Foundations of Human Interaction

LIVING WITH DISTRUST

MORALITY *and* COOPERATION *in a* ROMANIAN VILLAGE

RADU UMBRES

Living with Distrust

FOUNDATIONS OF HUMAN INTERACTION

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Living with Distrust

Morality and Cooperation in a Romanian Village

Radu Umbreș

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FOREWORD

If ethnographers were like rulers, we could simply use them to measure societies and cultures and record the results. But a ruler can only tell us the length of an object if we understand the units of measurement and trust their calibration. What if we know more about the thing being measured than about the ruler itself? Then, as Wittgenstein remarked, "you can measure to test the ruler." As when a student answers a teacher's question, an act of assertion may inform us less about the content of the statement and more about the person who made it. This is the balancing act of ethnography. An ethnographer cannot both participate in a society and observe it dispassionately. Ethnographers are not calibrated to any known universal metric. And so, as Radu Umbreș so clearly knows, if we are to discern reliable information from ethnography about a world being studied, we need to understand the properties of the ethnographer too. We cannot elide them from the account, nor should we. As Umbreș writes, ethnography "is a natural experiment of building a personal network of trust and cooperation which also offers a first-hand experience of distrust." His commitment to living these relationships of trust and distrust is foundational to this complex and textured study of morality and cooperation in a Romanian village.

N. J. E.
Sydney, June 2020

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Ultimately, this book is dedicated to Dan Sperber. I encountered his ideas when I could not make sense of my work, or anthropology in general. Among the wonderful things I learned from him, Dan offered a way to ask better questions and to rethink the value of ethnography. His wit, wisdom, and warmth pushed me further each time the going got tough. *Living with Distrust* exists because his trust made me trust my ideas enough to put them into writing.

Bucharest, December 2021

PROLOGUE: RIPPING THE COLLECTIVE APART

"Polenta does not explode," said a 1950s communist leader about the political quietism of Romanians, his metaphor pointing to the oppressed and subservient peasants making up most of the population. But in the early winter of 1989, mass movements overthrew the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu and half a century of communist rule over Romania. The change had not come cheap, with hundreds of dead on the streets of Timișoara and Bucharest, ending with the gruesome execution of the dictator alongside his much-hated wife. In the revolutionary frenzy of those days, thousands of people ripped through the material culture of communism and the outrageous personality cult of the reviled leader, destroying his palaces and statues all across the country, ushering in a new era of democracy and market economy.

Far from the fury of the cities, the revolution spread through rural Romania like ripples in a pond: somewhat dulled by distance but wider in reach. The overturn of communism eventually reached the remote village of Săteni in the Northeast province of Moldavia (not the country of Moldova, though historically associated). It was in the countryside that the dictatorship had done some of its worst damage, although quietly. Forced collectivization in the 1950s took land away from the peasants and all but ended independent farming. The political system imposed a form of common ownership called CAP—acronym for "agricultural production cooperative," an economic organization nominally belonging to local members but actually controlled by the state.

After the revolution, the villagers had the option of remaining in a collective enterprise, but they decided to break off and immediately repossess everything considered rightfully theirs. The CAP was largely dismantled in a few months. After dividing land, animals, and equipment, two stables remained at the outskirts of the village. A group of CAP members received them in lieu of payment for a large number of workdays for the collective. Although these were brand new constructions with concrete foundations, wood beam structures, sheet roofing, and brick walls, their dire fate remains a vivid memory two decades after the event.

One morning, two dozen villagers arrived armed with pickaxes and shovels with the same purpose in mind. They marked in chalk 2-meter-long sections inside the buildings and began to clinically dismantle the structures. Each family carted home the few wooden beams, sheets of roofing, or broken reinforced concrete slabs from their allotment. In a matter of hours, two perfectly functional buildings were reduced to useless rubble, as in many villages across rural Romania. It would be all too easy to explain away the destruction as yet another case of vengeance against the old regime. The buildings were not burned down as one would expect of an act dominated by collective rage. Nor was this an expression of economic senselessness, since villagers knew all too well the value of functional capital built through their toil.

The stables' dismemberment raises fascinating questions. Why collectively destroy economically viable pieces of investment? Why take apart assets whose constitutive parts had so little value on their own? To put it more generally, why did Sătenis give up on the economy of scale and scope provided by collective farming? Why did they return to small-sized household-centered subsistence agriculture, a preference expressed concretely in the act of destroying the modern stables to build shabby individual ones anew? Once coerced socialism was gone, why abandon industrial machinery and fertilizers, large-scale crop rotation, division of labor, capital accumulation, and all the other benefits of large-scale collective farms? What explains the coordinated choice to disengage from cooperation and prefer a technologically and economically suboptimal mode of production based on individual family agriculture?

All societies rely to some degree on cooperation, and humans could hardly survive without the assistance of others (Henrich and Henrich 2007). Yet the extent and depth of cooperation varies tremendously across time and across societies. Hunter gatherers collaborate in widespread networks limited to known individuals while modern urban societies require cooperative interactions with countless unknown people. Some helping relationships last for life while other actions are restricted to one or few interactions. Our highly cooperative species thus exhibits a great diversity in the number and choice of partners and in the amount and scope of prosocial behaviors. Yet not all social interactions are beneficial.

Cooperation provides individual and group benefits, yet actors must also deal with noncooperative actors. Benevolence can be exploited by deception or predation. Possessions may be stolen, promises broken, services unreciprocated, agreements contested, or resources denied. Cooperation needs to be delimited and protected from noncooperation to get off the ground and endure. Mutually beneficial interactions require trust between partners, and certain institutions can create incentives for actors to be trustworthy. But other incentives can make them untrustworthy, and distrust may inhibit cooperative endeavors.

How can some societies function with the levels of trust so low as to inhibit the cooperative choice of keeping a building standing for common use rather than ripping it apart for its low-value components? Villages like Săteni persist despite widespread distrust and low levels of large-scale cooperation, and in quite an orderly fashion. A striking but telling aspect of the destruction of stables was the spontaneity of the decision, the matter-of-fact way in which everyone agreed to partible demolition. No other alternative appeared; nobody said, "hey, we could do better!"; no one thought or said that they could keep the stables together as a team, as a group of owners or producers. The only solution to the dilemma of trust was to cooperate with family members and not with random villagers.

Their choices met in a Schelling coordination point (Schelling 1960) where everyone makes a choice based on thinking that everyone else makes the same choice. The intuitive default response was for each to get his own piece right there, right then. Sătenis met upon the cognitively and culturally salient expectation of short-term, equal distribution instead of long-term cooperation. The communist Leviathan gone, the return to the state of nature meant that the only social contract capable of sustaining cooperation came from the family.

Two years of ethnographic fieldwork in Săteni made me understand why the apparently senseless division was the most likely if not the only possible outcome. A preexisting distribution of trust and mistrust sealed the fate of the stables. To understand the reasonableness of Sătenis brutally ripping collective property apart, we need to understand why randomly picked villagers lacked the social relationships based on trust needed to engage in long-term prosocial interactions such as co-owning and using a shared resource. The random assembly offered no spontaneous mechanisms to create trust ex nihilo. No state or nonstate institutions could create incentives for trustworthy cooperation. Moreover, salient representations of mistrust made nigh impossible any coordinated solution other than immediate partition.

The stables' slice-off was a natural event in a place with a history, a culture, and an ecology of material conditions and social relationships, and not a controlled experiment in a social vacuum. Like many other events I will describe and analyze, it provides a relevant yet complex case study. On that winter day of 1990, as in many other moments, trust in family and distrust toward fellow villagers led to restricted cooperation at the domestic level and avoidance of collective engagements beyond it. Yet, as we shall see, the story gets more complicated: conflict may appear inside families just as mutuality may grow outside them. Săteni society is a dynamic distribution of interactions, relationships, mental and public representations, and institutions based on social expectations that range from deep trust to utter mistrust and all shades in between.

This book is a detailed account of how Sătenis think about whom to trust, when, how much, and why. It looks at how past and future interweave in the present of social interactions and lead to cultural representations of trust and distrust. It is an ethnography of one Romanian village but tackles phenomena familiar to students of Romanian, postsocialist, Southeast European, and various rural communities across the world. The story involves unique people acting in a particular social, historical, and ecological environment, but their predicaments and choices often speak of universal social dilemmas. While Săteni culture offers a particular combination of representations and practices, the underlying mental and interactional mechanisms evoke pan-human dispositions.

The analysis moves from the particular to the general and back, while theoretical interpretations are eclectically used to make sense of various levels of analysis. It matters that Sătenis have a complex folk epistemology of secrecy and a family-oriented worldview, but it also matters how universal mental mechanisms protect or fail to protect us against deception or predation. Rituals express ideas on folk ontologies, but they also change the actual social relationships between people. Political struggles and economic exchanges depend upon institutional and ecological factors, but they share certain common moral obligations with kinship and religion. A man may kill his brother in a fit of rage, but the act has behind it the history of the family, of the village, of a corner of Europe, and of human evolution.

My approach is interdisciplinary in its choice of theories but unified by its method of collecting and integrating evidence. I seek causal explanations drawn from conversations across different disciplines to help make sense of data collected in naturalistic settings using the ethnographic method. Fundamentally, this book is a participant exploration into a people's way of representing and dealing with uncertainty about the intentions and motivations of others.

In response to initial anthropological puzzles, the ethnographic account describes the costs and benefits of trust, how distrust may be a reasonable alternative in certain social interactions, and how Sătenis pursue their reproductive, economic, political, or transcendental goals within an equilibrium of low general trust but high personal trust. The story shows how some expectations of trust in kin or friends adapt to large-scale changes in social organization while other representations of trust replicate successfully across time as the primacy of the family as corporate unit.

This book seeks an explanation for the choice of taking stables apart and for many other practices and representations, some familiar and some strange, which characterize social life in Săteni, and probably elsewhere. The interpretative ethnography focuses on both cooperative and noncooperative social relationships in the village. A deep exploration of the social fabric of

the village allows us to analyze how the interplay between trust and distrust determines the outcome of social interactions between cooperation or conflict. The book will explain how suboptimal outcomes as in the case of decollectivization and other collective dilemmas are the result of interaction between agents situated in an ecology of natural endowment, historical processes, and cultural ideas, driven by personal circumstances and structural constraints. By the end of it, we should be able to understand why Sătenis had no other moral solution than destroying the stables. If anything, their moral obligation was to secure those petty resources. As in many other situations, it was just a matter of living with distrust.

Introduction to Săteni

The story of ripped-apart stables offered what anthropologists would call an ethnographic vignette. This part of the book will zoom out of that episode, offering a carbon sketch of the geography, history, ecology, material culture, and institutions that constitute Săteni as a place and a society. Subsequent chapters will expand on details deeper than this bird's-eye view, but here I will describe more the premises of Săteni ethnography, its research methods, and the opportunities and problems of a naturalistic study of trust. The discussion on the interplay of methodology and theory will lead to a roadmap of chapters ahead.

Săteni lies on the hilly plains of the historical province of Moldova in Northeast Romania, one of the poorest regions in the European Union.[1] Historical documents mention the village since the mid-16th century. Repeatedly destroyed and rebuilt after wars and Tatar invasions (up until the 18th century), Săteni used to be a serf village before gradual reforms in the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries freed peasants and redistributed the estates of boyars and churches owning most of the arable land.

All Sătenis are ethnically Romanian, although with many Slavic family names. Old people remember tales of migration from Bukovina (now in Ukraine), yet oral history is shallow. Villagers make it a point of pride that not a single Gypsy lives among them, except for (apprehensively received) summer visits by Roma groups selling pots and rugs, collecting scrap iron, and buying goose feathers. Almost everyone is Orthodox Christian, with a handful of neo-Protestant families.

With about a thousand inhabitants, Săteni is the largest and richest village as well as the mayoral seat of the namesake commune (the Romanian rural administrative unit), which includes four more villages. Though poor by European and Romanian standards, Sătenis consider themselves relatively

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affluent by having, on average, more agricultural land per family compared with surrounding villages. Land encroachment by villagers from Catuneni (a village in the same commune) was a growing concern.

Adding insult to injury, Catuneni is a newer village, populated by Bukovina people brought in the early 20th century to work on an estate. Since newcomers first lived in hovels dug into the ground, Săteni inhabitants derogatorily call them "burrowers." Catuneni villagers started with small plots, yet, by stealth and strength, their upstart descendants managed to amass large sheep and cattle herds and increasingly large holdings. While there is some sense of rivalry, many connections of kinship and friendship connect the two largest villages in the commune, as with other neighboring localities.

The village huddles the valley of a slow-flowing river, upstream being Catuneni and a reservoir. The lake is famous with local anglers and is leased by wealthy villagers reputed for extreme violence against poachers. A paved county road links Săteni with the small town of Oraseni and further to the county capital, all in all an eight-hour drive from Bucharest, the capital of Romania (see Figure I.1). Winters are dreadfully cold and snowy, summers

Figure I.1. Map of Romania in Europe and the approximate location of Săteni (adapted from Wikipedia Commons)

hot and prone to drought and hailstorms, with spring and autumn having pleasant, wet weather.

Houses and enclosed gardens are tightly packed along narrow dirt roads branching out from the asphalt road crossing the village. Săteni sits in the middle of the administrative unit, surrounded by plains and low-lying hills with humus-rich chernozem soil, arable land and pastures. The municipality, church, school, kindergarten, surgery, and two taverns are within a half-mile radius in the center. The cemetery lies at one end of the village and the ruins of the collective farm at the other.

The church built through local contributions in the 1970s and the cemetery are the only places where Sătenis meet and participate as a whole in village-wide rituals on holy days. Church attendance is quite low, with mostly older women on Sundays, but increases for Christmas and especially Easter. Parishioners flock to the cemetery on the "Saturday of the dead" or "the winter/summer olds" to celebrate their ancestors around family graves and receive the priest's blessing for "those who sleep."

A typical household contains a nuclear family centered on a couple and their children, sometimes including one of the spouse's parents or other relatives, while several old couples or widows live alone. Descent is cognatic, meaning people recognize ties both on their father's and mother's side, and they include in-laws by marriage and ritual kin among relatives. The prevalence of intra-village marriage (especially for older generations) provides for extensive networks of blood and affinal ties, while neighbors and friends add to the local sphere of social relationships.

Most families own land around Săteni and make a living from farming. Almost all households raise fowls, and many raise pigs, cows, sheep, or goats. The habitat mixes plains with low-lying hills, pastures with arable land. In the fields, Sătenis grow mainly cereals, sunflower, soybeans, and fodder crops, punctured by scarce thickets of forest and some small private orchards and vineyards. Companies collecting milk, the occasional cattle and grain deals, and the more specialized domain of shepherding provide modest agricultural income. Producers highly depend upon state and EU subsidies, as low prices and mediocre productivity keeps agriculture just above subsistence levels. All in all, Săteni comes off as a village of peasants, although not all inhabitants fall in this ambiguous socioeconomic category (Hedeşan and Mihăilescu 2006; Mihăilescu 2011).

Villagers constituted their land property during the agricultural reforms of 1864 and especially after World War I when veterans and their families received up to 5 hectares. Previously, the largest lands belonged to absentee landowners, boyars, leased in parcels to local tenants or in bulk to non-local entrepreneurs. Large estates, shrinking after each reform, were redistributed after World War II and boyars slowly vanished from Săteni history. Very old people still remember the landowners with mixed feelings for their wealth

and agricultural arrangements with dreaded intermediaries. Wealthier villagers organized to collectively buy out land from latifundia in the early 20th century, but agriculture had remained largely family based until socialism.

Săteni land was almost entirely collectivized in the 1950s with little public resistance or overt violence, the few recalcitrant peasants forced by physical threats or denial of employment and higher education to their children. People remember the highly mechanized socialist agriculture, miserable revenues for farm members, as well as generalized theft from the collective. In the first years after the collapse of socialism in 1989, the farm was rapidly dissolved by distributing the stock of goods and animals between members. The few items remaining have either been sold (more or less transparently) or degraded beyond use. The story of the two stables is illustrative of the destructive enthusiasm of decollectivization. Most local agricultural machinery owned by the collective ended up in the hands of farm employees or managers. These shabby implements became available for hired service and supplemented the cheap, yet inefficient, forms of animal traction.

Sătenis received back their land according to pre-1950s boundaries, with provisions to endow previously landless members. The process was highly dysfunctional, as documented across Romania (Cartwright 2001; Verdery 2003). Villagers blame bureaucratic incompetence and interpersonal malevolence for the wave of quarrels, disorder, protracted court litigation, and even murders. Twenty years since, some villagers still wait for ownership deeds or are bitterly feuding with relatives or other Sătenis over land. Although Sătenis have large possessions by regional standards, restitution according to 1940s property lines, partible inheritance, and demographic change led to a highly fragmented distribution of land. A significant share devolved to inheritors living in other villages and cities across Romania. Some of them sold out, while others leased their lands to relatives or entrepreneurs.

Several villagers own larger tracts of land due to inheritance or acquisitions. Cow and sheep farmers acquired a lot of grazing and fodder plots using business profits and aggressive land-grabbing strategies. Such entrepreneurs often have tools and machines delivering better returns than labor-intensive agriculture. During my fieldwork, several young villagers started growing vegetables, fruits, and seedlings using pesticides, fertilizers, irrigation, and greenhouses. Since Romania joined the EU in 2007, companies bought land through intermediaries, offering above-market prices. Villagers speculate about the identity and interests of these enigmatic entities, invoking either foreign capital or high-placed Romanian political figures. The opacity of transactions blended in with the secrecy of everyday life.

Limited private employment opportunities offer unskilled jobs paying low wages in local shops and bars run by self-employed managers, three textile factories in the nearby town of Oraseni, and a small agribusiness company. Many find seasonal and day labor in construction, agriculture, and sheep husbandry.

Local economy is vastly informal, avoiding taxes and official regulations. All Săteni businesses, formal or informal, are individual entrepreneurial projects or (rarely) run by two or three people connected through ties of kinship and occasionally friendship. The state is the largest employer, and pensions, welfare support, and child allowances constitute a significant if not the only source of money for many villagers. The widespread practice of informal credit settled on the day of state payments denotes a cash-strapped economy where many live from one day to the next.

The mayor serving during my fieldwork, elected and re-elected by solid majorities, was a member of the Popular[2] party. Recognized for his proficiency in using political networks to attract public investment in Săteni, his reputation included an alleged ability to skim off public funds. Benefiting from top party connections and a strong faction inside local administration, he comfortably controls political life in Săteni (especially the collection of votes for his Popular party) and managed, in the meanwhile, to increase his considerable wealth.

The stock of jobs in local administration and public services, as well as discretionary control over welfare distribution, presents local officials with authority and important political and economic resources for personal and party gain. During my work, a new faction formed by disgruntled returned migrants, sheep owners, and former allies challenged Popular domination under the banner of the Republican Party. The two factions (loosely based around networks of kinship and friendship) engaged in open conflict, marked by lively defamation, frequent treachery, and even physical aggression.

Many people born in Săteni have left the village. The first large wave of outmigration targeted industrializing cities across Romania soon after collectivization. The movement slowed down in the early '80s and was partially reverted after 1989 when many jobless or retired workers returned home to Săteni. The second wave began in the late 1990s and peaked after Romania joined the EU in 2007, as many young and middle-aged villagers found work in Western Europe. Contemporary migration routes followed on multiple individual strategies. Unlike in other Romanian villages—especially those with neo-Protestant communities (Sandu 2005)—there are no established channels toward specific destinations. Through personal strategies and connections, people traveled across Italy, Spain, Greece, Ireland, Germany, or the United Kingdom in search of lucrative employment.

Abroad, men worked mainly as builders, while women performed domestic services, and both found seasonal agricultural work. Men suffered more during the economic downturn in the construction industry, leaving women as the main sources of remittances. A few returned migrants have joined the minor wave of Săteni entrepreneurs in the building trade, commerce, and intensive agriculture, combining skills and capital developed abroad with local networks of kinship and patronage. Since the mid-2000s, remittances injected

new life into the Săteni economy, paying for food, bills, or fodder; home improvements; or education for children.

A successful migrant's most significant investment was usually building a house or the refurbishment of old dwellings into modern residences, making construction work one of the most energetic things to have happened in the not-so-glorious recent Săteni economic history. Several buildings, of impressive sizes and styles for local standards, are built each year, almost all for migrants who return temporarily or permanently. The number of new houses in a village signals the countryside's level of migration, since, in terms of intention and behavior, homebuilding is the primary drive for Romanian migrants above business investment or other consumption domains (Sandu 2010). These new houses were the effects of transnational migrants living a double social life between home and abroad (Schiller et al. 1995). But they also said something about the priorities of villagers.

Why didn't Sătenis invest in production (such as starting a business) rather than put their money into bricks and mortar, not to mention the costs of furnishing and maintaining a home large enough for several families? I had seen the same apparently irrational economic choices in another Moldavian village during my BA research (Călin and Umbreș 2006). A similarly narrow perspective governed the destruction of Săteni communal stables for minor domestic gains. Why this centripetal attraction of households? Was there an avoidance of venturing out into markets or collective organizations? International migration and the fascinating Săteni house became my ethnographic footholds when I joined the people building them. How that happened is itself a story about trust and distrust.

I.1. FROM THE SERENDIPITY OF ENCOUNTER TO THE STRUCTURE OF RESEARCH

The research behind this book comes from ethnographic immersion in Săteni society, a method whereby the researcher becomes embedded into the population and their social relationships. "Society," however, is a tricky concept. One could follow Radcliffe-Browne's advice to "(. . .) take any convenient locality of a suitable size" in order to study "the network of relations connecting the inhabitants amongst themselves and with the people of other regions" (1940:5). But what "convenient" and "a network of relations" actually meant in Săteni is a methodological question relating directly to the theoretical interests of this book. How can an ethnographic study of distrust get off the ground when its central subject seems to create a barrier? My fieldwork, however, did not start as a study of trust, a theme made salient by the surprises of ethnographic research.

My fieldwork began 20 years after the frantic dismantling of stables and should have had nothing to do with Săteni, were it not for a rough takeoff. As a postgraduate student in 2008, I began pre-fieldwork research among Romanian migrants in Athens, Greece. I contacted several people using Romanian and Greek personal connections to create a set of possible informants to study whether and how Romanian entrepreneurs used social ties to advance in a foreign class structure as an immigrant niche or ethnic enclave (Evans 1989; Jensen and Portes 1992; Waldinger 1994; Brettell and Alstatt 2007).

However, initial forays ran counter to my expectations that Romanians acted generously toward their own ethnic group, a form of parochial altruism (Bowels and Gintis, 2004) leading to an ethnic niche (Waldinger et al. 1990; Karra et al. 2006) that could then spur entrepreneurial success. Instead, I found widespread distrust toward one's fellows and avoidance of places with suspicious Romanians such as slackers or interlopers in public places. Some of the more successful entrepreneurs—the likely subjects of my study—mentioned making better deals with foreigners than costlier ones with fellow Romanians, including friends or relatives.

When I asked about unions, I was laughed off and told that Romanians immediately took the jobs of fellow nationals. To emphasize the point, they explained that, unlike us, Albanians in Athens put up fellow villagers with food and shelter until they could find a decently paid job. I could not test its veracity, but the strategy was considered to prevent desperate migrants from bringing wage levels down. But Romanians were said to gladly accept any offer when alone and hungry. People had to go it alone, "each must provide for himself," to "get by" the best they could given the circumstances.

Stories of intra-ethnic deception and exploitation expanded with foremen skipping out on paying workers, bosses running away with the cash, laborers stealing from companies or clients, unkept promises, thefts, gossip and slander, scams, incompetence, or malfeasance. "Don't trust just any Romanian,"[3] it was often said, since common ethnicity allowed for easy communication (cultural intimacy for Herzfeld 2005) but did not convey any obligation to be altruistic or representations of a moral economy (Scott 1976). Other scholars of Romanian diasporas encountered such widespread perceptions (Remus Gabriel Anghel 2013, and personal communication).

Before I could readjust my research objectives and take distrust seriously, global turmoil dealt a heavy blow to my fieldwork plans. The 2008 economic crisis hit the precarious migrants in the construction industry, with many Romanians made redundant overnight. Returning a second time to Athens, I found Mihai, the grizzly-built 40-year-old master builder who offered my main entry to the field, packing his tiny VW with tools and personal items to drive all the way home to his village of Săteni. The only thing missing was a

driver since he dealt easily with Athens cops but could hardly cross two borders without a driver's license.

Having few options, I hopped onboard. Mihai had been my social foothold in Athens. I came to him with strong personal recommendations, and our personalities clicked right off the bat. He introduced people I was planning to know better using his credentials, but many had already left. Mihai held on longer, living off meager jobs, but had to end a few years of prosperous entrepreneurship to start home anew, and the other seven men sharing his apartment packed for Romania as well. My entry cut down to a single reliable and meaningful social relationship, I chose to hold on to him and pick up from there.[4] My ethnography started in earnest with those many hours of Mihai riding shotgun while I was trying to come up with a backup plan.

The monotonous drive made for an extensive conversation. I brought up some dilemmas encountered in Greece. To keep me from falling asleep, he humored and egged me on. We talked about people in his life and mine. Mihai was one of those conversationalists who enjoyed making a point, always had an example in mind, and took real pleasure in showing how life really is to a young, inexperienced social actor whose city upbringing and cosseted education cushioned him against the world's harshness. One of the first things Mihai taught me (and he was the first of many) was that my naiveté, real or feigned, made me seem too trusting of the wrong people, apart from other social inabilities of the ignorant outsider.

I spent my first days in Săteni trying to get the lay of the land and seek a proper research topic. The site was new, but the village had its own entrepreneurs (I had just arrived there with one) and some empirical questions persisted. What made people successful in economic affairs? How did they deal with clients and workers? I was tacitly convinced that kinship was old hat, but then why did it come up so often and so ambivalently in people's representations of cooperation and morality in business?

Kinship became important from my first moments in the village. I met many of the relatives of Mihai, then the relatives of their relatives. Ethnographic inroads followed extended chains of warm and generous family interactions. At the same time, in Săteni as in Athens, there seemed to be a lot of generalized distrust in fellow villagers. In the absence of different ethnicities, could kinship serve as a stable and predictable structure of common interests and mutualism?

Yet, while everyone emphasized the importance of kinship in their lives, a few days into fieldwork a tavern patron shared a bit of common wisdom: "don't expect to get your prick wet from relatives and kin." I asked about the meaning of the saying, and, in lieu of explanation, he shouted another transgressive proverb: "not even the devil fucks you like your own relatives." The ethnographic route led to understanding what he meant and why so many shared his view.

One after another, expectations of amiable sociality seemed challenged. Common ethnicity brought caution in Greece, fellow Săteni could very well be dangerous and ought best to be avoided, and even relatives could be worthless and mean. The greatest social perils in Săteni and beyond seemed to come from those who shared a certain similarity to self rather than being radically different. A sense of pervasive distrust seemed to attach to all social interactions, not only the economic practices of initial interest. The fascinating fragility of trust became the focus of my ethnography.

Given the serendipitous event where the ethnographer has to build the research ship at sea, I just followed whatever came my way and promised an anthropological sense of wonder. I started off with provisional questions, some revised and some abandoned, and new ones appeared with each tentative answer. The common thread linking these theoretical and empirical explorations was the methodological approach to Săteni society.

Anthropology adopted participant observation as its core method since Malinowski's pioneering work (1922), yet the practice remains somewhat mysterious. Its evidence cannot be easily quantified, it thrives upon chance and serendipity, and its outputs are often more akin to poetry than mathematics. Yet anthropological observation is not really special at all. The anthropologist as participant blends in with everyday social life, approaching phenomena and data that occur spontaneously, and offering the subject of the study a voice in the representations of preoccupations and things that are important in life.

"Going native" is a derided or contested perspective with echoes of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (or Malinowski for Clifford 2002:92ff). But natives have their own dispositions in accepting ethnographers in their midst and giving them access to social events and spaces. Entrance into fieldwork is an exercise in discovering a society from the inside, working your way around cultural representations and local practices, piecing together different parts of experience with the sense of curiosity and wonder driving ethnography. Firth (1936) and Evans-Pritchard (1940) provided spectacular accounts of fieldwork beginnings, but one emphasized the ease of making acquaintances and being accepted by Tikopians, while the other described the uncooperative aspect of research among the Nuer. Their research experiences reflected differences in social openness between these societies. This ethnography met with both integrative and exclusionary aspects, reflecting the complexity of social relationships described in this book.

My friendship with Mihai and construction sites provided a convenient entry into Săteni society. He took me in as an apprentice, and I plunged right in the frenetic industry alongside work mates, clients, relatives, and friends. I explained my position as a social scientist trying to understand Săteni and why I chose apprenticeship as entrance. My interest in rituals, material

culture, or customs evoked the familiar and somewhat accurate figure of a Romanian folklorist.

To many, it mattered little to nothing why I was interested in what a ritual was about, or how inheritance practices evolved over time. Other things, such as who introduced me and who were the people I associated with, were more important evaluations than academic credentials or interests, which already spread through by word of mouth. With this dual identity, I entered the houses of many, sometimes for work, and sometimes for visits. I made friends with mates and clients, patronized taverns and attended funerals, and witnessed weddings and elections for two years.

After living a while with Mihai, I chose to live alone in an uninhabited house for writing my field notes in relative isolation, and I experienced the ethnographic perspective of neighbor and homeowner. I planted fruit trees and cared for my vegetable garden; I invited people over to make moonshine and fought two dreadful winters by stacking wool in my attic (against everyone's well-thought warning about bugs) and building a new stove with help from my new friends. Between working as an apprentice, staying over at my informants' houses, and spending time in public, I ended up sleeping in my work clothes next to my laptop and field notes. After a year, I mostly abandoned apprenticeship and focused more on certain people and stories and pursuing particular, recurrent social mechanisms that kindled my curiosity.

My social life followed the public and private practices of a dozen families, branching out into their relatives, friends, and acquaintances, and petering out into their more distant connections. My associates integrated me into their everyday routines of work, visits, rituals, gossip, and meals, and I created my own research universe within Săteni-specific conditions of social interaction. Navigating these expanding social interactions, I established various new connections, allowing me to study Săteni from within. Moreover, initial social forays provided me with a vital anthropological resource: a sense of wonder. One such source was to personally experience the mechanisms of trust and distrust.

I encountered some people, then met their friends and relatives, and sometimes was allowed to attend a visit or another event. But to be engaged in a relationship was more than ad-hoc interviews or chats; it meant reciprocal assistance. For example, a car and time and fuel to burn offered precious social currencies for the opportunity of driving villagers around. I even ended up doing it for little or no money with people I barely knew before. In the eyes of my friends, I was taken for a figurative ride, but I was far from exploited since people had to bear my inquisitive presence. Under various forms of social interaction, natural or manipulated, I carried out my research while spending as much time as possible just observing the interactions and, when possible, making general or specific inquiries.

I set up Internet networks and lent money to friends; went fishing or to pick up people from international bus stations; hired people to prune my trees, cut my firewood, or clean up my well; shopped around the village and even sold moonshine for a wedding, made in a copper still bought from traveling Roma craftsmen. I traveled with shepherds negotiating the sale of animals and cheese, clients fetching construction materials, guys running away from the law or running for local elections, and women visiting relatives and caring for the sick. I did everything possible to embed myself in the give-and-take experience of social life in Săteni, but certain spheres were off limits.

I wanted to record discussions and interviews, but Săteni perspectives about recording devices included suspicion that they would provide dangerous proof of incriminating declarations. Worrisomely, there was a growing trend among youngsters of uploading audio and video materials online to embarrass fellow villagers.[5] In a society where secrecy is a central concern, using a recorder in delicate situations would have meant abandoning spontaneity or honesty. I decided to transcribe everything as soon as I could. I then became known as "the boy with the laptop" as I jotted down information everywhere possible, still a conspicuous and slightly suspect behavior. Truth be told as Verdery (2018) argues for her Romanian ethnographic experience, the anthropologist is something of a spy and is not only perceived as one. It proved much easier to collect experimental data using anonymous and context-free questions testing certain models derived from ethnography during the last months of fieldwork, being less threatening than recording socially relevant information.

Many villagers were little interested in the attempt to study a village society. They were indifferent either to me or to my goals, and some were outright uncooperative. But even unapproachable members of a society can be observed in public interaction and interpreted through other people's representations. Fortunately, many Sătenis generously shared their experiences and ideas about the way their society works, about what drives people, and what one should do about it. It helps that gossip is more easily and innocently produced as evidence for the naive outsider with less or no local parti pris. Always the pragmatists, villagers moved from broad statements to illustrative examples to help an outsider to understand a life choice or a cultural idea, quite motivated by the pleasure to appear knowledgeable and wise.

I knew some neighborhoods where my close friends or their relatives lived, but not others where I had no relevant connections. I certainly observed more people than I knew or talked to. The ethnography explores the lives of people from all genders, of different ages, rich and poor and in the middle; farmers, animal breeders, traders, and widows; people with a diploma and those with two years of schooling, in politics, in crime, or just minding their households. All their voices and experiences are found in this book. But even so, this

ethnography is limited, necessarily so if some of the arguments in this book hold water.

The problem, I realized, was that being in a trusting or even casual relationship with someone meant closing other social doors. I could never be closely associated with two bitter enemies in open conflict. When two of my associates quarreled, I could sometimes stay as a friend of both by claiming honest neutrality. Yet most of the time I was not trusted or liked enough to be approached or warmly received by local adversaries of my established social connections. My frustration when I discovered they considered me an enemy by association disappeared when I understood it was not personal, but a general way of treating people. After getting into an argument with Mihai a few months into the field, new acquaintances appeared from previously blocked opportunities due to my close association with him. The social relations that connect some people serve as boundaries toward others, as observed by Strathern (1996).

Ethnography is also a kind of natural experiment in social dynamics. I started off with naive expectations of a total immersion in the "imponderabilia of actual life and of typical behavior" (Malinowski 1922:20). Sometimes, the ethnographic route meanders more according to the social organization of the locality and less according to the anthropologist's choice. Interactions with villagers, access to the social spaces, and relationships were largely determined by the social mechanisms of trust and reciprocity discussed in this book. Ethnography is a natural experiment of building a personal network of trust and cooperation that also offers firsthand experience of distrust.

I.2. OUTLINE OF AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF DISTRUST

Like all societies, Săteni is a maze of social relationships, of social institutions, of ecological and technological processes. An anthropologist must choose for his readers a door to the labyrinth, and this first decision is crucial for symbolic and pragmatic reasons. The account of social immersion begins from the place where strangers and villagers could easily mingle, yet also the place where distrust is the name of the game.

Chapter 1 describes the ethnographic encounter with the Săteni tavern, a confrontational arena where men experience social interactions marred by deception, conflict, and domination. These dramaturgical spaces contribute to the reputations of individuals as competent or incompetent social actors. Trust and cooperation are decisive in the course of affairs, being tested and tried in the face of social adversity. The deep play of taverns illustrates that part of Săteni ethics emphasizing personal responsibility and competitive individualism when engaging with an unpredictable and unforgiving world.

Chapter 2 shifts our attention to an entirely opposite social sphere: the home with its warm safety. I describe a society of households where each defining element is a nexus of people and things inextricably related and clearly demarcated from the rest of society. A villager's central orientation in the world in terms of identity, motivation, morality, and practices focuses on the family and its material and social ecology, based on a fundamental commitment to the only corporate entity of village society. The ethnography further suggests an epistemic function of households, places where the separation between the sphere of trust and the sphere of distrust is built into the materiality of the human environment and the mutuality holding the family together. Design and domestic customs reflect and create patterns of cooperative family interactions and mental representations of privateness as defenses against social harm.

The third chapter tackles two problems of Săteni kinship. The first is that relatedness seems, on the one hand, given and permanent. Yet kinship appears in equal measure as created and conditional. The second problem is that relatives should but do not always act morally toward each other. Săteni villagers have cultural solutions to these problems. I analyze a moral contract in Săteni kinship associated with facts of nature, genealogy, and ritual. All forms of Săteni relatedness share a common feature, glossed as amity by anthropologists, that I will identify as trust in the fairness of partners engaged in mutual cooperation. Social expectations of generosity and reciprocity evoke an intuitive moral sense and are codified in norms of conduct. Conflict and distrust erode ties of relatedness while enduring cooperation can create kinship from naught. I focus on marriage rituals and practices to analyze how moral commitments change during personal life spans and have evolved in recent history to respond to individual and societal transformations.

A particular feature of relatedness is the public aspect of its representations. Chapter 4 analyzes the social mechanisms associated with funerary practices as communicational vehicles for Săteni relatedness and morality. The finality and salience of biological death creates for social actors a scene in which to publicly enshrine social relationships into moral perpetuity. Death practices communicate and reproduce a transcendental worldview pitting conflict and fragmentation against moral unity. I will argue that institutions and events of mortuary rituals play a crucial role in the propagation of social representations, symbolizing long-term trust in particularistic, interpersonal morality as the primordial resource of social life against the existential threat of generalized amorality.

Chapter 5 pursues the trust/mistrust dichotomy in local politics by studying its formal and informal political organization and interactions. To control local governance, Săteni actors need to muster more resources than adversaries, translated into social support during electoral battles. However, allegiances are neither ideological nor attached to essentialized groups but strategic and

circumstantial, based on personalized morality. I will describe how political entrepreneurs and factions emerge both in competitive dynamics with opponents and by means of reciprocal commitments of friendship and kinship. I show how moral fragmentation, political corruption, patronage, and personalized use of political power are broadly aligned with Săteni representations of morality in society, and paradoxically conducive to social stability.

Patterns of social interaction change in Săteni, as they have always and everywhere. Chapter 6 uses my ethnographic position as housebuilding apprentice to follow the personal history of an economic entrepreneur facing several moral dilemmas. His initial success in trade involved those moral ties of kinship and friendship available for each villager, but opportunities and costs made him expand his connections outside of this sphere into the wider Săteni society and beyond. The process of building a house involves costly commitments to social interactions outside kith and kin and thus a complex balance of trust between parties involved. More importantly, a change in the mode of production of houses had an impact over the moral outlook of cooperation. From an actor's perspective, the recent social division of labor changes short- and long-term orientations and subsequently the value of relatives and strangers as cooperators. The shift, I will argue, resonates with larger transformations in moral views and patterns of social interaction, suggesting the role of both life history and institutional transformation in the evolution of trust.

The final chapter returns full circle to the stable dismemberment. The absence of cooperation among CAP members exemplifies an event where actors lacked the crucial resource of trust for mutually rewarding interactions given a structure of experiences and expectations. I compare the prudential if low-rewarding choice of immediate disengagement with the social euphoria of a haphazard event. An outside boon succeeded to make people transcend the zero-sum game of existence, painting an entirely different image of Săteni if only for a couple of days. I use these contrasting moments to revise the ethnographic evidence on the background of historical processes to open up the conversation toward productive, yet still tentative, avenues of anthropological and interdisciplinary investigation into the nature of trust, in Săteni and beyond.

The primary aim of this book is ethnographic description, meaning presenting and translating the practices and representations of a group of people as observed and interpreted by an anthropologist. But the act of describing has, arguably inevitable, theoretical implications. The ethnography shows how the interplay between trust and distrust appears at all levels of Săteni society, from minute interactions to long-term institutions to folk theories of social ontology. How one behaves at a wedding, what all weddings create, and how weddings fit in the moral worldview of Sătenis are three distinct phenomena related by the role of trust.

In particular, I argue that trust as expectations of cooperation plays a fundamental role in how Săteni make and unmake relatives, political factions, economic ventures, houses, and graves. Thus, rather than ask why there is so much distrust in Săteni, we need to understand how trust appears and how much it can extend given the natural, historical, and cultural processes at work. When we understand the causal mechanisms that make people not trust others, distrust appears not as the evil counterpart of trust but as its reasonable alternative. Distrust can, for example, save one's skin in the Săteni tavern.

CHAPTER 1

The deep play of tavern distrust

Imagine yourself suddenly set down in the middle of the village, while the bus that has brought you drives away out of sight. I begin with a paraphrase of Malinowski's thoughts on the beginning of ethnography since the first chapter proposes an experiment. The approach offers a first glimpse into the reality of village life while also reflecting the process and results of participant observation, the main methodology of this research. But rather than tackle serious anthropological topics such as kinship, religion, or mode of production, I will describe an apparently frivolous domain of Săteni society. There is a perfect place to start comprehending Săteni distrust if plunged directly into the center of the village.

On an ordinary day, you will not see many people around, as most work inside their fenced yards or far in the fields. But the atmosphere enlivens by two bars across the road from the mayoralty and the bus stop. A few dozen men sit in musty, smoky rooms or out on the verandas during scorching summer afternoons. Drinks are a bit more expensive than in smaller peripheral pubs, mostly beer and dubious beverages aspiringly called vodka and rum going for 20 cents a shot (which, to my surprise, means 100 ml). In the background, TVs broadcast news, football, and folk music, and every now and then, someone jokingly switches on the porn channel to the wolf calls of patrons. Boys will be boys, and taverns are quintessential masculine spaces (see Figure 1.1).

The choice of going to one rather than the other tavern has social importance. Berescu, Popular Party councilor and publican, practices a peculiar form of client selection. When the other place closes at midnight, he ostentatiously locks the iron grillage of his door and denies access to late-night drinkers, except regulars and bigwigs. Although losing him quite a few customers, Berescu's spiteful reasoning was born of frustration with disloyal patrons who took advantage of his late-closing hours after having spent most of their

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Figure 1.1. A Săteni tavern

money elsewhere. But for top clients, the Popular Party mayor being a typical example, Berescu shut down the place and joined select customers for a secretive late-night libation in a private room. I was flabbergasted by how people who barely kept on their feet still managed to drive home, a few flipped-over cars notwithstanding.

The other tavern would close earlier because Florica and Costel were not owners, but an elderly couple from a nearby town employed by a local businessman associated with the Republicans. Attracted by electronic gambling machines, higher-stakes rummy games, turbo-folk *manele*, and a slightly more modern design, young people were more likely to frequent the Republican tavern (draped in electoral mauve during elections) and associate with its

political faction. Still thirsty at closing time, these young men found themselves time and again arguing with Berescu through the locked grillage. Despite his sanctions, they were even more adamant not to be cowed into submission.

Drinks may be cheaper and the wobbly return home shorter in peripheral taverns for consumers more interested in the contents of their glasses than the location's social atmosphere. But only in central Săteni can one rub shoulders with the who's who. Except for a few hard drinkers, men come to the two taverns for their social importance. "I'm going to/let's meet in the center" usually means going to these pubs and meeting relatives, friends, and acquaintances. Some villagers (ethnographer included) drove or walked quite a distance only to be a part of the main daily congregation of men in Săteni and observe the others doing the same thing. Such open spaces where men may interact with any other of their co-villagers offer a microcosm of male public behavior. Compared with the privacy of homes, the tavern is a space of social dramaturgy (Goffman 1959) where people perceive themselves and others as actors engaged in constant public communication.

If everyone is both actor and spectator, what is the play? What do men do in taverns? They drink, they gossip, they bet, they fight, they joke. In contrast to private interaction, tavern sociality conveys more of the competitive aspect of Săteni society where men can evaluate themselves and others in a setting of overt communication. Patrons engage in games of generosity, luck, and physical and intellectual domination. They carry on with political scheming and everyday gossip. What is at stake? Money, alliances, jobs, hierarchies, politics, bodies, minds, and morality.

What ties these things together under the spirit of competition is the public nature of interaction. Actors knowingly put themselves in the spotlight of general observance where personal qualities and social ties are put to the test. Beyond apparent bacchanalia, tavern activity carries a special kind of informational content: the stuff that reputations are made of (Origgi 2017). The resulting social interactions have the characteristics of a tournament where reputations are chiseled and pored over with heightened vigilance to the actions and minds of others.

1.1. REPUTATION AND VIGILANCE IN DRAMATURGICAL TOURNAMENTS

Imagine my surprise when entering the Republican tavern one night to see the Popular mayor for the first time in the enemy lair. He sat across the table from Gheorghe, a sheep owner and Republican leader from Catuneni, the nearby village. Around the table sat three Sătenis: Grigore—local councilor, Vasciuc—ex-land-registry official, Mitica—a migrant returned from Spain,

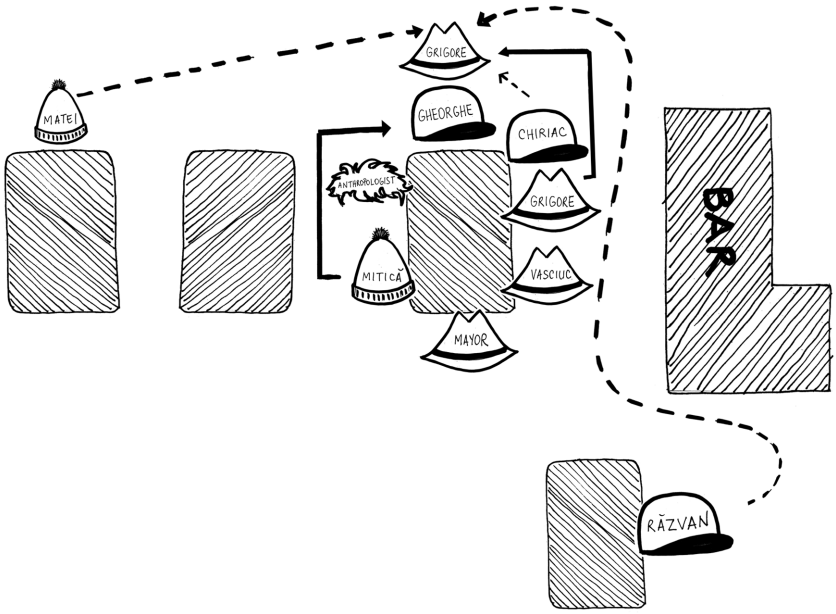

Figure 1.2. The tavern brawl
Baseball caps, Gheorghe's allies; hats,: the mayor's allies; woolen caps,: "neutrals"; dotted line, action benevolent toward Gheorghe; straight line, action malevolent toward Gheorghe.

and another young Catuneni (see Figure 1.2). The configuration was surprising since Gheorghe was a known Republican supporter ferociously opposing the mayor's faction. Excited that enemy factions were sharing a drink, I greeted Gheorghe, whom I knew well, and asked for permission to sit. He pulled me a chair, bought a round for everyone, and put their conversation back on its energetic track.

The main speakers were Gheorghe and the mayor, with others intervening sporadically in an argument about the botched renovation of Catuneni's school, shut down for over a year while schoolchildren were shuttled by minibus to Săteni. The wealthy shepherd asked the mayor for explanations, furiously complaining that his children had to wake up early in the dark, freezing winter mornings. The renovation had been an electoral pledge from the mayor, and Catuneni votes decisively tipped the electoral balance. The project received funding only as long as Populars formed the national government, but Catunenis became angry when works stalled while Săteni projects continued. The mayor blamed the current government (Republicans, i.e., Gheorghe's party) for denying funds (see Ioniță 2005 on preferential allocation). The conversation was rife with reciprocal accusations of sloppy management and malevolence.

Public exposure encouraged their loud rhetoric about high social stakes. Entourage interventions followed the social configuration of the (still-verbal) contest. The young Catuneni loudly supported Gheorghe, even though his arguments projected more vocal strength than clever wording. Buttressing the mayor's side were Grigore, as Popular party member, and Vasciuc, a known supporter looking forward to re-entering the lucrative nexus of land administration. Meanwhile, Mitica kept an ambivalent status but slowly shifted his sympathies. He began to present evidence supporting the mayor's side, invoking his professional knowledge of construction. Mitica's interventions were more even-handed than the sycophantic participation of Republicans, yet his impartiality—as well as everyone's allegiances—were to be tested.

Gheorghe became irritated with the mayor's stooges and insultingly brushed Grigore's comments aside. He was not discussing the matter with "puppies," but with the man with real power. He even lightly slapped Grigore, as one would an exasperating child. Protesting the rudeness, the mayor asked Gheorghe to maintain a civilized attitude, or things would turn bad. Despite the tension, the conflict rested on mostly metaphorical mentions of violence, punctuated by personal vows to avoid conflict as long as the others maintained a respectful manner: "fight we will if we must, yet we are responsible people who can do without violence," as the mayor said to Gheorghe's approving nod.

