind us, informal sovereignties constantly emerge through violence; they are *de facto* expressed through the capacity to kill, punish and discipline with impunity, and they are concentrated in the body of the individual person. Fictional realities are not the sole prerogative of the state (Aretxaga 2003). These are, indeed, personal, processual sovereignties in the making, moulded by the collaborative production of violent charisma's captivating power. Here, we delve into these sovereignties, the better to grasp the contemporary reconfigurations of power.

Indispensable to charismatic authorities, this production of awe is hardly limited to bandits and criminal political economies alone. For it also prevails in the political practices of the leaders of many states, both democratic and authoritarian. We live in a world where hero-worship, on-screen personas and entertainment can be systematically managed. And today, democratically elected strongmen like Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Narendra Modi and Vladimir Putin are wielding the power of the seduction mechanisms on which bosses rely in order to model authoritarian and charismatic leadership styles (as also, very recently, did Donald Trump). It thus becomes clear that the collaborative myth scripting which constructs fictional realities is an analytical tool with an exceptional capacity to understand the nature of personal sovereignties, even well beyond the realm of gangsters, bandits and criminal politicians. For it also allows us to get to grips with hyper-contemporary forms of authority, implanted in the core of democracy and global capitalism.

³⁷There is no doubt that the deployment of new technologies like deep fakes and 5G will allow the proliferation of this collective myth writing. This issue's aim is to shed an unprecedented light upon it.

References

AGAMBEN GIORGIO, 1997. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.

ARETXAGA BEGOÑA, 2002. "Terror as Thrill: First Thoughts on the 'War on Terrorism'", *Anthropological Quarterly* n° 75/1, p. 139–150.

—, 2003. "Maddening States", *Annual Review of Anthropology* n° 32/1, p. 393–410.

ARIAS ENRIQUE DESMOND, 2016. *Criminal Enterprises and Governance in Latin America and the Caribbean*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

BAYART JEAN-FRANÇOIS, **STEPHEN ELLIS** & **BÉATRICE HIBOU**, 1997. *La criminalisation de l'État en Afrique*, Brussels, Éditions Complexe.

BLOK ANTON, 1972. "The Peasant and the Brigand: Social Banditry Reconsidered", *Comparative Studies in Society and History* n° 14/4, p. 494–503.

—, 1974.

The Mafia of a Sicilian Village, 1860–1960: A Study of Violent Peasant Entrepreneurs, Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

CAÏRA OLIVIER, 2011. *Définir la fiction: Du roman au jeu d'échecs*, Paris, Éditions de l'EHESS.

GAMBETTA DIEGO, 2009. *Codes of the Underworld: How Criminals Communicate*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

HANSEN THOMAS **BLOM** & **FINN STEPPUTAT** (dir.), 2005. *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.

HOBSBAWM ERICJ., 2007 [1969] *Bandits*, London, Abacus.

JAFFE RIVKE, 2013. "The Hybrid State: Crime and Citizenship in Urban Jamaica", *American Ethnologist* n° 40/4, p. 734–748.

JAFFE RIVKE & **MARTJIN OOSTERBAAN**, 2019. *Most Wanted: The Popular Culture of Illegality*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press.

KAUR RAVINDER & **THOMAS BLOM HANSEN**, 2016. "Aesthetics of Arrival: Spectacle, Capital, Novelty in Post-Reform India", *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* n° 23/3, p. 265–275.

LUCA NATHALIE, **MARIE-ANNE POLO DE BEAULIEU**, **CHARLOTTE BIGG**, **STEFANIA CAPONE** & **NADINE WANONO**, 2019.

“Introduction: Les techniques du croire et du faire croire”, *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* n° 187/3, p. 11–25.

MAZZARELLA WILLIAM, ERIC L. SANTNER & AARON SCHUSTER, 2019. *Sovereignty, Inc.: Three Inquiries in Politics and Enjoyment*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

MICHELUTTI LUCIA, 2013. “Sons of Krishna and Sons of Bolivar: Charismatic Kinship and Leadership across India and Venezuela”, *Focaal: Journal of Historical and Global Anthropology* n° 67, p. 19–31.

MICHELUTTI LUCIA, ASHRAF HOQUE, NICOLAS MARTIN, DAVID PICHERIT, PAUL ROLLIER, ARILD RUUD & CLARINDA STILL, 2018. *Mafia Raj: The Rule of Bosses in South Asia*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.

PICHERIT DAVID, 2019. “Red Sanders Mafia in South India: Violence, Electoral Democracy and Labour”, in Barbara Harriss-White & Lucia Michelutti (dir.), *The Wild East: Criminal Political Economies in South Asia*, Londres, UCL Press, p. 194–214.

PINE JASON, 2012. *The Art of Making Do in Naples*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

RAMASWAMY SUMATHI, 1994. “The Nation, the Region, and the Adventures of a Tamil ‘Hero’”, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* n° 28/2, p. 295–322.

RANCIÈRE JACQUES, 2008. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

VAN SCHENDEL WILLEM & ABRAHAM ITTY (dir.), 1999. *Illicit Flows and Criminal Things: States, Borders and the Other Side of Globalization*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press.

VIDAL DENIS, GILLES TARABOUT & ÉRIC MEYER (dir.), 1994. *Violences et non-violences en Inde*, Paris, Éditions de l’EHESS.

WAGNER KIM, 2007. “Thuggee and Social Banditry Reconsidered”, *The Historical Journal* n° 50/2, p. 353–376.

WAGNER ROY, 1986. *Symbols That Stand for Themselves*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

WINDLE JAMES & ANDREW SILKE, 2019. “Is Drawing from the State ‘State of the Art’? A Review of Organised Crime Research Data Collection and Analysis, 2004–2018”, *Trends in Organized Crime* n° 22/4, p. 394–413.

Notes

1 Purnima S. Tripathi, “The End of Phoolan Devi”, *Frontline. India’s National Magazine*, 4 August 2001.

2 On sovereignty and the body as a site and object of sovereign power, see Agamben 1998. See also the convincing interpretation offered in Hansen & Stepputat 2005.

3 And it is worth noting that only 2.5% of the research published on organized crime is based on ethnographic observation (Windle & Silke 2019).

4 Hugo Chávez, a follower of such cults, has himself been incorporated into them as a demi-god and hero (Michelutti 2013).