Everything unraveled when Grigore silently rose to his feet, went behind Gheorghe's back, and put a knife to his throat. The ensuing drama was over in seconds. Before I could find my bearings, two other villagers, Razvan and Matei, jumped from different tables across the room, and Matei got hold of the blade with his bare hands while Razvan put himself between Grigore and Gheorghe. The young Catuneni grabbed the assailant and launched a vicious round of kicks and punches before being himself restrained. Meanwhile, Mitica armlocked Gheorghe from behind and, in the confusion, Grigore managed to run away. During the clash, the mayor kept a low profile but raised his hands afterward and loudly proclaimed that he had no more business there and—lo and behold!—how the Republican supporters are behaving in their pub. He left despite Gheorghe's calls to finish his drink and the conversation.

By a stroke of luck, I observed a rare Săteni event from its midst. But observation is, in this case, both the anthropologist's tool and an object of study. It may very well be that social actors constantly manage their presentation of self (Goffman 1959). Yet certain social spheres are more imbibed with expectations of the performance of the self. When men[1] interact in taverns, much of what is being said and done depends upon the awareness that one observes and is being observed. This fundamental quality gives tavern life a deep dramaturgical aspect, and the academic ethnographer is just one more observer or player from the crowd of folk ethnographers.

The pub fight left Gheorghe and his mates carefully dissecting the event over a couple of hours. Before I could get myself together as ethnographer and

investigate the event, everyone already had engaged in a collective study of reasons, intentions, and behavior, switching from event analysis to behind-the-scenes inferences about actors and their social position, recalling every little detail and interpreting the actions and motivations of parties involved. In the aftermath, the physical fight in itself was not the most interesting aspect. For audience and actors alike, the event revealed relevant information about personal commitments, a process of creating and managing reputations for social preferences in alliances or conflict on the background of preexistent knowledge and causal inference. More simply put, whom should one now trust after the fight? Which alliances proved trustworthy and which were broken?

Naively, I volunteered inebriation as primary cause of violence. The point was acknowledged but sidelined; after all, everyone had something to drink, but what made a specific individual start *this* fight?[2] They made me realize how inattentive I actually had been, by recreating the physical motions. Although sitting inches away from Gheorghe, I hadn't seen or understood much of the commotion. Razvan and Matei described verbally, and re-enacted physically, how the attacker moved in innocuously. Yet something about his right arm seemed suspect. In a split second, 130-kilo-heavy Matei ran about 5 meters and grabbed the blade before it even touched Gheorghe's throat. From the opposite corner, similarly built Razvan was the second to notice the attack, jumping as soon as he saw the knife and grabbing the assailant's arm.

While I was focusing on the illusively important conversation, background actors followed the relevant details of who does what to whom and why. Razvan's vigilance was well warranted. Gheorghe was his closest friend, core political ally, and ritual brother. Razvan kept a close watch over his Catuneni relative's interests and offered protection when he visited Săteni. Moreover, he worried that his ally could himself turn violent after a few drinks and exchange of insults and anxiously scrutinized potential for violence from any side.

There was a further reason for Razvan's interest in the meeting. Gheorghe was Razvan's political right-hand man and, as Republican leader in Catuneni, managed to win a sizable group of dissenters from the ruling party's stronghold. Someone whispered into Razvan's ear that the mayor planned either to win Gheorghe on his side or else assault him using confederates. In any case, Razvan stayed extremely vigilant during the conversation and remained ready to act.

The other helper was Matei, a hardened sheep owner with a history of violent behavior, including imprisonment for rape. Seeking a break with the past, he cared for his reputation as enlightened peacemaker, breaking up serious fights with his keen attention and tremendous physical endowment.[3] A young and humble Gheorghe had been a loyal shepherd for Matei's father, and Matei was also good friends with Razvan, and sympathetic (but not committed) to

the faction opposing the mayor. Although sheep owners often fight over pasture rights and trade opportunities, the three men mentioned in this discussion carefully respected each other and did not clash over status or resources. Layers upon layers of social relationships intertwined in a few seconds of tense social interaction.

The blitz fight threw into sharp relief solidarities between actors and defined their reputation for some time to come. Gheorghe's true allies had revealed themselves through their actions. The young Catuneni villager who had pounded the attacker proved once again to be Gheorghe's loyal follower. He kept boasting that Catunenis stand together in times of trouble.[4] Razvan's character was already rock solid in Gheorghe's eyes, and Matei further confirmed himself as a worthy associate. Everyone laughed at my performance: Gheorghe's throat would have been slit open long before I would have moved a finger, although everything happened just under my nose. Even if my heart was in the right place, I was not to be relied upon in times of peril, since lacking skills for detecting and fighting enemies, I was a loyal, yet ultimately useless, associate.

More interest was given to reading the minds and positions of other participants. The verdict on Grigore and Vasciuc was clear: they were the mayor's stooges, trying to ingratiate themselves with the powers that be by deliberately goading Gheorghe into nervousness. Grigore acted like a dangerous man with his aggressive stupidity, and Gheorghe promised to teach the knife wielder a lesson about messing with a shepherd known for vicious retaliation. Everyone commented that the mayor reconfirmed his treacherous, cunning personality. He was considered the main source of the conflict, and particularly dangerous given the slyness of indirectly provoking adversaries to fight and by maneuvering berserk lackeys.

The most controversial reputational effect involved Mitica, who was still with us. Gheorghe violently questioned his motives in immobilizing the shepherd during the first moments of the brawl. Gheorghe claimed that this helped the assailant by rendering the victim incapable of response. The accused disputed the interpretation by claiming intervention as a pacifier to prevent further violence. When indictments got categorical, Mitica left, clamoring for his innocence and good intentions.

In his absence, men agreed he probably was the mayor's supporter. He had been seen drinking with the mayor, and tavern rumor was that he eyed a construction contract with the authorities. His reaction during the attack, however, provided a crucial piece of evidence for Mitica's reputation. Just as Gheorghe's friends proved beyond the shadow of doubt that they were honest cooperators, so did Mitica's decision label him as allied with the enemies. This momentous event influenced future social interactions, as those present later avoided, or kept Mitica out of, important private discussions. There was little he could do to change the impression made with that one gesture. Stakes

had been too high and his choices biased enough to raise red flags about his allegiances.

After everything was said and done, there was surprisingly little immediate development. There was no police report, Gheorghe did not exact his revenge (his young companion did enough damage, he boasted), and Grigore even returned to center (but only in the Popular tavern). He justified pulling his knife as defending his honor blemished by Gheorghe's verbal and physical humiliation in front of villagers. For all I could tell, he was not even poised to kill, and I noticed the blade was pretty dull. But it was crucial for everyone to see him defending his dignity and cementing his relationship with the mayor's faction by challenging rivals.

These may be post-factum justifications and ethnographic speculations, yet they express important reflective beliefs about the management of self in public. The fight left in its trail an X-ray of individual competencies, character traits, and social allegiances that were considered by the audience as relevant and solid social evidence given the salience of the attack. The interpretation of such public events aims to discover the real, relevant details underneath the ambiguous appearance: what is meant (and what it really means beyond speaker's intentions) by what is said (and done), to borrow a simile from pragmatics.

The tavern fight is an empirical window into how reputational concern informs the way Săteni villagers enter certain forms of social interaction. When danger loomed over the life of Gheorghe, Matei in a costly manner lived up to his image as peacemaker (a personal quality) and friend of Gheorghe (social relationship). Razvan owned up to his moral contract of mutuality with Gheorghe and deployed his consistent support against his enemies. Mitica, on the other hand, had wittingly or unwittingly established his reputation as the mayor's ally. The mayor confirmed his image of a shrewd operator, smart yet less violent than his competitors.

Because tavern visits may end up in conflicts, patrons must discern and rely upon social relationships of mutuality and trust against competitors and their social resources. As always, villagers evaluate other individuals as potential partners, confirmed allies, or outright enemies. The taverns display a market of cooperation, where people see others' actions as communicative of commitments and personal competence and know that their own actions will be judged similarly. While fights are rare but intense moments of social scrutiny, every little gesture counts in the tavern.

1.2. CUES AND INFERENCES IN SELECTIVE SOCIAL INTERCOURSE

Using Loizos's apt description of the Cypriot coffeehouse, the Săteni tavern is "an important clearinghouse for information" (Loizos 1975:92). Above

all stands information about the self, but there is much more going around. Sitting in the tavern for a few hours is an opportunity to see and be seen by other Sătenis and to engage in meaningful interaction. The central location of these two taverns makes them appropriate places for gathering and discussing daily events or just hanging around observantly, in wait for interesting events.

There is little anonymity in taverns. Early in my fieldwork, I arrived in the center one evening and stood halfway between the two taverns, unsure of which one to pick. Noticing my indecision, a young man called out from the Republican tavern, saying that "your boys are in," referring to the construction team I joined at the time. My social connections had already been under social observation for some time. Joining a table, accepting and offering rounds of drinks, and tackling certain topics of conversation are occasions for reading and displaying one's social position versus groups and individuals. While the pub fight had a dynamic and overt quality, other cues for social interaction are subtler and begin from the moment one steps through the door.

I was once mildly admonished by a friend for not being attentive to greet him quickly enough. When I exaggerated in the opposite direction by paying respects to everyone, my overenthusiasm was curbed by criticizing the indiscriminate approach. Associates then gave me a crash course in pub etiquette, with thorough instructions that one should only greet friends, important people, elders, and worthy people in general. Paying attention to lowlifes, drunkards, or minor characters was considered self-demeaning while greeting enemies or strangers verged between self-humiliation and impertinence. Only important men gave a loud greeting to the wider audience, such as political leaders vying for electoral support. Some villagers observed that the mayor had enthusiastically saluted everyone before getting elected but was now very selective and haughty even toward his own faction, an additional sign of his duplicity.

While actors do not make overtures toward people considered clearly inferior, they accept salutations from them, without much enthusiasm and sometimes mockingly. Actors embroiled in conflicts may salute each other, depending on the intensity of enmity, but the exchange shows anything but friendliness. Sometimes, men face a reputational dilemma. A stuttering, shabbily dressed villager often greeted Mihai with a "Hello c-c-c-cousin!" He replied with a mock stutter and a wink, but without malice.

In private, Mihai confided that the young man sharing his family name was indeed a paternal third cousin. In the absence of significant social interactions, he was not eager to acknowledge a relationship with a man perceived as poor and dimwitted. However, he neither wanted to treat badly a blood relative, however distant, nor be seen as doing it. Transforming salutations into jest preserved social ambiguity without clear social commitment, informed by a pragmatic approach to kinship, as we shall see in chapter 3.

Sătenis always map out the social relationships of fellow villagers, inspecting ties of kinship and friendship, and deriving inferential knowledge from social behavior. As discussed in chapters 2 and 4, the intimacy of homes or the focal moments of family rituals are conducive to trust and cooperation. Yet there is another side to Săteni sociality apart from these spaces expressive of moral relationships. Taverns are places where villagers congregate with others spanning the entire spectrum from close relatives to acquaintances to strangers or even enemies. The social dramaturgy makes possible a series of inferences about what kind of social relationship links two or more individuals, drawing from a vast panoply of cues.

Săteni taverns don't have seats at the bar. Except pitiful alcoholics who quickly dunk their drink and roam about aimlessly, one must take a place somewhere at a table. An individual chooses and is accepted to sit with friends or relatives, or with groups wherein the possibility of social relationship may be pursued. People derive conclusions about the current state of social relations from rapid assessments of who is sitting with whom. When only one of two civil servants always found side by side showed up in the tavern for a week, someone suggested that their relationship must have gone sour. A local opposition political leader scorned a friend for spending the evening drinking with the mayor. Mitica was seen frequenting the mayor's tavern, buying the mayor drinks, and sitting next to him on many occasions and was considered to be sucking up to the official, allegedly in the hope of landing a fat contract with the local administration.

In each case, observers interpreted the visible patterns of social interaction as informative of the complex state of affairs hidden from direct access. Spectators tried to understand what motivated one behavior and not another. In some cases, the inference was plain wrong. The clerks had no row going on; it was just that one of them had temporarily taken over additional household duties. In other cases, people drew better inferences from observed actions. Mitica went from spending significant tavern time with the mayor to helping him in the fight.

At the same time, an actor can turn to one's advantage the ambiguity of meeting someone in taverns, compared with the conspicuousness of meeting at home.[5] Viorel reproached his friend Dorin for drinking with an enemy of Viorel the previous night. The suspect managed to dodge innuendos and teasing by invoking innocent socialization between two tavern-goers discussing football or gossiping about trifles. Successful justifications allow one to covertly approach someone in the tavern about important matters, hiding in plain sight.

Taverns are special but no different than everyday interactions in detecting cues of social affiliation and agency. What defines them especially is the state of meta-vigilance, of being even more vigilant knowing that others are vigilant too. Thus, every gesture counts and carelessness is no excuse. The

mere act of showing up in the center or putting yourself at a certain table with certain people requires actors to uphold their social reputation, as they have chosen to enter the game of overt reputations.

The shadow play of indirect cues was over when Mitica chose deliberately to show the mayor he was on his side (or at least not opposed to it) by providing a costly signal of affiliation. New information made the earlier innuendos become more credible and sealed his image of Popular confederate, despite his attempts to cover it up under neutral intervention. Henceforth, opposition supporters became wary of disclosing valuable information, worried that secrets overheard by Mitica would reach the mayor. The effects of tavern reputation spill into other spheres. Inquisitiveness and keen social interpretation seep into the wider social fabric of Săteni. When Mitica went from socializing with the mayor in the tavern and immobilizing Gheorghe during the fight, to joining the mayor for a midnight barbeque at his cottage a few weeks after the fight, prior interpretations became fully justified.

From the midst of the people who did little to hide their aversion for the mayor, I observed how they read pub interactions as illustrations of political networks. The mayor was usually accompanied by a group of friends and supporters that detractors called "a pack of little dogs," i.e., sycophants. The word "puppy" denoted weakness, docility, fear of one's master, and a bone-begging attitude. Moreover, the description followed the hierarchical structure of the social network as a canine pack, with the mayor leading from the middle, surrounded by his near allies and a larger circle of opportunist supporters.

Using this metaphor, the mayor's adversaries explained his political success as a mix of powerful, yet ever-fragile coalitions with important villagers and his dominion over weaklings. However, opposition leaders had few qualms about attracting these "doggies" to their side in the tavern area. When a local councilor from the mayor's party chose to sit at Razvan's table in the Republican tavern rather than take his seat in the Popular place, he overtly signaled to everyone a change in social networks and political allegiance with reverberations for future events.

Strategically or intuitively,[6] tavern patrons show their value as cooperators and advertise their strength as competitors to the wider audience. Such a preoccupation with personal reputation and an interest in the reputation of others can be associated with a contractualist morality based on fairness and partner choice (Baumard 2016). Villagers expect certain people to help them and be on their side, and they keenly survey how expectations are met. The many forms of tavern interaction have moral consequences and provide morally relevant information.

Inferences drawn from integrating observed behavior with background knowledge motivate further action. Based on Mitica's reaction, some observers decided to avoid him. Others decided to trust him as social ally, which led to his continuing association with the mayor's faction. His costly choice of

action advertised him as committed to certain social relationships. The tavern was not the only place where he could have displayed them, but it was certainly the public setting where personal competences are often put to the test.

1.3. EXPLOITATION AND GENEROSITY

As a smoker at the time, I noticed that most people didn't keep their pack on the table as my urban friends did. I soon realized that the owner of visible cigarettes gets rapidly fleeced. People I more or less knew (or sometimes not at all) asked so often for a cigarette that they smoked more from my pack than I did. I switched to keeping it in my pockets and then followed the example of mates who claimed to have none or only a couple left, whether it was true or not. They even pulled out an empty pack as proof, while having a full one in another pocket. But when asked by friends, people also raise their hands ("search me!") to reassure the others that it was a matter of resources, and not exploitation or deception—the processes linked with fellows attempting or avoiding the pinching of cigarettes.

Drinks, on the other hand, are almost never asked for but offered. It so often happens that clients shout to their associates from across the room about their drink preference, advertising simultaneously who is friends with whom, how well they know their tastes, and their costly investment. Only desolate drunkards ask directly (and usually unsuccessfully) for a drink. As a social neophyte, I was solicited insistently by a boy who had desilted my well to buy him beers, claiming it was just proper since he did such a good job (he didn't). Exasperated, a friend stepped in and berated him for taking advantage of me. He then scolded me for being naive and easily deceived by each and every person. I had no reason to buy him beers, his insistence was pure exploitation, and there was no shame in refusing unwarranted requests—quite the opposite.

Drinks circulated according to a pattern of reciprocity that functioned best when left implicit. When a man offered a beer to a young mate, saying he returned a bottle received the previous day, the recipient smashed it to the floor. He clamored for disinterest in balanced exchange: "I am not like you, I never think about it, I just share with friends whenever I have money." Attention, inference, and public expression follow one after another when people gear their cognitive cogs to relevant social cues. Such rhetorical remarks, strategically used, express the speaker's concern for their reputation as social partner. In this case, the issue was about the actors' reputation for generalized generosity (Sahlins 1972; Tooby and Cosmides 1996). When the drink was delivered as repayment in balanced reciprocity rather than uninterestedly, the actor refused the offer and expressed in a costly manner his

commitment to an authentic friendship where gifts flow unaccounted for (Hruschka 2010).

Tavern etiquette contains subtle and not-so-subtle signals of social interaction. People desire protection from exploitation, against people sponging off on one's resources in the absence of mutualism. The preoccupation goes beyond merely material loss. Agents are eager to control the signs they are emitting by producing reliable signals (Gambetta 2009). An actor sharing indiscriminately does not indicate generosity, but weakness, offering a cue for self-interested agents to take advantage of socially incompetent individuals. The circuit of furtively shared cigarettes or loudly proclaimed drinks must be confined to one's associates, with whom one congregates in the tavern, makes business outside it, and partakes in the other's social life in mutualistic ways. Only within these social relationships do actors signal their trustworthiness, their selective but uncalculating generosity, and commitment to mutuality.

The tension lies between the true friends and relatives of a villager and the rest of society. The social field is dynamic, as actors continuously reassess their position and observe the behavior of others, yet the distinction remains active across forms of interaction. The risk of engaging in a zero-sum game lurks behind the myriad of gestures and interpretations governing tavern life. At every step, one is reminded that that surrounding social environment teems with potential competitors seeking out weaknesses by means of exploitative agency[7] (Umbreș 2017).

Sătenis themselves acknowledge this particularity, as I have often heard friends talking about "testing" others in taverns. Marin liked to ask acquaintances in the tavern to buy him a beer as if he were out of cash. Sometimes, the addressee was stopped before buying the round, as Marin would flamboyantly throw cash on the bar to pay for both of them. He was merely testing his drinking buddies for stinginess or generosity. Marin's suspicion came from his belief (not entirely unjustified) that he was surrounded by spongers always singing his praises for a drink, but less inclined to reciprocate.[8] Feigning scarcity, he tested his mates' generosity beyond cheap talk. But other times testing takes an overt form as public competition.

1.4. DOMINATION AS PROVEN REPUTATION

Tavern patrons establish a reputation for preferences and competencies in social relationships that extends well beyond tavern walls. Yet bars are social magnets for conflicts because they afford the opportunity and legitimacy of competition. One thing that happens almost exclusively in taverns is the direct provocation of a conflict, of a competition or another kind of event pitting individual interests against each other just for the sake of the game.

A man can target another to demonstrate and compare personal skills such as cunningness or strength in the eyes of the beholders.

The ethnography touched upon this game-like aspect of tavern life in the brawl that involved allied teams and third parties working against each other to prove social superiority. But that event worked, in a way, as a relief valve for previous and underlying political and economic tensions. Unlike passionate fights, actors sometimes create a situation intending precisely to draw the other into the public arena and interpret and evaluate performances in the eyes of the village.

A direct and crude form of testing others is arm-wrestling played by younger men. Notable winners display their body strength, their stamina, and skill in overtaking a series of competitors, offering reliable cues of their physical prowess. While older men did sometimes comment on the games, they seldom engaged in wrestling. Content to belittle pretenses of manhood, they recounted their own exploits of youth. Yet physical strength is a relevant cue for work capacity, protection of self and family, and social domination (Sell et al. 2009). For some patrons, such qualities of competitive personality needed to be clearly signaled.

One evening, a young man seemed particularly skilled at overcoming opponents and even taunted the audience of established men by questioning their physical power. Razvan, the sturdy sheep owner with a mafia and prison background that we met during the brawl, picked up the gauntlet. He slowly rose from his table, faced the younger challenger, took a few moments to get into the right position and managed, in a few tense seconds, to win the match. He left the arm-wrestling table as matter-of-factly and confidently as had arrived and returned to the real men's table.

Reasserting his authority over the group of youngsters in a game of direct physical force was crucial. A sheep owner needs to display the brute power that safeguards a means of livelihood.[9] Moreover, Razvan cultivated youngsters for political supporters and could not allow a challenge to his authority, even in arm-wrestling, not to mention embarrassment in front of peers.[10] Using prison-acquired knowledge of strategic body posture and his opponent's fatigue, Razvan curtailed the young man's defiance to assert his domination in a memorable moment.

Arm-wrestling is a competitive yet largely amiable form of physical competition. The reputation for physical acumen can also emerge in spontaneous brawls. People fight less than talk about fights, but, as we saw, physical confrontations do happen in Săteni, and taverns are a perfect arena. Most times, a party feels insulted or aims to redress a perceived injustice (a form of morally sanctioned violence; see Fiske and Rai 2014). Fights may just be one-to-one affairs, but sometimes additional moral commitments intervene. One involved two father–son pairs, starting with an argument between the elders and developing into physical combat engaging the youngsters. The fathers quarreled

over a conflictual rummy[11] game doused in alcohol, and the conflict was fueled by an unrelated latent competition between the gamblers' sons for domination among village youths. The moment exposed both personal clashes and father–son alliances underpinned by the moral unity of the family.

Another fight resembled the provocations of arm-wrestling described earlier. A young man (not the proficient arm-wrestler, but equally brazen) had been boasting for a few weeks about his fighting prowess. He usually frequented peripheric taverns but one night came to the center flaunting his invincibility in hand-to-hand combat, loudly enumerating his victims. As people called it, he was "making his dick bigger," associating genital endowment with aggressive masculinity. This phrase has an ironic tinge that emphasizes the swagger's inability to live up to claims.

Testing the crowd, the young upstart found his match. Razvan again rose to the occasion and launched a vicious attack upon the young contender to inflict enough damage to chase the victim away from the center for months. Interestingly, neither then nor after arm-wrestling did Razvan brag. Behind his calm attitude stood a reluctance regarding such confrontations. Well-known stories of past exploits in prison and criminal circles already sustained his reputation as a bruiser who couldn't be challenged without impunity. Moreover, Razvan's plans aimed at local leadership, hence management-of-self presented an actor kind and beneficial to followers. Violent episodes of reasserting status were costly, yet necessary to maintain the audience of potential or actual followers informed about his formidability (the capacity to inflict costs, Sell et al. 2009).

The bodies clashing in the Săteni tavern compete over resources. But no one tries to extract something from the opponent; nobody attacks for money, drinks, or other possessions. The stakes are public recognition. Nobody wrestles in secrecy; people would often avoid brawlers in private encounters. The setting exposes actors to public knowledge, their competences are tested in a costly manner, and they need to signal their standing in front of allies and enemies alike. If a shepherd is physically dominated, how can he be master to sheep, workers, or rustlers and stand his ground in negotiations or conflicts over grazing sites? He must be cunning and backed by a coalition, but some situations demand brute physical power. Who would follow a political leader cowering under threats of violence? Can a man protect his household or pursue his interest if unable to project some threat of retaliation?

Formidability is not the only resource Săteni men use in their social interactions, but the forthcoming ethnographic account shows that it plays a role in certain contexts. Some actors, in particular, need to establish a reputation for high performance in this domain, and the tavern offers a proper arena for both games and serious plays on bodies. Following the games in the tavern, we find new kinds of knowledge about power.

1.5. LUCK AND AGENCY

Some competitions are milder, yet no less contested, while more complex in terms of rules. For example, rummy games are played in groups of three or four men gathered around a table surrounded by repeatedly shooed-off kibitzers. About two dozen men are professionals, while fringe players participate sporadically and, more often than not, leave empty-handed. Stakes can be as low as a few pennies to a week's agricultural wages. Covertness is essential, as gambling is illegal, but players can claim before police to play an innocent game of rummy without money. Players furtively exchange bills that are kept hidden from sight, also masking one's endowment from competitors.

When friends play, rummy blends into amiable relationships, despite the competitive gameplay. Stakes are moderate and winners change every day. Players buy a couple of rounds after winning a handsome pot, and there is plenty of banter, with successful players taunting losers by loudly ordering drinks and fluttering banknotes. A player may flaunt his success, but others curb his enthusiasm by referring to the ever-turning wheel of fortune. Winning patterns tends to favor a rather balanced outcome among core players, and amounts are usually trivial. The actual game often matters less than the style of promoting or belittling a triumph, a pleasurable way of spending one's time with friends beyond the zero-sum game of gambling.

But other rummy games are less about amity and banter, and more about pocketing other people's money. Games surge after state benefits and local administration paydays, with proficient gamblers making a profit at occasional players' expenses. Anyone can join and leave a game freely. Although no one admitted doing it, I overheard oblique suggestions of game rigging, with two or three shrewd players fixing up to "dry up" a dupe (especially if slightly intoxicated). But even professionals can get fleeced.

The village treasurer won a particularly high-stakes game by borrowing funds from the mayoralty coffers when his own money ran dry. He returned the money to treasury and enjoyed a handsome gain. It only added insult to injury for Republican losers that the treasurer was the mayor's father and trumped their reserves by gambling public money. Competitive but not amiable rummy involves cash on the nail; there are no expectations of trust or reciprocity, just a preoccupation with personal gain.[12] There are no offers of rounds, and people curse under their breath and berate others' luck or their own misfortune. There is less taunting, and more concern with playing your hand well and making sure others don't cheat. Instead of socially equalizing banter, we have beggar-thy-neighbor, zero-sum games.

The unambiguously illegal dice game of *barbut*, associated with prisons and the underworld and usually shunned by esteemed villagers, usually begins impromptu in a dark alley behind pubs. The frantic rounds have one player rolling the dice and others competitively betting against him. Money changes

hands fast, and everything is over after a few large stakes, leaving one incontestable winner. Again, there is little conversation, restricted to imprecations at loss and self-aggrandizing bursts at wins. The game is purely dependent on chance, yet players still maintain heightened attention to individual capability and luck.

Players record the fortunes of others for signs of intervention. Apparently, high-flying players (few of them in Săteni) inspect against dice loading when stakes reach into thousands of euros. Other times, luck is associated with sexual prowess, either when players allude to an individual's sexual exploits before the game, or when players rub the dice to their genitals to imbue them with power. Sexual continence is one source of good luck mentioned with playful lewdness. If a player seems very lucky, others ridicule his abstinence but avoid his suspiciously hot hand.

Games of chance revolve around apparently blind, random processes, but players pay more attention to personal agency in agonistic interaction. In friendly rummy games, wins and losses evened out in the long-term atmosphere of relaxation and friendly competition over small games and shared consumption. The other rummy games and *barbut* are purely competitive games, with no expectations of reciprocity, or amity, or symbolic rounds of drinks to appease sore losers. This aspect of zero-sum games feeds into the domain of competitive individualism. Each player's cognitive representations track individual agency in the form of persistent luck, hidden skill, or deceptive strategy. Everyone involved in a purely competitive game carefully interprets patterns of opponent performance in order to protect himself from cheaters or exceptionally able players. Moreover, agency detection spills over into tracking nonhuman agents in games of chance.

The Republican tavern installed two electronic slot machines, soon a hotspot for inveterate gamblers. Players took individual turns, except for some pair of friends sharing investments and profits. Most players knew the machine was programmed to return overall less than invested, but everybody was hoping for a windfall. Unlike rummy and *barbut*, slots pit man against machine, but individual prowess still comes to the fore. Winners loudly emphasize their luck rather than random chance. Success was also attracted by charming the machines into dispensing wins. They kissed or talked to them, spat at, headbutted, or kicked machines, depending on the outcome of a round. Some used special ways of pressing buttons to influence the result, while others jokingly asked the machine about its current mood and idiosyncrasies.

Players went beyond the management of luck by guessing the secrets of the machine for strategic betting. Experienced players, usually the same gamblers hardened at rummy and *barbut*, believed one could beat the machine by reading its inner causal agency. Recording winning patterns in memory suggested that large wins increased after many losers fed the machine without hitting the bonus. A proficient player waited for hapless players to spend their

money and used the right moment to make a large gain. Conversely, it was considered ill-advised to play against a machine that had already dispensed significant wins. Since I assume that machine algorithms were probabilistic, their explanations sought a pattern in random events involving human agency (of players or machine owners/creators).

A spectacular case of tracking the agency of people behind the agency of machines came when the state lottery prize once swelled to a few million euros. Although people got quite excited, I discovered that many villagers thought the lottery was rigged: "With so many people playing week after week, how come no one wins?" The abnormality was explained by human intervention. Everyone saw the pneumatic device selecting 6 out of 49 numbers on TV, but thought that organizers used magnets to control the spinning balls.

Again, human agency–based reasoning sought for design in random events, but this time I was determined to debunk the fallacy. What if the presumed mastermind selected numbers already chosen by a naive player? Little did I know that lottery managers had access to the data set of tickets and could always choose *those* six numbers no one played. But, if they really believed the draw was rigged, I asked in despair, why were they still playing? My argument of last resort was elegantly shot down. No one hoped to win the big six numbers prize, which would go to conspirators' confederates, reaping a boon accumulated over weeks of rollover. But ordinary people had a chance to get *five* numbers right and win a few hundred thousand euros.

Fusing sensible statistical reasoning with an active distrust in powerful, mysterious organizations, villagers hoped that the scraps falling from the table of scheming officials could even fall into the lap of a lucky Săteni.[13] Considerations of plausibility were brushed aside. Everyone believed in a conspiracy where all witnesses were either bribed or part of the scheme. After all, who was "the state" if not those all-powerful individuals organized in coalitions with access to information and technology used to swindle the people? Only a naive (and well-off) individual like myself could believe millions of euros would be left to mere chance. A scandal promoted by a sensationalist television, purportedly uncovering a conspiracy to cheat an innocent player of his winning ticket through racket and deceit, served to strengthen the general opinion that the dice—well, balls—were loaded from the start.

The cognitive commitment to the veracity of the lottery scenario ought to be taken with a grain of salt. Perhaps Needham (1972) was right in warning us about the use of "belief" by anthropologists, and a proper description of these mental representations should include a scalar commitment. Yet this creative and watertight scenario fused representations of secrecy, agency, and private gain of high relevance for Săteni villagers, especially when dealing with the unknown and nonmoral sociality. When facing uncertain, potentially conflictual contexts, villagers display a form of hyperactive agency detection (HADD), a

cognitive bias revealing patterns in apparently random events (Barrett 2000). In the evolutionary model, this psychological inclination evolved due to costs of false positives (detecting agency where there is none) being lower than costs of false negatives (missing out agents).

As Barrett observes, HADD would activate more when the possibility of threat loomed larger. While the model was employed to explain religious beliefs (e.g., misfortune as divine punishment), the Săteni tavern clearly conveys a dangerous environment. When patrons engage in competitive games with unrelated villagers, their attention and inferential mechanisms run into overdrive. Some cues of individual competitivity are overt, such as the outcome of fights or arm-wrestling. Others are less so, such as luck (or was it trickery?) at rummy or *barbut*. Conspiracy theories about local or national actors and institutions find fertile ground to circulate and persuade people of looming threats. In an environment abounding with cues of deception or predation, actors aim to detect the agency of human and nonhuman entities—or hybrids such as the automatized-yet-rigged TV lottery.

While mechanisms are sometimes miscalibrated, the error falls on the safer side, that of being more suspicious rather than too trusting. Described as the "sense of being siege" by Campbell for his Sarakatsani fieldwork (1992:22), the over-prudence displayed in taverns reverberates deep into Săteni society. In zero-sum game circumstances, individuals effortfully cultivate a reputation for skill and strength but also invest energy in scanning the social environment for cues and signals of adversarial agency.

The deep play of fights, games, and ruses speaks about universal cognitive processes but also about the environment of predation and deception that activate them. The tavern offers a concentrated version of purely competitive interactions that appear everywhere in Săteni society and make people hypervigilant about other people. Moreover, the arsenal of tavern tournaments has something special in store for those who err on the side of misplaced trust. By pure play, Sătenis teach a moral lesson about the failure of reading minds in communication.

1.6. THE IMPORTANCE OF VIGILANT MINDS

Having after-hours drinks with my construction mates in the Popular tavern, we were abruptly joined by a voluble and brash Bobi, the youngster who botched my well cleaning but kept asking for unwarranted beers afterward. After a few minutes, master builder Mihai offered him some work the next day. I was puzzled, since we needed no extra man and Bobi was neither a skilled nor a dependable laborer. Was it for Mihai's work in Săteni? No, the builder said, theirs was a new job: to build a dam on a river, somewhere in the mountains. Another worker contributed his opinion that Bobi would make a

great contribution as an expert swimmer, having crossed the lake back and forth several times.

Proud to be acknowledged, Bobi emphatically confirmed his aquatic skills and inquired about any particular clothes or tools. Another fellow mentioned wellies and even suggested a pair might be available from one of Bobi's neighbors. Mihai chipped in and reminded the new recruit of his necessary commitment to the important job ahead. They had to travel quite far the following morning, and everyone met in the center at 5:00 a.m. When Bobi commented about the early hour, Mihai laughed and replied, "it's a three hours drive; how otherwise can we ask for a full day's pay?"

More spectators intervened, and one asked Bobi to bring a pickax for breaking rocks. Bobi wondered about the strange job. Another patron reprimanded the last speaker, claiming it was inappropriate to make fun of Bobi—now part of the team. He turned to Mihai on a serious note and warned him not to forget the safety ropes. He asked Bobi, as an expert in cleaning wells, for his opinion. Bobi agreed to the use of cords and recalled a safety belt he had at home. Mihai praised Bobi's quick thinking and sent him home to rest for the hard workday ahead. Before leaving, mates reviewed all details: 5:00 a.m., the boots, the safety belt, swimming in the river, and so on.

As perhaps suspected, there was no dam project. The group deliberately deceived Bobi using a hoax known to folklorists as a snipe hunt or a fool's errand (Smith 1957), an elaborate prank played by experts on a naive and inexperienced individual in a technologically—or terminologically—complex field. Next morning, Bobi was left, as the saying goes, holding the bag at 5:00 a.m. in the center.

I observed a number of similar hoaxes, many but not all successful, even being the target once. In a builders' culture valuing manhood as physical endurance, only I was using protective gear. At a lunch break, Mihai told us he was upset. Someone named "uncle Toma" asked whether that new fellow, the "engineer" with the orange hard hat seen around construction sites and working on his laptop in taverns, designs Mihai's beautiful projects. Angry that his skill went unacknowledged and my showing off smart contraptions brought an unearned limelight, Mihai and several other team members advised me to keep a low profile, and stop being such a poser. The entire story was a farce; there was no old man (of course I asked around and made a fool of myself), there was no such gossip, and everyone knew very well who was who and did what at the building site. I was taken for a ride as a naive ethnographer with an enhanced sensitivity for my ambiguous role in the village.

Fascinatingly, hoaxes are never prepared in advance. There is no plan to deceive someone; there is no plot that specifies the story, the manner of presentation, or the target. Everything starts with one actor luring the victim. The initial instigator launches an open-ended scenario, yet his move quickly

announces a social affair. Indeed, he only begins the farce in the presence of an audience offering potential for continuation and reinforcement. The success of the deception is strongly dependent on cooperative performances from several actors.

Pranksters achieve coordination without prior communication and without any other information than communicated in the trick. However, in order to launch an appropriate scheme, the initiator must signal that his first utterances belong to another register than honesty. The code is contained in the message itself—there was no job for a dam in the mountains, no Uncle Toma. Only those in the know can read the start of a snipe hunt.[14]

A successful cognitive bait has relevant content for the target. Bobi was tricked with a job offer, I fell for a challenge to my village identity, and a watchman was lured by news about local policing. The aura of facticity increased when addressing a person other than the target with oblique remarks. The watchman was standing a few meters away when two villagers started passing on rumors about plans to restructure village security—in a voice loud enough to be heard from a distance, yet quiet enough to make it seem like a private conversation. They immediately started laughing when the watchman left home deeply worried.

The first moments of the charade are decisive for its future development since they must convey the credibility of the source. Had the men addressed the watchman directly, he might have become suspicious of their intentions. I have never seen people approach a victim too directly. In most cases, the beginning of the farce would effortlessly blend in with previous conversations. The key element working in favor of tricksters is thus the pretense of benevolence masking their manipulative intentions.

The audience makeup is essential. A construction team provides an ideal set of expertise in construction and familiarity with jargon, common knowledge within the group, but not for outsiders. The charade's degree of complexity becomes clear when we think about how the story is born. The seeds of the narrative are planted in a few bits of information offered by the instigator. Each additional detail presented by the audience will fit in with and further elaborate the story.

The reactions of the victim are used to calibrate the prank, either by focusing on something the victim contributes to the narrative or by diverting attention away from errors. The construction workers latched on to Bobi's joy at seeing his swimming skills appreciated and used it to drag him further into the story. Their credibility was enhanced by referring to apparently relevant details: the neighbor's boots, safety ropes, crossing the lake. When the aggregation of contributions almost flopped due to inconsistency, repair came by partially revealing a liar yet portraying him as a solitary joker in an otherwise serious discussion, drawing attention from the larger web of deceit that continues to mimic honest communication.

Naive actors involved in the charade are kept in the dark, lest they spoil the outcome. A group of men managed to convince a tavern janitor (utterly incompetent but often bragging about his skills) to show up the next morning with a few improvised tools to lay (technically inappropriate) parquet in an (imaginary) cellar and lay ceramic tiles on the ceiling (technologically impossible). The presumptive client knew nothing, and the gang rejoiced the next day when the story circulated about his confusion in being woken up by a lunatic keen to perform crazy works in a nonexistent cellar.

Farces are great fun for tricksters and audiences, making for stories that circulate widely in Săteni. But hoaxes are also arenas for individuals to use and display their wits at the expense of a hapless victim. After the event, the development of the trick is much discussed, and the highest praise is given to the most outrageous claims that manage to stick. Fool's errands are a form of cognitive competition among the other tavern tournaments.

These elaborate deceits are games of minds that pit the conjoined imagination and coordination of a group against the epistemic vigilance (Sperber et al. 2010) of a vulnerable individual. As I have argued elsewhere (Umbreș 2013), fool's errands exploit weaknesses of our evolved vigilance toward the credibility of the source of communication (i.e., its benevolence and competence). Successful pranksters succeed by first making victims see them as helpful and informed and then by delivering an attractive but opaque story.

Interestingly, it is not enough to trick someone into doing something ordinary. Great skill means giving credibility to an almost obvious lie: parquet in a cellar was unheard of, nonfunctional, and beyond belief. However, it was possible to manipulate an individual by using the joint intentionality of groups. Individual skill in deception aside, social coordination is crucial in staging an alternate reality for the mark. A socially isolated and cognitively overpowered man is easy prey for the playful if mischievous creativity of the tricksters' shared agency in manipulating reality.

Another factor for the cultural success of pranks is their social legitimacy. The victim has no one to blame but himself. There is no shame in tricking someone but a huge reputational cost in being tricked. How inexperienced can one be to "bite" such baits, which are transparently absurd for construction professionals? In fact, Mihai expressly tricked two construction upstarts who bragged too much about their imaginary wages and projects. He used deception and ridicule to clear up any confusion between real and pretend masters, elevating his status by destroying theirs (Gilsenan 2016). The immense humor helped spread the story wide and far, clearly identifying winners and losers.

Fool's errands are to mind what arm-wrestling and scuffles are to body, i.e., displays of social dominance and prestige. Physical contests and confidence tricks point to the same model of public interaction from different domains. Men win in the former by asserting their individual strength, either implicitly in the image of hierarchy known by the audience, or explicitly by proving their

dominance in direct confrontations. The latter is a manipulation of individual weakness in the face of superior cognitive skill, especially when confronted with collective deceit.

As evidenced across the chapter, concern with deception pullulates in tavern life, from debunking fake allegiances and false claims to detecting game cheaters. As with *kizb*, the Lebanese idea of cunningness as discussed by Gilsenan (2016), Săteni pranks are forms of using imagination and the privacy of one's mind to create power and hierarchy. If "all jokes are expressive of the social situations in which they occur" (Douglas 1968:368), Săteni mind games, just like competitions of muscle and fists, say something about how men think about and act toward one another in a public arena. If we ask the Batesonian question, "Is it play?," we find that the Săteni fool's errand hides behind mere amusement a morality play. Ritual humiliation tells a story of how distrust means moral protection and how misplaced trust brings fundamental failure.

1.7. SOCIETY AS COMPETITION

Early during fieldwork, I became overpowered by the state of perennial conflict and distrust visibly expressed in bars but was overflowing into other domains of village life. I confessed my feelings to Mihai, who shook his head with a smile: "Here, the sheep which cannot carry its wool gets eaten by the wolves." He was talking of the tavern but also of Săteni at large. The proverb resonates deeply with my ethnography of public social interactions by evoking two tropes of action and representation.

To pursue the metaphor, every person is a sheep surrounded by wolves. The world is a dangerous place where harm comes primarily from your fellow man. And it need not be a special kind of evil man, since potentially everyone could be wolf to Ego. In this folk-Hobbesian perspective, each must be individually responsible for his welfare, knowing that others will behave similarly. Conflicts of interest are bound to appear and pit people against each other in zero-sum games. Most worryingly, some dangers are known but others are not. Distrust of others is not a character fault but a legitimate and functional means to protect oneself against the uncertainty of social interaction. Is this man playing rummy fair or is he pocketing pieces? Is that one a true ally or a false friend? Is that utterance truthful or deceptive? The answers are badly needed but they do not come easily.

Men win or lose in the public tournaments of the taverns by how well they read and respond to the true intentions of others. Sometimes the interpretation is forthcoming. A fistfight provides honest signals of physical prowess previously only boasted of, just as a successful prank demonstrates mental agility. Other times, as in the scuffle between local big men, the signals are

subtler and affording multiple interpretations. Norms of sincerity do not carry a moral force for all conversations and lying is often expected (Keenan 1976). Most social interactions are epistemically murky, with actors trying to make sense of various and interlinked events, formulating and testing hypotheses about the behavior of others. New evidence adds to previous knowledge, and what is true of yesterday may not be true today.

Sometimes the detection of agency works in overdrive, and, more often than not, it errs on the side of caution. Better to be wary of rigged lotteries than to place unwarranted trust in cheaters or pranksters. The oversuspicious person may be wrong, but at least he protects himself, unlike the trusting fool. Generalized distrust offers blanket protection against deception and hidden negative intentions while misplaced trust is particularly prone to exploitation. One bears the responsibility of discovering truth and well-apportioning trust and distrust against a world of men doing and expected to do the same thing. The weak sheep has no one else to blame for losing its wool but itself.

But that is only half of the story. The pure conflict approach bears true for certain social interactions but not for others. Tavern life hyperbolically exaggerates the moral lesson that anyone could end up a lone sheep facing the wolves and had better protect his hide. At a pinch, the epistemic burden is ultimately individual. But sheep usually flock together, and a flock of sheep may turn into a pack of wolves, powerful because united. In taverns, as in the rest of Săteni life, men seek and interact as coalitions. From a pair bond between friends or relatives to larger groups based on residence, politics, business, or other shared interests, actors benefit from cooperation with certain associates, especially when competing with others. The mutualism linking bodies and minds explains how actors dominate brawls, coordinate to scam or fool others, win elections, or protect their non-metaphorical sheep.

Tavern interactions offer methods to seek and test partnerships. One displays generosity, scrupulosity, physical acumen, an affable disposition, wits, and skill as the situation demands. Each quality can make an individual appealing to potential allies and threatening to competitors. Just like being violent or predatory, being deceptive or working with hidden motives does not automatically make one untrustworthy in the eyes of each and all. Proof of exploitative agency (Umbreș 2017) advertises one as a skilled social operator, a useful connection, or a formidable opponent not to be messed with.

Sătenis come to taverns like folk ethnographers surveying the social environment, but they also come to display their competence and to test the competence of others. All competences are personal and central for establishing social relationships of conflict or cooperation. Villagers prove the strength of their arms and their commitment to promises. They show quick wits and attention to the welfare of their relatives. They advertise their skilled deception of enemies and their unswerving loyalty to friends. By

their actions, they create and recreate the boundaries between alliance and conflict while symbolically glossing over the importance of placing people in the right category.

More conspicuously than in everyday life, tavern interaction gives means to play around, sometimes in jest, sometimes seriously, with one's reputation, with one's commitment to promises, and with one's standing in the multiple hierarchies of social worth. "Going to the center" automatically means a decision to face adversity, to put yourself at risk knowing that performance is public and salient. As interpreters and producers of social signals, as mind readers of intentions and knowledge, and as manipulators or honest communicators, villagers step into taverns as tournaments of competitive individualism, where personal value is displayed and weighed.

What transpires from the interpretation of scenes is a sense of "deep play" (Geertz 1973), a reading of Săteni ideas and practices applicable to the wider village, friend and foe alike. Mechanisms of social interaction link psychological inclinations with cultural representations of individualism. Tavern social dramaturgy is staged by actors always vigilant to the agency of others, wary of threats and manipulation, and playing their own role in the competitive arena, yet simultaneously engaged in social relationships based on mutuality, costly signaling, and shared agency. There are costs in trusting the wrong person, as there are benefits in trusting the right one. Some games are zero-sum but other interactions have cooperative incentives. Success comes from a proper evaluation of competences and incentives, attention to strategic and coalitional dynamics, and a vigilant discrimination between friends and foes.

To give my late reply to Mihai's bon mot, Săteni villagers live a dual life as sheep and wolf under the same skin. A flock of sheep seen from the adversary's perspective is a pack of wolves. Both individual performance and moral commitments determine who gets fleeced in the tournaments of the tavern and the wider games of competitive sociality. This competitive principle is merely expressed more forcefully in taverns than in other places but underpins the entire array of social interactions.

You may have noticed the all-male cast and wondered: Where are the women? And what about those men who did not patronize bars? Taverns reveal some aspects of Săteni society but obscure others. Clearly, men are not simply defined by their public performances. Being called a "tavern pillar" never signals good social standing, no matter how entertaining and witty the inveterate patron. Taking a broader look, tavern play is a special kind of interaction rich in social signaling, but just one round in the wider game of competition and cooperation. The next chapter delves into another central space of life, with a radically different social script: a place where trust and not distrust is the fundamental principle of social interaction.

CHAPTER 2

The houses of trust, the fences of distrust

A friend of mine began staying late at night in the tavern, spending money and time away from his home. During an evening of playing rummy with mates, his wife came and calmly laid down dinner in front of him. She candidly expressed her worry that her husband was starving and sharply turned on her heels. My gregarious friend blushed, fumbled to eat fast, and went home immediately avoiding all amused looks. The next few weeks, his tavern presence became limited and meek.

The man was turning into a "tavern pillar"—*stâlp de carciumă*—who spends time and money away from home. The image denotes the social incompetence of selfish, destructive behavior, and such a "nothing man"—*om de nimic*—drops symbolically and practically in the eyes of audiences and the hierarchy of power and status in Săteni. Its praised opposite is *om de casă*—"a house man," who puts his family and household as the ultimate values in life. The word "house" stands here for house, home, household, but also for family, as it evokes the interconnections between people and things that create the Săteni domestic domain that gives sense and direction to the social life of individuals.

Home is the household, a nexus of people and things, the terra firma of villagers, the central space of life-giving identity and strength to all individuals. This chapter explores the fundamental role of households in the social organization of Săteni society. Recent history records how peasants preserved a family-level system for self-provisioning of food and other necessities. The domestic mode of production relied on internal interdependence and aimed at independence from the outside. The family-centered social organization survived the dominion and dissolution of communist dictatorship, reproducing

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the enduring trust inside the household but also the representations of precautionary distrust toward the outside.

The material culture and behaviors associated with domestic spaces present two symbolically opposed sides. From the outside, the household offers a material shell that protects its family against the known and unknown perils of the larger world. Fear of danger leads to an elaborate culture of secrecy that feeds back to heightened suspicion and imaginative inquisitiveness. The inside of the household, however, stands for a nurturing environment of safety and intimacy, based on long-term commitments and trust.

Săteni homes are built around a distinction in social interaction that defines the entire society. The in-versus-out dualism underlies a system of social organization where individuals align their interests with their families against an uncertain and potentially hostile environment. Domestic cooperation determines social association into materially and symbolically distinct corporate groups adapted to the interests of their members. Given the historical, ecological, and technological determinants of this village society, a fundamental but sometimes pressing need was basic survival.

2.1. THE ECOLOGY AND IDEOLOGY OF A DOMESTIC MODE OF PRODUCTION

Sătenis call themselves *țărani* (peasants) as opposed to *orășeni* (townsmen). They know quite well the luxuries of urbanity and keenly feel the disdain some city folks express for boorish country bumpkins. But peasants have one advantage over city dwellers, seen as depending upon the hinterland for basic nurture. Rural livelihood offers independence and security for long-term survival and flourishing by a direct connection to the fruits of the land. All their various activities notwithstanding, the economic organization of Săteni households revolves around the autonomous production, storage, and consumption of food and other necessities of life.

From sowing seeds to eating at the kitchen table, the domestic sphere offers an integrated economic system. The household fence encloses a garden for vegetables, fodder, a small vineyard, fruit trees, or woodland for fuel. The petty agriculture infrastructure depends upon the size and layout of the house plot and available work capacity. Big families with large gardens can grow maize, beans, onions, cabbage, potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, aubergines, pumpkins, grapes, and other small-scale crops. The bulk of a household's land lies outside the village in scattered parcels where the family grows cereals and fodder crops.

Family organization of labor includes generalized effort across genders or ages for basic operations such as weeding or harvesting. Specialization made men provide physically challenging labor such as plowing or animal husbandry

while women work the gardens and tend to the house and children help their parents and learn the ropes of agriculture even before going to school. Though some operations such as mowing hay or mechanized plowing often involve support from friends or transactions with external providers, the family provides the bulk of work and organizes the productive activity at domestic level.

Many families keep one or more cows, sheep, or goats, providing for daily consumption and occasional trade. Apart from industrial products, field fertilization relied on household manure, also dried for fuel by families that cannot afford firewood brought from the mountains. Almost everyone raises chickens, and perhaps also a flock of turkeys, guinea fowl, geese, or ducks if living close to rivulets. Rabbits and pigeons provide more fancy additions to a large and diverse supply of food delivered by home production from maize and vegetables to milk, eggs, meat, fruit, and wine. A few decades ago, the household cottage industry even dressed family members from head to toe, coveted lambskin hats down to pigskin shoes. Local inputs and family work delivered linen, hemp, or homespun wool textiles, clothes, carpets, blankets, and feather pillows. Certain richly decorated items became part of a dowry. The trousseau showcased the bride's homemaking skills, conspicuously displayed in a ritual room and at weddings, and symbolizing the richness and completeness of a household.

The household also provides for a store of value consisting of furniture, various appliances and tools, little stashes of hidden jewelry, and cash. Apart from arable land and the extremely few bank accounts or capital investments, almost everything Sătenis own belongs to the household, even when better off. Today more than in the past, some families produce beyond consumption needs. A few dozen wealthy shepherds, large horticulturists, and fruit or legume growers trade products in local markets or with personal clients outside Săteni, in towns or other villages with a different ecology (e.g., in mountains or near cities). For most, specialization is not a replacement for home-based agriculture but rather an expansion of the household economy. The handful of traders and craftsmen in Săteni also conduct their business using their household resources for simple woodcraft and ironwork, toolmaking, and repair or commerce. Even the wealthiest families maintain a large and wide level of food and non-food self-reliance and manage their capital in cattle, land, machinery, or professional tools in a production-and-exchange system centered on their household as an economic unit.

The various economic functions integrated into the household come with an ethic. A domestic virtue Sătenis particularly praise is self-sufficiency. The epithet *gospodar* (from *gospodărie*—"household") evokes a man whose home includes everything needed for a plentiful life. Ideally, a householder need not borrow food, tools, or materials because they already have them around the yard. The hoarding of even apparently useless junk was explained as "what if it will become needed?" Everything seems valuable if it ensures the economic

independence of households with enough land, animals, tools, and sundry resources to have a solid footing in the world without being dependent upon external agents.

The role of ideal self-sufficiency is not to limit or prohibit beneficial interactions, but to provide a solution when external cooperation becomes impossible. Though it attempts to organize itself to be as self-sufficient as possible, no household is a social island. Despite their particular striving for economic autarky (widespread among peasants; see Gudeman and Riviera 1990, for a Columbian example), Săteni practical attempts at domestic self-sufficiency fall short of professed ideals. From basic foodstuffs such as sugar or oil to rare tools or specialized services, every family needs to rely on external suppliers to some extent.

Nor are villagers irrational, as they take advantage of markets and social relationships outside the family when it is too costly or impossible to internally provide the needed inputs. But, if social partners are unavailable or untrustworthy, individuals can rely upon their family and their possessions to carry on living in isolation from external entities. Given the history and ecology of Săteni, the cultural representations of autarky describe a long-term strategy for survival in potentially hostile environments.

2.2. AUTARKY AS SAFE ATOMIZATION

Households have dependably provided for food and shelter, for safe and nurturing relationships in periods of scarcity of resources and social conflict in the recent history of Săteni, and probably deep into the troubled past of this peasant society. Elders painfully remember the 1946–1947 drought-induced famine that struck Moldavia on top of a war-driven typhus epidemic and postbellum political disarray. Crops failed two years in a row, animals died of thirst and hunger, and the state could or would not provide help. People ate through all meager reserves, then survived on wild animals, grass, or sawdust. Desperate people resorted to infanticide or even rumored cannibalism in nearby villages. Some villagers died of hunger and illness while others survived by restricted autarky, giving up hope of external support, and even fearing life-threatening competition with other villagers.

Social spheres of reciprocity dwindled dramatically to very close blood relatives, and the dominant coping strategy tended toward short-term self-regard and even predatory opportunism. Thefts became widespread, and speculators bought dowries, animals, land, and even entire households at miserable prices from starving peasants. Everyone hid their resources and shared nothing, going as far as denying access to water when family wells started to dry up. Traditionally, people bore wells close to household gates, and sharing of water

is axiomatic, a minimal contract of benevolence excluding no one. An egotism so deep could only be justified by fear of perishing of thirst themselves.

A dreadful natural experiment tested the strength of social relationships in an adverse environment. Family ties and domestic resources insured basic survival in the worst of times. Only a self-sufficient, autonomous domestic domain provided with certainty for the basic needs of life, since those outside the household cared for their families first and had no spare resources to share, or even turned predatory when pushed by need or greed. No outside options such as industrial jobs or commerce or state support provided viable alternatives to domestic independence, which helped Săteni families and households across economic crises.

The collapse of generic trust stood in sharp contrast to the deep interdependence between families sharing food and comfort and caring for the frail. Able members sought labor as far as the opposite corner of Romania and brought money and food back home. No one saved anything for himself; everything went to the survival of the family as a group. Even in the hardest of times, people helped the families of vulnerable close blood relatives or friendly neighbors after securing basic survival of their family. Moreover, most families endured hardships without harming the possessions of others. Yet, outside of family relationships and a handful of social ties of kinship and friendship, the greatest majority of fellow Sătenis were either incapable or unwilling to act as trustworthy, cooperative partners.

Self-sufficient households offer material safety and familial generosity but also dignity and control over one's life. The opposite of proudly independent *gospodar* is *slugă*—"servant," the ignoble name given to those having to work for other families in exchange for money or food, because their households have too little resources for independent livelihood. In times of scarcity and beyond, the rich and the powerful can exploit the wretched co-villagers who cannot survive without selling their assets or labor in unfavorable terms.

The word also evokes the distant past when boyars owned much of the land while peasants were forced to provide indentured labor or enter exploitative sharecropping arrangements. Nowadays, the label attaches to those poor and often family-less individuals employed for various agricultural work by affluent households, a state of subordination and destitution that places them at the lowest social stratum in Săteni. To avoid dependence on the divergent interests of others and their unreasonable costs, the households hoard resources for survival and internalize production at family level.

One effect of autarky is more specialization and complexity within than between households. Săteni families come in many shapes of kinship and with various endowments, but they resemble each other by the interdependence between members and their shared possessions that offers individuals the means for an autonomous life. Such similarities, however, do not promote economic cooperation between families even when economic situations

improve. The internal provisioning of food and many other products and services decreases a household's need on external actors. The more families approach the collective ideal of economic autarky, the more separated from each other they become.

Peasant atomization offered safety but at a low economic equilibrium. The return to private self-subsistence agriculture after socialism dramatically decreased productivity compared with collective farming. Partible inheritance over generations left households in the 1990s with increasingly smaller plots, scattered around Săteni. A familial organization of independent households replaced industrialized, centrally planned agriculture, losing any improvements in economy of scale and mechanization brought by socialism. Formally restored to their property rights, some lucky villagers lived only marginally better than before, and many were worse off. The low-efficiency agricultural economy, coupled with the absence of industry or services in the area, contributes much to the relative poverty of Săteni for Romanian, not to mention European, standards of living.

Autarky narrows down economic opportunities of large-scale cooperation but provides for basic security of life. Now and across history, material accumulation inside the household insured against uncertainty and scarcity, and reliance on family-centered economics helped peasants survive some of the worst events of recent history. History even tipped the balance ever so slightly in favor of self-sufficient peasants during the twilight years of socialism. The isolationist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu (a paranoid leader of peasant extraction) increased exports of raw materials to obtain foreign currency used to pay external debt. Sătenis joke that villagers feasted on self-reliance "while bellies grumbled in Bucharest" when the state cut down on city supplies of meat, eggs, or cheese. Many urbanites suddenly remembered their friends and relatives in the countryside to gain access to coveted farm products. Its black humor aside, the late socialist crisis reinforced the importance of controlling the means of food production, the backbone of rural livelihoods. For Sătenis and most Romanian peasants in the second half of the 20th century, the survival by a domestic mode of production meant resisting the state by any means necessary.

2.3. DOMESTIC SURVIVAL AGAINST AUTHORITARIAN COLLECTIVISM

The autarky-seeking peasant household faced a historical challenge after WWII when the socialist regime forcefully pursued the collectivization of agriculture. After the confiscation of land properties above 50 ha, the state actively targeted peasant independence seen as a bulwark against economic development. Massive production quotas paid miserably were used

to bully villagers into economic submission by joining collective farms. Some Romanian peasants engaged in violent struggle against socialist struggle, but the prevalent strategy was one of covert resistance using the "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1976).

Politically dominated peasants resorted to secrecy and deception, and some victories became legendary. Bogdan Iancu and Vintilă Mihăilescu[1] discovered that only one of two quasi-identical Moldavian mountain villages had been collectivized. Allegedly, villagers from the unlucky place presented 1950s collectivization officials with their best land, revealing their wealth. The others showed the same officials low-value tracts strewn with rocks and shrubs that made impossible the mechanized agriculture of collective farms. Beyond this quasi-myth of peasant wit, secrecy and deception helped peasants preserve their way of life against the repressive state.

In Săteni, state officials and local collaborators rapidly collectivized arable land using promises, threats, and even violence, but domestic strategies of survival persisted. Although peasants lost most of their land, household independence remained the villagers' main aspiration. In fact, socialist ideology and policy unwittingly allowed for a version of a domestic mode of production adapted to the new political ecology. Villagers did not forget that land used to belong to them (and were nominally still landowners, but entirely powerless). They knew and passed on to their children knowledge of the old property boundaries, and no one was fooled by the notion of collectivized land being a common property when it was effectively monopolized by the state. CAP (agricultural production cooperative) membership delivered meager benefits because the system of nominally voluntary associations was governed from bureaucratic centers that used peasant land and labor to feed the burgeoning industry and urban development. While Sătenis deplored the heavy economic and political exploitation of the regime, they did not remain passive.

Villagers lost opportunities to produce large crops but adapted by focusing on their household land and capital. As CAP members, Sătenis worked for the farm a number of mandatory days and used the rest for household activities. Some contracted land and operations from the farm for extra income; others engaged in petty commerce. Given mediocre CAP material or financial benefits,[2] villagers employed creative means to keep their households afloat. Intensive domestic work made the best of their household economic capacities, but they also targeted the vital ecological resources such as land, machinery, or cereals controlled by the state.

Domestic needs pushed peasants toward the covert appropriation of collective property. They took back from the state as much as they could and needed at home. Some Sătenis stole CAP crops by sack or by cart. In more adventurous night raids, villagers bribed and/or pressured night watchmen to mark the best animals, close their eyes, and declare them stolen or dead in the morning, by which time they had been sold twice over in remote fairs.

Even children stuffed the bottom of pants in their boots and brought grains for household fowl in these camouflaged makeshift bags.

Nobody doubted the morality of such practices since households depended upon this illegal access to means of production to survive. What could be read as negligent behavior or stealing from the collective farm meant something else for villagers thinking that "you eat from where you work." Taking from the collective meant taking back what was rightfully theirs as just deserts of labor and property. Moreover, illicit harvesting of farm resources was justified by the moral goals of family welfare since "the one who does not steal from the farm, steals from his children's mouths." Stealing from the collective did not mean stealing from other Sătenis, since villagers did not represent the farm as a Săteni collective group but, quite accurately, as a top-down institution controlling and exploiting its members.

While most peasants had a common enemy in the state, generalized theft from the collective farm was not a cooperative enterprise. Better said, each household had its own means of procuring illicit resources based on individual and family enterprise, without wider social coordination. Everyone knew about the phenomenon but cared more about personal shenanigans than for what the others stole. As most Romanians say about socialism but also about the present, "one disentangles how one can," meaning each individual finds their own creative solutions, including illegal practices given a lack of legitimate options. Under forced collectivization, appropriating from the farm represented the necessary, hence commonsensical, choice for each and every peasant against the shambolic collective entity imposed by socialism.

Arguably, autarkic peasant strategies survived because they did not threaten socialism as an ideology or political system. Atomization might have actually improved on the inefficiencies of planning and centralized management (Rev 1987). Lacking explicit demands or social organization, petty thefts and widespread malfeasance remained unnoticed or tolerated by authorities at various levels, and widely known and accepted by villagers. All that was needed to preserve the conspiracy of perennial disobedience was for each to mind their own business, live and let live. Independently but in parallel, peasants worked through the nooks and crannies of CAP ecology to reproduce the family-oriented system of production and reproduction of economic resources.

Though politically atomized, the Săteni strategies of stealth and theft actually created opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation both inside and outside the household. As before (and after) socialism, family members acted as a corporate group defined by their domestic realm, protecting the household from external harm and investing in the long-term safety of autarky. Some families made better use of domestic resources and farm parasitism, and they engaged in more social interactions, which brought both the benefits and the risks of cooperation. Moreover, the authoritarian regime

offered opportunities for conspiratorial exploitation but also for revengeful collaborationism.

2.4. CONSPIRATORIAL FLEXIBILITY AND OPPORTUNISTIC COLLABORATIONISM

Everyone had to make do with whatever could be scrounged from the environment ruled by an authoritarian centralized system vulnerable to predation, yet merciless toward defectors. Chance or skills made some Sătenis better placed to exploit the new material and social ecology. Stealing was hard work for the body and for the mind, and a good *gospodar* could make a bonanza by becoming a bandit-entrepreneur. The skills driving competitive tavern performance could be harnessed in the service of the household when the appetence for risk and cunningness needed for successful plundering dovetailed with status-seeking manhood (Herzfeld 1985).

In late '80s, Mihai's father Ioan contracted from the collective farm the harvesting of a hayfield. From the 20 haystacks, parent and son secretly carted home half at night and called the farm officials for the rest in the morning. They made 10 haystacks of uneven size—the bigger ones, cunningly fluffed up but lighter than the rest. If officials asked, there had been more but someone stole them at night. With little means and even less interest in analyzing the outcome, the administrators signed off and left with less than a third of the real production. This was one of the many exploits of Ioan, such as poaching from the communal lake, harvesting cartfuls of maize from CAP lands, and bribing warehouse overseers in exchange for supplies.

To provide resources and money for the household's reproduction as an economic unit, the family had to rely on appropriating collective goods. Such shenanigans lowered farm revenues but insured the survival of peasant households. Some, like Ioan, could work and steal more than others to build up a small family business aiming further than basic survival. The political system forbade or strictly regulated forms of free association or free enterprise in the ideological commitment to state primacy and planned economy. This did not stop peasants from engaging in various forms of production and transactions in black or gray markets. The stolen haystacks fed the family sheep, offering wool, a bit of meat, newborn lamb fur for locally valued hats, and milk for cheese, products also sold for cash or bartered. Yet covert entrepreneurialism had its risks.

Ioan went to prison twice, the first time when he used false papers to buy grain chaff from a mill for his animals. He was the final link in a network involving millers, policemen, and judges who made handsome profits from exploiting the blind spots of centralized economy. Only when a Bucharest police team began investigations did the scheme collapse. Although betrayed by

another partner and beaten to a pulp by police, Ioan did not betray his business contacts. One of his partners survived the Bucharest-planned investigation and came to Ioan's family offering his tearful thanks. He then helped his cooperating conspirator to hire a lawyer and get out of jail earlier.

These illicit networks could become so large and stable because their partners trusted each other and received mutual benefits from interaction. In the background of extractive and punitive state institutions, one had to know whom to trust and whom to distrust in the labyrinths of planned economy and its parallel, naturally emerging black markets. Whether from inside or outside the farm, private actors appropriated state resources for personal gain and domestic use. Relatives, friends, acquaintances, or just spot partners collaborated to capture nominally public goods. They helped each other and received mutual benefits as long as they cooperated against the communist regime. But, while family interactions were entirely safe from malicious intents, external relationships carried various risks.

Ioan benefited from deals with farm officials, policemen, and fellow informal entrepreneurs, but he also had enemies or disgruntled partners likely to engage in deception and predation. No matter how socially legitimate these behaviors were, legal prosecution was a constant threat if one was not careful enough to hide their tracks. Moreover, third parties could use the totalitarian state apparatus as indirect (and costless) punishment. The lack of fit between legal institutions and spontaneous practices allowed an enemy or someone jealous to inform the authorities out of pure spite, but seldom from moral conscience.

The second arrest happened after a couple of farm officials asked Ioan to sell a pig to an inspector to sweeten his visit to Săteni. He reluctantly agreed and made a bit of money, but someone ratted on him to the police. Ioan was accused of *speculă*, illegal and "exploitative" commerce. He suspected one neighbor witnessing the slaughter, because they had an unrelated quarrel over timber deals with mountain villages some time before. Other likely culprits were certain farm managers who had once driven to his sheep enclosure and asked him to contract some of his animals to the farm (paid below black market prices). He rebuked the demand out of pride and spite, asserting his independence over the powers that be and probably provoked their later revenge.

To summarize a complex story (Verdery 1983; Kideckel 1993), the communist regime aimed to control the household-centric orientation of peasant families but its policies disadvantaged CAP members. The socialist organization of agriculture increased productivity, but peasants were no better off due to the extractive planning of a centralized bureaucracy. As most Romanian villagers, Sătenis sought various means to exploit collective resources for private gains by restricting cooperation to family and trustworthy partners. The unjust system created incentives and opportunities for embezzlement and

black-market interactions but also increased distrust by turning everyone into a potential informer. Hiding their illegal but moral practices from authorities, peasants became vulnerable to treachery. Anyone could defect from the silent conspiracy to exploit the exploiting state, informing on fellow villagers to curry favor with party cadres or just to settle an old score.

A family made wine without reporting the production for quota delivery. The man had no intention of sharing his work with "the bad of the village," meaning the politically ambitious Sătenis running the collective farm. When a police squad came and dug up a barrel of wine from under a haystack, the family rightly suspected a tip-off from someone in their vicinity. The faux communitarianism of communism increased distrust between neighbors who had better access to private information and could (and often did) anonymously report each other to the gruesome state for personal vendettas (Utekhin 2018).

Secrecy and covert practices helped peasants survive the authoritarian state but also its weaponization by enemies, real or imaginary. While state predation and opportunistic collaborationism increased and modulated distrust toward uncertain social interactions, they did not invent it. The sense of constant vigilance predates and postdates the era of communism in Săteni, and it resembles the mutual distrust found in Mexico, Greece, India, and many peasant societies where people fear the inquisitive envy of their fellows (Foster 1965).

2.5. KEEPING EVIL AWAY FROM HOME

Two of my social inabilities in Săteni involved boundaries. I once returned home after leaving my front gate open, to find a neighbor's flock of geese feasting on my newly sown grass. An acceptable excuse was produced, nothing bad really happened, but then I related the story to a friend. She condemned the culprit's brazenness but immediately pointed out my well-known incompetence. Why was I always so inattentive when closing external doors or yard fences? How could the gate stay open with so many perils around, an error compounded by my habit of leaving stuff outside, even overnight? Had I no fear of theft or gossip? Did I think that everyone was naive and kind?

It is said that one can judge the worth of a family by the state of its fence. A collapsed barrier, holes, or rotten planks indicate decay in power or motivation to maintain a proper enclosure and protect its welfare. On the contrary, impregnable fences are interpreted as a sign of social standing in protecting one's property physically and symbolically. Solid pillars, barbed wire, treated wood, and fences high enough to restrict the view from the road but neatly and even artistically designed are all signs of a prosperous household that pays attention to its safety and reputation.

Perhaps good fences make good neighbors, as Robert Frost wrote, but they certainly keep the bad ones out. Suspicions often targeted nearby families. The most hilarious story I heard was a hole cut through a fence into a neighboring hen's coop to steal eggs with a spoon tied to a stick. Some people thought others were just spitefully damaging their households. A broken well bucket or splintered fence board suggested intentional harm, an agent-seeking interpretation of random events appearing also in taverns. Guard dogs and, recently, external lighting help householders feel safer at night, but thieves still target vulnerable prey such as lonely old people.[3]

Even extreme forms of defending the domestic sphere are seen as necessary and legitimate. One of the gentlest men I knew in Săteni had done time for manslaughter after kicking in the chest of a threatening neighbor forcing his way into his yard. He held strong to prevent his opponent from entering his private space, a fact favorably taken into consideration by the judge and everyone in the village. In their eyes, he was not a killer but a virtuous man (Fiske and Rai 2015) protecting his home by unfortunate but understandable means. It is morbidly fitting that the violent act happened on his household's threshold, the symbolic boundary between home safety and public peril. Though rare, such violent attacks on households legitimize further the state of constant vigilance to protect domestic life from external threats.

Extreme moments aside, the predominant mode of protection is not violence. It is manipulation of information. The second of my cultural blunders with boundaries was being curious and showing it. During visits to households, I loudly displayed my sense of wonder about animals, tools, or anything that tickled my anthropological interests. However, people quickly advised me to control such outbursts because conspicuous attention is associated with supernatural harm. Curiosity or wonderment causes *deochi*—the evil eye, which harms people, animals, or things even if the agent is unaware of his plaguing power (Dundes 1992; Murgoci 1923, for Romania; Evans-Pritchard 1976, for the classical Azande case). I was told to keep my enthusiasm to myself, lest people interpret it negatively, whether I desired the item or not. Extreme praise also suggests dangerously envious admiration unless the observer qualifies the utterance with either derisory or placating gestures against *deochi*, such as ritual spitting.

Superstitions about curiosity, praise, or wonder indicate envy and its nefarious outcomes, but Sătenis usually have quite natural eyes in mind. Concrete fears of petty or serious larceny concern things left visible and unguarded that attract undesirable attention. "The hand follows the eye," and valuables left out in the yard risked subtle theft by day laborers, traveling Gypsies, malicious neighbors, a problematic relative, or even intrusive passersby. When hiring some day laborers to clean a well, I was told to keep an eye on one guy because "tools glued to his hands." To keep them out of covetous gazes, things ought always to be put *la dos* "behind," protected by the secrecy afforded by

vernacular architecture. The everyday social life of a Săteni family is difficult to observe from outside the courtyard unless you are an immediate neighbor—and even then not too much can be inspected.

Windows have lace curtains that let in light and allow one to see from inside, but not from outside. Although many houses have a door toward the road, it is almost never used except for ritual moments. The main entrance to the house is placed somewhere at a right angle from the street. The door usually leads to a hallway, further barring the casual visitor from the insides of the house, sleeping and living quarters, and especially the ritual "good room," also called "big house." The position of buildings, annexes, and other structures insulate the household from the exterior, using the material infrastructure of the household to obscure a large part, if not most, of the intimate properties of a family and its domestic social interactions (see figure 2.1). The kitchen, where most of family life takes place, lies usually behind a corner of the house, coddled in the most intimate place of the household. The sociopetal design (Sommer 1967) of households holds the family and its possessions inside but raises a sociofugal barrier for those outside.

Săteni children grow up with a pedagogy of secrecy as household protection. Even toddlers receive firm instructions from parents and elders to behave properly in public, and especially to hide the secrets of the family, just like adults should. Children should dodge inquiries from strangers or give vague answers without disclosing anything of value. Indiscretions are criticized as "to talk / to give away (everything) from the house." Like shabby fences or open doors, loose tongues are informational leaks risking family welfare. Villagers pursue a similar epistemic etiquette in personal gestures or communication to that which they do for their material endowment. People politely and skillfully avoid mentioning their goals and businesses to untrusted others, either eluding or outright deceiving them (see Keenan 1976, for a Malagasy corresponding conversational attitude).

The so-called face-to-face societies of close social proximity, overlapping interaction, and rich social knowledge may just as well be described as living "back-to-back," Srinivas's reputed appraisal of Indian peasant villages. Sătenis often say that you cannot trust anyone these days, but they never put much trust in their fellows. They also say that "good defense turns peril away," the Romanian equivalent of "forewarned is forearmed." Like autarky in production, self-protection by material barriers and secrecy protects against potential enemies and helps the family survive through economic and political crises when everyone is expected to fend off mundane dangers on their own.

History, ecology, and mode of production made Săteni families into similar units inhabiting a finite environment, with cooperative interactions aimed at domestic autarky, defending their household by any means, including physical protection, concealment, deception, or theft. Their oral history is rife with deception and predation and failed cooperation, and heightened vigilance

Figure 2.1. The material and social ecology of a Săteni household

toward social interactions seems to persist across generations in a village where people live both very closely and very separated from one another. But secrecy protects personal interests against intrusiveness but does not eradicate it—quite the opposite. Generalized secrecy's unintended effect is scarcity

of information, which only increases the value of knowledge. If one must be secretive since others are curious, one must be curious since others are secretive. The back-to-back society creates the constant temptation to look over one's shoulder and into somebody else's business.

2.6. WHITEWASHED REPUTATIONS AND IMAGINATIVE SUSPICIONS

Just like tavern performances, households contribute to the social reputation of Sătenis. Since so much of the economy and social life happens inside households, villagers pay much attention to what the domestic domain reveals about its inhabitants. Actors seek information about the state of affairs between kin, friends, and neighbors; evaluations of wealth; the evolution of markets for agricultural products; local political activities; and sundry information. They record material and social cues and circulate stories about domestic affairs with their associates.

Peasants praise and deeply desire autarky, but households do not live in utter isolation from one another. Ideals of economic independence and domestic protection do not stipulate that families should not interact with those outside the household. Rather, it means that families survive through self-sufficiency and protection from the exploitative intentions of other social entities. Moreover, a household that controls and defends necessary resources has no need to covet the resources of others. A good householder is neither a prey to cheaters or bandits, nor a predator for other villagers and their resources. Industriously minding your own business signals the affluence that makes one less envious of other Sătenis, and thus a good partner for social interaction.

Elements of the domestic mode of production indicate the wealth and industriousness of the family. Old people recalled that, before collectivization, rich peasants could be recognized by their stored haystacks for cattle fodder. This rough-and-ready measure of land property and productivity overtly indexed economic resources and became relevant especially for marriage strategies. Nowadays, family wealth and strength come out in the size and style of houses, barns, and storage units; animals; machinery; family ritual consumptions; and other conspicuous cues such as clothes or mobile phones for youngsters.

Sătenis expect the public gaze upon their private sphere and use it to their own advantage. Vernacular architecture protects the safety of intimate spaces such as houses, barns, and hidden corners, but special attention is also given to the outward part of households, which belongs to the public domain of representation where individual behavior receives keen attention. Well-tended gardens visible from the street or shiny house facades are the household's visiting card, while the overt practices should indicate positive character traits

such as domestic conscientiousness and familial harmony. Old people whitewashing tree trunks in spring, for some reason or another, seemed to me to communicate they survived another hard winter and carried on with their household activities.

A good management of visible versus invisible parts of the household leaves less fodder for the "mouth of the village," the chain of gossip that builds or demolishes reputations. Proper villagers care much for the outside appearance of homes[4] even when the more intimate parts are messier and less decorated, just as they go to church in their best clothes while dressing down at home. The social taboo against working on Sundays or other holy days offers another example of the interplay between secrecy and display. Few risk gossip or opprobrium by overt breach, yet is widely known that people sometimes work in indoor privacy but not in the open gardens. Beyond internal faith, mere outward conformity matters for judging character. "If one has no shame, one has no fear," an old man once said. The corollary implication was that people disinterested in their social image should be avoided since reputational damage does not touch them.

The success of defending reputation hinges upon policing behavior between safe private spheres and closely observed public spaces. But, when all Sătenis cosmeticize the appearance of domestic domains and private family interactions, everyone knows that there is much more going on behind the scenes. Since relevant information lies behind managed appearances, observers have to master the art of inference and deduction from scarce signs. The response to defensive attempts to minimize and control information disclosure is the "education of attention" (Ingold 2001) to material cues, unwittingly shared thoughts, bodily aspect, and any other relevant tokens, no matter how apparently insignificant.

Imperfect cues sometimes lead to botched interpretations, and the secretive attitude of Sătenis encourages the fantastical escalation of tales. The very act of hiding becomes itself evidence that something relevant happens behind the scenes, as when a lonely drunkard brought a woman of rumored loose morals to his house. Everyone assumed physical intercourse, although only alcohol glued their relationship. The man unwittingly stoked the innuendos by waking up in the morning terrified by potential gossip. He tried to hide the affair by carrying her piggyback across a rivulet behind the garden. Alas, a neighbor's friend noticed the convoluted escape and amusedly shared the story with several people, all convinced of a shameful sexual play, exactly what the man clumsily tried to prevent.

The mayor's office attracts attention (and, as we shall see, is run) in a similar way to domestic domains. Compounded by the secrecy of local politicians who guard their space as jealousy as any householder, furtively gleaned details feed the mill of social inferences together with the grit of uncertainty and speculation. Even minor cues can activate background information to

supply interpretative versions when information is scarce or distorted. When Georgeta had an audience with the cadastral officer, her onlooking enemies (some with vested interest in her land deals) commented that she wore the headscarf to appear a poor and feeble peasant and impress the official in order to obtain a faster service. The middle-class woman caught wind of the tale and retorted that the scarf was protecting her hairdo during a windy day, followed by bitter remarks on her enemies' insolence and vicious curiosity. Only naturally, she discovered the offense by gossiping herself about her local rivals.

Fear of truth-bearing/-bending gossip increases defensive hypervigilance. As one villager put it, "you fart here and in the other end of the village they hear you soiled your pants." Don't fart, or at least make sure no one hears about it, is the implied advice. People like to shoot their mouth, and exaggerate, and malicious individuals might embellish the story with their own unfavorable interpretations. Actors know that the eyes of the village record and interpret every little object or gesture; they bemoan the practice as malicious, inaccurate, and intrusive when affecting their family. However, Sătenis have no qualms about being inquisitive for their own purposes, collecting evidence by observation or gossip to evaluate fellow villagers.

Accompanying Ana from the cemetery, she could not find her lock key in the usual hiding place and immediately thought a nearby "whore" (the oft-used sexual insult) stole it just to harm her. I asked whether something else might have happened. She then suspected a prankster kid living across the road in a pauper family. I looked closer and found the key in the grass. Relieved, she explained it would have been the second missing key, misdeeds of "that little devil" were well known and so was the cunningness of the woman. Like the "virtual thefts" in post-Soviet communal lodgings (Utekhin 2018), a sense of perpetual peril drives the imagination of agents toward elaborate but often groundless forms of mutual suspicion. When Ana wrongly suspected an intrusion in her private sphere, she was using knowledge of other people's lives to draw inferential, agent-seeking explanations for misfortune.

Agent-seeking explanations can also drive collective interpretations. One of the mayor's private buildings burned down together with a few tons of hay and a harvester combine. Someone familiar with the place told me an electrical short circuit was a possible cause, but almost everyone else, the mayor included, suspected arson. The scenario circulated across the village, fueled by the reputation of the victim. Mixing private business with public administration, the mayor became quite rich during his years in power, as detailed in another chapter. Since he made enough enemies on the way, the prevalent opinion was that one of them probably set fire to the building, destroying both material resources and the symbolical prestige of the ambitious politician. Also widespread was the lack of condemnation for an act that destroyed the dubiously acquired wealth growing year after year on the mayor's hacienda.

The mayor could hide his shenanigans but could not disguise or protect their lucrative proceeds.

While households aim to project toward the outside an image of material prosperity without attracting envy, another reputational asset is familial stability. The proverb "dirty laundry should be washed inside the family" suggests that internal conflicts ought to be solved in private interactions without disclosing to the public the weakness of domestic bonds. Like poverty, cues of family strife bring shame upon household members whose trustworthiness in social interaction decreases when they cannot maintain good relationships even with their closest relatives.

Why then, in this village of domestic discretion and intense gossip, did the woman publicly humiliate her husband by bringing his dinner to the rummy table? In the tavern, food appeared as "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966), and its movement across a symbolic boundary evoked a higher moral order. Food evoked the material aspects of the domestic mode of production, but also the moral relationships shared by families eating at the same table. She gave away the secret of domestic tensions in a crafty attempt to modify his behavior by manipulating his public reputation. The woman made her husband choose publicly between cocky but resource-consuming pub performances and primordial commitments to care for the family first and foremost.

But the event also showed that the image of the household and family presented so far in ethnography was partial and skewed. As an exercise in interpreting the Săteni domestic space, previous parts focused on the boundaries between the household and the exterior world, and the independence and safety of family life. This image is the ideal that Săteni households strive to reach and present to the world, but real families in their private quarters tell different stories. If enemies and rivals endanger the household from outside, the social inside should remain a cohesive, cooperative unit to fulfill its purposes of domestic security and reproduction. Like perfect autarky, family harmony is sometimes difficult, costly, or impossible to achieve.

2.7. THE HOUSEHOLD AS FAMILY COORDINATION AND INTERDEPENDENCE

Similar to tavern dramaturgy, the suspicions, superstitions, and vernacular design of Săteni households tell a story about expectations of social interactions. The domestic domain is materially separated, epistemically protected, and morally distinct from the outside world and its social perils. Envy, evil eyes, stealing, gossip, aggression, or secrecy are associated with the exterior, but the world inside the household is a microsociety with other expectations and attitudes. The household aims for independence from external

constraints, but its mode of production and reproduction revolves around the profound interdependence between family members.

Family members are related by birth, marriage, or other forms of kinship, as the next chapter will discuss.[5] But one thing is certain in all cases: families live in a household, and as a household, they eat together, sleep under one roof, use the same things, and make a living from a common environment. A family cannot be divided into more households. When members establish another home, they become a different family. While a family may (rarely) have two or more houses or gardens, only one is the household called "home." Tellingly, people talk about buying houses but never about buying households, since the second concept denotes a fusion of people through things. The household has social entitativity, a we-ness predicated upon the corporate interdependence of family members in a domestic mode of production.

Things do not act upon persons to make them a family. However, the material environment mediates the various relationships between family members. As defined by Fortes (in Goody 1962:8–9), "the domestic domain is the system of social relations through which the reproductive nucleus is integrated with the environment and with the structure of the total society" while "the domestic group is essentially a householding and housekeeping unit organized to provide the material and cultural resources needed to maintain and bring up its members." The fundamental relationship between family members is communal sharing (Fiske 1992), where family members coordinate behavior according to co-ownership and joint responsibility over the household, which interweaves their interests of social reproduction. But sharing the commons becomes difficult when individual interests do not align.

In his twenties, Mihai remained at home with his parents in central Săteni after marrying Gabi, who gave birth to a boy. Three generations lived as one family, but, after a few years, relationships between Mihai and his father Ioan soured. Following several quarrels, the straw that broke the camel's back was Ioan selling some timber Mihai saved for a fence and boozing the money away. Enraged, the son moved alone in a remote sheep pen uphill in the yard. A few years before, he bought a former CAP building and its surrounding land to extend the family business. After the quarrel, Mihai started working on an improvised shelter on his private plot and then took his wife and child to the faraway place where one can find them today. The social and material meiosis of households become a public affair recorded in the village and a salient event in the life of the protagonists.

Told now, Mihai's hurt feelings revolve around that cubic meter of pine that he had saved to repair a rotten old fence, informing everyone about the plan (his father in particular, given previous bad experiences). The planks came from timber commerce, where father and son were equal partners with shared investments and efforts. Both used their share of stock and money for private deals, but they also worked as a family with common interests. Ioan

could have used the wood legitimately for different purposes as long as his choices aligned with commitments to long-term household welfare. "Was it my fence? No, it was ours!," shouted Mihai to explain why he earmarked the goods squandered by his father. The entire family stood to gain from a household improvement, but only the old man and his buddies enjoyed drinks and cigarettes.

The now-graying man patently explained why leaving the parental family was the only right option. His principles draw on wider Săteni folk representations of family behavior. The planks were meant to improve "the good of the house." The expression uses the material shell of households as a placeholder for a wider concept of increasing the family welfare. One "sides with his house," aligns his interests with members, and stands in solidarity against outsiders. Behavior in household social interaction comes with joint responsibilities and practices for maintaining a proper house and a well-stocked yard while burnishing the reputation of a socially competent family sustained by selfless solidarity and enduring cooperation. Not all individuals fully achieve this ideal, but for someone to be admiratively described as "of the house/house-ish" means they are putting family interests above any other concerns.

Ironically symbolic, the rift appeared over a fence, the object separating the sphere of trust from external distrust. Selling the timber and harming the house, Ioan crossed the moral line between family and the world outside. If nothing else, family members should stand united against the divergent or opposed interests of other entities. The outside of the house harbors threats, but the inside is a place of utter trust and axiomatic cooperation. The border between them must hold for the survival of the family.

Obliquely acknowledging his error, Ioan paid repeated visits to Mihai's improvised new home to convince him to return. His arguments primarily invoked representations of material ecology: "Think of all we have there, why live here outside the village, there is nothing for you here." Ioan's words tried to mend social relationships by arguing that everyone would have been stronger and richer had they remained a single family in one household. In the end, the materials could have been easily replaced. However, the event was merely the tipping point after many similar or worse conflicts that suggested a weakening of Ioan's future commitments to family welfare. The son no longer trusted his father to refrain from abusing communal sharing of resources and to give Mihai his due share of collective decision-making.

While idiosyncratic sentiments stoked the clash between father and son, the cycle of domestic changes created the structural conditions of conflict. When confronted, Ioan replied to Mihai, "Was the timber yours? What did you do in life to call yours? Look around, all is mine. Talk when you did something like this." For Ioan, it was *his* household, where he brought up Mihai in a prosperous environment. The old man still saw himself as head of the family with a ranked authority (Fiske 1992) over his son, apparent heir to a

wealthy household. However, the passage of time brought Mihai's successful passage into adulthood, and his domestic contribution matched or surpassed his father's work. The costs of continuing an asymmetric relationship with his father made Mihai embark on the road of household fission traveled by many Sătenis parting ways, amicably or not, with their parents or other family members.

Mihai respected his father's past achievements, but Ioan was past his prime and engaged in destructive behaviors that affected the household without taking into consideration family goals and the personal interests of other members. It was not only Mihai's status as breadwinner, husband, and father that made him comparable if not equal to his father, but also his display of the uprightness of self-denial for family benefit that Ioan denounced. Adding insult to injury, the old man defamed his son in taverns and gossip with others outside the family. Mihai could not replace Ioan as head of his father's family, nor would Ioan yield his paternal authority. Mihai's filial piety to both his parents stopped him from aggravating the conflict, but he could not let the matter slide, either. He decided to show his father and others what he was made of. While Ioan chose immediate personal gratification over collective family benefit, his son pursued the exact opposite, playing the long-term game of mutuality in another configuration.

Years after leaving his paternal household, Mihai found a lucrative position in Athens. His first major investment in the new household was a concrete pillar and wire enclosure around his large garden, which cost as much as a small house. Two years' worth of savings turned into an 800-meter-long fence to protect the construction site and his yard from theft and vandalism. The investment may seem rash now, and Mihai bitterly reflects on the huge sunken cost, while his house remained unfinished. A feud with a neighbor partly explained the choice, but we could also read in it a symbolic gesture toward his father. The fence that Ioan drank away and the fence that Mihai erected by the sweat of his brow are fundamental elements for defining household integrity. They are material and social boundaries against the outside. The new family delimited its space in the social and material ecology of Săteni in order to create things and relationships inside.

Ideally, the family offers a positive-sum game where members can better achieve their interests inside a cooperative household than alone. Mihai was luckier than many villagers trapped in even worse situations because he had enough resources to start anew. Land, properties, money, and opportunities for skilled labor and business deals offered the economic infrastructure for an independent household.

The independence Mihai chose was not a reply in kind to selfishness. His reaction to short-term opportunism came as engaging in restructured long-term commitments. Mihai divested from his original family by assuming responsibilities and control over another domestic group. Whereas his father

invested in public reputation among mates, Mihai made a costly effort to create another family. He established his status as independent householder by creating a material sphere linked with a different, though derived, group of people. Mihai's life was deeply interdependent with the lives of others beyond his parents. Personal affront aside, Mihai cared deeply for his wife and son and wanted to secure a harmonious, prosperous household for them. If Ioan was industrious but negligent of his family, Mihai aimed to do better.

Mihai's crucial life decision involved his wife Gabi and was sadly accepted as reasonable by his mother Tereza. Gabi's role in the story further explains how families separate. In the intrafamilial conflict, Gabi sided with her husband against her father-in-law and preferred a smaller but united household. Though quite aware of the hardships ahead, she went along with her husband, shared his vision, and coordinated her behavior accordingly. Nowadays, Mihai and Gabi often say "we thought this," "we did that," "we could no longer stay there" and other utterances using a collective pronoun reflecting the joint intentionality (Tuomela 2016) of the nascent family. Another crucial element in Mihai and Gabi forming a separate family / household was their toddler son. Their interests and identities aligned in creating a safe and nurturing environment for biological and social production and reproduction of its members, which Ioan threatened by pride and negligence.

Mental representations accompanied by a concrete privatization of means of production encouraged family secession. Before moving out entirely, Mihai started trading alone and stored his goods separately from Ioan. His wife managed their money privately, although they generously contributed as before to common expenses wisely managed by the trustworthy Tereza. When Mihai and Gabi stopped sharing a part of their income and goods, they planted the economic seeds of family division. Mihai went one symbolic step further by grimly taking to sleeping alone in a sheep pen rather than under the same roof as Ioan. But his wife and son needed a safe and warm environment. Moving to a new domestic unit signed off the end of sharing, cutting the knot already weakened by micro-fissions. Ioan and Tereza's place no longer felt or meant home for Mihai and Gabi.

I asked Mihai if, after his departure "to the hill," Ioan was still "family." He stumbled for a bit, searching for what I meant. Of course, nothing could erase the tie between father and son, and he said, "they are family." "But," he added, "we no longer lived as a family, I had my family and he had his." Across different family configurations, Ioan remained father and Mihai remained son. Facts of procreation and marriage remained unchanged, but social interactions and their ecological infrastructures became separate spheres. The change in family structure followed from the realignment of commitments to cooperation in response to Ioan's choices. After the division, each man had his own family to care for before attending to the needs of outsiders, be they as close as a father or son.

The relationships shifted moral gear, but they did not disappear. The families of Ioan and Mihai continued to interact, the grandson living with his grandparents while his parents went abroad for work. When his father died, Mihai was devasted that he could not leave Greece, being sick and undocumented. While families are corporate social groups united by sharing and generalized reciprocity, they are not social monads, just as households are unitary and inexpugnable but not cut off from the world. In fact, they have material and symbolical openings toward the outside.

2.8. A SOCIETY OF HOUSEHOLDS

Thresholds occupy a fascinating place in Romanian folklore. Many household rituals involve the household's main door sill, such as the breaking of a pot once the corpse of a dead family member leaves the house for the grave or the superstition that it is bad luck to step or sit directly on it (e.g., a girl lying on the threshold risks not getting married or bearing deformed children). The permeable threshold separates the warm trust of the family and the known and unknown perils of a distrusted environment, evoking a liminal zone where the inside and outside enter in direct contact while being symbolically kept apart. Why is this boundary so significant for Săteni villagers?

The ethnography of Săteni domestic life evokes two much-disputed representations of peasant societies. The "limited good approach" (Foster 1965) proposes a cultural worldview that life is a zero-sum game over scarce resources. Another proposal for a cultural ethos is amoral familism (Banfield 1958), making actors concerned primarily with the economic welfare of their families. Taken together, these two accounts suggest a sharp discontinuity between the world outside and the world inside the household. The exterior is the world of the "limited good" riddled with competition, envy, conflict, secrecy, gossip, and scarcity. The interior holds the symbolical and practical opposites: cooperation, generosity, sharing, honesty, and affluence, where the good is no longer limited but contingent upon the interdependency of family members and their independence from external threats. A movement across the domestic boundary is a radical change of social expectations, roles, and moral commitments.

Tweaking Banfield's phrasing (1959), Sătenis acts as moral familists who benefit their household against actors with opposed interests, including mainly people just like them struggling over scarce resources and unpredictable perils. Cooperative intentions narrow down to domestic spheres while wider interactions require social vigilance expressed in preoccupation with boundaries and defense, secrecy, and suspicion. Sătenis are family centric, are distrustful of many others, and lack large-scale cooperative endeavors.

Individuals encounter and/or think about zero-sum games, opportunism, or predation in generic social interactions. Some threats are real; some border on the imaginary. But this does not mean Sătenis are narrowly individualistic, noncooperative, or short-termed. Rather, they prudently extend their cooperation to culturally expected limits.

Villagers interact in many mutually beneficial arrangements, but the greatest share of cooperation happens inside their households. Across history, the family stood for the minimal unit of enduring collaboration and default trust, a long-term collective endeavor with shared benefits. The constraints and opportunities of ecology, technology, and political history make representations of limited good and narrow familism a reasonable approach to social interaction. Cooperation beyond household level was costly and unpredictable, encouraging the more reliable autarky afforded by the social institution of the family and the material ecology of households, which insured for long-term economic security, from basic survival to entrepreneurial growth. With little room for mutuality outside the family, competition for scarce resources led to predation or deception, which in turn led to an atomized society of independence-seeking families. Secrecy, suspicion, and careful management of family reputation serve as coordination strategies involving people who trust one another in the default and generalized way that is not granted outside the family.

The role of metaphors, recurrent motifs, and wise lore is to make an extreme statement defining cardinal points. Even those in prosperous, solidary households admit that there are no perfect families given all the quarrels, errors, or character blemishes. Not all inside the household will honor domestic norms, and cultural solutions may solve the incongruence by negotiation, pressure, or separation. Not all people outside the household are untrustworthy, but a different world lies beyond, a dangerous universe that must be kept at bay for the well-being of the family. The socialist dictatorship was one nefarious external agent, and known or unknown villagers add up to the threat.

Yet thresholds also remind us that the distinction between inside and outside is amenable to transformation. While domestic trust keeps a family together, idiosyncratic or structural conflict may create the enemy within. Distrust may wreak havoc within the family, as in the story of Mihai and Ioan, where the latter's egotistical consumption led to a realignment of interests and family arrangements. Conversely, trust may appear toward those outside. The threshold symbolizes an opening, a channel of communication between the domestic space and its external universe with people and things moving across. The household provides food, shelter, enforceable property rights, safety, emotional warmth, and much more of what Sătenis see as the good life. However, no one can be fully autarkic or reach paranoid levels of secrecy and protection and, at the same time, flourish and enjoy existence. "We are

not beasts living in the wild," said villagers, referring to various ways people interact outside their households and treat non-family individuals.

The Săteni desire for autonomy should not be mistaken for a preference for isolation or an antisocial attitude. If we look closer at the social mechanisms associated with the ideology of self-reliance and secrecy, we see how a strong household gives its members resources for social interaction outside the family. Family life does not isolate individuals from society. On the contrary, it offers the means to enter it as competent actors, capable of mutually beneficial relationships with social partners. People step outside their homes carrying the power of familial trust and corporate resources.

A deeper sense in which households are necessarily incomplete is social reproduction. A family might produce inside much if not everything needed for its subsistence, except for the biological mating of its offspring. One needs to marry someone outside the household to perpetuate reproduction at individual and domestic levels. Marriage is one of the fundamental ways families are related to other families. So are ties of blood or ritual, which connect individuals from different households.

Fascinatingly, physical thresholds also denote kinship. Relatives "no longer step over each other's thresholds" when they stop visiting each other. The conspicuous absence of domestic interaction signals to actors and observers the end of moral commitments between kinsmen. Like the Papuan Korowai in their tree-high houses (Stasch 2009), Sătenis use material cues and symbols of the household to describe the choices and paths that make people either trusted, accepted, and welcomed into family life, or kept outside in the fog of conflict. For relatives to be in or out of the house is, as the next chapter shows, a position relative to trust.

CHAPTER 3

Making and unmaking kinship

Writing about kinship in Săteni is a discouraging enterprise, and not for lack of material. Almost all of my field notes mentioned relatedness, and often the entire life of actors seemed to revolve around social relationships with relatives. For the purposes of this book, I can touch but a part of the ethnographic data. However, the evidence points to some fundamental principles of kin interaction.

In Săteni, kinship (or relatedness, as I will use the terms interchangeably) is a social relationship of mutuality and trust enduring across time, governed by cultural representations of normative behavior. The rules of kin identification and the norms of behavior between relatives are relatively clear and widely agreed upon. The resulting social structure is apparently rigid and ascribed by facts of natural reproduction. A closer look, however, shows that interactions between relatives are dynamic and governed by moral intuitions. Relatedness begins when individuals assume duties, endures by living up to expectations, and disappears when relatives end or renege on moral obligations. In their own words, Sătenis "make" themselves kin, "hold on" to kin, or "stop holding" each other as relatives.

There are many ways to be kin—*neamuri*—but the overarching moral principle linking all cultural representations and social interactions between relatives is fairness (Baumard 2016). To varying degrees and in different contexts, individuals ought to be generous to kinsmen, but generosity has to be mutual and ought to take into account and balance the interests of all parties. Relatedness as mutualistic interaction endures as long as relatives trust each other to remain committed to the future-oriented contract of kinship. Yet trust and cooperation may collapse between certain relatives but flourish with others, leading to strategic investment or disinvestment from social

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relationships. A history of mutualism may even create kinship from thin air, emulating or replacing natural ties.

This importance of this chapter's subject justifies a fairly extensive approach; therefore, the ethnography is divided into two parts. First, the analysis will investigate why Săteni choose to "hold" to some kinsmen but not to others, and how they negotiate between the relative importance of nuclear family bonds, consanguinity, and affinity in long-term relationships based on trust and mutualism. The study reaches back into the history of kinship from the early 20th century and focuses on the transmission of property, which creates structural tensions leading to fusion and fission in networks of relatedness, and presents their effects on contemporary kin relationships.

The second part turns toward the present, showing how a moral concern for mutualism explains the transformation of Săteni kin norms and practices in response to ecological and historical processes. The ethnography focuses on rites of passage at marriage and birth as moral theaters whose characters and scripts evolve but always signal resources and commitments. I discuss how forms of fictive kinship created in ritual or adoption add to and complement "real" relatedness as the basis for interactions between cooperative partners.

Săteni kinship is a sphere of mutualistic social relationships with representations, practices, institutions, rituals, dilemmas, and innovations. As a fundamental moral framework, kinship identity gives rights and obligations. One primordial right is the capacity to become a competent person. Given the social organization of Săteni described in chapter 2, an individual needs a household to create a family. Since times immemorial, the creation of a domestic domain involved the right to property ascribed by birth.

PART I: "BROTHER-BROTHER, BUT CHEESE COSTS MONEY"

Dumitru and Vasile, old men with crooked backs, passed by each other one day on the street without a word or even a look. After a few steps, an onlooker shouts to Dumitru, "Old uncle, that's your own brother!" The startled man turns around, squints, then enigmatically shakes his head and carries on walking. A few years later, Dumitru's son discovered that Vasile's hens pecked his freshly sown corn and forcefully dragged his uncle toward the river during a quarrel. Had it not been for his wife Elisaveta to restrain him, Costica would have drowned his father's brother to end a feud lasting for decades. Going back in time 40 years to when Elisaveta was a marriageable teenager, she herself threatened to "take to the river" (i.e., drown) two of her younger sisters like peasants do with unwanted litters of dogs or cats. With 8 offspring (out of 15 live births), their parents had too many children left to marry, girls especially, to offer each a sizable dowry.

Nowadays, the sons of Costica and Elisaveta denied on various occasions their genealogical position of cousins to the offspring of Elisaveta's siblings, including the inconvenient sisters. This made no sense given Romanian bilateral kinship reckoning, but one of them insisted that only people sharing his family name of Horodeanu, inherited from his father, are real relatives. However, the name was shared with the great-uncle that his father Costica tried to drown and whose face his grandfather forgot despite being brothers. Moreover, the name belonged to many other people that Gheorghe and Titi did not consider relatives despite various genealogical connections. What explains such apparently illogical arrangements?

3.1. Sibling equity and fair marriages

There is a common theme to all these conflicts, paradoxes, and omissions: land. Edmund Leach (1961) said that kinship is a way of speaking of property relationships. Rights over land, households, and other domestic means of production historically followed from principles of descent and family-based social organization. From what can be gathered from oral history, "*cherchez la terre*"[1] is the best advice that can be given to those who desire to understand Săteni patterns of family fusion and fission before collectivization.

In the developmental cycle of domestic groups (Goody 1962), a Săteni started in life by being born and raised in a household as a member of a family, a corporate group with collective ownership and common use of property. Coresident parents and children shared the rights and duties associated with the domestic mode of production and consumption, albeit with differences according to generation and age. Parents governed over the household until the children grew up to have a voice over family affairs, and elder siblings took preeminence over younger ones. However, all offspring had customary rights to succession to their parents' estate when reaching social adulthood by marriage. Siblings split up the "parent house" to make their own families.

For as far back as people remember, customs and legal norms of partible inheritance stipulated a fair division. Children, irrespective of sex or age, received a share of the parental estate at marriage. Spouses were thus endowed with conjugal resources to create their own household as the agricultural unit of production needed to start and sustain their domestic group on the road to subsequent social reproduction. All out-marrying siblings inherited arable land, house plots, animals, and tools as inter vivos transfers at marriage. A special exception was made for the (usually youngest) sibling, who stayed home with parents until their death and inherited the parental household with an extra share of land. Everyone in the family regarded preferential inheritance as a fair recompense for the extra duty to care for elders in their old age, and to organize their funerals and mortuary commemorations, to a greater extent

than other siblings. Nevertheless, other siblings also had an obligation to act respectfully and generously toward parents in life and death. The expectation came naturally from filial piety but was also expected due to their endowment with property by parents.

While fairness governed inter-sibling distribution of property, the decisions had to accommodate another expectation of fairness. At marriage, each newlywed sibling was provisioned with land and assets matching the other family's contribution but also leaving enough to endow unmarried siblings in the future. Finding a suitable spouse thus required a balance between family-internal and inter-family accounts to reach a mutually advantageous deal for all parties involved.

Before collectivization in the 1950s, marriage choices were a family affair. Though youngsters could express and manipulate families toward their wishes, the final decisions rested with the two sets of parents and close consanguines. After initial explorations, such as old women carrying back and forth gossip of interest or maybe some furtive interactions between girls and boys at communal dances (*hora)*, formal procedures began when the would-be-groom, his father, elder brother, uncle, and/or godfather called at a girl's house to negotiate marriage terms.

The elders spent many hours over food and drinks to make the other party offer a bit more to the future couple. Arguments revolved around the relative size of paternal assets, the number of children left to marry, and the needs of the spouses' future household. If *înțelegerea* ("the understanding") was successful, the families prepared for marriage even against the private wishes of soon-to-be husband and wife. Parents pursuing a property-maximizing arrangement could force children into marriage without love by threats of disinheritance, all but destroying marital eligibility. Hesitating children had to accept parental decisions since any marriage offered at least some independence compared with no marriage at all.

Parents thought of their offspring's long-term interests in marrying into wealth rather than short-term erotic drives. But another motive loomed large in their negotiations. They also feared a disadvantageous marriage where their side gave more than the unfair or incapable others. Offering too much for one child drained familial resources needed to marry other children and for the upkeep of parents in their old age. The overall principle under scrutiny was a fair equivalence between the contributions of the two families of origin.

Land reigned supreme among marriage criteria. Villagers recall that "rich married rich, poor married poor," a form of wealth homogamy where rich peasants married their children into similarly positioned families, while the poor had to find spouses among their peers. While equivalence in land endowment was the focal norm, other factors could bring about a mutually convenient arrangement. The reputation of marriage partners and families influenced marriage choices beyond strict equality. Vices or problematic relatives lowered the

social value of potential spouses, just as respected parents, grandparents, or uncles known for householder competence increased the chances of marrying into a respectable family.

Both boys and girls received shares, but slight gender differences appeared in the equilibria of marriages. Some wealthy parents agreed to a pauper but devoted daughter-in-law, especially if beautiful, healthy, and congenial. In fewer cases, hardworking yet land-poor boys could marry up, usually by agreeing to move to the girl's village and/or parental house, a small but noteworthy drop in status. People agreed that the marriage prospects of women depended more heavily upon sizable dowry. Fear of out-of-wedlock pregnancies or bleak spinsterhood (the deplored "old girl at her mother and father's") made parents anxious about their daughters' marital prospects and willing to give daughters slightly more than sons received. After all, "boys marry themselves," a phrase whose gruesome undertones will later become dreadfully meaningful.

The fairness in marriage compatibility could thus be negotiated by balancing several qualities and costs of spouses and their families of origin. But parents and spouses might have agreed upon a marriage that left other siblings feeling disadvantaged. Tough negotiations or parental favoritism created variations from ideal equivalent divisions. The qualitative heterogeneity and fragmentation of land created further causes of subjective or objective inequality. The fraught partible inheritance at marriage sowed the seeds of separation between siblings.

3.2. The many problems of dividing property between relatives

The mechanisms of transmission of property between parents and offspring created a perennial tension in the household-oriented society of Săteni. While united by the mutual trust and common interests of the paternal household, siblings faced a zero-sum game when sharing the finite resources of their parents. Inter-sibling trust and enduring solidarity inside the family of origin were tested during the intricate division of parental property. Personal life histories, ecology, and legal institutions all played a part when people felt treated unfairly.

Dumitru and Vasile quarreled over inheritance when their parents split equally a garden that Vasile, as younger sibling, felt entitled to inherit whole as part of preferential ultimogeniture. Although reciprocal bitterness made brothers cut all social ties and even forget what the other looks like, they still shared a land border that was inherited by Dumitru's son alongside perennial grudges. After Costica almost murdered his uncle, Vasile's children stopped speaking to and entirely avoided their cousin. The history of land division separates some relatives and unites others, bearing heavily upon the present.

Bestowal arrangements had long-term consequences, and often the intensity of conflict increased over time. All forms of partible inheritance pit siblings against siblings, but the specific material ecology of Săteni households encouraged conflict. Land inheritors couldn't turn their backs and walk away; they had to live with the consequences of past choices. Viciously, quarrels between siblings began with partible inheritance but were further stocked by the petty bickering associated with sharing land or household boundaries as previously discussed. Conflicts over land partitions endured across generations, pitting collateral descendants against each other, another reason for organizing households as defensive shields against untrustworthy relatives as seen in the previous chapter. Imagine the murderous rage of Costica when discovering an attempt on his land, specifically from his uncle, who already had received an unfairly larger inheritance than his father!

Things were no rosier and rather more complicated on the other descent line. Costica married a woman with less inherited land, a frustration also inherited by their two sons. Although coming from a rich family, Elisaveta and her many siblings had to settle for modest shares after an oldest daughter received about three times more than the rest. Irina was impregnated as a teenager by her future husband, allegedly instructed by his parents. The girl and her parents were forced into marriage by the shame of out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Only on her dying bed did Irina confess to a sister-in-law that she had been raped by her future husband.

Each sibling stood, at that time, to inherit 2 hectares of land, but Irina received 3, a valuable house plot worth another hectare, and her father also offered to build a house with family effort including Elisaveta's contribution. Aggravatingly, their father donated the land with a dowry act, which was unassailable in court instead of a verbal agreement challengeable after his death. While the younger daughter awaited her turn to marry, her mother bore three more daughters. The prospects of lowered dowry led to Elisaveta's murderous innuendos.

The deprived sister never forgot Irina's weakness or complacency. Irrespective of the forced conditions of marriage, the eldest daughter received more than double and now enjoyed a prosperous household compared with those of her siblings. Only a lucky match of character and availability married Elena to a wealthier Costica just returned from a WWII prisoner camp. She argued her parents into a 1.5-ha endowment next to Irina's land, lowering even more the shares of siblings waiting in line. Her continuing reproaches, shared by her husband and sons, extended to Irina's children as inheritors. Gheorghe and Titi inherited a grudge created before they were born, one of the few common and solidary elements in another sibling relationship itself challenged by land quarrels. Yet their family stood united against perceived unfair relatives on either side of the bilateral descent.

At some point, all these conflicts originated in people who felt they were treated unfairly by their families. Original actors' children and their children's children preserved and accentuated tensions over land divisions, going as far as selectively erasing kinship identities (see Figure 3.1). When the grave of Irina and her parents was damaged, her descendants demanded that Elisaveta's descendants chip in. "Had they not also received land from the old father?!?," they said, mentioning an event from 60 years ago, a time in which the land had been collectivized and decollectivized, split and leased, and sold many times over.

Gheorghe and Titi denied assistance, saying that they owned nothing due to the unfair division between siblings. In fact, Gheorghe shouted that he was not even related to them, and that his only relatives came from his father's side—an absurd claim by Săteni norms of bilateral kin reckoning. But Gheorghe and Titi did acknowledge aunts and cousins on their mother's side whom they liked (and found useful as city connections, such as Stefana and her daughter) while not recognizing some cousins of their paternal side—the grandchildren of brothers forgetting each other. Kin amnesia is structural, selective, and strategic.

When land divisions were fair for everyone, brothers and sisters and descendants had good reasons to live in neighborly harmony. Physical closeness afforded mutually beneficial relationships between families with accessible reciprocal help and emotional intimacy between the households of married

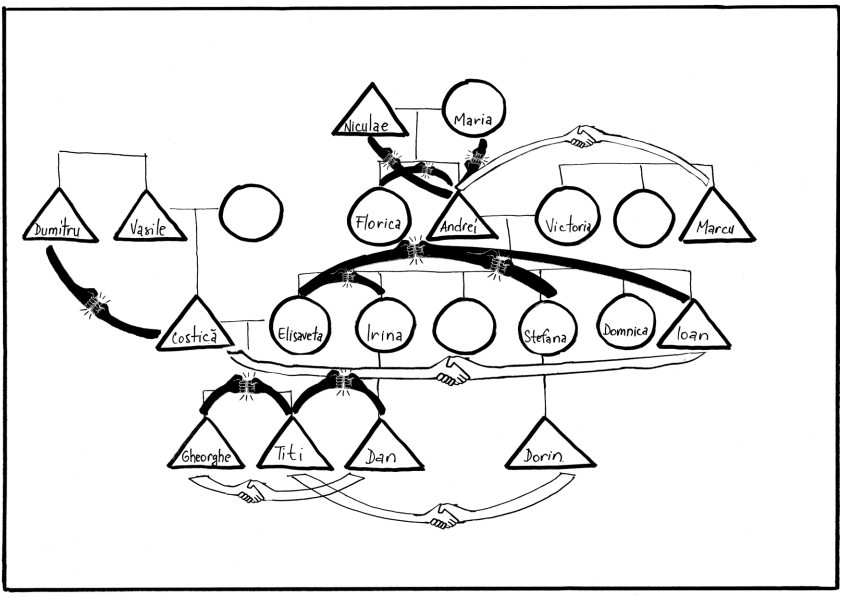

Figure 3.1. A genealogy of conflict and cooperation between relatives

siblings. They continued under new circumstances the compact of trust between family consanguines. Thus, sibling conflict was not necessarily the cultural norm or the predominant outcome. But, once it happened, it tended to last and reproduce across time and people, leading to intense grudges and distrust toward close blood or affinal relatives.

Unfortunately, even when partible inheritance was unquestionably fair, it had disastrous economic consequences. Imagine the realistic scenario where parents had four offspring and two pieces of land, one better and larger than the other. To leave no child feeling disadvantaged, each piece was divided in four, and each sibling received two small plots far from each other. Scale this scenario up to village level across two or three generations and you get 150 villagers dividing a field of 200 hectares into a patchwork of tiny strips (about 1:10–1:20 in width:length ratio). The 6 hectares of a family could be in five different places, kilometers away from each other. In these conditions, agricultural productivity was limited by scale, travel, and monitoring costs.

Land fragmentation may have some advantages, such as diversifying production and insuring against total damage (don't put all your eggs in the same basket, as the saying goes), but it has costly drawbacks of time, fuel, or multitasking effort. On hillsides, the horizontal orientation of narrow strips and plowing furrows lead to constant land erosion. Land consolidation through voluntary exchanges is considered impossible, since land quality and position are idiosyncratically valued, and discussions of national policies for compulsory aggregation are met by villagers with a universal aversion to relinquishing one's property. Never did a dozen villagers coordinate to plow cooperatively a few hectares of land, with less money and with improved land management. Since it only took one or two uncooperative owners (like two feuding siblings) to hamper the entire process, no one even thought about proposing a pooled effort.

Productivity decreased further with each additional division across generations, and fragmentation of land created as many new opportunities for conflict as there were new relative-cum-neighbor pairs. For all its dictatorial procedures, collectivization of agriculture ended the downward spiral of partible inheritance, which, nonetheless, returned in full force after 1989. Sătenis received back their land in a highly disorganized manner, given the weakness and corruption of the administration and the complex changes in demography and kinship over decades. The early 1990s witnessed a surge of conflict over land, with bitter feuds and even assault or murder between close relatives.

Feeling deprived of their rights, lacking any trust in formal institutions, but driven by angry righteousness, many villagers took moral justice into their own hands. The general economic stagnation in the 1990s made things worse since even minor losses threatened family security. A man drove an axe through his brother's skull for moving fence posts just one meter, in a confirmation of Sayre's law that the bloodiest battles have the smallest stakes.

Collectivization at least lowered land conflicts between relatives, but the return of private property stoked them anew.

While the shambolic state of justice in postsocialist Romania played a part, even inheritance laws could create irreducible opposition and conflict potential between siblings when stipulating a default division deemed unfair by family members. After a man died, his family began the legal process of succession. His wife and three daughters considered the youngest son as customary heir to the household even though Marcel was unmarried and working in Germany. But Fane, his elder brother, remaining in Săteni, did not see proper ultimogeniture in the same way. In the face of family pressure, he exploded. He told everyone that, if the law gave him just one wall of the house, he would tear it down rather than leave the household to Marcel.

Although Marcel had trusted his brother with lent money to build a house and even offered to pay double for his share, Fane stood fast by his aggressive stance, fueled by pride and jealousy. Enraged, Marcel vowed to take the parental house apart himself. Better that no one got anything than allow for an unfair division was the spiteful message sent by feuding brothers. Even when a majority of family members saw fairness in one option, only one dissenting member with a different moral evaluation was enough to block a coordinated decision based on long-term trust, using state laws against cultural norms of fairness. The destroyed stables story or the pattern of collective action failure in plowing land repeated itself inside a family when trust and cooperation gave way to private and opposed interests. The house remained unclaimed and derelict while the feud continued.

There is another structural factor pulling siblings, cousins, or other blood relatives apart beyond recurring tensions of partition and sundry acts of cheating. I once asked why siblings did not collectively share a household and its property to do away with inheritance fights. Many could see the wisdom of not having to start anew in each generation, but the universal Săteni view and practice are that married siblings cannot share a domestic space except temporarily. Even if brothers got along fine, sisters-in-law couldn't. The idea of a kitchen equally owned and run by two women evokes head-shaking laughter. Distinct domestic groups keeping separate and balanced social accounts avoided the certain conflict between loyalty to spouses and loyalty to siblings. The problem was not gender, but the inevitable tension between affinity and consanguinity that marriage creates.

3.3. Marriage as unity and separation

Sătenis say, "We do not work for ourselves; we work for our children." The main purpose for accumulation of wealth inside the household is to ensure the future social and biological reproduction of offspring. Division of property

is inevitable if children are to create new families. Moreover, marriage necessarily transforms a Săteni into another kind of person, carrying different moral duties. Spouses face a dual moral realignment. On the one hand, they separate from siblings and parents and may even enter into potential moral conflict. On the other hand, they embark upon new relationships of kin mutuality. Săteni wedding rituals elaborate specifically on this change in family and household configuration.

In practice and representation, Săteni marriage largely followed a virilocal norm. Sons usually remained in their natal village and received a slice of the parental house plot to build a new domestic unit or brought their out-marrying wives in their household if last-born.[2] Spouses coming from nearby villages inherited land closer to Săteni (another possible reason for sibling quarrels if the tract was particularly good) or tried to swap properties with another newlywed moving in the opposite direction. One way or another, women left their families of birth at marriage, an asymmetry expressed by rituals and symbols.

Before going to church, the groom's party came to pick her up from the household. "Say goodbye wife / from your father from your mother / from your brothers from your sisters / from your garden full of flowers," wailed her womenfolk of the sorrow of leaving social relationships behind, using symbols of severance from the nurturing material culture. Oh, the hardship in living with a father-in-law who is not an uncle and a mother-in-law who is not a mother, and the wife's plight before her husband's stone-cold heart! The last verse says the bride now has to hate her sisters and love her sisters-in-law, a further distancing from blood kin in favor of affines.

This rite of passage (van Gennep 1961) describes a painful but necessary transformation of kinship duties. It states the initial state of kinship offered by blood and nurture, its natural, automatic benevolence and morality. All that is to change when living with affines, people related only by marriage and never by blood, given the strict exogamy excluding consanguines up to 7 degrees.[3] Moreover, a woman moved into a location whose members shared exactly the solidarity of blood she has departed from. The bride would have to toil and obey for becoming a part of her new family, which received a stranger in its midst.

The ritual marked the painfulness of replacing birth connections, yet also the necessity of creating marriage relationships and the emergence of a new family nucleus. At the marriage of the last daughter, tearful mothers said they now could die at peace knowing "all girls are at their houses." This is the apex of family accomplishment they have expected and prepared for since having children, a moment that everyone should notice. Much pride surrounds the colorfully dressed bride, yet she is not the only one leaving the household.

Elders recalled how the bride would ride an oxen-drawn cart filled with rugs, pillows, duvets, carpets, embroidery, furniture, and even pots and pans on her way to the new household of marriage. The fuller the carts and the

more intricate the embroidery, the more conspicuous the wealth and hard work accumulated over winter nights by the bride's womenfolk. The trousseau accompanied the bride indicated the inheritance given to create a new household and symbolized her domestic virtues. The gender distinction in traditional customs offered a symbolic representation of domestic interdependence between spouses, but sometimes the intricate negotiations of marriage transfers and decisions led to in-marrying husbands. Mothers sometimes fought to keep a daughter close given her natural gentleness and domestic intimacy.

Rituals were adapted while still signaling the conspicuous generosity of families of origin and the resources transferred to the spouses. In "dowry danced on the spot," the girl's family proudly took the trousseau out through the home threshold and into the yard, circled it a few times accompanied by song and dance, and then took it back in. In this case, the groom's reputation depended upon cues of parental generosity and spouse value. An outmarrying man customarily received from his family a cart, draft animals, a plow, and other agricultural implements destined to complement the female domestic contribution. His was a masculine trousseau, and the ribbon-embellished domestic capital crossed the thresholds of the two households to symbolize marriage transfers by a similar communicative device.

Using the symbolic difference between women and men, the wedding ritual evokes interdependence and equivalence. Apart from gendered gifts, both pairs of parents called out at the wedding their land endowment to the new couple, communicating the balanced generosity that made possible the marriage. Separation and unification of people and things conveyed the ritual meaning of the relationship between the groom and the bride, the fusion of two bloodlines and their accompanying inheritance into a new family. By receiving their fair share of property, spouses become autonomous of their parents in the basic means of production holding together a family.

But marriage also creates new kinship duties through and beyond the husband–wife pair. The groom becomes son-in-law and brother-in-law to his wife's blood kin, who become father/mother/sister/brother-in-law to him. His parents become *cuscri* to his wife's parents, and his brothers and sisters become *cumnați* ("sibling-in-law") to his wife and her brothers and sisters. Similar to consanguines, a man also calls these people *neamuri* ("relatives"), if necessary, linguistically distinguished by adding "through marriage."[4]

The relationship with in-laws ideally commands the respect if not always the familiarity and intimacy characteristic of ties of blood. In-marrying spouses develop a special kind of social closeness with those sharing a domestic domain. While living with her in-laws, Mihai's wife called them "old mother/father" while referring to natural parents as "little mother/father." Gabi, moreover, deferred to their authority while the young couple shared her husband's birth household. Her mother-in-law replaced her mother in the

practical and symbolical organization of family duties, and Gabi continued to hold her parents-in-law in deep regard even after the domestic split. She now also had Mihai's three sisters as sisters-in-law to call upon in time of need and offer generous treatment in return, next to her four brothers and sisters. Marriage provides the opportunity, not always materialized, to extend one's close social circle, and this demands a more complicated social accounting.

In affinal relationships, moral expectations are fairly balanced between the private interests of spouses and their filial and brotherly duties. Each partner ought to help the blood relatives of the spouse and expect their family of birth to receive matching treatment. But they also expect equivalent help from the two sets. Conflicts appear when one spouse feels her family of birth offers more (or is treated worse) than her partner's family, especially when marriage negotiations ended in lopsided endowments. Sometimes Mihai felt his wife was too generous with her parents, but he let it slide since he liked some but not all of his affines.

The relationships between siblings-in-law can go many ways, just the way it happens between siblings. Same-generation affines may become close confidantes and provide key social support but they can also turn into rivals. Several times I heard women gossiping about how sisters-in-law mistreated their brothers or manipulated them to ignore blood kin in favor of affines. Common sense tells Sătenis that each spouse would intimately cherish blood relatives more than in-laws. But a family needs to balance the needs and interests of each spouse to treat bilateral relatives fairly. For the couple taken as a whole, the two sets of consanguines are equivalent in moral distance. Just as families of origin equally performed their duty to create the marital fund, they should receive equal consideration. Whether they actually do depends on how fairness fares in social interaction.

3.4. Moral readjustments in the domestic cycle of reproduction

Affinity adds to the moral strains of being fair to close kin. Whereas before only one family concentrated the natural generosity of blood ties, as relatedness expands, so do the individual and practical problems of balancing different commitments. So more explainable, thus, is the nostalgia over those pristine and happy moments of carefree childhood and the feeling of unshakable connection with mothers.[5] On the other hand, Sătenis say, "one does not choose their relatives," when pondering the failures of blood kin. But you chose them in marriage (or had them chosen for you). Affinity offers an alternative to consanguinity for mutualistic interaction. A man can now turn to a brother-in-law for assistance when a real brother cannot or will not assist.

Andrei returned a decorated veteran in 1918, and the reputation of his wealthy family and his serious demeanor made for a perfect match in the

eyes of Victoria's parents. Although she was in love with a younger and more cheerful man, Andrei prevailed as chosen spouse since he also received five hectares for his WWI service on top of his considerable inheritance. Yet even though he only had one sister, Andrei was asked by parents to out-marry as elder brother and forgo his paternal household. He also received less land, because his parents thought his war compensation was more than enough to marry well while his rich wife inherited a well-located household. Adding insult to injury, Andrei's sister received at marriage a tract of land taken from his favorite plot. Trying to balance marriage prospects between siblings and to keep a girl at home, parents favored the daughter over the son. The latter took offense at the division of land and stopped speaking to the former other for decades, the now-familiar story of sibling rivalry.

Victoria's story was the exact opposite. She also had a handsome dowry but kept excellent relationships with her half-brothers and sisters. The incomplete biological connection was no detriment for their persistent solidarity; quite the contrary. When she was 10, her biological mother died, and her father remarried and had five more children. Victoria helped her stepmother raise her siblings and carried much respect for her selfless domestic dedication. At marriage, she only inherited her mother's land, while her five half-siblings divided her father's land. Her mother's share included a valuable abandoned household, a patrimony well above that of her half-brothers. Yet by law she could have also claimed a share of her father's land. Unlike Fane or her husband, who felt disadvantaged, she chose magnanimity and preserved the trust of enduring kinship. Her share provided for a good marriage with Andrei, without leaving her brothers worse off.

The good relationships with stepsiblings spilled over into Andrei becoming very close to his brothers-in-law, treated as smaller brothers or older offspring. He even helped two of them with large marriage gifts, all the while ignoring his biological sister and her family, and even his own "unfair" parents. In fact, it was Victoria who tried and to some extent managed to keep at least civil relationships with her in-laws despite brother and sister showing no intention of compromise. Her kindness is the reason some (but not all) of their descendants today recognize and interact with each other as relatives.

Counterbalancing affinity and consanguinity, marriage increases the flexibility of choices in pursuing certain kinship relationships. Siblings may or may not remain in mutually rewarding social interactions depending on how they navigate the troubled waters of partible inheritance. Individuals can downplay fraternal or parental ties that are neither mutually beneficial nor fairly balanced. After marriage, people have siblings- and parents-in-law as additional options for relatives as cooperative partners. Customary norms of respectful behavior toward in-laws offer the initial framework, which may or may not be turned into meaningful recognition and cooperation.

The assortative mechanism follows mutual rewards of social interaction more than the consanguinity–affinity distinction. The interests inside the family govern the development of relationships with outside kin irrespective of how they are related. The role of personal interests becomes even clearer when the marital union follows its natural course. As if the numerous wedding symbols of fertility were not enough, guests left the ceremony loudly calling, "see you at baptism!" Sharing a household and land, the husband and wife looked forward to sharing children, as procreation was the main purpose in the life of a new couple. Despite all material endowment, a barren household is sadder than the shabbiest shack full of the noise of little feet. "What good was all that wealth with no one left behind?!?," say Sătenis, often with oblique gloating at the misfortune of rich but childless villagers.

Biological reproduction unites a family as the husband–wife pair turns into a father-mother-children nucleus. Offspring will, at some point, divide what parents have shared and cooperatively increased, putting in motion once again the domestic cycle of social reproduction and its accompanying moral dilemmas. But, until then, the family is united under one household with aligned interests. The joint link between children and parents unites co-progenitors in moral perpetuity.

For all its joy, the birth of a first child deepens the divergence toward bilaterally related families. Spouses-turned-parents now share a primordial duty to nurture and protect and endow their own children with means of social reproduction before attending to other relatives' needs. One can count more on the assistance of childless siblings, but priorities change dramatically when their families become complete social units. When Romanians say that "brother-brother, but cheese costs money," they use the symbols of domestic nurture as legitimation for putting personal interests above the necessities of others. Sătenis also say that "man thinks first of his family" to justify a lower investment in other relatives by a hierarchy of moral obligations that places children and spouses at the top.

In fact, this family and not the family of origin is now their own family. The possessive undertone emphasizes the outcome of personal agency in marriage and procreation within a created household[6] rather than given at birth. The appearance of children also helps a couple reach moral coordination. The consanguines of one spouse are never the consanguines of the other, given strict exogamy. But children offer the prospect for personal reproduction and, together with the shared domestic sphere of the household, give an unambiguously common goal for both spouses. Mihai admits he could have endured Ioan's faults as many times in the past but had to think of his wife and especially his infant son living in a tense household.

The raising of children serves as a further test for kin mutualism. The equivalence sought between endowments at marriage likewise governs social interactions regarding children related by blood to both families of descent and

extended relatives. Assistance with childrearing and a general interest in the welfare of offspring ought to come equally from both sides related by blood to children. But residence or history of interaction might make a family closer to one rather than the other set of blood relatives. Villagers recollect early memories of, e.g., maternal grandparents being warmer than paternal ones, a particularly close uncle, or supportive cousin. Other ties, though similar in genealogical distance, lapse due to lack of social interaction.

If a tie of blood can be negated, so can a tie of marriage. Affinal ties may consequently collapse, and structurally even faster than consanguineal relationships when brothers-in-law or parents-in-law stop interacting and "holding on" as relatives. The marriage connection itself, though symbolically created for perpetuity, lasts only as long as spouses manage to get along tolerably well and "make a good house," using the household as both metaphor and object of family solidarity.

Legal divorce or practical separation annuls moral obligations between married people, followed by the erasing of secondary affinal relationships. Practically and symbolically, living in different households marks social separation and the realignment of moral duties. Former spouses or affines may maintain amiable relationships depending upon the history of personal interactions, yet an acrimonious splitting of the domestic unit often cascades into people, cutting off former affines in a display of solidarity with consanguines. The existence of common offspring inhibits but does not exclude a total social separation.

The importance of close kin becomes vital when either father or mother, or both, reneges on their duties as parents, and family members have to adapt. My friend Adina had a glorious wedding. One of the prettiest and smartest girls in Săteni, she went to university and worked for the civil service before marrying Bogdan, an affable and reliable son of wealthy merchants. Suitors besieged Adina, but she played with them gently and smartly, always having a good laugh and even some repairs done to her home by boys settling for just an evening chat but never spending the night. She would not go the way of her mother, married due to (alas, consensual) teenage pregnancy to the still great shame of her grandmother, Ioana, the daughter of raped Elena.

Adina's mother soon divorced her wayward husband, migrated to Spain, and left her daughter to be raised by the grandmother. In everything but biology, Ioana became Adina's mother. They formed a spectacular alliance of compatible worldviews and personalities grounded in one of the deepest feelings of selfless love I have encountered in Săteni. Their relationship came to fore when Adina married, an event I did not attend but describe here as culturally observed and interpreted by one of her maternal cousins. Adina's mother took her customary seat next to her daughter at the main table, but no one could mistake whose pride shone brightest. Fashioning Adina into a respectable, educated, and wealthy person entering social womanhood next to

a worthy partner was Ioana's crowning moment. Only now could she be ready to die with a sense of fulfillment.

Were you not to know, you could not imagine that an underwhelming presence at a distant table was Adina's father. He had left the family and never paid much attention to his daughter, and he even lied about revenues to pay less alimony. That he was invited at all only showed the magnanimity of Adina's maternal kin who organized her wedding, just as they nurtured her across years. Adding to their symbolic superiority, they seated him next to Adina's distant maternal consanguines, as no one else from his side was invited to the wedding.

Just as they had eloped from social interaction since the divorce, Adina's paternal consanguines vanished from the ritual. Her father's presence did not evoke paternity in the moral sense, a role he had abandoned and had to be recast. Adina had a second and even better mother in Ioana instead of an absent social father, while the ritual summarized the story of her life in losing and cutting off half of her consanguine ties in the world while cherishing and being supported by the other half.

There was no Săteni cultural script in Adina's wedding. Rather, the ritual and the interactions followed social bricolage based on moral intuitions. People adapted symbols and relationships to real situations, marking the intensity and valence of lifelong interactions over and beyond the facts of nature. Adina's father lost the position of nurturing parent while her grandmother became a super-parent, more than required from her genealogical connection. The mechanism lowering one while elevating the other causally followed from their real investment in a person's future and reaping their just reputational deserts. The choices of actors created the socially relevant kinship ties signaled at Adina's wedding.

3.5. Partner choice in "holding" and "not holding on to kin"

Surveying my neighborhood, I noticed a peculiar L-shaped garden engulfing a smaller rectangular yard. Despite the signs of partible inheritance, the neighbors did not seem related. The two women called each other by name and had a socially asymmetric relationship, as the richer one hired the poorer one and her disabled son for domestic services paid in petty sums or products. After some inquiry with third parties (i.e., gossip), I discovered that the grandmother of the poorer woman was a sister of the rich woman's late husband's grandfather. Though linked by genealogical ties of consanguinity and affinity, neither thought of nor interacted with the other as relatives. Genealogical distance could explain part of the omission, but not all of it since the late husband also ignored his second cousin, and so did their respective first-cousin parents. In fact, subsequent generations carried forward a cleavage from

many decades ago, starting with sundry partible inheritance disputes, and continued with the cooling and eventually freezing of kin relationships, the already familiar pattern.

The old knowledgeable neighbor who helped trace the genealogical connection said, "they are relatives but they do not hold on as relatives," using a formula I have heard over and again about Dumitru and Vasile, Andrei and his sister, Gheorghe and his forgotten cousins, Adina and her paternal relatives, and many others. There is a common end to all kinds of kin relationships. People no longer recognize or act according to formal identities when they no longer "hold" each other as relatives. "Holding on to/as relatives" goes beyond genealogical ties. It denotes fulfilling the norms and expectations of mutual amity with all relatives, be they consanguines, affines, or ritual kin. Moreover, the transitive plural form of the verb denotes that the act is a joint effort in which relatives are reciprocally holding (see Stasch 2009:130–132, for a similar linguistic construct of kinship among the Korowai), which suggests that "people are aware of the past or potential stranger in the relative" (Stasch 2009:136).

First and foremost, "holding" requires mutual acknowledgment in direct interactions and public social identification. With identity should come a code of conduct reciprocally applicable to each individual in a particular relationship. Crucially, "holding" involves overt attitudes and complex social practices aiming at the reproduction and cultivation of relatedness as an ongoing social relationship. This ranges from as little as addressing the person by their kin term, as in "how are you doing, nephew!," when meeting on the street and exchanging pleasantries and news and gossip, to more intimate interactions such as house visits and attendance of family rituals, and costly support in time of need. While the last is the most tangible and often vital in key moments, the others are subtler yet no less important.

I drove Gelu and his paternal uncle to visit a second cousin living in another village. They pre-announced their visit and arrived offering gifts. We were seated and treated to a simple but hearty meal. Having last seen each other a few years back, they spent a few hours catching up on news, both about themselves and common kin. They inquired about who died, who works where, what are so-and-so's children up to, how the health of elders is, and so on. We left for Săteni with cajoling and promises for a return visit. "So why did you guys visit this old man?," I asked, to be offered the proud and matter-of-factly explanation that "this is how we hold on to relatives," the cultural idiom I was following along.

Yet I knew and observed something else. During the conversation, Gelu inserted questions about who tills the guest's land in Săteni and what will happen with the property in the future. He keenly expected precedence and a preferential price in case his distant relatives intended to sell a key tract sitting right next to his land due to ancient partible inheritance between the cousin's

ancestors. Physical proximity of property offered an opportunity to reactivate distant kinship for strategic reasons. Economic strategies motivated this visit, among the many reasons to maintain a relationship with our host—a gentle, respected, and schooled ex-army man with well-placed children who repeatedly proved to my friend's mother to be a nice person. He was the kind of relative one desires for reciprocally beneficial social interactions and tries to "hold on to" by communicative gestures of acknowledgment and sympathy. Kinfolk need them and are needed in exchange.

Visits and other forms of "holding on to kin" need not always have an overt or covert strategy. When a villager travels in another village or finds herself in another corner of Săteni, she will make a point of dropping by her relative's households in the area, even unannounced. Feelings of longing, interest in the other's welfare, the pleasure of gossiping or bragging or complaining, and myriad other motivations make villagers seek the company of their kin. Home visits allow relevant outsiders into the morally intimate domestic sphere. The privacy of homes affords a field for expressions of honesty and generosity, with symbolic gifts and confidences traveling back and forth between social partners. Though without immediate interest, random or planned interactions offer a kind of insurance policy. One could not just simply go and ask a relative for help without a history of mutual relationships. Appearing all of a sudden with a request will be likely and legitimately denied as mere opportunism. But it is more difficult to refuse a person who recently showed up with no immediate self-interest, giving even more reasons to imbue simple visits with signs of trustworthiness.

I could understand why Săteni migrants spent much time and money visiting a dozen relatives during their holidays back home, but not why they brought bags of U.K. or Italian supermarket coffee and chocolates utterly identical and slightly more expensive than products available in Romania. "So they will know we thought of them while abroad," a woman replied, producing an honest signal that relatives are "held" close in mind even when far and away. Migration increased the importance of rare but focal and costly home visits, adding another knot in the web of kinship, lest time and distance unravel it.

A special kind of visit forms the backbone of a ritual that, paradoxically, should bring the entire village together. The Săteni church has a patron saint whose day (*hram*) is celebrated by religious service and followed by domestic festivities. Though nominally a village celebration, the peak moment involves the personal kinship networks of individuals. Families prepare a lavish meal and expect *hrămeni*—relatives and sometimes friends from nearby villages or cities. Most come announced in advance, while some pay a surprise visit to rekindle social interactions. Nobody is turned down, and proud and joyful families hope to host and satiate numerous visitors, a sign of their social connections and capacity to sustain mutualistic relationships. The guests leave after extracting promises that hosts will come to their *hram*, the symbol of

reciprocal "holding on" between relatives. Many times I noticed that such ritual visits appeared when the social interactions between distant relatives increased in frequency and importance, for example, while working, trading, or migrating together. Sometimes they happened just before transactions took place, the customary meeting providing a mutually costly signal of elevating the kin relationship to social significance.

Left untended, social relationships fall prey to social entropy: people stop seeing, needing, and knowing each other; their activities and social networks drift apart. Other relatives may draw closer and fill the social void by offering and receiving the fruits of mutualistic interaction. The dissolution of kinship identity appears naturally with genealogically distant relatives. I was trying to debunk some connections with an informer when, exasperated, he declared, "To me, he is . . . the tenth foot of a dead dog!" The joke says that a derisory connection may be found almost with any other Săteni, but passing through too many generations and individuals to carry any moral force and social recognition. A trace of blood and marriage carries abstract genealogical relevance[7] and nothing more.

Another kind of structural amnesia has more subtle origins. "The rich forget the poor relatives," Sătenis say, about the unilateral process of detaching unwanted relatives when feeling disadvantaged by the balance of generosity. Families would rather cultivate distant relatives of similar (or higher, if possible) status than closer ones who are lower in the hierarchy of wealth or prestige, especially if tainted by character blemishes. The separation may happen gradually by giving the cold shoulder enough times to make the others feel unwanted or more clearly by omitting a ritual invitation or refusing one. As a folk song put it, "When you are grand and you live well, everybody is kin to you; when you are small and you live badly, not even your relative is kin to you."

Behavior toward kin has ramifying social consequences. Some people have a reputation of "bad/stupid relatives." The designation targets people and families known for being unsociable, arrogant, greedy, backbiting, ungrateful, or exploitative, or violating in sundry ways the etiquette of generous and mutually beneficial interactions between relatives. The stories of awful relatives revolve around a particularly hurting moment but use similar motifs of moral faults. The truth of the matter is often contentious, but utterances express feelings of puzzlement, sadness, or anger in the face of betrayal and ungratefulness as the greatest vices and moral violations. Bad relatives harm the people who trust them, who open up their door and soul only to be attacked from within by those whose should have reciprocated with similar honesty and benevolence: "A stranger, yes, he could do that, but how can your *relative* act like that?!?" Conceptually, betrayal needs a falsification of prior trust (Turnaturi 2007) such as the axiomatic moral expectations between kin.

People love to bicker about ungrateful relatives, if only to advertise to fellow gossipers their own unreciprocated goodwill. Such a bad reputation, justified or persuasively created by disgruntled kinfolk, influences the social fate of people who conspicuously fail in the art of "holding on" to relatives. One consequence is avoidance of marriage with people whose personal or family character foretells misfortune for potential affines. Of course, the same family may be avoided by some and frequented by others, although debilitating vices such as alcoholism or thievery or violence may lead to the social isolation of people ignored even by very close relatives trying to obscure the relationship.

What adds to the moral violence of an act committed by someone who should behave cooperatively is the default trust of the victim. Relatives can harm Sătenis more than strangers because one opens up their mind and household to kinsmen and helps and honors them, only to receive disdain or even treachery. As the previous chapter described, villagers know all too well how to protect from the dangers outside the household or in taverns. The worst peril, however, comes from the enemy within. "Not even the devil fucks you like your relatives" is the bitter conclusion Sătenis reach after bemoaning the wickedness of kin. Parent against child, sibling against sibling, aunt against nephew, cousin against cousin, spouse versus brother-in-law: all these are conflicts created and fueled by feelings of being mistreated, of offering more and receiving less, of trusting and being cheated.

The first half of the chapter argued that Sătenis provide and expect generosity in order to remain in the cycle of reciprocal prestations between kin, and they keenly survey the level of personal contributions. The sphere of kinship expands with new relatives created by trust and cooperation but also shrinks by ignoring old kinship, whose betrayal or unsuitability makes them unworthy of assistance or even recognition. Even when formal genealogical identities remain acknowledged, they are devoid of any moral import. Like at a wedding, not all villagers are invited, and not even all genealogical relatives take part in moral communion, no matter how close.

One particular moment in Adina's wedding synthesizes the moral history of kin relationships. Adina's father was not only seated next to second uncles and third cousins; he also offered a similar cash gift. From one way of looking at things, money as wedding gifts serves the same purpose played by land: it is the contemporary way of expressing morality in kin relationships. From another perspective, money tells a new story about Săteni kinship, a story of historical changes in expectations of kin support.

PART II: ADAPTING RELATEDNESS TO FAIRNESS

The villagers' preoccupation with partible inheritance justifies Leach's attention to the role of property in kinship. But the story of land is just one case of

Săteni kinship's coming to terms with mutualism. The first part argued that the norms of inheritance and of proper behavior toward consanguines and affines prescribe a moral mutuality between relatives where everyone's interests must be considered, leading to a fair distribution of benefits and costs. The interests of siblings must be internally balanced and harmonized with the interests of affines. Mutualism functions as a moral principle in dowry negotiations, and the rituals of marriage symbolize it extensively. Kin duties change when the interests of individuals realign toward affines or conflict with blood relatives. Idiosyncratic or structural deviations from expectations of fairness lead to conflict or even social separation.

The moral reasons for choices and interpretations of kin behavior and representations revolve around considerations of fairness (Baumard 2016). Fairness is ubiquitous in kinship norms and practices and can explain how expectations of mutualism drive and respond to actual practices in social interaction. We can pursue further the role of fairness in Săteni kinship by following a change in ritual. Marriages and families have changed in the last 50 years. So have weddings and their social dramaturgy of relatedness.

3.6. Changing families, changing weddings

As far back as people can remember (i.e., early 20th century), ceremonies took place in the household. The families laid down a table in the yard for a home-prepared feast. They invited relatives and other people close to either genealogical side, and a large participation in the domestic ritual signaled a wide social network of amiable relationships. After parents announced the key endowments of land and dowry, guests contributed with gifts also evoking the domestic union and enrichment of the family beyond the basic means of existence. The size and quality of donations correlated with social distance. A brother or uncle of a spouse might offer cattle or sheep, a distant cousin a wine barrel, and a neighbor a couple of chickens. Post-wedding, a family started social life with a well-equipped, independent household whose domestic mode of agricultural production depended centrally upon land.

The partible system of inheritance lost its main object when peasants were deprived of land during collectivization. Moreover, many young Sătenis migrated and made families in the industrializing Romanian cities, though often picking a spouse from home or nearby villages. Only close relatives attended these town weddings, but many spouses returned for a Săteni ceremony, and the elaboration of rituals suffered significant changes. The ritual still started at home with traditional chants, but the festivity took place in a restaurant or other public space accommodating an increased number of guests drawn from close and distant relatives, neighbors, and friends.

These feasts still used domestic products such as home-baked nibbles and wine or moonshine, but they also required a large financial investment in hired location, food, music, transport, and decorations. The amount became so large as to become the main wedding gift from one or both families of origin. Correspondingly, everyone attending now gave a cash gift. Spouses hoped to go well beyond recouping costs, and the morning after wedding found them counting weary-eyed the financial proceeds that constituted the modern marital endowment. They could also measure with a clear metric how much each guest offered, starting with parents and ending with people they never saw before in their lives.

Wedding money tells a story of persistence but also innovation in the ways of creating and embedding a family in Săteni society given infrastructural changes. The interests, resources, and expectations of kin amity changed with large-scale social transformations in the second half of the 20th century. Weddings changed because the structures of marriages changed. Collectivization of land led to a decrease in children's reliance on parental endowment. Coupled with new opportunities for making a living in Săteni or elsewhere, a change in the mode of production and social organization increased the spouses' alternatives and the importance of personal preferences in mate selection. Teenage marriages have all but disappeared, and most Sătenis started families after finishing education, finding a workplace, and "catching some rennet/clot," i.e., saving up. Starting with socialism, parents could no longer use land to press their children into arranged marriages, even though their opinions still carried weight. Land gave way to money in marriage arrangements, and the nuptial gifts replaced in importance the prenuptial deals.

The increased financialization of contemporary weddings thus follows from a change in the social structure of property and livelihood. Whereas land endowment from parents created the main foundation of a family, now the marital fund increasingly consists of contributions from more individuals, ending in a lump sum at the newlyweds' disposal. Parents remain central, but social support becomes diffused and wider. The process recalls the individualization of Chinese villagers studied by Yan (2010), where offspring become more independent of parents and siblings. In China as in Romania, socialist and postsocialist social transformations of property and modes of production played a causal role in household organization and moral commitments. The fungibility of money replaced fixed and predictable land inheritance, giving spouses more control over their life choices.

The increase in flexibility survived the fall of socialism. When villagers received their land back, it was no longer the only, or, with rare exceptions, the best way of making a living in Săteni. Better-off villagers worked in commerce, administration, or industry or migrated to Romanian or foreign cities. The elders and paupers received vital pensions and welfare payments. Agriculture

beyond subsistence levels required market exchanges, and even the poor families needed to buy at least cigarettes and sugar. Villagers no longer dreamed of land. They dreamed of money and its many uses. Cash replaced land as primary valuable as the economic environment of families went beyond the autarkic domestic mode of production into a wider and interconnected mode of social interaction between households.

Kinship support did not disappear, and neither did the importance of family and household, quite the contrary. Evolving forms of relatedness offered new and useful avenues for social interaction. In the case of marriage, as reliance upon close relatives decreased, more people of kith and kin became key cooperative partners in the focal moments of establishing a family. The transformations, however, continued to be guided by a persisting principle of mutualistic relatedness.

3.7. Calling out and keeping kinship accounts

The patterns of attending and gifting money at weddings indicate how Sătenis create and display trust in cooperative relationships in the contemporary conditions of Săteni kinship. The wedding becomes a moral theater where each gesture tells something about the actors. The customary greeting of newlyweds is "house of stone!," a symbol for the solidity of their future relationship. Wedding gifts place a cornerstone for the economic foundations of the new family, often needed precisely for building a new house.[8] After revelers have enjoyed food, drinks, and dances played by traditional musicians, the crescendo of merriment peaks when a master of ceremony (a witty and loquacious relative or a hired performer) begins to call out for donations.

He begins with parents, who usually give the highest amount. Considering the previously described expectations of fairness, the two families strive for equal or equivalent gifts, coordinating in advance to make sure neither loses face. Rumors say some even pretend to give more than actually is the case in order to "raise the table," i.e., increase the cognitive anchor for consequent gifts. The endowment may range from hundreds or thousands of euros to the donation of a house plot. While still significant, parental gifts contribute a lower part of the total wedding income as land inheritance from parents became a less stringent issue given less reliance on agriculture. Moreover, spouses developed other fundamental sources of marital support.

The second important gift comes from outside the spheres of consanguinity and affinity. In Orthodox marriage, a senior married couple become ritual parents to the newlyweds. Glossed anthropologically, wedding sponsors carry the sacred role to facilitate entrance into the world as spiritual advisers and practical helpers of the new family. Their significance clearly appears in marriage endowment. Starting with socialism, wedding sponsors gifted

sizable amounts, sometimes even more than parents and sometimes also inflated sums in cahoots with the spouses.

Siblings come next, followed by other close blood relatives on both sides. The gift ceremony peters out as more distant relatives and friends present their contribution. The size of gifts tends to decrease, although particularly rich guests may offer much more than genealogically or socially similar peers, especially if their relationship with the spouses is particularly strong and/or are particularly wealthy. In a sense, the scene evokes the competitive display in taverns when actors outbid each other in generosity toward the focal marital couple. Careful families carry more money than they would like to give, and adapt their final offering to previous donations, keenly observing and reacting to "how the table works/goes." They may add a bit more or chip a few banknotes off the stack, but they always strive to appear no less stingy than others given their relative wealth and closeness to the newlyweds.

What is perceived as fair generosity may vary widely. Some people, especially older and poorer, offer barely enough to cover the expenses of their attendance, if even that. Yet no one takes offense, and their presence is enjoyed despite unrecouped costs. Wedding spirit shuns pure mercantilism, and the gifting moment extends seamlessly the wedding atmosphere of joy and fun. Extroverted guests (usually male) call out their prestations, count each piece, fumble around their pockets for the one last banknote, joke with the minstrels, and sometimes slip a banknote for musicians to sing a heartfelt tune.

For all the money changing hands, or perhaps due to it, people overtly display how this is one of the happiest moments in a hard life. Apart from rationales of costs and social investments, weddings create a friendly setting in which to observe and interact with people, discover or rediscover connections, gossip and talk business, and even provide romantic opportunities for youngsters that will end in similar weddings. The joyful atmosphere loosens tongues and dancing feet (even amusing fisticuffs given all the excitement and alcohol). It offers a prosocial counterpart to the secrecy and bickering of everyday life. The wedding becomes an arena in which to display the altruistic side of their personhood in interaction, by humor and generosity, or the brotherly love expressed in *hora*—a collective circle dance at the end of the ceremony.

Every bit of generosity counts, but it also matters how generous each participant was in absolute and relative terms. Guests shout with pretended meekness, "little from us, more from God more," but the audience registers what "little" really denotes. The married family keeps an even closer track. After more than 20 years, Gabi remembers exactly the financial details of her wedding with Mihai. They borrowed about 2000 euros (in current money) from a wealthy sister of Ioan, Mihai's father, to pay for wedding costs. His parents gave about 500 euros, but her parents were poorer and could only afford about 200 euros, an asymmetry between affines persisting until today.

Though Mihai's parents would have preferred a richer spouse, Mihai was too much in love and too stubborn to be swayed.

The wedding sponsors offered 700 euros, more than either parents did. They were the daughter of a friendly neighbor of Mihai's family (a business manager) and her well-to-do sailor husband. Mihai's sister from Austria offered the same amount as the wedding sponsors. Finally, the wealthy aunt offered 500 euros like her brother and, immediately after the wedding, received back the loan of 2000 with expressions of warm gratitude for her help. These figures register the salient memory of moral behavior created by weddings. Mihai also recalls how, a week before the party, he went to the cellar to check on the wine his father promised for the ceremony only to find out that Ioan had drunk it all. Mihai had to borrow five barrels from an aunt, promising to pay it back from wedding money. Once again, his father failed Mihai.

The young man had to rely on his own moral commitments to get ahead in family life. Ioan objectively could not afford to give more money than his richer daughter, sister, or wedding sponsors. But Mihai could trust more the help coming from two aunts than from his own father, who sabotaged the wedding by carelessness and self-gratification. Meekly, Ioan took antibiotics as a folk remedy to refrain from drinking and its potential for shameful behavior, but the harm was done. Such episodes were hard to forget or forgive, being decisive for their impending domestic separation.

Mihai's sister's large gift, on the other hand, describes the felicitous turn of events in kinship rearrangement. The diminishing importance of partible inheritance lowered sibling rivalry. When brothers and sisters went separate ways by specialization or migration, they had new opportunities to remain on good terms and benefit from mutualistic relationships. His sister donated a considerable yet affordable amount given her Austrian income and invested in a sibling protecting her interests in Săteni, such as taking care of their parents and properties. Structural mechanisms engendering conflict lost some steam given geographical dispersion of siblings and decreased interests in partible inheritance.

Societal changes also extended patterns of amity well beyond nuclear relatives, and the universal medium of wedding money allows for many meanings. For a guest, conspicuous generosity communicates both personal wealth and the moral commitment to the couple's welfare. Collectively, the ritual of gifting money maps out the new family's network of relatives and friends, with overt and comparable cues of social importance. For the new family, guests offer a marital start-up fund and define the social network of effective relatives and friends on which they can depend in the future. The donation, however, goes beyond mere altruism.

The conspicuous presence of money makes some villagers say weddings are "a business," but the tinge of irony lacks moral condemnation. The ritual unites the spouses in symbolic conjugality while the financial proceedings

provide for the material infrastructure of a family that is now money oriented. Yet, as in a good business, one needs both to know who a good social partner is and to advertise personal credentials. Weddings are social gatherings for reckoning moral relationships where marital cash confirms and recreates trust. Cold cash walks the talk of "holding on" to relatives (see Figure 3.2).

Spouses think hard about who should be invited, i.e., relatives and friends with a meaningful social relationship to them or their families of origin. Savvy and early planning extends the circle to less-frequented relatives and recent acquaintances, especially if financially potent. A migrant brought his Italian boss from Sicily, and local functionaries often attend their colleagues' ceremonies. Some people have to travel across the country since refusal to attend

Figure 3.2. The moral gifts of the wedding

without a very good reason is extremely bad manners. If one cannot physically attend, they should reasonably send a cash offering to prove their commitment at a distance. However, a lack of invitation clearly sends the exact opposite signal. When proud cow farmer Dorel found out only a few months later that his sister's daughter had married, he decided that the cooling of social relationships between siblings had hit a terminal point. He needn't even confront his sister, since there was no alternative explanation. No one can forget to send a wedding invitation; omission is 100% commission.

Without explicit mention, newlyweds are morally obligated to return the service when attendants have their own weddings or baptisms. The reciprocity links families in cyclical participation at rituals across life, often transmitted across generations. Though called gifts, the sums are recorded in memory or sometimes in writing by old folks, both donors and recipients keeping exact accounts of "obligations" for future interactions. The word suggests that presence is mandatory, even if burdensome for financially tight families that even have to borrow money in order to avoid a failure in reciprocity.

Fascinatingly, the very gesture of handing out cash seems to matter beyond monetary transfers. When Gabi and Mihai baptized their daughter on a Friday, one of his business-clients-turned-friends attended and gave them 150 euros. By coincidence, the same man married on Saturday, but the older couple could not attend the wedding due to fatigue. However, Mihai drove there and handed him the exact 150 euros received the day before. The transfers made no financial sense, since they canceled each other out, adding some minor transaction costs (like the groom attending two parties back-to-back!). As in the Trobriand Kula cycle (Malinowski 1922) or other "free" gifts (Mauss 1925), ritual cash implicitly honors promises and creates further obligations, whose punctuation overtly and publicly communicates the enduring bond between people.

The cycle of ritual reciprocities reliably expresses trust in future solidarity. You come to my wedding; I come to yours. Young families draw upon their private pool of collective support when facing an important moment in life and contribute mutualistically to their helper's or his children's endowment in the future. One gift does not repay a previous gift to end the debt. Rather, it makes the recipient axiomatically indebted to future ritual prestations, extending into baptism, and even funerals as we shall see. Putting spouses in the spotlight while showered with gifts by the assembly of kith and kin, weddings make social relationships begin and endure over time. They also communicate in symbols and hard cash how meaningful social life requires cooperation between families linked by relatedness or friendship.

The weddings involve people with no kin ties such as neighbors and friends. Interestingly, rituals today involve more unrelated people than several decades ago, confirming the scenario of increased flexibility in social relationships. While friendship compensates for the gradual decrease of reliance on core kin,

it may become itself a form of relatedness when assuming an institutional identity carrying norms of mutualistic moral duties. By ritual, good friends can make themselves kin.

3.8. Choosing relatives by moral obligations

Some guests attend the wedding even without any previous significant interaction with the newlyweds. Collectively labeled "obligations," these are people invited by wedding sponsors. Accepting to sponsor a wedding carries great prestige of wealth and agreeableness but also requires that sponsors call on people whose rituals they had attended or make future commitments for reciprocation, adding to the ritual's participation and earnings. The more "obligations" they can bring, the more socially potent the sponsors' investment in the new family. Interestingly, the inviting wedding sponsor and not the newlyweds have to reciprocate attendance, respecting the pattern of personal debt.[9]

But why do wedding sponsors go to such lengths as gifting above others and becoming indebted themselves for the future? We should also look into another fundamental ritual of kinship that closely resembles weddings, including the participation of relatives and friends, requiring significant donations: christenings. Also moments of making kin, baptisms are similar in symbolizing the institutional ties of elementary family kinship. In weddings, two people become related as husband and wife. In christenings they become father and mother of a baby, and she becomes their offspring. The two rituals communicate and legitimize publicly the creation of core kinship ties in front of society. Both rituals add another layer of kinship, ontologically different from blood or affinity, though still called *neamuri*. Anthropologically glossed as fictive or symbolic kinship, these ties emulate "real" kinship in representation and practice. Godparents become spiritual parents of their baptized child and are called by the same term as the wedding sponsors, offering spiritual parenthood to a married couple.

Neither of these forms of fictive kinship is ontologically confused with biological or social parenthood, having their own symbols and codes of conduct. But all *neam* relationships share a set of governing moral principles. While being ontologically different from consanguinity or affinity, ritual relatedness also builds upon enduring mutuality. Fictive kin express the capacity of Sătenis to make kinship out of any social interaction if the conditions are right.

The role of wedding *naşi* only begins with the religious sacraments and customary endowment. Sponsors are supposed to act as secondary parents, helping the young couple in marital life with transfers and counsel. Their position allows for an impartial, equidistantly supportive intervention in spouse tensions without the bias of blood ties.[10] Ritual kinship morally fuses people in a way biology cannot, as wedding sponsors become symbolic (since naturally

impossible) parents to both husband and wife. They owe protection and guidance, a helping hand, and a wise word for their wedded symbolic children. In return, *finii* ought to respect *nașii*, honor them with house visits on special holy days, and answer their call for work or ritual assistance.

For their part, godparents serve as lifetime guardians for godchildren and establish a recognized kin relationship with their parents called *cumetrie*. While infant godchildren have no say over the choice of godparents, the roots of *cumetrie* grow from a history of amicable relationships. Razvan baptized the daughter of older Gheorghe, sealing in ritual a friendship developed in taverns, fishing expeditions, and cheese deals, then branched out into politics. "We were such good buddies, we wanted to make ourselves relatives," as each independently described the process of turning long-term cooperative interactions into an essentialized, public, culturally institutionalized tie of kinship. Ritual kinship turns the flexible, intuitive friendship (Hrushka 2010) into rigid, explicitly institutionalized relatedness. Also, choosing one friend over another to become wedding sponsor or godparent communicates publicly a decrease of outside options (Hrushka 2010:159), signaling out one particular person as a trustworthy and valuable associate.

Ritual kinship may sometimes build on existing kinship but marking a significant distinction. A godparent can be, for example, a parent's sibling or cousin, one especially close to the family. Ionel helped his sister with money and advice more than parents could during difficult times. When he landed a job in Germany, he baptized the daughter of his England-bound sister. Interestingly, when ritual kinship builds on top of blood kinship, rituals are a more private family affair called "splashing." In the domestic domain, Ionel became a superbrother to his cherished sister. When ritual kinship comes from outside the sphere of existing kin, the overt celebration displays the public engagement and activates that sphere of obligations assumed by the ritual brother.

Another particular pattern is the conspicuous deployment of spiritual kin terms. More often would a man say, "I went to town with Gabriel," when Gabriel is a son or a brother than "I went to town with *cumătru*." In fact, people would call out "brother" or "my son" only when trying to evoke the moral import of the blood tie. The opposite applies when personal names are replaced by fictive kin terms. The insistence upon kinship-evoking words rather than individual identities reinforces in mental and public representations the constructed-yet-fundamental relationship between individuals. Spiritual kinship is not merely ritually created kinship, but also repeatedly and overtly evoked and expressed kinship.

Cumetrie is a fascinating word. There is no word in English to translate its many meanings so easily available to a Romanian even beyond Săteni, but "ritual brother" captures the essential kin identity. The etymology comes either from the Slavic word for "brother" (more akin to my interpretation) or

from a Latin construction as "co-mother," yet the concept has fascinatingly ramified linguistic meanings. Though by no means a unique social practice (see Latin American *compadrazgo*; Mintz and Wolf 1950), *cumetrie* contains a minor national *Weltanschauung*.

Primarily, it means the kinship relationship between godparents and natural parents, but also the big party following the ritual of baptism. A *cumetrie* can also mean a deal or arrangement, such as a Săteni leasing a grass field in particularly favorable terms to a *cumătru*, or any imaginable kind of reciprocal favors and stable economic transactions between these fictive relatives. People also say "they have a *cumetrie*," referring to a favor based on a stable and trustworthy exchange partnership with a friend lacking any kind of real or fictive kin connection.[11] A former president of Romania made headlines by denouncing "*cumetrie* capitalism," whose fortunes built on shady personal relationships rather than market mechanisms (ironically perhaps coming from an ex-communist apparatchik).

The power of *cumetrie* comes from tested and enduring trust. The godparent is the social brother one would prefer to have.[12] And very often he becomes the cooperative, morally phenotypical brother while real brothers drift apart. It is very good if godparenthood comes from an existing tie of blood or affinity as a communicative device to indicate a special partnership above others. But people can also choose anyone from outside the sphere of kinship, unencumbered by inheritance tensions or structural conflicts between consanguines and affines.

If ritual relatedness is kinship by partner choice, it takes two to tango. Sometimes people approach potential godparents with a proposition and get delicately denied. Overt reasons revolve around contextual financial strains, but sometimes the true reason is unwillingness to turn a casual friendship into a more serious engagement, or the fear of being approached just for short-term financial donation and not a long-term, mutualistic engagement. Since fictive kinship lingers on long after the ritual, people are cautious and strategic in choosing whom to make into a relative. The road from acquaintance to ritual kin moves slowly, starting small and then increasing stakes in a process of costly courtship (Hrushka 2010:158, 202), eventually reaching the public commitment from which one cannot extract oneself without reputational costs.

Another importance of *naşi* and *cumetri* is the extension of opportunities for social alliances and links between distinct spheres such as urban–rural and across nations, or between different social classes. Traditionally, villagers of good standing sought fictive kin among local notables such as mayors, lawyers, state functionaries, or doctors, creating a moral bridge toward economic and institutional resources (echoing Sarakatsani in Campbell 1976). Resourceful villagers can be serial godparents, creating many obligations to

attend rituals, but also to offer support in business or politics for fictive kin selected for their benevolence and competence in social affairs.

During socialism, for example, people nurtured village–city ritual ties, offering access to education and health and, respectively, scarce food products. Even a godparent in another village or in a distinct line of work could pass on valuable information about business or migration opportunities, offer assistance in local affairs, or vouch for the trustworthiness of their fictive kin in front of real or fictive relatives, and friends. Moreover, it provided the extension of agency by (initially) weak ties in a different social field than the strong ties with too-similar blood or marriage relatives (Granovetter 1973). Connecting with his wedding sponsor and his *cumătru*, Razvan could follow three local markets of land, trade fodder and cheese, develop a political network, and perform such vital services as hiding his wedding sponsor from law enforcement in a night chase over the hills.

Weak ties need nurture, especially when people live in or move between different places. While parents, brothers, and sisters live together in a household, cultural norms of fictive kinship prescribe ritualized domestic contact. At special moments such as Easter, Christmas, or patron saint days, people visit the homes of spiritual parents carrying special gifts, the customary "*plocon*" being a large fowl. With each visit, they honor and repay the service of their ritual kindred; they sit down at the family table and catch up on news and plans. Even just a phone call on special occasions signals the persistence of relatedness-by-choice in the absence of other interactions. But how could Mihai ask a favor from his wedding sponsors or invite them to his daughter's baptism when he last saw them 10 years ago and lapsed even the rare courtesy call, as he ashamedly confessed?

Tracing the communication of commitments between ritual relatives, we have come full circle to the matters of trust and mutuality that characterize the entire universe of Săteni kinship. For Fortes, all kinship relationships are governed by an axiom of amity. He also remarked that "there is a fiduciary element in amity. We do not have to love our kinfolk, but we expect to be able to trust in them in ways that are not automatically possible with non-kinfolk" (1969:249). To support his suggestion, he immediately adds "that is why agreements in the forms of contracts are needed for entering into and maintaining relationships of moral and judicial validity with people defined as strangers."

Fortes did not develop his argument any further, and in my view the strict distinction is untenable in Săteni. Villagers do attach axiomatic trust to kin relationships, but this default position may change with experience of actual social interaction. Sătenis expect to be able to automatically trust certain relatives, but they (sometimes painfully) learn not to expect it from others. However, friends can offer and receive the trust of cooperation that evokes, complements, or even replaces the ties of relatedness.

When Pitt Rivers (1973) replied to Fortes that friendship likes to masquerade as kinship, he touched upon the moral similarity between different relationships of enduring trust and cooperation. The cultural institution of ritual kinship offers a normative and symbolic way to turn the closest and most socially important friends into relatives. A further confirmation of the pattern is that, once friends become relatives, they need to keep the relationship alive just like the rest of kin ties. To remain good relatives, fictive or real, means to stay good friends.

But for all their many cultural forms of entering, reproducing, and ending relatedness as a moral interaction, Sătenis insist upon the primacy of biology. They often say, "blood does not turn into water," an essentialist counterpoise to the constructivist and contractual interpretation proposed so far. It is true that siblings, parents, offspring, and more distant consanguines quarrel, stop helping, or stop speaking to one another. They might even willfully renege the genealogical identity created by biological reproduction evoked by blood. But Sătenis see "the call of blood" as immutable and stronger than feelings toward affinal or ritual kin. I will argue, however, that the metaphor gains currency only when backed by a moral commitment, for Sătenis themselves show how even water can be turned into blood.

3.9. A fair replacement for blood

A metaphor depicting the partner choice interpretation of ethnographic evidence is that each Săteni grows a tree of kinship. It begins as a sapling in the family of birth. The tree branches out into consanguine extensions based on shared descent and then grows new branches of affinal and ritual extensions. The growth is perpetual across individual life and influences the development of descendants and their trees. Across life, a person prunes unwanted ties while grafting useful relatives.

To paraphrase Marx ([1852]1926), Sătenis make their own kinship, but they do not make it as they please. Decades ago, Săteni metaphorical trees were more deeply rooted in arable land and descent lines as seen in Elisaveta's family history while now they branch out widely into financial and non-financial deals with an expanding network of moral relatives as witnessed at Adina's wedding. Moreover, the history of each individual tree bears witness to the serendipity and context that come with growing in a forest of other trees, cooperative or not. But, to follow the dendrological metaphor, any tree has a genetic structure that cannot be altered by the gardener. One such immanent quality comes, for Săteni kinship, from the facts of natural reproduction.

Individuals cannot appear out of thin air; they must be made by other people—their parents. From this primordial tie, the Săteni system of descent and marriage relates people with maternal and paternal collaterals and with

the spouse's consanguines. The ideal norms of kin reckoning are a generative code for creating genealogies, the socially acknowledged tree structure, the hierarchy and balance of its branches. The brute material of natural kinship is given long before being pruned into shape and supplemented with external grafts.

Sătenis draw inferences from the observed facts of biological procreation, providing cues about the individual and information about social relationships. The former describes the child's biological potential. Children inherit physical resemblance to biological parents, as Sătenis are quick to explain either by mentioning basic genetics learned in school for the more educated ones or folk representations of essence transmission (Medin and Atran 1999). Native ideas of biological inheritance involve a fuzzy naturalist explanation for the transmission of traits along bloodlines. Essential features are "thrown" in a particular individual, perhaps skipping a generation or two, but discernible with enough genealogical depth. People interpret naturally created similarity of physical aspect but also character. A work-shy or violent personality gets transmitted alongside blond hair and walking gait. Shepherds in particular talk in the same way about physiological or behavioral traits in the case of men, sheep, and dogs, and how their bodies and minds resemble their ancestors in various combinations depending on pedigree.

Trees usually grow from the seed (or roots) of parent trees, but for a glaring exception: pomiculture. Experts graft the sapling into the rootstock of another tree, which nurtures a genetically close but ontologically foreign organism. Săteni has its corresponding practice in the form of alloparenting. Some children are not the biological offspring of their parents, yet they also grow up in the world of relatedness. The successful grafting, I argue, feeds on the sap of mutualistic morality.

First of all, filiation may be created out of close but indirect biological relatedness. Mihaela remembered that her mother had a 20-year-younger halfbrother who, after being orphaned, joined their household. The sister and brother-in-law took over the role of parents, integrating the young man in their household and raising him no differently than their similar aged biological offspring. They even endowed him to marry and settle to his own household. In a continuation of a previous story, Tamara and Ioan's granddaughter Dorina came to live with and help them in their twilight years after Mihai and Gabi left. She replaced her uncle in his role of culturally expected caretaker as youngest offspring. She consequently received the right of inheriting the household of now deceased grandparents, a transfer considered morally justified by everyone, including Mihai. He could have invoked a more advantageous legal division but felt his niece fully deserved the inheritance as ultimate caretaker.

Parenthood includes nurture without biological descent, as in the case of stepparenting. Artificial ties emulate natural connections, and the distinction

is marked by saying "stepmother" instead of "good mother." Sătenis would also clarify that a "good/right brother" shares both parents with Ego in comparison with just one for a "brother-through-mother" or none for a "stepsister." Yet these relationships without (or with partial) biological ties obey a moral code of conduct irrespective of the reality of natural reproduction as long as they are nurtured in the warm environment of families and households (as observed by Carsten 1997, for Malay peasants). In fact, people are wont to praise stepparents who behaved just as well or even better than natural parents, a clear sign of their generosity, repaid in kind by grateful stepchildren.

Biology, however, remains the measuring rod, the focal and exemplary model, the intuitive and culturally agreed origin of familial morality. Villagers expect, as a rule, that natural ties work better than purely social commitments. The cold stepmother often appears in Săteni negative accounts and folklore, especially when biased by having natural children of her own—themselves pitted against nonnatural siblings. Yet Sătenis know and appreciate examples of nurturing nonbiological parenting. Biology prevails in Săteni expectations and experiences, ceteris paribus. But if everything else is not equal, and often it is not, then the crucial variable is actual behavior in relation to ideal norms.

Using folk theories and contextual inferences, people know or suspect that certain children were fathered by someone other than the husband. However, if men ignore or accept the biological incongruity, the father–child relationship develops through nurture and reciprocal recognition.[13] While villagers used Costel's biological features to presume procreative fatherhood by one of his wife's lovers, they always referred to the cuckold husband as Costel's father. The man cared for the boy as for his own flesh and blood, nurtured him into adulthood, and left his entire household to a man almost certainly biologically unrelated, a fact most people believe he privately knew as well.

Conversely, Costel fulfilled his part in a social relationship of filiation as an exemplary son. Both sides behaved as expected from fathers and sons. But Costel's allegedly biological genitor raised another, acknowledged offspring. After a fight, much more acrimonious than Mihai and Ioan's, father and son stopped speaking to each other and went entirely different social ways. Moral behavior and not the facts of reproduction ultimately determined in interaction the ties of filiation as representation and practice.

A man and a woman may also adopt a child and raise him just like a natural offspring, performing the role of *pater* and *mater* without being genitor or genetrix. In return, the adoptee treats parents and family members, knowingly or unknowingly, as if tied by a bond of blood. Adoptees and adopters also call out using normal names for mothers and sons, even though they make clear that the relationship is not of nature but "of soul." Natural inclinations may be emulated through mutual acceptance of social roles of parental and filial rights and duties.

Relationships with and without biological connection coexist within the social institutions of parenthood and brotherhood. No matter how they become family, individuals should act generously toward one another according to family membership and collectively sustain and be defined by the household as a corporate group. In moral terms, social norms for parent–child or sibling relationships do not depend on biological ties, though empirical expectations of duty fulfillment are stronger for a natural connection. The, admittedly few, cases of alloparenting lacking any natural connections show that Săteni kinship chooses its way even beyond the fundamental ties of filiation.

Adoption may even be the only choice for perpetually barren families. Dying childless is the most dreaded fate for Săteni villagers, a pain surpassed only by the tragedy of having children die before parents, especially gruesome if occurring before producing grandchildren. As if the thought of extinguishing their bloodline is not enough, old villagers living alone fare badly in the Săteni environment, from putting food on the table to surviving its cold winters. Thoughts of dying alone, uncared for in this life and beyond, inspire dread during many sleepless nights. However, there is a cultural moral way out of biological fruitlessness.

As in the case of Dorina, the practice of turning distant consanguines into family members elevates them to the rights and duties of natural children while exploiting a trace of shared nature between parties. When no young relatives are available, a neighbor or a poor but friendly and hard-working young couple may be the best or only available choice for a late-life adoption. The relationship again reproduces the mutuality defining filiation. Fictive children nurse fictive parents in their twilight years and receive the rights of ultimogeniture, a relationship openly and poignantly considered as a fair arrangement for all parties involved.

Though even late-life adoptees go as far as calling adopters mother and father, villagers believe that lack of shared blood makes for a suboptimal solution, offering cases of ungrateful fictive descendants profiteering from the isolation and vulnerability of elders. In the next sentence, however, they provide another example where artificial relationships functioned better than the real thing for both adopters and adoptees. Though I pushed harder on the theme of blood, they seemed to contradict the folk metaphor by saying "don't you see that nowadays son kills father and brother kills brother?!?"

"The blood not turning into water" offers the foundational idiom for defining Săteni family by the natural connection between child and parents, and its immediate extensions. But if biology is the preferred and most common way of creating family ties, it is not the only way. The facts of nature provide an ideal and statistical model for the social institution of the family, but not an exclusive origin. Social norms use categories derived from expectations inferred from the facts of procreation and shared substances between parents and children (and blood relatives in general). However, social roles can

be filled by people behaving according to the role though not ascribed for the role. One can be nurtured into behaving like a biological child or sibling or knowingly choose to fill the role of parent or offspring during adulthood.

Sătenis displayed this flexibility in reasoning about filiation in an experimental design aimed to test ethnographic insights and explore essentialist reasoning about kinship. I presented around 100 people with a scenario where, due to hospital mistake, a pair of Săteni parents left home with a baby born by Roma parents (who left with the Săteni baby).[14] Even though most respondents thought all bodily and many character traits are inherited from natural parents, they also inferred properties developed from the child's interaction with nurture parents. Most considered the child as Romanian rather than Roma, and about half believed he would display peasant virtues. More fascinating, the majority considered that the Roma-born boy deserved to inherit the Săteni family's household and land rather than their natural offspring raised by Romas. In their moral reasoning, even a person biologically created by the most disparaged (if not despised) ethnic group should receive the fundamental rights to parental property after being nurtured since birth by a Săteni family and growing as a social if not biological offspring.

The ambivalence and apparent fragility of their conceptual definitions often frustrated my ethnographic attempts to get at the core of "what kinship really is" (Sahlins 2013) from my first days in the field. The problem appeared from trying to impose a distinction between nature and culture that was insufficient for a Săteni account of the foundation of kinship. This chapter showed that Sătenis use moral mutuality to interpret and act in interactions between relatives. What matters for kinship is "the kind of man," a native term evoking "human nature" or "character." This personal quality explains how a mutualistic match of persons can replace a missing biological filiation, just as it explains why biological relatedness vanishes into thin air when expectations of fairness are violated.

3.10. The importance of being kin

The ethnography suggested an interpretative account of Săteni kinship as an emergent process of making, "holding," or abandoning social relationships. The representations, norms, and practices of relatedness build on long-term trust in reciprocal fairness, on the background of a history of cooperative interactions between actors judged and informed by a mutualistic morality. Kinship does not accrue to persons, but to interactions between persons. To return to the dendrological metaphor, the arborescent growth that symbolizes kinship is not solely private mental representations and personal agency. Every connecting branch belongs to two trees. Each is a moral contract uniting two trees, which dries when either one prunes it away but survives as long as nurtured by both.

The concept of relatives—*neamuri* in Săteni—has a clear negative definition. They are not "strangers," a word used for foreigners or people outside Săteni but also for those Sătenis who are not kin to the speaker. The definition is, of course, positional. There are as many sets of "my relatives" as there are people, since each individual has their own unique tree of kinship, ascribed at birth and fashioned across life. Correspondingly, there are just as many sets of actor-relative strangers. Strangers can become relatives by marriage or ritual, and relatives can become strangers by avoidance or amnesia. But the distinction is crucial because it creates a moral difference.

One treats kin differently than strangers. Relatives receive various forms of symbolic amity, cooperative gestures, and enduring trust, whereas strangers are met with caution, avoidance, or outright distrust. Moral obligations to relatives automatically derive from the many ways of being kin, with relative intensity for different kinds of relatedness. Personal experiences of betrayal or structural conflicts show how axiomatic trust may often collapse. But it's not trust in relatives in general that disappears. It is trust in "that" relative. An exploitative cousin does not destroy the institution of cousinhood, only his personal bond with the victim, while both continue to believe in the norms of reciprocal assistance between relatives, including cousins. Although the formal genealogical connection persists as long as someone still holds on to the mental representation of their parents being siblings, the cousin-not-behaving-like-a-cousin becomes a stranger in moral terms.

In Săteni kinship, there is no solitary tree but a forest of interlinking branches feeding and fed by expectations of trust and fairness. Anyone can become (or unbecome) kin, but not anyone is kin. Outside the "held" relatives lies the perennial distrust and potential conflict with strangers, generic unrelated persons or demoted kin. The Săteni morality of kinship is universally shared but applies in a particularistic fashion. If each personal tree of kinship carries a set of moral obligations toward related trees sharply distinguished from the strangers, what kind of social order can emerge without the requirement to act morally toward each and every other? How does a society like Săteni reproduce as a whole if all its members have only particularistic moral relationships with relatives and friends, and antagonistic interactions with many, potentially all, others?

One way to answer is to study the transcendent domain of Săteni morality. The image of individual trees and branches between them would be incomplete if we only accounted for the living organisms. The forest includes a universe of people who biologically are no more. Yet they are very much alive as a consequence of their behavior in the past and as representation in the minds of the present. These fallen trees tell a story of what keeps the forest alive. Like the living, the dead persist by trustful mutuality against conflict and absence. How Sătenis live determines how they die and what happens with moral commitments after biological extinction.

CHAPTER 4

Death and the regeneration of trust

A man's death makes everything certain about him. Of course, secrets may die with him. And of course, a hundred years later somebody looking through some papers may discover a fact which throws a totally different light on his life and of which all the people who attended his funeral were ignorant. Death changes the facts qualitatively but not quantitatively. One does not know more facts about a man because he is dead. But what one already knows hardens and becomes definite. We cannot hope for ambiguities to be clarified, we cannot hope for further change, we cannot hope for more. We are now the protagonists and we have to make up our minds.

John Berger [1967] 1997:160

Quarantined to hospitals and mortuary technicians in urban societies (Elias 2010), death is an extraordinarily social moment in Săteni. Church bells ring to announce a death and the news spreads fast by word-of-mouth. A black kerchief hung toward the road and nowadays light bulbs left constantly on draw attention to the bereaved household. The roadside door usually firmly closed now opens broadly to the exterior. It leads to the front "good room," storing dowries and symbolic valuables, a focal space of domestic rituals. During the three-day wake, the dead lies in an open coffin on a table surrounded by symbolic objects and chairs for attendants.

Whereas households are epistemic fortresses in everyday life, the rituals of death temporarily abolish all secrecy barriers. What might have been secret and ambiguous becomes open and clear since, customarily, anyone may come and be generously received by the family. Mortuary practices make a biological event into a total social fact, to follow Mauss (1925), expressing the worldview of Sătenis and the fundamentals of their social organization. The death of a person turns the inside out since they lose internal agency but remain present

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and relevant by the acts of the living accounting for the past and preparing for the future.

As John Berger suggests, it is a moment of reckoning. More than in other moments of life, reckoning comes from friend and foe alike, family and stranger, inside and outside the household. Mortuary practices are eminently communicative moments when the private domain of life becomes ritually public. The moment of death expresses social interactions that have been built over the years, which must be accounted for in the present as there shall be no other occasion. The future now belongs to the relatives of the dead, who continue the moral compact of solidarity, of taking care of their own in death as they do in life. Or they might choose not to.

This chapter argues that Sătenis see in death the evidence of life. The distinction between forgiveness and pitilessness, between being there and not being there, expresses the broader Săteni view of society as divided into moral and nonmoral social interactions. What happens after one dies tells a story about that person, her social relationships in life, her achievements, and her failings. Each death also tells a story about how society persists despite biological expiry.

4.1. BEING THERE: THE MORALITY OF RECKONING DEATH

Late one night, word reached village taverns that Vasile Ion was found dead. Since he was old and no one present was close to him, the event raised little emotion in the pub. Rather, patrons inquired how Vasile died and what was going on at his place. A neighbor found him lifeless outside his house and called the elder's two daughters from a nearby city. I met the old sheep owner a few times and was good friends with one of Vasile's neighbors. Hearing the news, she dressed quickly and went to his house. I tagged along.

At the scene, a dozen people energetically began mortuary preparations. A male neighbor (someone of the same sex but from outside the household, as required by custom) had just finished washing Vasile's corpse, dressing it in a nice suit to be laid inside an open coffin. We uttered the formulaic "May God forgive him" and asked for details. Vasile had a stroke after a bout of heavy drinking, and his absence went unnoticed for a day or so. His daughters interpreted missed phone calls as an understandable error from an old man unaccustomed with technology. My friend told everyone she had dreamed of Vasile's wife, who longed for her garden, now interpreted as an omen of death, then joined the workgroup.

In these emotionally intense moments, everyone was hectically concerned with domestic appearances. The two daughters, helped by relatives and neighbors, frantically dusted ledges; washed windows; hid imperfections; covered all mirrors; and pulled out the best covers, carpets, and pillows and spread

them around the ritual room. Everyone present helped or at least offered advice about things to be hidden or displayed, the arrangement of seats for wake attendants, the orientation of the mortuary table, and so on. Under the supervision of the daughters, the location changed quickly from a dusty neglected room, perhaps expected from a lone widower, to a neat space that conveyed the propriety of a "good" household.

I stepped out of the house and noticed that the body lay unattended on the porch. I could not help feeling that they were slightly callous in caring more about appearances than grieving the dead. The ritual preparations looked just like a last-minute spring cleaning, were it not for the corpse outside. My initial interpretation was quite naive. The family and its helpers were not ignoring Vasile, quite the contrary. The daughters already had their moment of private grieving when encountering their lifeless father. But loss gave way to another profound motivation. What I failed to understand was that Vasile had died but did not disappear. Quite the opposite, he was now more important, more visible, more present than ever.

Mortal remains tell only part of who that person was in the world. Focusing on his corpse, I lost sight of the representation of Vasile as a social person. The entire world was about to see his worldly fate in a sequence of events where the living become, perforce, protagonists, to echo John Berger. What I mistakenly took for just shallow pretense was, in fact, the relevant people of Vasile's life acting morally in a crucial moment of reckoning. He was an agent no more, but that night I witnessed the first steps in the social construction of Vasile's presence after biological expiry through the agency of many others.

The end comes for all, villagers say. One usually may not choose the moment or the way. Nevertheless, the living remain agentive; one becomes accountable yet flexible over the course of events (Enfield and Kockelman 2017). When Vasile died, his daughters knew what families should do in such moments. A customary set of practices govern the display and disposal of bodies. The bodies of dead men should initially rest in their homes with loved ones by their sides, right in the core of domestic space for everyone to see and honor.

More than flesh and bones, Vasile left behind a house, a household, and material traces of his life's accomplishments. Moreover, he left behind the people who should take care of their own in death as in life. His daughters were there to care for their father in his domestic environment, to care for Vasile's image as a social person, as father and householder, as a unique individual with a history of deeds and social relationships. They prepared the scene for the village to see that Vasile died after a socially and materially accomplished life.

But Săteni society discovered something else in the same event. After leaving the early mortuary preparations with my friend, we ended up gossiping. Vasile had a brother, Horia, living next door. Yet the younger sibling was not there to light a candle, grieve his brother, or help out with funerary

arrangements. Like most people, we largely expected his absence since theirs was a troubled history.

In a dark but immensely funny story peddled by Vasile, he came visiting from the army to find a newborn baby sleeping on the stove. He pondered, "Is it my mother's? Is it my sister's?" Too ashamed to ask, he returned to his unit. He asked, "Had I known then, wouldn't I have turned the basket upside down to smother the devil!?" Facetious infanticide might have saved Vasile a life of trouble riddled with conflicts for their father's attention and partible inheritance, reaching recurrent physical violence. Lately, they severed all social interaction, and each brother built his own inexpugnable wall, creating a fascinating double 4-meter fence between their adjoining households.

While Vasile's daughters displayed proper dedication in the funeral preparations as expected from loyal and well-off offspring, talk of the village revolved around the deliberate flouting of kinship norms by his brother's family. For all eccentricities of known troublemakers, not attending a brother's final moments made people remark over the next days that it was "as if they had never been brothers . . ." Over the following days, Horia attended neither Vasile's wake nor funeral, and some joked that he was probably buying celebration drinks for mates. Horia's son also avoided his uncle's death, solidary with his father as proven over and over again. It was not that they did not know what close blood relatives ought to do—they just chose differently.

Given his cynical evaluation of Horia, I think Vasile knew better than to expect his brother to come to his deathbed or funeral. In Săteni cultural expectations of kinship, even close blood relatives can lose the trust needed to predict acknowledgment and morally codified behavior at death. Vasile did not live to see the events, but the entire village did. Non-reckoning at death made sibling separation final, an end to persistently toxic social interactions, the ultimate act of "not holding on to kin." For his brother, Vasile died as he lived for decades—worse than a stranger, an enemy.

Unlike birth or marriage, death freezes the fluidity of kinship once and for all. It becomes a moment of social closure, establishing kin identity through performative utterances and actions toward the dead. As observed by de Pina Cabral (1986) in Portugal, attendance to funerary rites circumscribes the moral universe of the household but can also entrench social divisions. An extreme example is a dying person's wish to exclude sworn enemies or individuals guilty of lifelong misbehaviors from funeral rituals. The excluded could be neighbors, relatives, or even ungrateful children. The grieving families make sure these unwanted people keep away from mortuary moments, usually by the indirect but convincing transmission of information that attendance would be inopportune. My informants emphasized that the wish was always enforced, seen as something that no one but the dead can decide.

The death curse is an irrevocable identity choice. By symbolically definitive severance of ties, the soon-to-be dead have one last power for acting upon

society. The decision not only separates the dead and the living but draws a division among the living as well. The person banned from the funeral is socially and symbolically kept away from mourners in a key ritual moment of eternal morality. The symbolic vehicle is the "pardoning of sins" that all attendants should express at death. On his deathbed, a middle-aged man asked his family to call his estranged father-in-law. He confessed to many wrongdoings in the past, expressed his remorse, and asked for his pardon, which he received before closing his eyes forever.

The act of forgiving the dead carries a strong moral content, being the last path for redressing the wickedness of the past and perhaps reconnecting with the living. Once dead, people cannot forgive or be forgiven anymore. They might have died upset by someone's behavior, or having wronged someone. Only the living keep the capacity for a unilateral act of leveling the moral scale once and for all, leaving all wrongs behind. The dead depart in symbolic peace with those engaged in mortuary acknowledgment, or forever in conflict, opposition, and separation with those choosing to remain outside.

Not all rituals, in Săteni or elsewhere, have a public aspect. But the rites of death carry a particularly strong representational content, a striking mix between the overt communication of tavern life and the intimacy of the household. The entire society can now closely monitor the behavior of actors evaluated by expectations of social relationships. The actors know that choices and performance have an ostensive quality in Săteni mortuary rituals. Far from mere erasure from earth, the death of a man shines a brutal light upon people and things.

4.2. DEATH AND FINAL REPUTATIONS

The cultural representations of death imply that the entire world bears witness to the final moments of a man's earthly presence. The household becomes a symbolic domestic space for practices where individuals display the central values of Săteni society's moral order and social organization. This inversion from closed to open in Săteni domestic funerary rituals has intense reputational consequences for the living and the dead alike.

Sătenis always care dearly about their image, as elaborated in their intricate management of the visible part of their domestic sphere as public representation. The persona of the dead does not end with biological expiry, quite the opposite, as mortuary rituals poignantly express and contribute to their lingering-on reputation. The mortuary rituals implicitly and explicitly work against the disappearance of individuals from mental and public representations by focusing on the image of the body, the nurturing household, and the social interactions directed to and around the dead.

Old people in particular worry considerably about what follows immediately after their deaths. During the building of a new house, an old woman asked to see if her coffin could be easily moved around, lest she suffer the indignity she once saw in the neighborhood when a corpse had to be pulled out of a window—and infamously dropped during maneuvers. Conscientious seniors prepare a set of funerary clothes (elegant and new but for wearing them once at church service), prepare the "good room," store special alms offered during mortuary services, and diligently tend to their future grave. As much as possible has to be ready for the dead to leave the world in an honorable and meaningful way. The greatest burden, however, falls upon those remaining alive.

Mortuary practices are tasty gossip morsels for "the mouth of the village," and people monitor behavior and settings with great care for social details under great fear of shame when performance falls short of social expectations. The performance of ritual provides information about social relations leading to a shared public representation that stabilizes into private mental representations and will remain salient for future inferences. This kind of social information places episodic knowledge (such as the events of a funeral) in relation to generic knowledge (such as social expectations from bereaved relatives) for an analysis of social relationships and individual performance.

Vasile's daughters knew that, more than ever, villagers would judge their behavior, estimate their investment, and interpret every minor detail. Though they had departed a long time ago and kept minimal contacts in Săteni, they rushed to their natal household as a solidary social unit reunited by their father's death. They energetically burnished the household's material appearance for a focal moment of ritual performance when relatives, neighbors, friends, and anyone could come and pay their final respects to Vasile during the three-day vigil. As proper offspring should, they cared for how their father would be perceived and for how people would evaluate them as daughters bound by filial duties.

Few people saw how they had sent medicine, money, and clothes to their father over the years. But everyone could now witness in the momentous scene the intensity and benevolence of social interaction between parents and offspring. His daughters made sure that everyone perceived how Vasile benefited from filial piety and support. So could villagers compare and interpret Horia's glaring absence as the exact opposite of moral interactions between close relatives.

Ostensive choices and performances in the rituals of death reveal to society the state of the actors' social relationships toward the dead. While Vasile's closest relatives provided two diametrically opposed but unmistakable signals, the protagonists' behavior can have more subtle connotations. When Elena's abusive husband died, she started customary preparations with due care, but for one element. During a normal funeral, a mourning spouse above

and next to all other close relatives should call out the name of the deceased and his qualities and voice her pain inflicted by death. A cousin told Elena that wailing after a life of mistreatment would be foolish, and indeed she appeared rather restrained for a grieving wife. Her sister-in-law questioned her calmness in front of everyone. Elena retorted she would mourn her husband if her sister-in-law told her the proper words, for she could think of none.

In the story told by her sister, Elena publicly asserts the painfulness of her conjugal life in a final act of rebellion. The same event has a different meaning for Ana, Elena's daughter from a previous marriage. She hated her stepfather and remembered that her mother followed meekly all ritual performances for the "bastard," remaining mired in a web of complicity and dependency. What people read from Elena's public performance and choices in a final moment was based on their prior expectations. Both observers read this focal event as the definitive account of an entire marriage. Maybe Elena's actions were intentionally ambivalent enough to allow different interpretations. A more radical display (like Vasile's brother) would have clarified her stance and consolidated a generally agreed-upon reputation.

Compare this case with Elena's daughter, who also faced the death of her husband after an unsatisfactory marriage. They had been living separately for a few years, and Ana saw him as more of a burden than the strong partner she had always desired. After I read out to her his diagnosis of terminal cancer, she began to berate his life of substance abuse but also started frantic preparations to meet the inevitable. Despite the vicissitudes of their marriage, she used her famed zest and unmatched stock of embroidery built upon years of night work to perform a proper funeral like a faithful wife should, and she got all their children involved in the process.

Ana was keenly aware of the public image she was about to create by treating the father of her children well. She decided to present herself to the village as a skilled and powerful householder, "shutting the mouth" of village gossip. Intimates were not misled that the marriage was perfect, but the description of a proper funeral became widely distributed among all Săteni villagers and created a stable representation of fulfilled moral commitments. A strong ritual commitment indicated the strength of her household, and people come to honor her customary devotion even more than the passing of her husband. Friends and foes alike knew and feared her willpower and keen social sense, making her a proficient player in family and neighborhood interactions.

The reputational force of death events is unique. People only die once, and only once can the others make social relationships last forever in ostensive ritual behavior. Had Vasile lived a few more years to repair his relationship with Horia, his brother would have put a candle in his hand and help his daughters take care of rituals. The minds of everyone would have registered the persistence of brotherhood, despite all past troubles. At the very least, Horia could have made peace with his brother at any point during Vasile's ritual passage

from the world. Mortuary rituals offered the last chance for social interaction in a public manner toward the dead as if they were still alive.

There will be no other occasion, and the rupture spills over the social relationships between the living. Vasile's daughters came together to perform the mortuary rites, surrounded by their own people. Horia omitted all behavior expected from brothers, and his family remained among the others outside the household and outside moral relationships. Just as Adina's wedding invitations ignored certain affines, conspicuous behavior at death provided public evidence of cutting the moral ties of kinship.

But unlike for a wedding, expectations of trust in social interaction end once and for all between the living and the dead, and consequently between the living themselves. When two families grow apart, Sătenis say that "they don't even come at death," the cultural representation used to observe and communicate the utter absence of moral social interaction. At that moment, one may be inside or outside the household, inside or outside the family, participant or not to the ritual. Be here now, or forever be apart. Uncles, nephews, or cousins part ways when the living perform symbolic gestures in mortuary events, saliently confirming the estrangement in the past and entrenching separation. Now, after a decade, Vasile's daughters continue to live as strangers to Horia's family, whose behavior in rituals are the events people use to define the state of definite, overt ceasing or maintenance of social interaction between the living.

But, while those coming to the dead are people ritually and reputationally distinguished from the rest, they are not an amorphous entity. As argued previously in the analysis of kinship practices, mutuality differs quantitatively, not only qualitatively. The dead leave behind many types of social relationships, close or distant, particular and general. Some Sătenis leave more relationships than others. Mortuary rituals are culturally elaborated moments when people ostensively communicate which relationships persist beyond death and how strong they are.

4.3. FUNERAL SYMBOLS OF MUTUALITY

The very first customary procedures indicate that death should not be a solitary event. Old women lamented that Vasile died without a candle. One ought to draw one's last breath grasping a symbol of life, also appearing as the long ceremonial candle called "staff," which should continuously stay alight during the wake. Such objects are part and parcel of a set of symbols of the vitality of social interaction. There must always be someone to care for the dying up until their last moments, light their candle, and keep it burning.

Everyone may, and some particular people should, come to the dead. They enter the sacred space of a household, keenly protected in everyday life but

conspicuously inviting in ritual moments. But attendance ought to be a moral gesture. I was preparing to attend such a ritual for my neighbor Georgeta when Mihai and mates joked that only the priest and I were happy when someone died. They pointed to my bulging belly "full of alms" and compared me with regular wake-goer (and famed drunkard) Sandel's craving for free drinks. Caustic irony emphasized that funeral rituals are public events, but participation should come from benevolence and care, not interest in consumption, indicating weakness and parasitism. I brushed away ironies with a dignified scholarly attitude only to brush shoulders with Sandel at the vigil.

I uttered the formulaic "May God forgive her" (the proper greeting), took a seat, and received cookies and brandy from the family while guests whispered about my identity. While anyone may come to the wake, behavior must be restrained. When an inebriated Sandel started to sob and talk to Georgeta, attendants quickly dismissed him as a show-off drunkard. She could no longer hear him, and he should have behaved respectfully and not disgrace the ritual. He was again scolded for passing the liquor tray over the coffin, a ritually improper gesture, and gently ushered away.

The atmosphere remained calm and respectful, and sometimes surprisingly jovial. A neighbor joked that she wants to be buried on top of her garden to observe neighbors, to still find out who visits whom. Meanwhile, family members received distant relatives, offering treats, engaging in discussions about funeral preparations, and collecting information about absent third parties. Some arrived from several hundred kilometers away to pay their respects and attend the funeral. As I saw over and again in Săteni funerary practices, customs and social interactions unfolded without snags. The family put up a solid display of unity and ritual competence. The guests paid their respects to the dead, and everyone carried on with a dignified yet lively demeanor. After spending about an hour, I left as most people do, except for family members who must never leave the dead alone for the three days of the wake.

Georgeta's death and subsequent mortuary practices went quite uneventfully, but, given the episode of Vasile's death, we know that people closely manage these appearances, and intense social dramas may unfold behind apparently forthcoming rituals. The three days of vigil offer further evidence of the dead's social relationships with relatives, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. Although anyone, drunkard and ethnographer alike, may attend, usually people come when they had some sort of meaningful social interaction with the dead over time, however distant. These people are also expected to attend the rituals of burial, where social relationships are symbolically categorized and overtly acknowledged.

For Georgeta's funeral, I joined some old neighbors, asking them what practices meant. From this lateral position, one can observe the ritual but also witness the discussions among attendants keenly interested in analyzing the scene. As usual, the audience inspected the main protagonists, the quality and

quantity of alms, and the sartorial attention given to one's final public appearance.[1] Everyone sought cues in funerary arrangements to draw inferences about the state of social relations and personal reputation.

By and large, attendants agreed that Georgeta's funeral followed proper procedures, making for an ideal case study of mortuary ritual symbols. The ritual has five phases based on symbolical locations: the household, the road, the church, the graveyard, and the communal meal (Figure 4.1). In my ethnographic interpretation, each will tell a story about Săteni society by emphasizing different sides of the dead's personhood. A man dies with a set of distinct social relationships and with a personal reputation; he dies as a Christian and also as a Săteni villager. He dies but social life goes on.

The funeral began with the priest performing Orthodox rites in the "good room" based on readings from the Bible. Family members then took out the coffin to the front of the house. Someone from the family broke a jar on the threshold, signifying the definitive departure from the house. In the yard, family members called out specific people, ritually handing them alms over the coffin. As often noticed during almsgiving, many gifts had been collected, wrapped, and labeled with the name of future recipients by the old woman during her last years. The overt offerings targeted close blood, affinal, or ritual relatives, and dear neighbors.

Through the medium of conspicuous, expensive items such as clothes, pillows, or blankets that belonged to the dead, the ritual delivered a map of significant social relationships. Giving the gifts inside the household compound but out in the open also publicly communicates moral closeness, as recipients have and continue to create a history of social interaction for reciprocal help or courtesy visits in their intimate domestic spheres.

The first phase of the funeral ritual ended when Georgeta's coffin left the household for the church. The moment was marked by the loud chorus of a wailing family: "Who will take care of your lovely house? How can you leave your garden where you have worked so much? With whom are you leaving us?" The entire household symbolically cries out for the departed as the ritual separates the dead from things and people. The dead forever leave the household's warmth and goodness, going toward the coldness and loneliness of cemetery grounds. Rupture from domesticity comes with an intense expression of sorrow, associated with the fundamental role played by households in defining personal identity. Now merely a corpse, a person breaks off from the material and social ecology of life, no longer able to act upon the world as a householder and family member.

The dead now enter the public domain of life and the second phase of rituals. On the road, the priest performed a series of short services at crossroads, followed by rounds of alms given by the family to participants other than the household receivers. The bundles contained a towel, candle, and bagel, and some but not all were labeled with the recipient's name. The coffin crosses

these "bridges," helping the dead pass on into the next world, while coins laid on wells and snatched by kids symbolically buy water for the voyage. Georgeta's family even had a "bridge" bundle with my name, to acknowledge my earlier visit and presence in the sphere of ritual benevolence.

These offerings, like household gifts, represent assistance beyond death. The living act on behalf and for their passed relatives, to help them begin and flourish in existence beyond death. They fulfill one more duty toward the dead, whose soul needs the moral benefit created by material "bridges." The givers expressly mentioned that alms help the dead, given "for my mother's soul." Recipients reciprocated by expressing their moral commitment to the dead's fate, just as they did by attending the wake. They formulaically acknowledge their desire for the dead's rest and forgiveness: "May her earth be light."[2]

But there is a marked difference between household and road alms in value and significance. Many but not all funeral attendants may receive "bridges," while about half have labels to identify and acknowledge special persons. Moreover, road alms are multiple and similar, yet only certain people receive household gifts, and these specifically designate people close to the family. Household alms themselves vary in importance. The choice of who will receive what signals the relative intensity of sociality. The stronger the moral relationship with the recipient, the more prestigious and special the gift. The initial expensive alms offered over the coffin designate the closest social relationships of kinship and differentiate them through material value.

Ceteris paribus, distant relatives and neighbors receive lesser home alms compared with close relatives, but the alms still carry symbolic prestige. When the recipient cannot attend for objective reasons, alms are not redirected to someone present. The original addressee receives them at home to make it known that they were thought of and publicly acknowledged. They are specifically honored, however, compared with the identical, minor "bridges" randomly distributed among general funeral attendants and people coming out of their household to greet the dead.

All alms communicate generosity, but the patterned distribution of valuables symbolizes Săteni selectivity in social interaction. On the one hand, Georgeta was a fellow villager to most Sătenis. As most people, she had spoken to, worked or traded with, or had attended rituals with hundreds of villagers in her life. The small offerings carving her way to church and grave correspond to these idiosyncratic interactions based on a modicum of social agreeableness. Contrastingly, the conspicuous, expensive, identifiable gifts elevate recipients to a particular moral status toward the dead. Georgeta handworked her household funeral endowment over the years, just as she nursed the key personal social relationships with relatives, friends, and neighbors now publicly acknowledged in ritual.

Sătenis use alms to overtly sketch out a network of moral relationships. For all its conspicuous generosity, mortuary prestations indicate that some

Figure 4.1. The road of the dead: mortuary rituals and trust beyond death

relationships deserve more investment than others. Receiving something larger than another individual ritually expresses a difference in social closeness. Forgetting or ignoring relatives or neighbors ranges from social ineptness to intentional omission. My fellow attendants immediately interpreted why Georgeta's family didn't call out a certain cousin. Having quarreled some time ago, the families kept apart and ignored each other as subtly communicated.

Beyond Georgeta's social identity as relative, neighbor, or regular Săteni, she was also a Christian. The third focal phase happens in church, where the deceased received the Orthodox last rites. The priest led the formal service, first reading from the Bible relevant passages about eternal life after death in a typical nasal, flatly melodic tone. His sermon turned to a free-form rhetorical obituary comparing the woman's qualities to spiritual and social ideals. He lauded her faith expressed by regular church attendance and donations, and her admirable demeanor as wife and mother. He described how she kept a clean household and fed and clothed an entire family.

The sermon emphasized the importance in church-focused commemorations, praised her family for proper performance, and finally urged all to follow ritual cycles, even if that required returning often to the village. The last commandment rang particularly relevant, as three of her four offspring lived elsewhere and many Săteni descendants relocated to urban areas or abroad.

The ceremony continued with those present bidding their farewells. One by one, they approached the dead woman in her open coffin and ritually forgave her for any harm they might have suffered from her. This would be the very last opportunity to interact with the dead directly, to touch and kiss their hand, to look at and speak to them as if still alive. Family members came first, followed by more distant ones and later everyone present. In a powerful expression of emotion, the four daughters and their families kissed and wailed for their mother, once again calling on her not to leave the world.

The priest called out for the final church ritual of eternal remembrance. The closest relatives collectively sang and held and rhythmically bounced a basket blessed by the priest carrying ritual offerings and Orthodox symbols. All others touched them or another person physically closer to the dead, joining the chorus. Funeral attendants became a ritual social whole, symbolically unified by bodily proximity and joint action. They came together as one just before the lid covered the coffin, erasing the last unmediated representation of Georgeta that people knew.

The event channels attention and behavior away from the body and toward a material token with symbolic import. The basket contains *coliva*, an exclusively funerary ritual wheat gruel, wine, an icon, a candle, and a towel, all of them recurring symbols to commemorate the dead. The shift is momentous. What unites this ritual body of people, their common denominator, is the dead person. Social relationships based on descent, alliance, ritual, or friendship

brought them together as one. The group of people symbolically connected to the ritual object delimits the sphere of moral relationships at the time of death. The ritual expresses both a gradient of social closeness associated with relative physical distance, but also the force of sociality against death.

The towering message overtly communicated in eternal remembrance, but present everywhere in mortuary rituals, is the continuation of existence through memory and practice. The individual permanently changes from embodied person to symbolic representation. Their image lives on even though the body enters the grave. The ritual transforms physical death into a social phenomenon. If the dead are remembered and honored, and their souls cared for by attending rituals and offering alms, they are still in this world through the agency of others.

The ritual basket evokes the cycle of mortuary performances timed 3, 9, and 40 days; 3, 6, and 9 months; and yearly for another 7 years after the funeral. Many families dutifully perform all obligations, and almost all the first commemorations. Each event, though smaller in scale, repeats the first church ritual of remembrance using similar objects, utterances, and procedures. Symbolically, the endurance of ritual overcomes the finality of death. It acknowledges directly and recurrently its biological occurrence but denies its power to erase the dead. The appearance and salience of ritual objects expressing recognition and moral duty drive attention away from the corpse, whose ritual importance comes to an end.

Fascinatingly, the burial as the fourth phase of the ritual contains the most perfunctory and rapid moments. At the cemetery, the priest consecrated Georgeta's grave and uttered ritual formulas. Family members took their final goodbyes, more restrained than before,[3] and threw clods of earth over the entombed coffin. Diggers covered the hole and received customary offerings, fixing a temporary wooden cross to mark the freshly overturned soil. The burial ended soon, and some of those attending used the occasion to light candles at their own graves before congregating in the village center for *pomana*—the communal meal after the funeral, the fifth and final phase.

In contrast to rapid inhumation, the dead's family organize a feast that takes several hours. Burial attendants receive food and drinks and are not allowed to thank or toast, but only to utter "May God forgive her/him." The atmosphere is respectful but not necessarily sad. Commensality and conversations revolve around the departure of the person, and her life remembered and praised, with compassion for her bereaved family. The overarching representation is death as a natural event that comes for each and all; all those living now will die at some point, and today does not know what tomorrow brings. Death cannot be fought, but life goes on, and the generosity and solidarity of the communal meal end the funeral ritual to mark the return to everyday existence. But what happens with the dead while villagers carry on living?

4.4. THE SOCIETY OF THE DEAD

The problem raised by lifeless bodies might explain why the burial seems under-stressed in Săteni funeral rituals. Inhumation gives unassailable evidence of a fundamental change: the dead leave the tangible world, their corpses become invisible, and their last physical presence smothered under the soil. If funerary rituals carry symbols of regeneration (Bloch and Parry 1982), they mark the passage toward a life beyond biological extinction.

Despite its lesser ritual importance during funerals, the ground receiving their bodies becomes the central symbol of life beyond death. When Sătenis talk about destiny after death, they would sometimes say "the other world," but more often "up the hill," pointing to the cemetery. Though only children confessed to sensing spirits, many people dream of their late relatives. Sometimes they talk of problems or relive past moments, and the dead often express sadness for being far and forgotten. Such encounters spur villagers into action to organize almsgiving more rigorously and especially to mend old graves, which evoke the concrete presence of the dead tied to their material remains.

As homes of the dead, graves recall the domesticity of Săteni social life, a miniature of the society of households down to finer details of social importance. Graveyard material culture reproduces with uncanny fidelity the existence of the living. Almost all families have their dead in the graveyard, making it one of the few Săteni commons where everyone has a presence and interests. When villagers commemorate their dead, the graveyard become perhaps the place having the most Sătenis simultaneously involved in coordinated activities.

Yet it is not a collective effort. Each comes with the specific purpose to honor their own dead lying in the sacred place. In early spring, women move between household gardening and graveyard preparations for Easter. They weed, dig, and plant to secure the family's food but also reputation for the home of the living and for the home of the dead. The similarity with home arrangements is striking. Good graves have waist-high fences with concrete foundations, iron or granite crosses, and complex floral arrangements, a reproduction at scale of their owner's proper households. Other graves lack fences, their wooden crosses lie broken or rotting, and weeds take over unkempt plots, an analogy to shabby compounds of destitute villagers.

The graveyard becomes the focal space for mortuary ritual practices during several Orthodox holy days such as Easter Sunday. A few days in advance, women clean and decorate their family graves. On the occasion, people in their best clothes gather around graves of parents and very close relatives. Families pour libations on the ground for the souls of their dead and call on the priest to perform blessings. Recalling how his father enjoyed smoking while having

a drink, Mihai poured some liquor on the ground, lit a cigarette, and laid it on the cross for Ioan in the world beyond.

The Săteni grave reconstructs the society of the household, its external propriety and internal moral interactions. While families pay their respects to the dead, they also use the occasion for social intercourse. In the moment of a quasi-universal social gathering of villagers (surpassing church attendance), everyone was very keen on who went to what grave and how families prepared the event. They knew almost everyone else in the graveyard and otherwise inquired of someone who might tell them about unfamiliar faces. They laid out snacks and drinks to share with friends, neighbors, and passersby to honor the memory and peaceful rest of their dead. Feisty old women crisscrossed the graveyard searching for friends and relatives.

Following villagers around, I revisited in a few hours their networks of social relationships in everyday life. For Mihai and other villagers I knew closely, this amounted to about a dozen close relatives and friends, and more than twice as many distant relatives and friendly acquaintances. Alms, libations, and ritual utterings traveled back and forth along the reciprocal social relationships between families. The exchanges replicated the alms offering during funerals, but, since on commemorative days recipients have dead of their own to remember and assist, people ended up giving and receiving basically the same prestations and offerings. In fact, they were very careful to reciprocate lest they appeared as solely receiving, the way pitiful beggars wait around graveyards. People teasingly dragged people to their family graves to serve food and drinks after receiving similar treatment.

Like funerary prestations, these are pure gifts offered without conditions or expected return (Mauss 1925). Preferential mortuary prestations for relatives and friends track ongoing mutualistic social interactions but it is not direct exchange. Gifts do not repay gifts, and material values matter little. No one grows richer from alms; one gives as one takes. Yet each offers knowing the other one offers as well. Ritualized, reciprocal prestations communicate and confirm moral social relationships. While offerings evoke and involve the dead, the living ceremoniously cultivate relatives and friends in a moment of public representation and ritualized morality. The remembrance of the dead intertwines with ongoing reciprocal recognition and generosity.

Graveyard arrangements illustrate the constitutive elements of Săteni social organization in a symbolic re-enactment of ecology and society writ small. The basic units are families, with their share of material and symbolic space, followed by the social relationship linking them. Some families interact preferentially with other families based on ties of kinship or friendship, displaying the ritual generosity bestowed upon special persons. But not everyone is bound by reciprocal prosociality, and Săteni graveyards host a different type of social interaction. For one thing, graves create social boundaries.

Elena had married and divorced twice and cohabited with a third man but died only once. In her final moments, she left word to be inhumed next to her late second husband, Dumitru. Although the couple had separated many years before, her daughter and siblings approached his family, invoking the norms of conjugal unity in death. Elena's sister-in-law, the one who scolded her for conspicuous dispassion at Dumitru's funeral, obliquely but forcefully refused, claiming the family grave was already full of remains.[4] Her consanguines then buried Elena with her parents.

The open-ended, multi-sourced universe of kinship described in the previous chapter becomes spectacularly narrow in burial. A person can only join one grave and remain forever identified with certain social relationships and not others. Weddings created beginnings, deaths endings. When marriages persist, the rituals of death inscribe into perpetuity the moral contract established between spouses, now forever buried together. The singularity of death puts the final mark upon the up-to-then open-ended relationship of marriage. Sometimes identity after death confirms the moral commitment of spouses. Other times it tears it apart.

Grave choices become the endpoint of the flexibility of kin ties and the elasticity of the genealogical principles of relatedness. In the ground, kinship is made or unmade into perpetuity. Within the fences of graves, families enact their symbolic reproduction but also the evolution of kinship by cooperation and conflict. The fate of Elena's corpse tells a story of alternative forms of relatedness. Had she been entombed with her husband, her physical presence, name, and identity would have been associated with the ties of affinity created through marriage with a husband and his family and future descendants. As things unfolded, all elements of social identification connected Elena eternally to her parents, and their parents, with dead brothers and sisters. In anthropological terms, with consanguines, not with affines.

Separate burial places certified that the conflict extended to families of origin. The act symbolized a rupture inside the couple in death, and between respective kin groups in life. Her children have today strong relationships with maternal kin, but not with paternal relatives. Thirty years after, families show no desire or spontaneous consideration to evoke being relatives. Decisions in the past also weigh heavily upon future deaths. When Elena's children think about their own burials, they could either choose the tomb of one family of origin, or the other one, but not both—an option available to those whose parents are buried together. Of course, they could also choose a new burial ground, and many people in such a predicament do so in an act symbolically similar to establishing a new household. But the choices are socially significant for mortuary duties.

Who cares for which parent's grave after separation? Will children attach to one parent, while the spouse is looked after by other consanguine relatives? This was the case with Elena's children, who were neither expected nor

welcomed into their father's grave managed by his siblings and their descendants. The outcome resulted from a string of events that could have ended differently had actors made other choices, or had different personalities or backgrounds, or if the marriage had been a predatory strategy afforded by land inheritance in the 1930s.

Ultimately, Elena's real and important kinship ties survived with the people who buried and commemorated her, and with those welcoming her in perpetuity. In her case, relationships of consanguinity prevailed over marriage. But burial arrangements can also indicate a selective denial of blood. Vasile was not buried with his parents, but Horia likely will be. Their father favored the junior offspring and even fought against his eldest. One but not the other parent–child relationship remained strong enough to warrant perpetual symbolic and material solidarity.

Whichever their provenance and form, the mutualistic relationship between the dead and the living unites all these forms of kinship. Starting from genealogical principles, long-term social interactions determine who will be left with a moral debt toward the dead. Death has the capacity to turn the socially flexible into the transcendentally rigid, as seen in the case of the fascinatingly "un-kinded" Vezo in Madagascar (Astuti 1995). They start in life with an amorphous identity as babies and create kinship throughout life, and only death stabilizes into perpetuity their ties with ancestors and descendants. Likewise, all Săteni face a moment when the open-endedness of the future surrenders to the frozen representation of the past.

The funeral wails sometimes rhetorically ask, "For what did you live? What do you leave behind?" The mortuary rituals implicitly give the answer. Those around the body claim and care for the person as for one of their own. The dead leaves behind social relationships of everlasting mutuality. The open-endedness of moral contracts finally stops when social relationships between the living and the dead become transcendental when inscribed in the material evidence of graves as moral boundaries.

If the funeral ritual proclaims the continuation of moral relationships, the grave gives evidence of their actual persistence. The dead enter their second life, one potentially infinite but practically limited and conditional. They live on as long as someone remembers them. Săteni graves show how the peril of being forgotten becomes painfully clear. As everywhere else in the village, the fate of the individual depends upon whom one can trust.

4.5. THE DRAMA OF PRIVATE GRAVES . . .

Several problems affect the Săteni cemetery, which is crowded and in part inaccessible. Some troubles come from limitations of space, but Sătenis themselves create part of the problem. Competition for scarce resources of location,

prominence, and accessibility creates conflict and costly externalities. The graveyard arrangement tells us about conflict and solidarity between relatives, but also about the relationships with other villagers. The fate of private property and commons thus becomes causally predicated upon the absence of cooperation outside of personal moral relationships. Let's start with a vexatious case.

Returning to Săteni for Easter celebrations, Florica discovered that another villager had enclosed with an iron fence part of the grave of her parents. An old and prominent family, they had a good spot that remained untended for some years. Furious with the affront, she complained to the priest, who, although acknowledging her claim, suggested some sort of common understanding and declined to make a judgment. Feeling fully entitled, Florica and relatives pulled out the enclosure, built a stone monument, and secured the endangered grave with concrete borders. The trespassers felt shortchanged and appealed to the priest. He obliquely suggested another abandoned grave, whose old rotten wooden cross the family removed, securing the plot with the iron fence.

Many graves left untended and forgotten have disappeared when other villagers occupy them in part or whole for their inhumations. People usually know which graves remain abandoned and stealthily stake out their claim with solid boundaries. Formally, the graveyard is common property tied to church membership. Virtually all Sătenis have a right to a grave under the loose supervision of the priest. Contests over plots matters greatly for villagers and provides an example of how Sătenis interact outside of family and allies. Lacking a communal or centralized system of management, graveyard arrangement emerges from competition for available spots. Primordial ritual responsibilities lie toward one's family, both living and dead, over and beyond concerns for the welfare of unrelated families. The creation and protection of a grave may pit them against other villagers.

Villagers treat the graveyard in the same way they approach the entire world: divided between a sphere of deep and long-term cooperation with socially relevant people and a domain of potential zero-sum games with others. A neighbor might chip away at household boundaries over time; petty thieves steal household goods; arable fields shrink or disappear when owners fail to measure before spring plowing or keep track of land register data; maliciously herded animals harvest plundered crops. But it is not only the individual who loses (or wins)—it is the entire family, and others whose social relationships make them parties to the conflict. Hence, if any help and reciprocity are expected, they will only come from one's close relatives and friends.

The deceased in their separate graves stand just as fragmented as the living. There is no collectiveness governing representations or practices related to graveyard sacred matters. The cemetery is not a shared space where everybody cooperates for a common good, either in spiritual or material

form. The representation of ancestors evokes the fuzzy image of "those people of old," without leading to any kind of metaphysical entity of a corporate body outside the family with "our dead." Instead, we have interactions between individuals and families with private interests. Those seeking a place on the symbolic map of cemetery and society erase the graves of people lacking social power. Outside the sphere of family and close relatives, there is no socially available way to be remembered or defended in cemetery arrangements.

Competition for burial places marks another denial of potential equality before death. Quite contrary to the Christian idea of king and pauper faring alike after death, equality of fate is frowned upon by anyone with an interest in public appearance—that is to say, most villagers. While death has a leveling effect in common sepulchers inside Portuguese churches (de Pina Cabral 1986), the material culture of Săteni spells inequality just like its rich or poor feasts during funerals are signals, and moments to create alliances, to display wealth, and to advertise the success and endurance of family and kin groups (Hayden 2009).

Fear of anonymity and erasure makes them arrest inexorable decay by replacing grass or wood with concrete to get more visibility and possession than others. In neighboring Plosteni, villagers compete for proximity to the church inside the cemetery. Graves are so close to the building that they endanger its structural integrity, and the encircling procession during Resurrection Day becomes a hurdle race. A disgruntled gravedigger suggested that, for all their vanity, the rich and powerful will next want to be buried right in the altar.

Likewise, potent Sătenis protect and invest intensely in their funerary grounds. After death, hope for persistence becomes continuous generosity of some of the living against destructive competition. Florica's parents avoided obliteration through the agency of their live relatives. Competition involves individuals but also contextually defined cooperative groups. Florica mobilized her parents' relatives, those who ought to stand in solidarity with the dead by her side, to gain social leverage and material support in the name of a moral cause. The invading family also had its social resources and pursued a similarly honorable objective of ensuring a space for the social reproduction of their family. In fact, they wrongly believed that Florica's parents had been forgotten or little cared for. Faced with a solidary comeback, they backed down. Both parties tried to ally with the priest who, without taking definite sides, managed to satisfy all by suggesting a solution harming no one socially relevant.

For dead and living alike, social superiority comes from activating personal relationships. But after drawing their last breath, the only hope for the dead is that someone will honor the promise of keeping them socially relevant as persons with rights and dignity. We can no longer hear them, but Florica

rhetorically asked what her parents would feel, think, or say if their remains were desecrated and treated like mere dirt? One cares for the dead to keep them honored, remembered, socially alive, and relevant just as one acknowledges duties toward the living. Otherwise, the world outside will take its merciless course and bring the second death, in effigy as in biology. Unlike in life, however, trust in others remains the only resource available against impending social disappearance.

Direct conflict remains sporadic since savvy villagers appropriate only graves abandoned due to permanent migration or generational amnesia. With no recent dead to join the ancestors, old graves hosting distant grandparents or great-grandparents grow weeds instead of flowers while moss covers crosses. Moral obligations reach a limited genealogical depth, rarely expressed beyond two generations. People of old appear in historical discussions about land inheritance or singular events, but their mortal remains fade away with the waning of their social import.

Symbolically, natural material extinction erases the memory of people too far away in the history of kinship, property, and moral respect to matter anymore in current representations. At some point, everyone vanishes, as friends told me about the thousands already made one with dirt in centuries of inhumation. No one remains forever even in the graveyard, and only the remembered dead leave a mark upon the world. The rest is fair game, but one that imposes costs on everyone.

4.6. . . . AND THE TRAGEDY OF THE COMMON GRAVEYARD

From my first visit, I became perplexed with the ridiculously problematic arrangement of cemetery paths. Alleys between graves either narrowed or disappeared entirely. Families had to cram during commemorations into a couple of square meters around headstones, often stepping over other graves. A 50-meter walk during funerals becomes a 5-minute obstacle race over fences and crosses. Given limited space, everyone wants to catch as much as possible, even by encroaching on common lanes. Without a graveyard overseer, each strives to accumulate as much land here, as peasants do for agricultural land. With a mere difference of scale, the principle of self-reliance governs both situations.

Such graveyard arrangements evoke the tragedy of the commons (Hardin 1968) affecting everything not privately owned. If everybody scrambles for possession at a cost to public welfare, only a fool would unilaterally protect common areas. People recognize the suboptimality of outcomes, but this triggers a mechanism further increasing public costs. Since access becomes more costly the further away one walks from main alleys, points of entry attract heightened prestige and increased demand. Sumptuous, overreaching graves

cause bottlenecks that ironically increase their positional value at everyone's cost.

The tiny tragedy of vanishing graveyard alleyways shows how, in the absence of third-party enforcement, private actions impose negative externalities upon others. Săteni offers many palpable examples of commons mismanagement, from rubbish thrown on the riverbanks to pasture overgrazing to theft of public goods, as documented in the next chapter. Such acts usually aim at myopically maximizing the welfare of one's family. If everybody leaves garbage on public land, why ought one take time and effort away from family concerns to carry them all the way to the dump? Sătenis could have organized a graveyard system of commons management, of social governance backed by a system of rules and enforcement, yet they haven't. They leave the fate of cemetery commons to the social interaction between private entities pursuing narrow concerns, negotiating and maneuvering independently in relation to the other families.

I asked why people couldn't coordinate on shared rules, such as keeping the distance from adjoining graves, or discarding fences and concrete slabs, or collectively returning old graves for general use. Any suggestion hit upon negative reciprocal expectations. People do not trust that, if they follow the rule, others will too. You may comply and discover that nearby neighbors encroached on common ground. Since there is little recourse to outside punishment given the priest's reluctance to antagonize parishioners, the best option is preemptive movement: enclose as much as possible given the opposition of interests from surrounding grave owners. If relatives and friends respect the abandoned graves of consociates, there is no guarantee someone else won't appropriate them. Family interests come first, and there is little trust in the benevolence of others.

As the previous chapter argued, kinship builds upon trust in mutually beneficial, long-term, intense cooperation in this life and beyond. Social interactions outside the moral sphere bring conflict, costs without benefits, and narrowly opportunistic behavior. Left alone, the dead lacking descendants to remember and protect their graves disappear from the balance of earthly forces, dispossessed of their last piece of earthly possession. One cannot hope in the comfort of strangers. The principle applies always and everywhere, and Săteni management of death symbolically confirms its power.

4.7. THE LIFE AND DEATH OF TRUST

I once told Mihai that, if a visitor only had one hour to understand something about Săteni, they should look at the graveyard. He started laughing: "disorder and quagmire, right?" A particularly reflective informant, he latched on to the outcome of conflicts of position, permanence, and display acted out

behind cemetery gates. However, there is a structure behind apparent chaos. If "tombs are used to construct an idealized material map of the permanent social order" (Bloch and Parry 1982:35), the Săteni cemetery derives from and reproduces the overarching principle of opposition between the morality of kin relationships and the nonmorality of other social interactions.

All societies have to face death. Bloch and Parry (1982) analyzed the institutionalized manner of treating the dead in mortuary rituals and fused two anthropological approaches. One of them concerns the symbols of regeneration associated in rituals of death. The second theme, of Durkheimian import, focuses on the transformation of individual human beings into social persons integrated into a larger, transcendental domain. Bloch and Parry integrate these insights with an added twist. Rituals express an ideology of regeneration by the reaffirmation of the transcendental origin of resources culturally deemed important for the continuity of society.

For Bloch and Parry, rituals of death evoke the social order because death creates natural disorder. If a living actor, flesh and bones and agency, disappears, what is left to maintain life, society, the future? To frame it in Bloch's later terms, rituals provide a transcendent solution to a transactional problem (Bloch 2008). The symbolic elaboration communicates that, against the finality of death, individual existence subsumes and derives from an external source "which is culturally conceived to be most essential to the reproduction of social order" (Bloch and Parry 1982:7).

Rituals are not merely the stylized image of a social order—they convey the mental representations of the reproduction of social order. Bloch's analysis of Merina funeral practices reveals a particular ritual mechanism that publicly represents traditional elder authority as source of human and ecological vitality using the medium of women and land. If the ideology of Merina social organization structures around the ideal relationship between social norms, ecology, and biology expressed in death practices, what source of social vitality comes to fore in Săteni rituals? How does this reflect the ideological representation of social order?[5] What kind of social order is evoked, and what resource appears as fundamental for Săteni society?

One possibility is that the entire society provides the force of life in the face of death. I already mentioned the public aspect of rituals, underscored by ringing the church bells and opening wide the doors of the ritual room for wake attendants. Moreover, certain funeral symbols invoke a community, a social order based on Orthodox religious precepts declared by the Church and widely known in the village. The priest repeatedly mentions the universal orientation of the faithful, the sacred authority of the all-embracing Church and its symbiosis with the state and society at large. He addresses the congregation as one body, persuading believers to give alms without reckoning as proper Christians do. After the cemetery burial, the priest blesses the table that the family provides for attendants. He calls out for strangers to be seated

first. Usually restricted to the domestic domain in everyday life, ritual commensality where everyone is welcomed underscores the moment's uniqueness. More than mere observers, all Christian villagers—that is everybody—could and even should be somehow involved in the ritual.

While formal religious discourses emphasize the generous and all-encompassing representation of society facing death as a community of believers united under one church, the representation of universality is fragile. Rituals express personal duties for presence and active remembrance and hence do not involve everyone equally. Priestly sermons often invoke the egalitarian and communal aspect of Orthodox religious practices in a community of faith, but the priest's moral directives specifically target familial obligations. Irreverent villagers even say the priest emphasizes family responsibilities since this a lucrative opportunity for the mandatory ritual expert. Just like alms, fees paid to the priest are part of familial ritual duties, a private cost for specific people, because the dead do not belong to everyone. The moral obligation of mortuary prestations is particularistic, not universalistic.

Ineluctable death guarantees no common fate since wealth buys more frequent and attentive ritual services. The number and high rank of priests officiating the funerals of regional potentates elevate their elite status. Costly ritual embellishment indicates the prosperity of a dead person and her family and its capacity to carry on mutualistic relationships with many people (Hayden 2009). When people say, "priest, take him faster for he has no money" (Popp 2004[1817]):191), the quantity of ritual "bridges" signals unequal financial acumen and variation of social power. There is a baseline of mortuary services that even poor families receive but also much room for conspicuous ritual investment. All Sătenis die, but not all deaths are alike.

Not all of those left behind are alike either. We already saw that special persons receive designated funeral items, echoing a 19th-century Romanian folklorist's difference between communal and personal *pomeni*—alms designating qualitatively different social spheres (Popp 2004). In quite clear opposition to priestly advice, I have heard many, especially older women, say that relatives and neighbors should primarily receive alms: "give closer to house." Special persons also ought to be seated first at *praznic* or at least closer to the family to signal social affiliation. The priest's call to first feed the meek reveals clearly that, left to their own devices, the family would rather leave them in a marginal position.[6] In death as in life, relatives and friends come first and foremost, apparently generous commensality notwithstanding.

Their open, public quality of funerals, where participation of non-kin is expected and encouraged by Christian norms, signals the high-water mark of generalized generosity in the funeral cycle. However, the timescale of ritual uncovers the privatization of generosity, as the wave of morality retreats toward the domestic domain. Post-burial ritual commemorations involve religious services in the church and/or at the graveyard, and communal meals at

home. Family members personally invite specific people, and no one would consider showing up without being invited or having a very good reason to think that they should be present. A failure to invite as well as a failure to attend are considered grave insults and remembered as relevant signs of unsociability. As times goes by, prestations gradually transform from climactic public performance during burials, into intimate family affairs.

Bloch and Parry argue that death rituals evoke the representations that life is a limited resource, requiring an external source of vitality (1982:8). In Săteni, not only biological life seems scarce. Only social relationships of deep morality can extend the scope of life beyond the here and now. People need other people to bring them into the world, and to create, use, and protect the shared, nurturing environment of household. The moment of death projects this need into the transcendent domain. Solely through the agency of moral relationships extending beyond biological life can Sătenis avoid permanent oblivion. The only hope for extending beyond individual existence comes from trusting family, relatives, and friends to be there at that final moment and to use the force of the ritual for denying the finality of death. They create the only existence remaining for the dead in this world.

What Sătenis fear about death goes beyond mere biological extinction. The peril of a bad, non-regenerative death (Bloch and Parry 1982:18) comes from social disappearance when no one remains to carry on the relay race of the ritual. Dying childless is a bad death since it stops the cycle of life. But when Mihai said, "I buried and gave *pomeni* for my parents as they did for theirs, as people have been doing forever," he looked back at moral continuities between ancestors passing on duties to descendants. He also knows his son will do the same when the time comes, adding another rung to the chain of life and death. Each mortuary ritual demonstrates that social reproduction remains intact. One buries his parents knowing he will be buried as a parent himself. The life source expressed in ritual is nothing else but life as expressed in the agency of people to keep society going on. Each generation keeps alive the memory of the past knowing that the future will inevitably make them a part of history.

The transmission of moral obligations is reflected in the pedagogy of ritual, even in its cognitively opaque parts (Csibra and Gergely 2009). Parents and other close relatives engage toddlers in all mortuary rites, instructing proper behavior. When a couple attended Georgeta's vigil, they guided the hand of their child to symbolically put money in the coffin on behalf of the family. An old woman had few memories of her mother, having lost her when she was five. She had, however, a clear recollection of her mother's funeral despite being almost delirious from fever. An aunt carried her in her arms to the coffin to kiss her mother goodbye. After seven decades, the event still carries salience and emotional power (Whitehouse 2022) for defining the social relationships involved in ritual.

From an early age, children are assisted and instructed by adults to become proficient social persons. They receive explicit instructions in ritual performance and learn the proper ways to think about and behave in relation to death. Their tutors direct their attention to the importance of death as a crucial social event with ritual requirements so essential that must be learned and experienced from the first moments of social awareness. Later on, elders explicitly ask youngsters to pay attention, as they will soon have to perform the same rituals for parents and relatives. The active participation of young people insures the cultural transmission of the tradition (Morin 2016). The morality of rituals enshrines perpetual social reproduction: although everyone dies, others will remain to continue their lives and properly take over funerary responsibilities.

Death practices receive another symbolic source of vitality from an irreverent tradition. I have described how the social atmosphere at vigils is far from sullied or numb. Attendants enthusiastically talk of the dead, recall their life and exploits, and keep them in the conversation and attention. An unusual form of vitality appears at vigils of old people having an uneventful and gracious end of life. Teenage pranksters rig corpses to move when someone approaches the coffin, to the audience's great fright or amusement. Such tolerated jokes give the setting one more symbolic jolt of persisting agency. When successive generations carry on learning the ropes, to keep the rituals and practices of death, and even entertain such frivolous behaviors, life defeats death over and over again.

The greatest menace is not irreverence, but the tragedy of dying alone. Time and again, people mentioned that the worst fear and shame are to die alone and be buried by the village. If one cannot even trust all close relatives to behave morally at one's death, how could she hope strangers will perform rituals properly and diligently? The image of people who perhaps never set foot in one's home entering the sacred private space and destroying the symbolic bond between the dead and her personal property (see Humphrey 2002) terrifies lone people into creating a fictive successorship. A symbolically natural but nonbiological kinship relationship creates a moral contract of relatedness. This involves transmission of wealth[7] as well as duties to use and protect households and graves. End-of-life adoption insures the endurance of one's intimate and socially defining traces upon the world. Given objective constraints, it remains the only hope against being left at the mercy of strangers.

Petre and Diana had just married when her childless and widowed aunt proposed moving into her household. With no one left around, the woman sought a family to come and live with her until her death, take care of funeral rituals and commemorations, and, in exchange, inherit her properties. The arrangement worked for a few years, but petty quarrels and better opportunities made the couple move to their own place. Diana went to work in Sardinia,

while Petre remained in Săteni to raise their daughters. The aunt got sick sometime after the separation, and Petre looked after her in her final days.

When the old woman died, neighbors invaded her house, keen to begin arrangements for the funeral, especially the distribution of alms. Though the adoption agreement had been explicitly canceled, Petre put his foot in the door, kicked everybody out, and defiantly told them that "she will not be buried by the village." He went ahead as the main organizer of mortuary rituals. He received a small legal inheritance share, and although he spent much for commemorations, Petre considered the arrangement unfair but felt morally indebted to honor the old woman as their shared domestic life created a bond of mutuality stronger than with anyone else left alive.

"To be buried by the village means to be buried by nobody," people say. Perhaps this last phrase defines the deep nature of funerary rituals as makers of sociality. What matters more than how or when one dies is who one dies for. There must be someone left to care for the dead as their own people. There is no available representation of the village as a corporate body to take over the dead unclaimed by a family, just as the graveyard is a shared but not commonly governed space. No moral relationship and no social contract of solidarity exist with a diffuse village society in no significant way connected to the dead, a nonmoral entity.

Tamara's aunt was unusually lucky. Petre, a person related through distant ties of affinity and descent and temporarily elevated to adopted successor, behaved over and above the call of duty for Săteni expectations. Many remarked his unusual kindness and honesty in incurring severe costs with his proud, righteous choice. The act of assuming and performing all funerary rituals and practical gestures counted for much in terms of reputation and self-esteem. He iron-handedly controlled the correct distribution of alms and the management of household and grave affairs during rituals but received little material compensation for his efforts. Yet few of those attending the ritual failed to perceive his good-natured altruism and generosity, the trustworthiness of his social commitments.

In that critical moment, he delivered the representation of a proper householder and the kind of person one trusts to have as friend or relative. In that final moment, which John Berger insightfully condenses in his quote and this chapter has tried to describe, Diana's aunt received a socially meaningful death. Her passing could have turned otherwise had Petre taken a different moral route. Ultimately, he was the protagonist in Berger's conversation. Petre knows today, as he felt then, that it was the right thing to do. He made an ethical decision (Laidlaw 2002) where alternative moral justifications were available. He took the high road most aligned with an altruistic act. He lost in short-term material costs but gained the long-term moral image of the self, both an internal and a social representation.

Others perceived the sincerity of his cooperative inclinations to respect the mutualistic contract of kinship beyond the death of a close relative and former

family member. As people say, "he did things sons don't do even after getting all that wealth." Compare him with poor Marin, the alcoholic son who kept his sick mother bedridden for years. He even hid her corpse for two months after death to drink her pension away until neighbors noticed and called the police. Left to their own devices, Petre and Marin each followed their heart and showed the world what they were made of.

The true morality of family, relatives, and intimate friendship means being kind to one another from mutualistic inclinations even when others are absent or even dead. As we saw, not all theoretical kin behave as kin until or at the time of death. Observing villagers know this, actors know it, and the ethnographer comes to know it too. We interpret some particular events; we evaluate what Peter or Elena or Vasile Ion's brother and daughters did and thought. These moments rich in emotion and information defined kinship relations between many real people, across time and genealogies. Each death tells a particular story but all revolve around a central value.

In death, the image of transcendent morality becomes magnified. Funerary rituals evoke and practically involve the strength of long-term cooperative bonds between people, the sense of enduring trust in the social future becoming the transcendent ever-being for those dead. Everything bad comes from the absence of a secure connection to the world of the living: relatives not acknowledging their dead, strangers or enemies troubling their final resting place, and, above all, dying alone, unattached, and insignificant.

A person has a good, regenerative, non-final death when there is trust in particular persons to behave prosocially once again to keep destruction and disappearance at bay. For, if no one does, the moral entropy of Săteni society will turn biological extinction into social erasure. When Sătenis admonish someone for not paying attention to his narrow family interests, they say, "do not cry at a foreign grave." In death and in life, one should look after personal interests and close people, since no one else outside the moral sphere will.

This chapter described how Săteni practices and representations of death revolve around symbols of morality. The way villagers think and behave at the time of death projects everyday social norms into the realm of transcendence, of the way things are, have always been, and will always be, over and beyond the transient life of the individual. The finality of death weighs heavily upon the cultural transmission of ethical norms from one generation to the next. Each funeral reproduces a social order based on the distinction between trust in never-ending cooperation and mistrust of omnipresent conflict, testing once and for all the many intermediate and ambiguous forms in between.

Yet a paradox remains. What kind of social order governs all Sătenis if the foundational morality as expressed in funerary cosmologies remains a private and limited Ego-centered affair? The next chapter takes us back from the realm of transcendent morality in Săteni sociality to the social order emerging from the reproduction of its transactional mutualism.

CHAPTER 5

The political stability of social fragmentation

Drawing on two classical ways of thinking about society, we could interpret folk representations and practices of social interaction as making each Săteni a dual person. On the one hand, a villager lives in Durkheimian solidarity with a personal sphere of trust relationships. From representations of transcendent morality to practices of reciprocity, every Săteni engages in mutualistic communion with a part of society defined by family first and foremost, relatives, and friends. However, outside this moral sphere the villager lives with the peril of the Hobbesian state of nature, the war of all against all, driven by an ideological and behavioral self-reliance in competitive interactions. Between people lacking a social relationship of trust and mutuality, moral expectations prescribe no mandatory solidarity and no promise of benevolence and even induce an ever-present fear of predation and harm, in life as in death.

What social contract can then emerge between individuals divided between the part-Hobbesian state of nature and the part-Durkheimian moral solidarity? This chapter explores this question by describing the political organization of Săteni. It describes how villagers act and think about institutions that include all of them as citizens with rights and duties. As local governance emerges from formal state institutions meeting political agency at ground level, what makes a Săteni politically powerful? How is power used in local government? What makes power legitimate?

The ethnography will reveal how Săteni political life continues the tropes of social interaction found elsewhere in society, fusing the tournaments of taverns, the symbolism of funerals, and the cooperativeness of families and relatives, the interplay between trust and distrust. A competitive game for

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high stakes, political interaction feeds on the cooperation associated with private contracts of reciprocal morality between villagers, be they citizens, voters, candidates, or officials. Let us start from the key players who occupy the center stage, those Sătenis who step up to the challenge of contesting and creating social leadership.

5.1. THE MAKING OF A POLITICAL ENTREPRENEUR

Some villagers seemed destined for politics. We have already encountered Răzvan's imposing stature when policing upstarts or enemies and defending his body, reputation, and moral partners in taverns. His public displays announced and partly provided his fund of power for future political battles. It was only a continuation of a picaresque life story, starting when he entered social manhood in a quite appalling manner.

Like many of his generation, Răzvan's father migrated to an industrial city until his early retirement in the '90s but kept a close connection to Săteni, where his children spent summer vacations with grandparents. A charismatic and physically imposing character, Răzvan easily mingled with local adolescents and dominated peers with both city slickness and rural acumen. When his family returned to Săteni due to postsocialist industrial redundancy, Răzvan was in his early 20s and enjoyed a bachelor's life with buddies, booze, and girls.

His easy life ended when a friend threw a party after returning from military service. Wasted on beer and moonshine, four men including Răzvan stormed the home of a girl of allegedly slack morals. The aggressors chased away her brother and father and then engaged in sexual intercourse with the girl and her mother. The following morning, police arrested them for rape, and each served several years of prison.

Răzvan emphasizes the story's convenient ambiguity. Although regretting his drunkenness and wasted years, he challenges the whole affair by vividly describing the sex as consensual. He claims victims tried to gain material advantages, even forcing him into marrying the girl. Though Sătenis perceive a grave guilt in brutally violating someone's domestic sphere and personal intimacy, the victim family's shabby reputation and social marginality made many villagers support this contextual interpretation and, despite incarceration, thought well of Răzvan and his wealthy family.

For three years behind bars, the young man took on bodybuilding, weaseled into the coveted position of cook, and asserted leadership over a 50-man cell. Jail became "the school of life," i.e., the covert pedagogy of criminal society. Using prison know-how and acquaintances after serving his time, Răzvan joined mafia networks in Romania and Western Europe dealing in

prostitution, theft, fraud, and enforcement. Some close run-ins with the law and rivals and gambling most earnings away convinced him to start anew in Săteni.

Răzvan married and fathered two boys, and his parents helped him manage around 200 Karakul lactating ewes, lambs, and breeding rams in a proficient division of household labor. Răzvan handled transactions and relationships with other shepherds, while parents and hirelings ran the daily business, connecting a domestic mode of production with market exchanges. Handsome profits, up to a couple thousand euros in a good month, came from selling cheese, lambskins, and meat, often dealing cooperatively and splitting profits equitably with his trader father-in-law. Although not the largest sheep owner in Săteni, he carried enough prestige thanks to his meteoric rise and the coveted copper tint of his lambskins. His father's and his wife's relatives provided the immediate local ties in the village, and Răzvan developed and rekindled social relationships with many Sătenis from all walks of life.

His ambitions and spending habits pushed him to seek more sources of income. A genealogically distant but socially close cousin, Mihai helped him find work in Greece, but Răzvan injured his back and returned home. The money wasn't great either for an unskilled apprentice. A better opportunity came from working on behalf of foreign buyers of land. Apart from company commissions, Răzvan kept the best deals for himself and his friends and was even allowed to graze his sheep on property left unused by enigmatic companies allegedly more interested in EU agricultural subsidies than actual production. Now a minor landowner, he increased his flock, bought a black secondhand Audi A6 used to carry cheese and flaunt his wealth, and began to cut quite a figure across Săteni.

His closest confidant was Gheorghe, the bearish and garrulous shepherd from Catuneni sharing a history of violence and imprisonment, who would have gotten his throat slit in the tavern were it not for Răzvan and another friend. Baptizing Gheorghe's daughter, they became ritual brothers, sanctifying the moral strength of a close friendship. Gheorghe had another *cumătru* in a nearby commune, who had another *cumătru* further up north. Across the chain of ritual kin between shepherds, Răzvan's reputation reached a Republican businessman running for Parliament.[1] They had a chat over the phone, and, enterprising as usual, the young Săteni expressed interest in a collaboration.

A few days later, the loud noise of expensive all-terrain cars woke Răzvan and frightened his mother that her son was again in legal trouble. The candidate and Republican notables came to visit, introduced by Dumitru and his *cumnați*, all party supporters in their villages. They vouched for Răzvan's intentions and capabilities yet also drew attention to the state of the house. A hardworking man, they said, Răzvan had two small kids and many obligations,

and they pointed out Răzvan's desire to build a new family home. The candidate promised to take care of a loyal supporter. The young man enthusiastically declared his commitment to the candidate's faction and pledged to get Republican votes against Săteni-dominant Populars.

The meeting of top-down political changes and strategies with social networks on the ground made Răzvan into a key local player.[2] He had the prerequisites of a leader: a solid household, relative wealth, connections with many relatives and friends, and formidable public performances from tavern dominance to market business. Having built his ascendancy in several social spheres, Răzvan threw himself in politics with gusto. The benefits soon materialized. A few weeks into his political career, he called some Republican connections to help him gain the goodwill of land and sanitary officials and successfully bypass institutional hurdles to his businesses. But the long-term plan was running as Republican mayoral candidate and breaking up the Popular monopoly over local governance and institutional resources.

Răzvan needed to come up with an organizational structure and a strategy to articulate a political alliance. Previously, Săteni Republicans verged on nonexistence, with minor results in local or national elections. The former leader shied away from conflicts and the party gained no local seats. Populars ruled virtually unopposed, and many believed the mayor had the Republican leader in his pocket, a puppet manipulated to smother the opposition in its infancy. Using top-down instructions and assistance, Răzvan booted out the ex-leader and his puny clique and got down to work.

From the beginning, political interests were framed as moral commitments of kinship and friendship. A political faction developed overnight based on a social network of kith and kin. Răzvan and Gheorghe became, respectively, president and vice president, a few other friends and relatives occupied key positions, and they refurbished the Republican party chapter into a sizeable political faction based on personal relationships.

On his road to power, Răzvan needed the trust of allies and his allies' allies, and so on, deeper into the social fabric of Săteni. His strategy had no ideological call for political organization. Political allegiances scarcely followed abstract or remote reasons, such as party orientation, history, or current national affairs. The Republican sobriquet served merely as the rallying banner for a heterogeneous network of social relationships. Villagers turned Republican first by following Răzvan, others by following his inner core of early supporters, and so on through personal connections with insiders. Each newcomer brought family support, and his allegiance reverberated among relatives, neighbors, and friends. The glue holding together the faction came from preexisting moral commitments to reciprocal support, activated now by a concrete political opportunity. If this was the story on the ground, Sătenis fitted in quite harmoniously with the wider political environment.

5.2. RITUAL POLITICS AND POLITICAL TRANSACTIONS

Using my car as an ethnographic capital, I drove some newfangled Republicans to a regional meeting in the county capital.[3] An arena show with music and fireworks introduced each MP candidate, followed by someone they had helped: an orphan given a job, a businessman counseled in a legal matter, an old woman assisted in getting health insurance. Each example communicated private philanthropy rather than policy or ideology, a display of moral personalization linking politicians with citizens. Voters picked candidates, not parties, as electoral reform from list-based to individual candidacy elevated the importance of personal character over political ideology (see Marian and King 2010, for an institutional analysis). In fact, that was how our candidate recruited Razvan and his faction, by exchanging private services for personalized political support.

For the meeting, each agent had to deliver from his chapter a minimum head count of 10 people, closely monitored as a personal sign of political influence and costly solidarity. But Sătenis had no face-to-face conversations with party leaders to discuss politics or strategy and scorned my hope that bosses would personally acknowledge us. As Romanians say, "before you reach God, saints eat you up." Significant communication remained dyadic and between neighboring hierarchical levels: top candidates with their regional agents, and agents with their personal connections in grassroots organizations.

Though minor players, Sătenis discussed the latest rumors of alliances and feuds between regional politicians and their exploits in corruption and discretionary authority. They focused on kinship and friendship ties both within and between formally opposed parties. Fascinatingly, the names of political parties were hardly mentioned, and I could read no clear pattern of conflict across ideological lines. Instead, Săteni activists represented politics as a dynamic pattern of personal ties similar to those of their village experience. They were not mistaken, since top-down political structure revolved around a world of persons and not a clash of ideologies, as symbolically and practically expressed after the arena show.

As good traditional hosts, the organizers invited major rural representatives to a restaurant in the city outskirts, while the lower echelon had to make do with some grilled meat in the market. The leaders' meal stunningly replicated the ritual commensality of weddings (all the way to chair sashes). Resembling families, each village chapter had its own bouquet-ornate table. The city bosses sat at a prominent table, as newlyweds do. Skilled political operatives moved between tables, toasting and acknowledging each chapter as wedding sponsors circulate during ceremonies. The intimate political gathering evoked familiar moral relationships, celebrating and communicating the harmony of personal interests.

A former Minister for Agriculture, also ex–forest manager well known to timber traffickers, gave the key speech. A top political player carrying a plain-speaking honest-Joe, back-to-the-roots character with an unashamed Moldavian accent, he delivered a charismatic and relevant persona for the villagers. His discourse extolled the organizational principle of relatedness. He saluted by kin term his nephew, praising his great progress as president of the County Council. "Brothers!," he called out to everyone, urging them to engage seriously in electoral campaigning, especially on election day. Winning hearts and minds was fine, but victory came from actually getting people to vote. On election day, agents had to ferry by car or horse-drawn cart all consanguines, godparents, godchildren, affines, neighbors, friends, and everyone personally indebted.

Finally, he reiterated that personal votes matter greatly. If each of those present could get at least 20 votes from associates, Republicans would win the election. His final argument related local to national interests. The Socialist and Popular party leaders came from South Romania and naturally sided with their provinces. Though a southerner himself, the Republican president, a friend of the ex-minister, had a mother and a wife born in Moldavia. "Who do you think cares more for you?," he asked, rhetorically invoking the morality of kinship connected to regional proximity.

While political bosses evoked the solidarity of kinship, local agents had qualms with the state of mutualism, especially its failure to materialize. A village leader stood, hat in hand, deploring the difficulty in convincing people or even himself to be loyal Republicans if spoils continued to benefit outsiders. A burning issue concerned decentralized state organizations for health, environment, or law, given their large budgets and powerful mandate. Disappointed grassroots activists felt their efforts went unrewarded when denied nomination by unfair favoritism at the center unfairly sharing the rewards of political victory.

Deploring the messiness of politics, the national leader acknowledged mistakes, promised reparation, but immediately swapped carrots for sticks. Asking attendees to switch off recorders, he explained what happened if opponent parties won. A Republicans defeat would be followed by decreased school funding for affiliated headmasters, mayors skipped over for investments, and members fired from positions of public managers. Even if Republicans won nationally but the local county performed below par, chapters with better results would receive the national budget's lion share. Only if they stood together would they have a chance to sit at the rich men's table. The meal ended with toasts and encouragements for the political struggles to come.

A social mechanism based on dyadic relationships connected national politics with realities on the ground. Such blending of moral contracts and transactional connections defines a patronage system (Wolf 2001; Campbell 1976; Gellner and Waterbury 1977; Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984). Grass-roots

members activate their kith and kin to secure local votes. Higher party members gain access to these moral networks using transactions with state resources, in which key gatekeepers receive and distribute rewards. The higher leadership co-involves local agents to pursue the party agenda in local and national elections and to energize their people. Foot soldiers trust top dogs to send resources their way in exchange for political activism materialized in votes.

A lengthy hierarchy of social relationships links the humble voter in Săteni all the way up to their "Moldavian" president through a series of personal ties based on trust and reciprocity. The chain connects cultural representations of morality at the village level to wider Romanian political discourses and practices. But something more tangible travels along the reciprocal chain of political interactions. A month before elections, Răzvan received 200 leather boots from his MP-candidate patron. He parked his Audi in front of the central taverns and faced a dilemma.

On the one hand, Răzvan wanted to reward followers, many of them relatives and close friends. But he already counted on their allegiance. To help the candidate, boots had to buy new votes. Patron–client interests were not quite aligned. Răzvan's dilemma evokes the Melanesian big men, thoroughly bourgeois owners of personal relationships torn between exploiting and rewarding their political base in the quest for power (Sahlins 1963:289–294). Săteni political struggles also hinge upon the tension between moral contracts and competitive individualism. To count on his social partners' support, a political agent should fairly share benefits and promote unity of interests among associates. Nonetheless, the sphere of moral partners is too limited for the purposes of a political entrepreneur.

To gain real power, Răzvan needed to reach beyond allies and into the public arena populated by thoroughly individualistic and acquisitive agents. Tactically extending his support base, Răzvan distributed half of the boots to undecided villagers. A public signal of generosity cunningly maximized political purchase, when he proclaimed a charitable distribution and personally handed boots to pauper villagers promising to vote Republican. Defiantly and poisonously, Răzvan sent a few pairs to poor Populars since "perhaps the mayor doesn't have money for shoes."

Along with rounds of drinks for socially distant villagers, boots served as electoral currency. "Electoral alms" in Romanian political discourse ironically represent illegal transfers as ritual gifts for winning the recipient's benevolence. Political agents strategically hand out alms/bribes and explicitly make selected recipients indebted to return votes. Transfers during Easter, Christmas, and holy days deepen the symbolism of ritual gifting for political donations, which sometimes contain religiously symbolic food—fish on Palm Sunday or lambs before Easter. Ritual embellishment notwithstanding, everyone sees such gifts as advance payments. If anything, politicians used the

mystical domain as an anti-cheating device. Recordings appeared of mayors forcing voters to swear on their promises inside churches under a priestly blessing.

Răzvan gave the other half to kith and kin, fascinatingly including those certainly voting Popular. Short-term political transactions with Republicans aside, electoral boots entered Răzvan's contracts of reciprocity and mutuality. The moral duty to his people was just as important as party commitment. Some recipients supported the mayor for compelling reasons such as having a family member employed in the local administration. Had Răzvan been in their shoes, he would have done the same thing: putting family interests first, as theirs was seen as a legitimate, fair decision.

Moreover, political alliances in Săteni were not an all-or-nothing affair. Apparently free gifts proved Răzvan's generosity in honoring a personal relationship above contextual interests and doubled as a persuasive tool to get people to switch sides in the future. Răzvan offered relatives and friends with divided commitments a moral, equitable way out: "vote with the mayor now, but remember to vote for me in the future," splitting two-way their electoral resources to help both partners. The political upstart started playing the long game of personal ambition.

When parliamentary results came in, Răzvan shouted in the tavern: "I got 200 votes, the mayor got 600 votes, Mircea got 100." In voters' and local politicians' representations of elections, local men won votes, not the MPs. Răzvan's candidate was elected despite losing in Săteni, and the agent proclaimed the result a local victory against the mayor's monopoly. Yet he expressed disappointment since far more than 200 people promised their vote. He accused some boot recipients of not voting at all, or of voting for another candidate, but never questioned the loyalty of close relatives and friends. He said that in another Moldavian village, a politician handed out only one boot and gave the second if results turned favorable; maybe Răzvan shouldn't have been so widely trusting. However, he praised the honesty of particular people who received boots even though they warned that they would not vote for the mayor's party—at least these were dependable people even beyond politics.

Many Sătenis experienced Răzvan's conspicuous generosity, which he pleasurably imagined provoked his enemies' envy and fright. All factions handed down promotional items (such as umbrellas, rubber mackintoshes, vests, and rubber boots), yet boots outshone all. Răzvan started mocking paupers dressed in ragged Popular-labeled apparel compared with his quality, no-strings-attached footwear. Small victories mattered, since Răzvan played a double game all this time. On the one hand, he worked for the higher boss to deliver on promises to keep his party's support. On the other hand, he eyed the forthcoming local elections and used the MP campaign to build a faction, gauge its strength, and plan for the future. A tactical defeat offered a strategic advance in his quest for local power.

The boots story describes the problem of social interaction in Săteni politics in terms of whom one should trust for the anonymous moments of stamping one or another candidate. One can rely on family for certain, then on close relatives and friends, and the families of allies for the largest part. The rest is murkier, fluctuating, and up for grabs. Outside the certain moral commitments, politics becomes a competition between actors and their cliques vying for short-term support. A proficient politician maneuvers between, and extracts support from, both zones, fusing long-term moral obligations with short-term transactions to achieve superiority in village politics. All political strategies require resources to remain engaged in the circuit of reciprocal support in moral relationships as well as striking new political deals. While Răzvan was just getting started, his enemy had thoroughly perfected a way to solve the social dilemma.

5.3. SMART THIEVES AND POLITICAL IDIOTS

Răzvan was an ambitious Săteni with a questionable past and aggrandizing persona but also with significant social achievements. He emerged as a political contender by using personal relationships and moral tactics to aggregate a core of supporters and voters. Yet at no point did Răzvan appeal to a universal, abstract, ideological discourse beyond the scope of gaining power. He pursued rebellion, not revolution (Gluckman 1963). The mayor was the enemy not from a difference in political ideology or practice, but because Emil had what Răzvan craved: control over local governance and the vast fund of power accruing to its administrator.

Răzvan competed for votes by offering a supposedly better deal without proposing an alternative political, social, or moral arrangement. In fact, Emil's and Răzvan's political agendas were quite similar across the political barrier, inside and outside state-institutional power. The mayor's alleged corruption was a moot point. Răzvan himself had no qualms engaging in electoral bribes, coercion, cronyism, and other unorthodox or outright illegal means. He fought against the mayor, but not against the political order, to replace the powers-that-be, all the while sharing the same moral principles of political behavior.

The similarity came to the fore when Emil came to Răzvan's car and asked for a pair during the boots giveaway. Răzvan obliged with pretended benevolence, but the mayor turned the gift into an exchange by swapping some low-value Popular artifacts. Emil explained to the audience that it was a fair exchange of spoils received from their political patrons. Neither was giving anything out of their own pocket, drawing attention away from Răzvan's apparent generosity.

Later in front of the taverns, Emil again attacked Răzvan's claim to power by loudly inquiring about his political intentions. Răzvan joked that he only

wanted one vote for each boot. The mayor sneered. There was no need for a circus; Răzvan could have simply asked for 200 votes, and the mayor might have offered them, had they reached an agreement. With an undoubtedly overconfident and insincere boast, Emil aimed his words more at the audience than at Răzvan, pointing out their moral similarity but also power asymmetry. A comfortable electoral victory proved Emil's resilient control over village politics as a self-designated "*jupân*"—an archaic term for overlord. His discourse reiterated the transactional aspect of local politics, by classifying votes as personal achievements rather than ideological choices.

Emil and Răzvan used verbal skirmishes in the Goffmanian theater of taverns to gain political power, to outsmart their opponent, to convince and retain supporters, and to defend their status as capable, self-reliant men. Without a confrontation of ideologies or moral narratives, the men engaged in a political market offering their personhood to the audience of electors, competing in a tournament of power between two socially relevant persons. Răzvan loudly declared that Emil and his clique had had enough. It was time for other Sătenis to enjoy power. In private, he bragged about his shrewdness and boldness to extract resources for his family and acolytes. "Better live as an eagle for one day than a hundred years as a crow" worked well as tavern motto, but short-term braggadocio couldn't rival Emil's long-term hold over Săteni.

A year later, Răzvan ran for the mayor's office and lost. He managed to gain a seat in the local council where Republicans upset the Popular majority. Although receiving a third of the votes, he couldn't outspend Emil nor match his institutional leverage or create a larger kin-and-friends network. He tried to damage his enemy's reputation with poisonous posters claiming theft from pensions while postman, but his adversaries counteracted with the rape story.

Ultimately, villagers said that there would have been no difference if Răzvan had won or he could even have behaved worse. An old woman said, "Look at the mayor and the 'piglets' sitting on the porch! At least their belly is full, the others come hungrier." After three consecutive mandates, replacing the enriched ruling faction might have led to more predation from challengers looking to recoup their electoral investments by plunging elbow-deep into the fund of power.

For all his boots and slickness, Răzvan remained a bit player in terms of institutionalized political resources. The entire local governance structure controlled by the mayor dwarfed his opponent's capacities while being administered in a profound particularistic, non-ideological, non-formal fashion. Răzvan's enemy was not elected and re-elected for honesty or for abiding by institutional rules. Emil offered something more palpable (see figure 5.1).

He first became mayor in the mid-1990s but had a disastrous term. Young, inexperienced, and surrounded by sly, opportunistic public servants, Emil lost social support and gained little during the lean years of postsocialist Romania. But later people compared him positively with the next mayor.

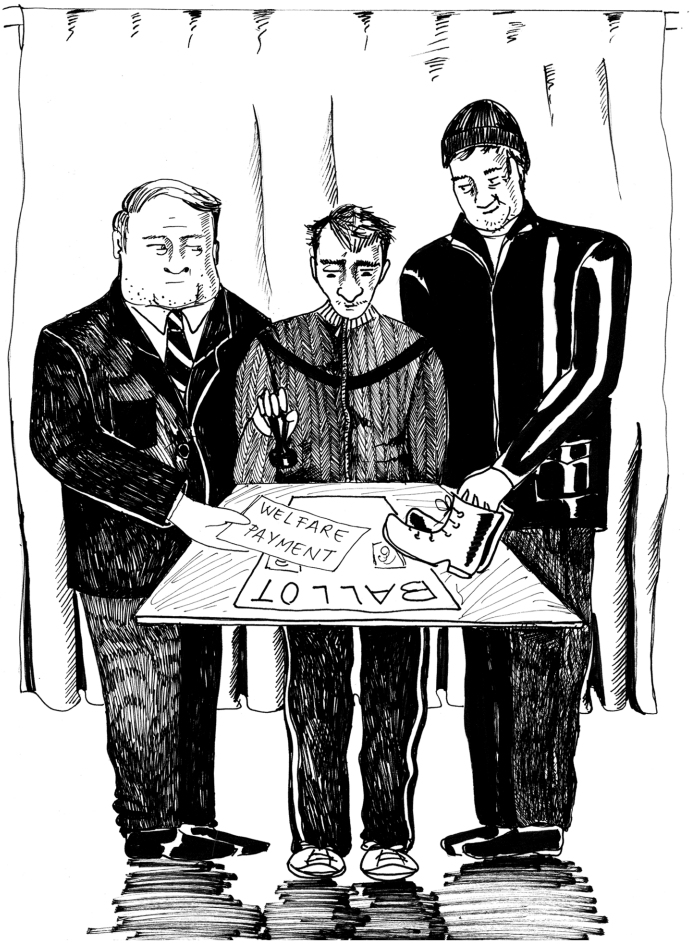

Figure 5.1. Political choices in local elections

Viorel's reputation was destroyed by the rumor that he refused an unprecedented allowance from the national budget. The elderly ex-postman declared that so much money could only bring a criminal conviction for mismanagement or embezzlement. The thought of millions made his head spin. People remember how "that idiot" returned money to government, leaving no one in Săteni better off.

Interestingly, Emil also worked as a postman for four years after his first mandate, slowly paving his way back into office. The job served as a political launching pad for him, as well as for his predecessor and for many other rural officials in the region. Monthly visits handing out pensions and benefits opened the doors and hearts of villagers, especially elders and paupers vitally

depending on state support. While not giving anything out of his pocket and just doing his job, Emil had more regular and cheerful social interactions with Sătenis than most ordinary villagers. He came from a large and prominent family, had many wealthy and prestigious relatives, pursued some education, and displayed (initially) a very affable personality. Meanwhile, he remained active in top Popular circles and even developed a personal relationship with the party's national president.

Learning from experience, Emil entered office the second time with a changed outlook. His administration became an efficient machine in control of government resources, from money to enforcement of rules, with power over people and things. The primordial goal was self-reproduction, insuring that Emil and his faction held power indefinitely. The fuel running the machine was the discretionary use of formal institutions for private benefit.

In his first act back in power, Emil dismissed Viorel's son employed as a cleaner. The employee left the job as he got in, through a decision based on his social position in relation to the institutional power man (his father and then his father's rival). The purge targeted more jobs taken from adversaries and offered to supporters. The mayor's stepfather became treasurer, and Emil's wife librarian. Key supporters received eligible council seats, and jobs as waste managers, drivers, technicians, and personal staff. When the school headmistress showed signs of dissent by joining another party, Emil told her to toe the line or else her husband, a local surveyor, would be sacked for drunkenness. Irreplaceable specialists remained, but everyone clearly received the message. Emil wanted to and could reign with an iron hand, keeping everyone loyal and obedient.

The aggrieved cleaner went to court, and the mayoralty had to pay back his salary from the local budget. Emil's enemies rejoiced in his personal defeat but did not condemn the waste of public money by the petty squabbles. Emil even bypassed national reforms aimed at minimizing mayors' private funds of power. When the law stated that mayoralties must externalize services, a private company supplied the night watch patrol. To get the contract, the contractor agreed under the table to hire Emil-nominated people. All private guards came from the mayor's clique, including the Popular party youth leader. Emil maintained his grip on yet another scarce resource appropriated from local governance.

The political trajectory of a truly successful Săteni operator illustrates the functioning of the Săteni political system and its articulation with upper echelons—something Răzvan could only dream of. Under the democratic system of representation governing elections, leaders and their factions must gain and mobilize social allegiance for winning local positions but also deliver votes for their own party during national elections. In return for being a stronghold in parliamentary and presidential elections, Săteni received increased funding when the Populars formed the government, further entrenching Emil's power.

Contracts for refurbishing the mayoralty, schools, or roads went to party-friendly companies that supposedly filled Emil's pockets with bribes and stabilized his position as a trustworthy operator in local affairs. As the Romanian economy and budget revenues improved, he held control over "the bread and the knife," i.e., a firm clasp over the distribution of coveted resources.

The recent political alternatives varied between a "stupidly honest" weakling, a rapacious charismatic ex-hustler, and an aggrandizing corrupt official. Overwhelmingly, Sătenis chose the last option, offering Emil five mandates and uncontested local authority for some time to come. Yet Emil could not have done it without such a wide local support. What justifies their consistent support, or at least perennial acceptance and non-contestation of this kind of political leader?

Unlike his unfortunate predecessor, Emil knew how to fearlessly spend public money while siphoning resources along the way. Enemies (or nonaligned actors behind his back) called Emil a "smart thief." Having "the mind of a thief" implies a vigilant, profit-seeking, crafty, and slightly mischievous attitude. In fact, the expression carries a fearful admiration for skilled cunningness echoing the heroic masculine image of Cretan sheep rustlers following "*kleftouria*" (Herzfeld 1985), the fusion of rugged individualism with enthralling public performance.

Few doubted Emil's embezzlement of public funds, or the illegality of many administrative procedures. Yet Sătenis preferred a shrewd politician able to negotiate state money with a positive impact on local welfare. The outstanding success of Emil in political games came from pushing the envelope more than his competitors, using strategic cunningness and extensive social support to reap personal benefits directed to his family and moral consociates. Nevertheless, he remained squarely within Săteni expectations of individual proficiency and responsibility in public interactions. He just played better than others.

5.4. LOCAL GOVERNANCE AS PATRIMONY

Emil ran local governance as a worthy householder manages his private domestic sphere. Officials kept mum about internal procedures; no one outside of allies was invited to council meetings (which were instantly rescheduled when outsiders forced their way in). Secrecy ruled supreme in local affairs. Villagers found out about policy decisions only after the fact unless they had access to some insider gossip. The negotiation of major rulings involved Emil's core group of supporters, mainly the village secretary (a non-Săteni official providing invaluable legal expertise) and a handful of very trusted allies. The vast majority of Popular supporters remained at a distance from the power core but benefited from various preferential access to local governance.

Slowly but pervasively, Emil turned more village resources into private capital. A law offered young people house plots from communal land, and he gave most lots to confederates agreeing to sell them privately to Emil for paltry sums. He gained an extensive domain from five ex-parcels, and, despite a blatant conflict of interest, nothing could be legally proven given formally registered exchanges. On his vast well-positioned land, Emil planted an orchard, erected a summer cabin, and set up a precast concrete workshop. Each day, several men worked, tending the property or churning out batches of bricks and pillars that Emil's company sold to other communes with Popular mayors.

To round up the neo-patrimonial hacienda image, workers were welfare beneficiaries. Per law, they had to provide mandatory community service, yet hardly any did public works. Instead, many worked for Emil without wages except for food, drinks, or cigarette money. From their perspective, they had to work anyhow and couldn't care less about the beneficiary. Moreover, it helped to ingratiate them with their "employer," preserve welfare status, and remain within the valuable proximity of a big man. For other hacienda works, Emil hired a returned migrant to cut weeds with his professional mower and another one to weld a structure, repaying them with mayoralty contracts.

Emil used for personal benefit cars, fuel, labor, land, and anything he could harvest from the political ecology of local governance. How did generic Săteni feel about these glaring examples of (neo-)patrimonialism? Where I expected outrage, I found an array of attitudes ranging from indifference to envy and even praise. As in most cases of appropriation by officials, villagers hardly felt cheated by the exploitation of minimum-guaranteed-income beneficiaries. There are few public works to begin with, and no clear plan to use the workforce for collective benefit.

Moreover, their private interests were not affected by the mayor's treatment of welfare payees, and sometimes quite the contrary if benefiting a friend or relative. Villagers and their close social partners depended upon frictionless access to state resources and protection from sanctions. Private arrangements between citizens and public servants oiled the institutional wheels, offering modest gains for sundry villagers and a premium for rent-seeking politicians.

Emil's enemies loathed his success but admired, as everyone else did, the householder-ness, the secretive and ruthless acquisitiveness and keen protectiveness of the mayor and his expanding boyar-like domain. Far from a moral outlier, his values and motivations reflected a proficient Săteni actor winning at the political game. In fact, most villagers treated common goods just as Emil did. When trucks brought gravel for road repairs, people persuaded or bribed drivers to unload in front of their gates or even inside the yard rather than use it for public infrastructure. Everyone benefits from a dry, even road. But each household has more to gain from private investment when their neighbors already took their share—an identical structure of incentives leading to public goods failure as in the stable dismantlement.

Not all public services can be transacted by local government, such as child support or fuel subsidies, while education, health, and pensions belong to national government. Many other benefits, however, depend on the gatekeeper's goodwill, granted in exchange for private benefits. One road gets gravel; another doesn't. One person's land registry papers are issued immediately; others take years when a paper is mysteriously missing. Bending the rules helped the mayor turn welfare payments into tradable commodities by rigging means testing. Officials under Emil's direction control eligibility and amount when processing applications and assessing animals, land, or incomes. Recipients had few and expensive alternatives to official recourse and remained largely subject to the discretionary power using state benefits to funnel resources toward the mayor's household.

Only when exchanges are repeated and authority is stable do socially effective leaders such as Emil profit from official power. Informal transactions face the risk of perennial deceit. A man easily tricked the previous mayor—the "honest idiot." Just before elections, he asked Viorel to falsely record 20 days of community work, promising subservience in the near future. After the paperwork was signed, the freeloader laughed in the fool's face. He had no intention of keeping his promise to a man who would lose power in a couple of days.

When tavern-dreaming, detractors predicted the similar crumbling of Emil's power base just before his imminent fall. "All doggies will look for a new master," i.e., apparently loyal supporters will seek a better deal with another big man. Their support, enemies argued, came from fear and greed, just as Sătenis tame dogs using violence and food. The local equivalent of Melanesian "rubbish men" (Barker 2016), their social weaknesses made them easy prey for Emil as well as for any other rival offering a meatier bone.

Emil's tavern boast was that "one is mayor today, tomorrow not; it is the man, the character that counts, not the position." Easy to say for a man certain to hold power for years to come, but also an assertion of his power source. His message subtly turned self-humbling into the confidence of a proficient big man. Power is nothing without control as classic Pirelli advertising says. Emil knew his grip on the long-term reproduction of the political machine needed vulnerable villagers. He needed not trust them, for they knew who buttered their daily bread—or not.

The trust of other players, however, mattered. Emil could not individually control everything in local governance and depended upon councilors and public servants to legitimize and enforce decisions. Although asymmetrical, social relationships between key officials were built upon mutuality, cooperation, and trust. For one thing, they stood together against outside intrusion in local affairs, such as government inspections or anticorruption investigations. Many signatures next to the mayor's commit to legal repercussions. If he falls, they follow. But everyone gets a piece if corruption persists, from employment to perks, petty bribes, and social importance, helping relatives and friends if

and when they could. Notables cultivated an intimate relationship with Emil, attending regular barbeques at his hacienda.[4] When his grandmother died, the entire mayoralty staff attended the funeral, although most had no relationship to her, yet they collectively bought a labeled flower arrangement.

Some of these people knew political secrets and offered key support. The administrative and electoral machine depended upon their cooperation, and hence Emil needed to trust them in the long term. Although benefiting from political power, they were not entirely dependent upon it. Businessmen, sheep owners, publicans, merchants, or tradesmen: they had financial resources and social relationships making them both valuable allies and relatively independent agents.

These various personal capacities allowed them room to maneuver in dealing with Emil but also made them potentially dangerous were they to switch sides. When licking his wounds after losing local elections, Răzvan loudly reflected that Emil's eventual defeat will come from its inner circle, from treasonous allies fed up with his rule, rather than from outsiders like Răzvan. In fact, he did defeat the mayor once with the help of disgruntled subordinates. However, that only paved the way for a future alliance between previously sworn enemies. How was that turn of events even possible?

5.5. *PLUS ÇA CHANGE . . .*

My two years in Săteni fell within the window of Emil's absolute political control. The end of his dominance was nowhere in sight. But not everything went smoothly. More people than just his enemies noticed a change in his attitude. During his four years out of office, everyone appreciated Emil's affable disposition, politeness, self-effacement, and generous interest in the lives of others. "A wolf in sheep's wool" is how Mihai remembers a man once his best buddy and helpful neighbor.

A property dispute revealed Emil's true self. His wife called Mihai, saying the mayor's people trespassed their yard to lay some electrical wires to the newly acquired hacienda. From Greece, Mihai angrily shouted over the phone, but the workers declined responsibility since this was ordered by Emil personally. This last straw broke the back of their relationship already strained by his friend's aggrandizing demeanor. Emil could have asked for Mihai's permission, but a unilateral, arrogant violation of domestic space made them sworn enemies. Their wives stopped visiting, and they all but stopped saluting each other. When Răzvan, a very distant cousin yet sharing a family name, approached Mihai, he found a natural ally. Albeit driven more by personal resentment than by ambitions for direct and immediate personal gratification, Mihai was one of the few Sătenis socially supporting the anti-mayor faction

without aims for institutional power or a direct involvement in official political decision-making.

Many others such as Ilie and Gica also changed camps after conflicts with Emil but kept gunning for a seat at the table. Both had animal husbandry in common with Răzvan, whose background was more familiar than that of polished Emil, who rubbed them the wrong way with his superior airs. Gica coveted a councilor spot but Emil preferred others, so he had little to lose by switching. Ilie, already local councilor, began to understand how much the mayor actually made from his side deals and felt shortchanged.

Most villagers suspected embezzlement, but few actually figured out the amount. Emil limited the external signs of wealth, just as Sătenis usually do, but few achieve the invisibility of out-of-village real estate, stocks, or bank accounts, or lavish city spending. The hacienda was just the visible tip of a rumored iceberg of graft. Ilie realized the pettiness of his crumbs and joined Răzvan, who promised preferential treatment. Just after betraying the mayor, both Gica and Ilie received chapter positions, eligible electoral mandates, and key roles in the political adventure to come.

I often wondered why ex-felons, from petty thieves to criminals, always seemed to gravitate toward local politics. "The school of life" offered them one lesson largely unavailable to most Sătenis: acquaintance with the law. Some of the best legalistic reasoning in Săteni came from Răzvan and his *cumătru* among Republicans and a fearful shepherd among Populars. This latter big man had maimed and even murdered people, though always eluding law using connections with prosecutors and judges and by intimidating victims. The swears and aggressive swagger of violent entrepreneurs (Volkov 2002) smoothly gave way to astute and informed legal opinions, controlling well the jargon and procedures of the law.

Years spent in tribunals and jail forced them to learn the ropes better than their lawyers, to minimize prison time and avoid further incrimination. Dumitru seemed an illiterate brute until peering over legal documents. He knew how to apply a physical correction to Emil without legal risks, smacking him one night outside the tavern without leaving proof in witnesses or body marks. Emil replied by installing CCTV and issuing a fine when Dumitru drunkenly pushed his two-horse cart up the mayoralty stairs, the rural symbolical enactment of the Storming of the Winter Palace before a gaping audience, knowing he only risked committing a contravention. Lately, both Răzvan and Emil studied law in private, long-distance courses, learning how to better take advantage of the blind spots of justice.

Such expertise came in handy when Ilie brought information about the forthcoming auction of common pastures imposed by national government. An action cell organized around the Popular faction, later reaching to nonaligned animal owners. The stake was 500 hectares and 50,000 euros worth of subsidies up for grabs to the highest bidder. They registered an agricultural

association headed by Răzvan with Ilie's wife as financial officer. Fusing formal and informal expertise, the association leaders computed an advantageous bid but also prepared for deception. Ilie found out through intimates among public servants that a mysterious company from Transylvania enlisted in the race. They immediately suspected Emil's involvement since, surely, he either directly controlled or was indirectly bribed by the company.

Răzvan submitted documents only at the very last hour before the deadline, fearing Emil would (illegally) open envelopes and outbid them. He and Dumitru asked same-party relatives and friends from a neighboring village to bid as a "rabbit" (prison slang for pretend competitor). They already used Republican land officials to review their application, but, if the mayor disqualified their documents, they had another horse in the race. The guys from the neighboring association waited in my car in front of the mayoralty, while an envelope with a higher bid sat in my dashboard in case Ilie found out from insiders about competing offers.

Eventually, neither backup was needed, suspicions proved unfounded, and the Săteni association won. Răzvan's faction moved faster than Emil in recruiting many and important pasture stakeholders, especially sheep and cow owners instilled with fear of losing access to summer grazing. The association leaders, despite some internecine competition, persuaded a sizable group to subscribe to their project as nominal members.

While they won the round, the short-lived history of this grassroots organization tells a story of reproduction of political order rather than contestation or change. During the one-year lease, Răzvan allowed all villagers to join the association and graze on common pastures, though he saved the best spots for acolytes and himself. He knew the risk of an all-out revolt from villagers left without pasture. He also had plans to win a majority of votes in future elections. While he minimally managed a common good to village stakeholders, underneath generosity ran a mechanism of providing benefits for gatekeepers.

They could only use subsidies for investments, so the board controlled by Răzvan bought overpriced fertilizer with kickback payments. About half of the sacks ended up in the leaders' storages. A tractor with washed-down fertilizer did a few rounds just for show. They distributed the rest to individual members who fertilized their private arable land, not common pastures. Everyone's choices expressed an organizational principle: each wanted private control over resources; no one invested in common goods. Members happily accepted a couple of sacks compared with nothing a year ago or what they would receive if another faction controlled the pastures.

The uneven distribution correlated with access to power in a formal institution created and run by Răzvan and his core group foremost for their private benefit. Like the local government, the socialist farm, the stables, and the graveyard, the commons exist on paper more than in the minds and actions of

Sătenis. One can trust only what is privately controlled. It is up to everyone to take as much as possible given that everyone else tries to do the same. Some do better than others, having more power through transactional interactions between independent, self-regarding actors.

I asked Răzvan and others about using the collective as an entrepreneurial catalyst. They could collect milk, process cheese, invest in pasture irrigation, or manage collectively the livestock, production, or commerce. Though not blind to economically sensible alternatives, association was deemed impossible. First, all cherished their independence. How could anyone give others control over their family business? "The eyes of the owner fatten the cow" is how they describe the relationship between the economic uncertainty of depending upon others and personal control. Even cheese taste and consistency differed between makers, giving political economy a culturally salient cue of personal qualities preventing commonality or cooperation.

Long-term organization necessarily devolved to the domestic level of independent units even when families were close allies through blood, marriage, ritual, or close friendship. Dumitru delivered the ultimate response: "even I and *cumătru* are keeping to our own business, and whom else would I trust more in the world?" They cooperated in politics since power came from coalitional solidarity, but that was as far as they were willing to go.

The pasture collective was a vehicle for narrow and immediate private interests without any larger commitment to any cooperative endeavors based on trust and mutuality involving a group of Sătenis. In this, it mirrored the opposing political faction. Morality and solidarity only accrued between particular actors in various arrangements for whom the nominal association functioned as an institutional shell. Ultimately, Emil lost against a structure emulating his political strategy on the background of general Săteni social norms. Personal connections plus privileged access to knowledge and institutions plus a minimal aggregation of social affiliation offered success to a core group. A handful of leaders kept lower echelons satisfied and dependent while reaping the informal benefits of gatekeeping. Răzvan replicated in the private sector Emil's position in the state domain. Both fused legal institutions and villager agreement or acquiescence using similar though personally tailored strategies.

They differed in scale, however. The lease was up for auction again after one year. In the meantime, Emil's strategy was to sap Răzvan's support by winning over key actors lacking strong ties with Răzvan and his clique, dissatisfied with their returns. His minions bullied others into joining a rival association run by the mayor's stooge. They won the next auction and carried on business as usual. Răzvan and company got too greedy, and their crumbs were inferior to Emil's offer. For Mihai as lateral observer, the pasture story justified further cynicism. Had Răzvan been mayor, he would have, barefaced, plundered even more than Emil, just as his association stint proved. For all his opposition to

Emil, Mihai as many others saw the similarity between the goals of political leaders, their guiding principles, and their practices. Moreover, private appropriation of common goods was not a novelty in Săteni.

5.6. . . . *PLUS C'EST LA MÊME CHOSE*

The conflict between Emil and Răzvan involved similar strategies and interactions, merely perpetuating a stable pattern in local politics. Competition between leaders reproduced a structure of moral expectations and behaviors where actors fought each other, and replaced or emulated enemies, but the game stayed the same. Despite changes in persons or contexts, these ethnographic stories continue a long history of personalized Săteni politics.

Răzvan also had an "idiot" counterpart. After the dissolution of the socialist collective, villagers unwilling or incapable of working land themselves remained in an association presided by a local agronomist. His months of shambolic performance are legendary. He carted grains to his mistress's barn, unruly employees sold equipment for petty bribes, and members not only received no earnings but had to cough up money for subsequent spring seasonal works. Everyone withdrew their land in 1991, the president ended up as a "lap dog" washing Emil's car, and no one would again risk leaving land management to third parties.

During socialism, farm administrators and government officials were equally corrupt, using party connections and personal networks to capture state power for private means. Romanians joked that the PCR acronym for "Romanian Communist Party" also spelled "fixers, acquaintances, relationships," the ways one could get by and exploit the communist bureaucratic system. Despite the 1989 revolution, no fundamental ideological or practical alternative appeared in two decades of a democracy maintaining a perceivable continuity with the past.

Socialism also had its bandits-turned-businessmen. Parcescu and his father, known troublemakers, refused to join the cooperative in the '60s. They received poor land but also the status of independent farmers. From outside the state control, Parcescu grew a business based on stealing from farms, trafficking, and bribing everyone along the way. He did jail time but emerged in 1990 as the richest man in Săteni. Bullying villagers into leasing their land, he amassed large tracts for his expanding herds. The postsocialist short-lived association just had one last stable left standing. A Săteni-born Bucharester and his local relatives tried to buy it but didn't bribe enough the right decision-makers. At the end of the accounting year, the shambolic agronomist-turned-president scrambled to make ends meet and Parcescu bought it for a song. "Sir, please give us a bit more!/No! Father only has this much in his pockets," he

said, referring to himself in the third person and emphasizing his patriarchal-like dominance over naïve officials.

Small wonder Parcescu and Emil were nicknamed "boyars," alluding to the wealth and status supremacy of large landowners before socialism. As today, interwar village governance accrued to political leaders empowered by personal relationships with voters irrespective of ideologies and using state infrastructure for private gain. For example, a 1940s tax collector used his position to enrich his household and children, later career professionals during socialism.[5] Particularistic, family-oriented practices persisted over decades irrespective of national political organization.

For more than five generations, village politics revolved around patronage, personalized morality, and competitive familism. The stability was only twice unsettled in the 20th century. In the '50s and '60s, local opportunists with little to lose ("the village no-gooders") enthusiastically helped communist apparatchiks to impose centralized, authoritarian control over Săteni, especially retaliating against kulaks—landed peasants. Many received jobs in the socialist nomenklatura. Before that, some Sătenis followed the 1930–1940s fascist "Legion of Archangel Michael" (later "The Iron Guard"). As occurred widely across Moldavia, young and aspirational villagers heeded the nationalist, mystical Orthodox, anti-system call of charismatic Corneliu Zelea Codreanu and far-right Romanian intelligentsia. They joined perhaps the only political movement with authentic grassroots support in rural Romania (Weber 1964, including a brief but accurate account of Romanian interwar quasi-democracy).

Both movements involved a minority of villagers, drawn especially among the marginalized or overly ambitious, and only for a short amount of time. Initially, communism and nationalism apparently proposed universalistic ideologies transcending rural patterns of social interaction, but the effect was short-lived and practices soon veered toward self-interest. Many benefited directly from the confiscation of kulak land or the looting of town Jews. Politics returned to normal as the spoils of power spread through personalized relationships between friends and relatives. Ideological fads gave way to the hard-nosed realism of atomized peasants. Neither political movement carries any weight nowadays, though villagers sometimes express vague anti-Semitism or rich-bashing. Along with anti-Hungarian or anti-Roma sentiments, these views lack social relevance in Săteni, where only Romanians live, while the truly rich and powerful are far away in Bucharest.

Săteni politics is a continuation of social life with other means. Villagers don't act against the principles of politics-as-usual because they would have to challenge the social moral order. Emil, Răzvan, and other leaders indeed looked after their own interests above common or universal Săteni concerns. They bended or broke laws, they favored kith and kin instead of following abstract rules, and they appropriated village or state resources. But so did everyone

else—only to smaller benefits. All Sătenis strived for their household, favored relatives and friends over strangers, and increased and protected their own even when it went against public benefit. Villagers were neither equivalent nor universally bound to each and every Săteni. Actions against state laws, just as those against Orthodox Christian prescriptions in rituals, are morally justified or even necessary to uphold one's rights as well as the moral contracts toward family, relatives, or friends.

Big men like Emil or Răzvan share much moral ground with fellow villagers but have something extra. They are more ambitious and courageous, greedier, or luckier than most Sătenis and gain more control over material and institutional resources. However, the lack of fit between legal frameworks and local norms appears to everyone at some point. Most Sătenis live in ignorance or contempt of many laws, from rules of commerce or trade to building codes, environmental laws, or inheritance. Mihai, a relatively righteous and enlightened Săteni, worked without permits, licenses, or paying taxes and saw nothing wrong of it. He knew others knew as well, one of the reasons he would never think of personally calling in legal prosecution against Emil for fear of in-kind retribution. Mihai let Emil do his thing as Emil left Mihai to do the same. Even when one stays clear of the law, there can always be a family member or other close person falling on the wrong side and becoming vulnerable to the objective enforcement of rules.

In taverns, markets, graveyards, or household boundaries, might is right. Political institutions such as local governance, civic associations, or parties are one more arena for competitive individualism. They are special because the successful political agent in Săteni checks many important boxes of social dominance. He (since usually a man) is smart, cunning, dangerous, and revengeful, winning over opponents in direct and indirect games just as prominent actors dominate taverns. But he cannot do it alone. You can out–arm wrestle each Săteni by yourself, but a mayor grows from a social network of his own making. He needs to persuade, to trust and be trusted, and to participate as a socially knowledgeable individual in the web of kin making and friend making that ensures long-term cooperation.

In a way, this evokes the world of women: giving alms, grooming each other for gossip and intimacy, and sharing their domestic space with neighbors and relatives. When Mihai disparaged Emil's ways, he called him "whore"—"smiling while stabbing you in the back." But this also evoked the subtlety of navigating ambiguous social interactions, getting by nonviolence and amity, even when purely strategic. In fact, Răzvan bragged that he could be "whorier" than Emil, smartening up from crude rapist and petty mafioso to smooth political operator. Even Mihai considered that politicians needed to embellish the truth since brutally honest, outspoken, principled leaders couldn't endure in Săteni. For all detractions, Emil knew how to surround himself with long-term alliances with key local actors, reciprocating their support with the spoils of

politics as relatives and friends do in ritual or everyday life. In the forest of kith and kin, he stood as the royal oak.

While Sătenis did not curb their politicians' malfeasance, external control over local governance and politics shone by its absence and irrelevance for Sătenis, irrespective of personal sympathies. Villagers perceived police and investigators as crooked and manipulated from Bucharest. Their real mission was to control local resources, not to insure fair, legal compliance. When an inspection did target Săteni corrupt affairs, villagers reacted against perceived interference. Emil bought an excavator for twice the market value from a firm that specialized in large, shady state contracts in the region. Company owners ran away with the money, and investigators discovered that the excavator actually belonged to a bona fide dealer-leaser. When the official inspection tried to solve the corruption case, they found that the equipment was first left without tires. On the second visit, it was hidden in a nearby monastery to avoid repossession. Everyone kept mum. Life beats movies, as villagers joke.

Villagers received inspectors coldly, and not even Emil's adversaries like Răzvan aided investigators. They merely mocked the jangling of handcuffs when crossing paths with enemies in the tavern. But all villagers hoped and made sure the excavator remained in Săteni. Many speculated that the mayor was just a scapegoat for higher, obscure operators. Although the mayor and his driver used the machine for personal benefits, once in a while the excavator cleaned road gutters or was informally leased by a client, making it a valuable—though scarce and unevenly distributed—local resource.

Although people thought that all officials stole, at least some offered something in return. History worked in Emil's favor as his party ruled during the mid-2000s economic boom and channeled fat investments to loyal mayors. For Săteni, the windfall brought the excavator, a truck, some road works,[6] a school sports hall, the restoration of the old boyar house turned into cultural hall, and many other improvements. The mayor and his faction grew richer with each transaction, but Sătenis have historical expectations for even fewer public goods from greedier leaders such as Răzvan, or incompetent ones such as Viorel. They say, "at least Emil left something behind," a phrase often praising proven-corrupt Romanian mayors, ministers, and, hauntingly, Ceaușescu.

Another pillar of political stability comes from the representations of the state institutions and resources as an external entity. Take the example of the commune budget. Săteni is poorer than most Romanian communes. Taxes and earnings cover just a minor part of expenditures, with the rest coming from national redistribution, as in more than three-quarters of all Romanian communes (Expert Forum 2013). Villagers either pay very little directly into mayoralty coffers, or indirectly through value-added taxes accruing to registered transactions, or not at all. Since Sătenis receive net transfers from other taxpayers, they are more right than wrong to represent local budgets as constituted from elsewhere than their pockets. The money in Emil's hands

appeared as an external boon harvested from the vaguely represented state rather than a rightful allowance based on citizenship and locality. It is Emil's pie to split, and their interest to get a larger slice.

Sătenis supported leaders capable of distributing more to their benefit, increasing the pie by whatever means possible. But most negotiations between villagers and officials over public goods were individual rather than collective affairs because few investments benefited all. Only some villagers had children in school, lived on a certain road, crossed a certain bridge, or had pastured animals, and many had side conflicts preventing trustful cooperation. Lacking a form of social unity outside the diffuse network of relatives and friends, families and individuals had to face Emil in narrowly self-interested exchanges.

Despite institutional asymmetry and interest fragmentation, villagers were not entirely powerless. They vocally stood their ground, threatened Emil's reputation and electoral prospects, and used social partners to put moral pressure on him and his acolytes. Ana bluntly approached the mayor in the village center saying she would throw demolition debris on her muddy road unless he sent a truck of gravel. He complied to avoid the wicked tongue of an esteemed matriarch.

The ratio between public expenditure and personal gain resulted from Emil and his clique engaging in myriad negotiations and trade-offs with private interests. Still, the fragmentation of dissent and pressure favored the congealed local power. When Săteni and Catuneni, the other major village in the commune, began competing against each other for investment (schools and cultural centers, more precisely), Emil played them against each other. He spread word in each village that *they* were getting the better deal and warned that Răzvan would favor the others.

Division of interests partly explains the messy process of restitution of property in the early '90s, unfinished even today. Each claimant tried to get local surveyors and supervisors on their side, prejudicing third parties and facilitating the administrative opportunity for corruption and abuse. A woman told a local TV station how she feuded with a sister (and neighbor) over inheritance and claimed that her enemy "made relatives with the whole mayoralty" through baptisms and weddings to gain preferential institutional support. Tavern patrons watched the story and nodded approvingly, mentioning many similar stories in Săteni and elsewhere. The social interactions of making and unmaking the morality of kinship offer one more pillar for the personalization of political games.

The constant redrawing of borders between the solidarity of the few against the threat of the many kept the political system stable and reproduced the asymmetries of power. Pursuing parallel or divided interests, villagers strengthened administrators' grip on local affairs as gatekeepers wheeling and dealing with each in part instead of solidary groups. Sătenis

competed for resources more against each other than cooperating against Emil for an overall advantageous distribution. In the face of power, divided they stood and united they reproduced the structures of domination and control.

5.7. THE MORAL REPRODUCTION OF POLITICAL MARKETS

This final part will take stock of the moral origins of Săteni political stability within, against, and beyond the formal framework of state institutions. The ethnography only briefly explored the articulation of local with Romanian politics at large in terms of legislation and national dynamics. But an ethnographic perspective can provide a unique source of knowledge on local realities. While it is not the purpose of this book to investigate Romanian political institutions such as laws or government organization, Săteni offers a case study of how formal institutions function in social interaction, when enmeshed in local patterns of cultural and personal expectations of morality and trust.

Abstractly defined institutions are public representations of norms and identities that operate through the minds of people and their expectations and motivations. For example, Emil was both mayor—a bureaucratic-codified position—and a Săteni villager, a person with a history, a social identity, and individual qualities. There was no separation in the minds of villagers between these two persons. Emil did not shed his preexisting personhood when entering office, quite the opposite. The formal position was yet another aspect of his self, a further development from and of his moral strength and competitive individualism, another personal asset.

Like other parts of Săteni material and social ecology, formal institutions and the legal framework offer both constraints and opportunities for political entrepreneurship-oriented villagers. It produces a game for higher stakes than most social activities, but still played by the same cultural rules of morality and conflict governing Săteni life. When a drunk Dumitru threatened and almost managed to drive his horse-drawn cart into the mayoralty one night, he did not challenge the office but the man holding it, in order to show the tavern audience Dumitru feared no one in this dog-eat-dog world.

My analysis touched only briefly on important institutions such the judiciary system. Officially, police and courts enforce civil and penal law independently from the local administration. These institutions are accountable to central authorities in ministries and operate under firmer constraints. Policemen, for example, cannot work in their home villages to avoid conflicts of interests and serve at the bottom of a militarized hierarchy. In a sense, their work is more clear-cut since they deal with many cases without moral ambiguity. Everyone agrees that murderers, rapists, thieves, and criminals in

general should be punished, and they usually are, unless they have privileged access to authorities.

However, rich and well-connected villagers can get away with many misdeeds by bribing or appealing to direct or indirect favors from powerful officials. The bigger the legal authority, the larger the spoils. How could an honest county judge afford a villa worth 50 years of wages? A bored police officer bought a 100,000-euro Mercedes coupe for an extra thrill when chasing cigarette smugglers too small to afford bribes, unlike the ones running trucks through rigged customs allegedly controlled from higher-ups in Bucharest. A traffic police colonel, feared for his lucrative road checks, ran the largest bootleg alcohol operation in the region. Law representatives live side by side with politicians and big men, meet at weddings or fishing trips, play poker, and become *cumetri*. They share a way of living and acting in the world.

Despite formal constraints, the guardians of the law have the same view of a society. Might is right, and each is privately responsible for his own welfare. I had a dispute with Răzvan in the tavern about who was guilty if I left the gate open and a thief stole my cow. We were talking at cross-purposes, as I referred to the legal guilt, while he talked of the causal culprit, i.e., my stupidity. Slickly, he turned to the local policeman at another table. The marshal straightened up and replied, "First and foremost, one should be cautious. If thieves cannot get in, there is no theft in the first place." Tautological and self-serving perhaps, as cautious villagers make for less police casework. But also expressive of how people trust in justice. Above all, watch your back and don't expect others to do it for you. Even when police or courts have to intervene, one often expects little objective treatment and must try to tip the balance their way, or at least balance it against the workings of opponents.

David Hume offered as a maxim that "in contriving any system of government, and fixing the several checks and controls of the constitution, every man ought to be supposed a knave, and to have no other end, in all his actions, than private interest" ([1742] 1889:117–118). The ethnography suggests that culturally defined self-interest underpins the stability of the Săteni political system, its reproduction, and articulation with formal and informal upper institutions. Emil was a true knave when controlling the system of government, and so were Razvan and the rest of Săteni. But political self-interest in Săteni needs to relate to the interests of others.

The mechanisms of Săteni politics observed in ethnography revolve around the distinction between trust and mistrust, between cooperation and conflict. Access to political power depends upon trust in the support of kin, friends, allies, and dependents—but also distrust in those who cannot be co-opted or coerced. No representations of village-wide solidarity inform political interactions. There are no common goods; no universal political community as a body of equals; no disinterested, rule-bound, altruistic administrators. Governance resources are represented as external resources rather than universal rights

or common ownership. Villagers support skilled political operators capable of maximizing private returns irrespective of how they obtain them or how much they siphon along the way. Thus, each legitimates the leadership that provides the most individual benefits irrespective of collective outcomes.

Political agency in elections, governance, and civil society seamlessly blended in with local representations and practices governing transactional everyday life and transcendent social order. Political actors acted in the domain of institutional power informed not by universalist or formal-legalist morality but by the ethics of a society of households, its mutualistic networks of kinship and friendship, and its public arenas of competitive individualism. Power is won, exercised, and guarded by the same individual competencies and social relationships determining success or failure in all social life, from secrecy and cunningness to trustworthiness and solidarity.

Săteni society offers a dual paradox for social theory. Durkheim saw in shared cultural representations—*conscience collective*—a unifying force for social solidarity and cooperation ([1983] 2014). But, although Sătenis share a set of moral values and beliefs, they do not point to universal cohesion. Quite the opposite, they paint the social world as a field of opposition, conflict, and fragmentation. The cultural source of social solidarity in ritual and everyday life comes from a circumscribed, finite universe of kith and kin. Although each villager has such a sphere, their configuration is distinct from all other configurations. Each set of relationships is contextually defined by certain persons, not by an impersonal, abstract, all-encompassing entity such as "society," "Săteni," "citizen," or "Romania/ns." Outside each idiosyncratic moral sphere, social interaction follows collective representation of individualism and non-collectiveness.

We could then turn to an alternative, opposite image of the social as the "warre of all against all," a world of solitary knaves. For Hobbes ([1651] 1904), "amongst masterless men, there is perpetual war, of every man against his neighbor." But Sătenis acknowledge competitive individualism without leading to generalized conflict since there is more to be gained by allying with successful coalitions. The villager follows, supports, obeys, or fears leaders because they can provide benefits either in mutualistic relationships or transactional, competitive situations, not because they have transcendental or institutional authority over people. Sătenis acknowledge personal strength and competence in social relationships that fashion leaders from their midst but they do not fetishize the source of power. Political authority comes only from what one can create out of the cultural repertoire of social interaction, from how one builds, manipulates, and defends personalized relationships of solidarity. Real power comes from social support rather than individual agency, as found from the Yanomamo (Chagnon 1968) to Polish inmates (Kaminski 2010).

Despite being at odds with the principles of democratic, accountable, bureaucratic institutions, Săteni politics display an uncanny stability despite corruption and/or inefficiency. Political conflict comes not from an opposition of worldviews, ideologies, values, or abstract identities, but from contextual configurations of social relationships and individual histories determined by similar cultural representations and practices. As often argued by anthropologists, these cultural and social mechanisms turn conflict into a source of stability.[7] Today's enemies are tomorrow's allies, and the other way around. Configurations of personal trust change but the moral outlook remains. Representations of "us" and "them" do not evoke an essential political boundary, only personal, situated classifications liable to manipulation and change.

The absence or inefficiency of universally and indiscriminately beneficial institutions provided by the state, local governance, or civil society breeds further dependency upon families, relatives, and friends, the only ones to be trusted in cooperative social interaction. Since those formally assigned to govern public interests are certain to look after their own moral partners first, so should anyone. However, this reaches beyond narrow individualism.

There is a way to use both Hobbes and Durkheim's insights to understand the stability of Săteni political society. No one can go it alone in the quest for power in personalized politics. What appears as overall fragmentation is a coexistence of multiple, partial, intricately overlapping spheres of moral solidarity. With no single, all-encompassing moral sphere associated with *all* common goods or universal individual rights, a strong, overarching social contract for all, we have multiple social contracts of various intensity between particular individuals.

In Săteni politics, trust varies between two extreme positions. On one end, the social interactions of political agency pit knaves against knaves, without hope for gratitude or benevolence. Agents act to maximize returns even by lowering the welfare of others, as when two political leaders compete for power. At the other end, actors have strong, mutual ties of cooperation with their core allies, developed in the long term, marked by the transcendental relationships of kinship, such as loyalty between parent and child or between godparents.

Between these extremes, we find a plethora of social relationships having something of both. Răzvan distrusted Emil to the point of paranoia. He fully trusted his parents or his *cumătru* in things political or otherwise. As political operator, Răzvan had to navigate a wider web of social relationships with various levels of trust nurtured with relatives and friends or created with allies and supporters. Emil did the same, with better results. The intersection of democratic elections, institutionalized governance, and local configurations of reciprocity and conflict selected winners and losers. The game remained the same.

When all was said and done, Emil won a Hobbesian victory by out-Durkheiming Răzvan. In the battle of social relationships and representations, the mayor amassed enough trust from more Sătenis than Răzvan. This statement may seem puzzling since Emil seems to have strong-armed many villagers into voting for him. However, everyone knows one stands alone in the booth and can stamp anywhere one likes.[8] Emil could squarely count on the vote of many villagers beyond welfare-indentured servants and other paupers, and not only because his team distilled hectoliters of sugar beet moonshine in the weeks before elections to distribute among easily swayed voters.

As Mihai poignantly observed, political "doggies" shed their fur as quickly as real canids. Răzvan simply failed to persuade enough villagers that he honestly and reliably offered a better deal than the current distribution. Nor could he get enough of Emil's key confidants or his rank and file to change sides. The mayor administered an all-around defeat to Răzvan in Săteni social arenas of cutthroat big-manship and competition for trust.

Hobbes' theory of society-destroying egoism appeared with the English Civil War in the background, a clash of factions but also a deep conflict of ideologies and political structures. Though permeated with distrust and deception, Săteni political egoism plays out within a stable, widespread cultural framework legitimizing not only self-reliance but also personalized mutualism. In action and representation, political power in Săteni comes not from a transcendental, external force but from the transactional domain created by villagers. There is no recourse to sacred values in political projects, no dispute about an ideal world. Sătenis have met the enemy and it is themselves.

Political actors interact with like-minded individuals and speak the same moral language across contextual divisions and social hierarchies. When everyone trusts socially related persons above generic individuals or impersonal institutions, even enemies coordinate to legitimate and perpetuate norms of political engagement. Instead of the destructive war of all against all, we have the many, overlapping, stabilizing covenants of the few. Sătenis are too socially intermeshed, driven by too similar cultural representations to erect salient, permanent, transcendent barriers between each other as political actors.

The coda to their story gives one knot in the weft of Durkheim-meets-Hobbes political stability. Răzvan wised up after losing twice and reassessed his political strategy as a hard-nosed realist. He played his hand for all it was worth. The best odds were not against, but with, Emil. Two common friends, the school secretary and a cousin working for the mayoralty, intermediated the political rapprochement. Răzvan made a covert deal and ran as Democrat candidate. As a mere electoral "rabbit," he helped Emil's first-past-the-post election against a divided opposition. Sătenis witnessed another rivalry turned into alliance by contextual interests and shared representations of political agency. Nowadays Răzvan can be found fanning the mayor's barbeques, where he enjoys the spoils of treason against former allies on the background

of turbo-folk tunes bemoaning untrustworthiness of allies while praising cunningness (Schiop 2017). Emil and Răzvan now trust each other as allies because they came to share a common goal against their contextually defined enemies.

Such stories of political realignment show the stabilizing effect of social and political markets where individuals interact as atomized carriers of personal interests even in the absence of a unitary, shared purpose. Contra Hobbes, we saw in Săteni how separate interests may harmonize in political transactions, leading to a consolidation and reproduction of political power despite perennial conflict. Contra Durkheim, Sătenis show how a society may broadly share the same collective representations of private morality and public self-responsibility, interact according to these principles, and reach a certain political dynamic equilibrium without leading to either collapse or generalized solidarity.

Săteni politics display how limited access orders (North et al. 2013) work at the local level as culture and practice. Ideas and behaviors reproduce despite replacement of actors or conflict between individuals, while political leaders amass and use power using personalized patronage and particularistic morality. Without prescribing universal, depersonalized morality, shared representations and behavior based on narrow, personalized trust sustain the stability of political markets and social norms of interaction. As in graveyards, the result may lead to inefficiency or inequality but still observes a social equilibrium. When Sătenis say all politicians are basically the same, they look at themselves and see the Durkheimian, i.e., collective, representation of Hobbesian self-interest. Of course, Emil and Răzvan were enemies when interests diverged. Naturally they became allies when interests coincided, acting like all Sătenis do in households, taverns, or rituals.

When all Sătenis know and play by the rules of the game, they accept, legitimize, and reproduce the means and outcomes of personalized politics even when results personally or generally disappoint. The Săteni political market limited by distrust in certain people but dependent upon trust in others delivered a stable but low equilibrium configuration. Yet we can observe another phenomenon. Markets can also create new kinds of trust.

CHAPTER 6

Changes in the construction of trust

This chapter describes how an economic actor tackled the Săteni problem of distrust in a fascinating, complex, and central business: housebuilding. In construction work, people sought builders they could trust with such an important project as their home and feared those who make a pig's ear of the job or profiteers. Builders wanted to avoid unreasonable, financially unstable, or cheating clients. Offer met demand in social interactions informed by cultural representations of cooperation, trust, and morality.

In time, technological and financial changes in the mode of production of houses have changed the terms of transaction. Certain economic transformations encouraged or discouraged ideas about fairness and partner choice relevant for the wider moral outlook of actors. New houses meant a difficult but necessary restructuring of trust between builder and clients. To get a sense of the problems faced by a contemporary construction entrepreneur, we should begin from the perennial problem of distrust in the Săteni economy: getting the job done as promised.

6.1. THE HURDLES OF ECONOMIC DISTRUST

Gheorghe, the pugnacious farmer-politician, lived and traveled far from his sheep enclosures and feared that herdsmen would graze animals inattentively, loiter around the pen, or even steal milk and cheese in his absence. He was renowned among prominent shepherds for his ostensive physical corrections applied to workers, thieves, and predatory competitors. Any good herdsman needed a good beating upfront, he said, to feel on his skin who the boss is and mold him into mindful submission.

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But Gheorghe also devised a devious strategy to keep his employees on their toes. He gave them mobile phones and sometimes called saying he would arrive in 15 minutes (while being a 2-hour drive away), or in 2 hours (when just about to reach the enclosure). Other times he told the truth. Laughingly, he explained that they either kept busy waiting for his apparently impending arrival, or he would catch them lazing about thinking the master was away. Workers had no way of knowing when he lied or not. Hence, they could only presume the worst and get down to work. The induced unpredictability combined with fear of violent reprimand insured compliance in an activity severely dependent upon a docile and diligent workforce. If the eye of the master fattens the cow, so did his reputation for menacing unpredictability.

Gheorghe deployed his mental and physical formidability for punishing cheaters and scaring off potential predatory actors in the (sometimes literally) cutthroat business of shepherding. Few Sătenis can or do use such extreme measures in economic exchanges, but cultural representations of labor relationships evoke a deep sense of uncertainty. When trusted relatives or friends are unavailable or insufficient for reciprocal support, people hire workers either occasionally (e.g., for weeding or mowing) or semi-permanently (as herdsmen or farmhouse laborer). Employers often deplore the quality and cost of paid labor, accusing workers of greed and sloth. No one works well unless he works for his own household, they often say. From distrust comes close monitoring, working side by side with laborers to berate them into putting in some elbow grease.

When control over the labor force was laxer, interests of employees often collided with their employers' benefit. A town businessman owned several bars and entrusted tavern management to families to insure trust and solidarity. Family–management–labor overlap worked best since employees only accepted to share financial and stock responsibilities with trusted, close relatives. On his side, the owner could enforce collective accountability over domestic groups unable to shift blame on unrelated coworkers.

When accounts showed a considerable loss after two years, allegedly due to embezzlement by an elder couple to fund their daughter's wedding, the employees had to pay back every penny as they had guaranteed assets with their house. The owner fired the elders for malfeasance[1] and hired another, younger couple. Putting again a family in charge of a tavern did not avoid perverse incentives. The second couple also pocketed money from the cash register and from selling their own merchandise instead of company drinks.[2] Another family replaced them and seemed more reliable for the time being. The boss took fewer chances with a town supermarket he personally supervised, where he installed video cameras to monitor employees even more keenly than potential thieves.

Family trust works as an organizational blueprint for Săteni economy. Most businesses in agriculture, commerce, handicraft, or services remain individual

or family-level enterprises. Sometimes, wider kinship trust offered lucrative opportunities for cooperation. An uncle, a nephew, and his brother-in-law collectively grew a watermelon patch. Each invested an equal or equivalent amount of money, skills, and labor to grow seedlings, erect the polyethylene field tunnels, and take turns irrigating and guarding the crops overnight. They divided three ways the profits of cooperation and repeated the process each season in a stable and mutually rewarding partnership between trusted relatives.

Despite professed autarky, the village economy included many transactions of products and services. People bought and sold, usually for cash or, rarely, barter, vegetables, cheese, animals, meat, or hay and paid people to harvest crops, sink wells, cut trees, repair machinery, or mend around the household. Some are repeated deals with known and trusted partners. These long-term exchanges involve relatives and friends, preferred partners even when slightly better deals could be gained from third parties but carried the risk of losing the trust of established relationships in return for quick but uncertain opportunities.

In spot exchanges with contextual partners, transaction ethics follow a *caveat emptor* principle, whereby each party holds exclusively private responsibility for getting the best deal. After money changes hands, it is difficult to invoke hidden defects or disadvantageous outcomes when buying a bad car or poor-quality fodder. Knowingly engaging in a dishonest, imbalanced deal is called "spike/sting/skewer," an increasingly present term for swindling. Even repeated exchanges without the benefit of moral commitments can present serious shortcomings. Farmers accused oligopolistic dairy collectors of incorrectly lowering the fat content, which determines prices, so they preemptively diluted milk. This widespread practice increased the local collectors' suspicions and defensive measures, arguing, moreover, that they needed to skim a bit since industrial buyers would also underprice the poor-quality milk as in a market for "lemons" (Akerlof 1970).

Distrust of exchange partners increased transaction costs (Williamson 1979). As most transactions are informal and costs of formal justice are too high for villagers, people spend time and effort to find reliable partners and to make sure the deal is fair for their side. Actors had to provide their own enforcement of contractual obligations, by cajoling, threatening, or even punishing cheaters or bad debtors. Reputational damage carries much weight as accounts of fairness, reliability, and competence matter in sundry economic exchanges. Dishonest or rapacious agents are often singled out but raise the question as to whether an exchange truly reflected predation or merely the speaker's self-interested damage of character. Conversely, the reputations of naive, incompetent actors traveled widely, just as taverns carried the rumors of fool's errands. So how would someone start a business in the trust-deficient economy of Săteni?

6.2. THE ROAD TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP

When Mihai returned from Greece, ethnographer in tow, he navigated both familiar and unfamiliar Săteni waters. He returned to the place he knew best to build, for the first time, houses for other villagers. His new kind of entrepreneurship had to face a universal economic conundrum: whom to trust. This was not his first radical life change based on navigating trust. We have already encountered Mihai's mid-twenties family-cum-household reconfiguration, one of many decisions driven by courage, pride, and curiosity in the background of societal transformations.

The youngest and only male offspring of a moderately prosperous family, Mihai worked since early childhood in domestic economy, helping his father tend their family's flock of sheep and with collective farm duties and shenanigans. Resourceful Ioan sent Mihai and two daughters to Bucharest to learn a lucrative craft and financially supported his four years of school and factory training as a metal caster. Mihai graduated and worked for a few months, but the 1989 revolution caught him in Săteni, where he remained to help with family affairs.

They received their land back, but Ioan was already making better money by trading grains for lumber in mountainside markets, a barely legal business during communism. Mihai already learned as a kid the ropes of commerce, from negotiation tactics to greasing the palms of policemen and foresters. Though profitable, the business dried up after the family breakup. Mihai went to one of his sisters, married in Serbia. He learned construction from experienced Vlach master builders before the Kosovo War ended his three years of circulatory migration between Săteni and Vojvodina.

With a couple of good friends, he illegally crossed the border to Greece and survived on day jobs. A minor Roma Greek entrepreneur hired skilled Mihai to get better contracts. Although he felt exploited by a greedy, unskilled businessman, Mihai gained a stable economic position. He learned the difficult Greek language, rented an apartment, and made contacts in Athens' construction industry. His big break came from meeting up through friends with a large Romanian subcontractor of the 2004 Olympic projects. For two years, Mihai was mason foreman in a technologically complex project, working directly with engineers and architects, heading a team of fellow Romanian laborers and earning a considerable wage by Săteni's and even Athens' standards.[3] He followed up with other jobs over a few more years, specializing in masonry and roofing, developing many other skills on the way with his insatiable curiosity.

The 2008 financial crisis sent Mihai home to start once again from square one. He longed to return to his family but also displayed a keen entrepreneurial sense. Years of work in Serbia and Greece had endowed him with technical

skills and professional equipment unmatched in or around Săteni. He evaluated local construction as severely dated, leaving much room for improvement in design, technology, and team management. As people were prepared to pay more for reliable and original buildings, he could do away with inefficient practices in a sweep of creative destruction (Schumpeter 1976[1942]). Moreover, except for remittances to keep his family moderately prosperous in Săteni, his Athens income was invested more in professional tools than in saving up for his house. It is hard to describe the pride and care Mihai took in this exquisite machinery, unique in Săteni and neighboring localities. The objects afforded his skilled performance, saliently indicated his superior mastery, and displayed a costly investment in high specialization.

Like the entrepreneur of Austrian economics, Mihai aimed to profit from an opportunity to transform and link capital from different sectors of the economy (Kirzner 1973; a model independently developed in anthropology by Barth 1967). Migrant remittances brought affluence for several families, along with higher expectations of housing quality. He planned to provide villagers with Western houses at prices tailored for migrant incomes, an opportunity unavailable to unqualified local builders. In economic terms, migration created both the supply of skill and capital from Mihai and the demand from financially endowed customers.

Easier said than done, though. After a decade spent outside Săteni, Mihai entered a market where prospective clients knew nothing about his performance as a hired master builder. His household identity and former professional activities, as well as style of negotiation and honesty, were a known quantity: hardheaded but kind, short-tempered but fair, proud but smart. But could he actually build good houses? Mihai had no more money to finish his own home, until recently the largest investment of time, effort, and money in Săteni. The skeleton building loomed as ambivalent proof of his expertise. Could they trust in his performance? On the other hand, could he?

Mihai was not a business neophyte, having engaged in agriculture and trade for a large part of his life, managing large amounts of money and navigating intricate social relationships with partners. Yet exactly this knowledge of Săteni representations made him extremely cautious of village transactions. He confessed to never feeling or encountering such distrust in Athens, but he found it normal in Săteni. His entrepreneurial strategy had to bypass the uncertainty of Săteni beginnings. He needed for people to see his capacity to erect beautiful houses at correct costs. He also faced the problem of finding solvent transaction partners of discerning taste offering predictable and affable business intercourse who also trusted him in return. It is no surprise that Mihai found trust in a familiar Săteni way. But it did not come for free.

6.3. PRICING OLD TRUST FOR NEW HOUSES

Mihai's business kicked off with a deal made in kinship heaven. His elder cousin Ana called on him to radically refurbish her house. Apparently nothing new, for as long as people remembered, families, relatives, and trusted friends and neighbors built each other's houses. However, a summary archeology of Săteni homes shows how technologies and moral expectations changed over time.

The oldest buildings still standing date from the early 20th century. The family and a group of relatives, friends, and neighbors built these wattle-and-daub structures in a one-day work party called "*claca*."[4] Hosts provided merriment as food and music and reciprocated in kind across the long duration of personalized mutualism, with no money payments. Most materials were homemade or recycled from older buildings, with minimal financial investments. This first archeological layer appeared in Ana's household when her grandfather bequeathed a plot at the wedding and organized the construction of a house for her mother as part of matrimonial arrangements in the 1930s.

We saw how weddings changed because marriages and families changed after collectivization. And so did houses. The second layer appeared during the socialist 1970s when Ana's family build a house called a "stable," which was used initially as summer kitchen and storage but slowly turned into living quarters as her mother's house deteriorated. Following Săteni practice at the time, the family, primarily and helped by a few close relatives, churned out mud bricks and did most of the masonry, doing away with "free" collective labor.

However, new technologies and styles required cash for store-bought (or trafficked or stolen) materials such as asbestos roofing, cement, or timber. Money procured by the family from petty commerce, wages, or ritual gifts now also paid for experts (such as electricians or stovemakers) or day laborers. Often, relatives provided necessary services or goods, at preferential rates or reciprocated across time. While no one lived exclusively by construction work, only very poor or very skilled families remained entirely autarkic in terms of homebuilding, and most joined the moneyed economy.

Ana's large family with its skillful members managed with only petty savings to build three more households for out-marrying offspring. All projects benefited from parental and sibling solidarity and intensive mutualistic relationships with generous and capable relatives. Ana invested much effort into keeping her offspring united by fair treatment, and relatives satisfied by long-term counterprestations. A gnomish lady with foxy eyes penetrating her sunburned and wrinkled face, Ana was a larger-than-life character whose loquacious wit, industry, cunningness, as well as talent for both insult and praise helped pull her through life despite poor odds. Pointing to her household and her rugged hands, she humbly brags, "I did it all by myself, no one helped me."

What she meant was no one acted out of pure generosity. She repaid all debts and oversaw a domestic mode of production of houses to conspicuous success.

Now in her 70s, Ana had one last home project. Yet this time she faced a different economy. During my fieldwork, contemporary dwellings used reinforced concrete structures, walls of ceramic or aerated cement blocks, profiled metal roofing, tiles, and laminate parquet flooring. Urban-style indoor toilets and kitchens added to significant design changes compared with older styles. Affluent families used double glazing and polystyrene insulation and added another level or elevated attic. Modern construction work was almost exclusively specialized, requiring experts for shuttering, mixing concrete, bricklaying, roofing, drywalling, gypsum plastering, and expertise in electrical or sanitary systems. To build a good modern house, one needed a lot of money that an average family could save in 10 years or more.

Though registered as a family-managed project, most families informally hired tradesmen, primarily a master builder for overall design and execution. While most lacked relevant formal education, professionals learned the craft by apprenticeship and self-teaching in the blooming building sites in Romanian cities or abroad. Teams included several workers, some permanent skilled collaborators and some unskilled day laborers. A considerable financial expenditure paid for this workforce. In turn, their expertise and honesty became vital for a successful construction.

The third layer of Ana's domestic archeology appeared after her youngest son Dani landed an exceptionally well-paid and secure job. In one year in Germany (those in Greece need three or more), he sent enough money home for house renovation. Dani invested in his own future as customary inheritor but also chose to put family interests before selfish gratification in cars, partying, or gambling like other Săteni youth. Proud Ana extolled his virtues and dutifully managed home affairs using this financial windfall.

Luck had it she needed a good and trustworthy builder just when Mihai sought his breakthrough in Săteni construction. For Ana, her cousin was the perfect choice. Not only was he skilled and conscientious, but also a relative whose business relationship continued a pattern of mutualistic interactions tracing back to traditional homebuilding. Proof of past amity were Ioan' few days of hard labor for his niece's stable some 40 years before, and Mihai's lending to Ana's daughter a batch of bricks saved for his future projects. On her end, Ana helped Mihai's wife left alone to manage the household while her husband worked abroad, including for Ioan's funeral.

In a way, Mihai's first job carried further a history of moral cooperation in construction. Incidentally and symbolically, Mihai's work built upon a previous layer of Ana-driven construction. He tore down the old roof of her stable, erecting another level covered with modern sheets, and insulating and plastering the entire house. Their economic cooperation also straddled between contemporary market relations and the domestic mode of house production.

We can understand the mechanisms, strategies, and tensions in societal economic transformations by looking at how Mihai reasoned and negotiated the price of his service.

In terms of effort and responsibility, Mihai's work went beyond the call of customary expectations of help between cousins. Unlike his father, construction was his family's main income source, and he was very keen on maximizing entrepreneurial profits. Moreover, the builder had doubts about dealing with Ana since she and her daughter once offered a below-market price for his bricks. Yet, surprisingly, Mihai started without settling a financial agreement. When work began, Ana tentatively asked for an estimate, and he replied it was too soon to tell, and that he will later ask for a price "as between relatives." She expressed relief and promised he would not be disappointed.

During the project, Mihai asked only for money to pay workers and cover his living expenses. After a couple of weeks and with more than half the work done, Ana asked Mihai for an estimate fee to tell Dani. At first wary of giving an exact amount, Mihai relented and said 1000 euros with some provisions for future change. When the job was done, Mihai increased the final amount to 1500 (minus money already paid). Ana admitted that the generosity of the fee compelled her to reciprocate with future services.

In public interaction, Mihai and Ana seemed in perfect harmony, reciprocally amiable and trusting. But each had other thoughts as well. Ana lost sleep thinking of Mihai's pigheadedness and expensive demands. Mihai feared his cousin's thrifty approach to business, her carefulness in making a profit out of all interactions, and, importantly, her wicked tongue, often bad-mouthing unworthy neighbors, relatives, or anyone getting on her wrong side. He feared asking a sum that Ana could interpret as exploitative. Just to be on the safe side, he minimized earnings as much as possible.

Ana and her children did behave generously, by helping with Gabi's garden work, and occasionally delivered grains, cheese, and meat. Mihai's family could surely use such inputs but still wondered how much the givers thought these "free" gifts were worth in the final account, and whether the barter was not disadvantageous. Nowadays, Mihai would never do this job for less than 3000 euros. A few hundred euros worth of products could not balance the financial scale. So what covered the rest?

First, Mihai gained in terms of reputation. A few months before dying, old Vasile Ion passed by the site and shouted, "Mihai-o, where did you bring these 'books' from? Your grandfather raised sheep, your father only knew 'the horse, the sack, and the mountain' and you . . .?"[5] He bit his fist and hyperbolically cried "billions, little Ana, you have here billions!" while the old woman chased him away with giddy pride. Before departing, he nodded uphill to his brother's household, "Others have a thousand sheep, and did shit all."[6] Such was the hate between brothers that even an unrelated villager's success could be used as symbolic weapon. Thus works the "mouth of the village,"

imaginatively carrying on representations that elevated Ana and Mihai's relative social worth through their joint project. Mihai put all his skill and effort and even cut profits to make the best of the first chance to showcase his entrepreneurship. "Books" and fulfilled promises could now be openly read by future customers in the tangible reality of Ana's house, which made many villagers turn their heads.

Second, Mihai also fulfilled his duty of treating Ana preferentially at a certain direct cost to himself, as moral relatives should. Their relationship and his reputation as trustworthy cousin endured despite underlying tensions. Ana and her son acknowledged and repaid more of the implicit debt over time, such as Dani gifting Mihai with secondhand tools from Germany. Her expressions of satisfaction in particular mattered for Mihai's reputation, especially coming from a demanding and astute customer.

Preexisting trust in kinship solved some problems of entrepreneurial beginnings. Dealing with the known quantity of relatives offered an economic launch pad for Mihai, with costly investments in reputation and honoring moral contracts. But not everything went smoothly when working with and for kin. Part of the problem was the tension between different moral expectations during the social division of labor. Contemporary technology and economic constraints created new problems for negotiating fairness in economic exchanges between builders and homeowners.

6.4. FAIRNESS BETWEEN THE SHORT TERM AND THE LONG TERM

Mihai also built a storehouse for second cousin Relu with money from his wife Mihaela working in Italy. After the largest part of the storehouse was completed, Mihaela called Gabi one evening, and, somewhere in the middle of the conversation, she inquired about Mihai's fee. The next evening, Gabi returned Mihai's estimate of around 1500 to 1700 euros. Mihaela expected an even higher price and expressed her gratitude by promising generic future rewards for Mihai's kind offer.

It seemed a repetition of the Ana scenario, but for a moment of intimacy. We were enjoying a cup of coffee at Mihai's house when Gaby hushed his attempts to intervene and pressed me to estimate the fair price for Relu's project. I had previously discussed it with Mihai, who gave me a Geertzian wink to avoid disclosure. Taking into account size, difficulty, the number of workdays, and the real fee, I said 2500 euros, still lower than market prices. Gabi was quite pleased with my higher estimation and complained that her overgenerous husband only thought of others while few thought of his household when times got hard. Mihai quietly assented, muttered "Relu is still Relu," and changed the topic.

This intimate scene reveals a tension in Mihai's economic interests. With her husband working all day, Gabi alone could not at the same time manage the large household and grow cash crops and animals. She had no time or opportunities for paid work and even had to help Mihai by cooking for his work team. Unlike Ana, Relu, and many other relatives and generic villagers engaged in domestic agriculture, his household became entirely dependent upon entrepreneurial incomes. Unlike part-time builders of yesteryear, Mihai could not afford to wait for compensation in the long term of delayed kin reciprocity of traditional building, nor could he indefinitely afford lower-than-market prices for relatives. Short-term needs required immediate and full payment for expensive professional performances.

Gabi played an important part in a signaling strategy to communicate his economic shift. She called at every job that Mihai did for associates and found a way to turn the conversation toward the message that their family needed serious wages over and above the cycle of delayed moral reciprocity. Food was expensive, tools had to be replaced or repaired, and sometimes they had to borrow money for clothes and groceries. Her directed grievances emphasized that "we are no longer like you"—no livestock, no land, no migrant remittances, nothing except Mihai's income. She was better positioned than Mihai to convey the message by counterbalancing his generosity with the normative representations of the competent householder suffering unfair deprivations.

The message, though veiled in good-natured innuendos, was clear: Mihai had to curb preferential treatment of kith and kin. His expected prices were higher. Specialization had its advantages, as a proficient builder could earn considerably more than agriculturalist Sătenis. The economics of division of labor were not lost to clients valuing the worth of craft. Mihai did a few more projects for relatives and friends, offering decreasing but still-generous terms, increasing his portfolio and exposure. But a change was in the air.

Some kin relationships even became toxic during construction. He roofed the house of a Relu's brother Gelu, again for a lower-than-expected price. Mihai even accepted his second cousin's offer to pay half in fodder and maize, although he would have much preferred cash. Later, he avoided doing another job for Gelu, claiming that other promises took precedence. A few days after, he heard a rumor from Relu that Gelu went around saying, "What, Mihai is too proud and busy to come work for me? He forgot how I put food on his empty table?!" Rumors added insult to injury. It was already bad to accept unfavorable deals with relatives, but Gelu unfairly shamed Mihai. He portrayed the household incompetence of a destitute relative who repays nurture with disdain once doing better in life. This was the risk of working for kin when transfers in kind could be disingenuously presented as vital assistance. Mihai kept quiet but became even more convinced that business with relatives outlived its scope and purposes.

The straw that broke the back of a strained kin relationship came when Gelu was asked by an uncle (from a branch unrelated to Mihai) to offer the builder a fence job. Mihai accepted and took Gelu as a coworker, although his cousin often absconded to care for his cattle and nearby household. The client was happy with the result, asked Mihai for the price, paid on the spot, and even threw a turkey into the bargain. Gelu approached Mihai and the following conversation took place:

G: How much did you ask for?
M: 6 million.
G: What, so little?
M: It's just a fence, how much could I charge? So, what should I pay you?
G: Half, of course.
M: What?!?
G: Well, I brought the job and we both worked side-by-side.

Mihai entered one of his dreadfully silent stances. He handed in half the bills, turned on his heels, and revved up his car. Gelu ran after him and tried to push a banknote through the car window. Mihai pushed it back and drove off in cloud of dust and smoke. Never had he thought Gelu did anything more than relay the offer and put in a bit of effort, not even close to an equal partnership. To justify his rage, he mentioned a follow-up story.

Days later, Gelu found out that Mihai got a turkey, so he went and asked his uncle for a similar fowl. The client acquiesced and then told Mihai about the shameless demand. Externally provided proof of Gelu's insatiable and unreasonable greed was one more reason to end all business transactions as with other uncooperative relatives or friends. But this was not a wholesale rejection of kinship, only a necessary and specific increase in selectivity and distrust. For Mihai, construction work became a major domain of "holding" or "not holding" onto kin.

Relu once had finished mowing Mihai's hay and was preparing to leave when the builder called him back for payment. Relu shook his head and turned again to leave. Mihai then tried to push some banknotes into his coat but Relu threw them back with a smile and ran off. He did not forget the low price the builder had charged, and he honored at every occasion the moral contract of reciprocity. Of two cousins, only one was a trustworthy relative to Mihai, respecting long-term commitments to fairness beyond contextual unbalances. Business deals with higher stakes than the historical reciprocity in traditional domestic agriculture did not cancel out the importance of kinship but merely threw into sharp relief which relationships could be trusted in the long term, and which couldn't.

Preexisting mutualistic interactions were not endangered by the social division of labor but remained too few and financially limited to satisfy Mihai's entrepreneurial ambitions. Embedding business in existing social relationships of recurring moral interaction offered only a temporary and costly solution. Previous associates offered the entrepreneurial resource of justified trust, but their number, capacities, or unfair expectations limited Mihai's economic prospects. He politely delayed, refused, or scrupulously selected requests from intimates in favor of better projects for new customers in Săteni and elsewhere. The leap into uncharted social relationships dispensed with the costs of preferential conditions but also removed the certainties of interacting with proven partners. Moreover, he also had to convince previously unknown clients of his honesty and professionalism.

6.5. CREATING TRUST UNDER SOCIAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL UNCERTAINTY

No matter how much need in of new jobs, Mihai never went out looking for a client. When I suggested a business visit to someone returning from abroad with money and building plans, he flatly refused—the person knew where to come if truly interested. He banked on his fame to receive quality, self-selected clients and claimed that going around Săteni for work sent out a bad signal. He feared conspicuous eagerness would be interpreted by villagers as deviousness. Mihai knew of dubious contractors collecting advance payments from several clients, then leaving them "with their eyes pointed at the sun." Better to wait for interested parties to initiate business contacts couched in cultural practices of amiable sociality.

Prospective clients did seek Mihai, either at his home on Sundays or other holidays carrying work interdictions, or in taverns during weekday evenings. The two men[7] usually kicked off with clients obliquely asking about Mihai's work schedule in a particular period and then outlined some plans. If Mihai did not like the project or the person, he invoked a busy schedule—often a true but not always main reason. Another way to get out of a deal was to immediately ask "a price to run away from," as Mihai called it, a high amount scaring away an unappealing client.

But if an interesting job was in the air, Mihai changed the cockiness and irony employed in public performances to affable generosity. Settings and attitudes started to shift the social interaction away from rugged individualism toward amiable sociality between business partners. A successful overture ended by setting up a site assessment meeting, as was the case of Mirel, a newlywed migrant to Spain looking to build a large family home. Mihai surveyed the area with an expert eye, mentally designing the steps ahead, and assessing project needs and resources. He asked Mirel about available materials, gave

advice on premium deals from building suppliers, laid out plans for the construction phases, and even offered solutions to technical problems.

He talked about many practical issues as if the job had already been secured, giving out his time and expertise to return and reconfirm his client's trust. The interaction seemed to avoid essential economic details: the negotiation and possible rejection of a fee. As if offer already met demand and the deal were sealed, parties seemed fully engaged in the project. Every mention of money was met with an optimistic "We shall see about that, find a way, we are people after all." So, could the trust of moral contracts with kin such as Ana or Relu expand indefinitely should the need arise?

The image of actors engaged in this joint project without paying much thought to money is again largely an illusion based on public communication. Just as when building houses with relatives, the issue was rarely far from the actors' minds. Mihai had one good reason to take so much time before telling Ana or Relu the final price. He needed a couple of dry runs to estimate effort, and the unforeseen problems of materials and workers, and trustworthy relatives offered the opportunity for gaining experience in better estimating the Săteni social and technological processes. From his first visit to Mirel and prior to agreeing to undertake the job, Mihai scribbled surfaces and outlays and jotted down schedules and figures about workdays and wages in a pocketbook. As time went by, the notes amounted to a basic accounting system used to compute entrepreneurial costs and revenues.

Mihai had a few more meetings with his client and even began some work before offering his fee estimation. Rates increased yet remained affordable and Mirel accepted with no haggling. Behind conspicuous benevolence and superficial disinterest in discussing money, language betrayed the conflictual aspects of offer meeting demand. When partners reached the initial agreement involving terms and prices, they said, "we made peace"/"we made up," the same saying used in the tense marriage negotiations of yesteryear. Parties knew that each side tried to get a better deal while the price setting was a zero-sum game where one party won by decreasing the other side's position. Mihai sought to make a profit, but also to stay within his client's means by offering a better deal than competitors.

The apparent disinterest in money also reflects that the amount revealed less about what it actually ended up paying for. In Săteni construction, information about the object of transaction was insufficiently provided by prices and had to be created by reliably sharing knowledge. The initial price was just a starting point for an economic process fraught with unpredictable developments. Mere financial details could be ironed out later unless uncertainty and distrust made parties fail to reach a mutually beneficial agreement.

His brother-in-law and a worker once told Mihai after work that he should ask for clear and higher advance payments. That way, clients couldn't seek other builders or make unreasonable demands. The entrepreneur shook his

head and compared this with the ways of friendship. If you start keeping accounts, if you pore over each and every penny going between you, it means you care more about money than about the friendship, that you do not trust someone as a real friend. Sometimes you lose a bit, and sometimes you win a bit, but transactions remain fair in the long term as long as both rely upon the other's goodwill.

Mihai needed to prove both honesty and the proficient competence that justified his earnings. Avoidance of cold calls, conspicuous interest given to client welfare, and the underplaying of financial matters were careful exercises in the management of representations of mutual honesty. Mihai continued to build trust in mutuality by salient cues such as his annoying economization of materials by reusing every scrap. When I got tired with pulling out nails from every rotten plank we reused, he told me that a good builder does not waste his client's resources. Instead, he makes do with salvaged goods like the ancient cost-cutting autarkic households. Our budget savings made clients trust his benevolence, and effortful thrift also legitimized the overall fee compensating our labor.

The second domain of his communicative intentions was to facilitate the clients' accurate interpretations of actions and outcomes. Mihai spent work breaks explaining the intricacy and adequacy of every project phase. Such crash courses in technology increased client awareness of Mihai's contribution and the just value of his remuneration. He constantly reminded me that people are naturally apprehensive and a successful job depended on avoiding and clearing expected misunderstandings. For days and weeks at the building site, Mihai did everything possible to inform clients of his enduring and attentive benevolence.

Halfway through the project, Mirel came to our lunch break and said figures did not add up. If Mihai asked for 50 euros per sq m and his house had 100, why pay 10,000? Sweating but calm, the builder explained that the cost was multiplied by the two levels of the house: "Ask around, every builder will say this is how it's done, you know me, I could not invent it!" He took a piece of broken brick and wrote down the multiplication on the raw concrete foundation. The client brushed the matter aside: he had enough money; he was just curious. Now everything was cleared up and the price was deemed fair. This was an educated young man working in Italy, more knowledgeable about modern economy than many other clients, but still Mihai had to persuade him of honest intentions.

The episode made the builder even more aware that his clients were either inexperienced or cunning, requiring constant and attentive communication. For many hours across a job, Mihai's talk supplanted and supported his work. Without redressing the asymmetry of information between client and provider, representations of acting in a market for "lemons" (Akerlof 1970) could

make clients afraid of being cheated and drive down prices to push out honest but costly builders such as Mihai.

Mihai was not cheap but projected the image of an ambitious, resilient, and flexible constructor. The kind of man who gets the job done since nothing was impossible. This was an important asset in Săteni construction since, of the many projects I witnessed, initial plans of construction bore only a basic resemblance to outcomes. There are no strict plans to be followed. When villagers had no leeway with officials to oversee the site, they just registered a plan bought from an architect, often merely legal fictions for the actual project.

The ongoing designing of surfaces, partitions, and forms suffered considerable alterations, some from client proposals, others suggested by Mihai, or others as adaptations to external opportunities or constraints. A client found discounted profiled steel roofing, and Mihai agreed upon their quality but had to explain that additional tools and time increased the price while it looked like a no-cost alternative for the client. Most alterations required Mihai to increase the final fee. Proof of honesty and competence lowered the unpredictability of an evolving transaction far more complex than a spot commodity or service exchange.

Our team usually worked in the client's household (and ate homemade lunch), allowing for an intimate yet respectful access to the family's life. Mihai listened carefully to clients' conversations and used piecemeal cues about sources of income and family investment to estimate his customer's financial resources. When he detected a wealthy client, he suggested further improvements to gain additional work. Instead of the agreed-upon iron fence, he took an old man to see a previous project of intricate woodwork dependent upon Mihai's unique artisanship and expensive routing machine. Demonstrating and reassuring clients of his fair, non-exploitative motivation to get the job done at a reasonable cost, Mihai needed to be particularly persuasive, as the real client was the man's daughter in Austria. Mihai suspected that she worked in the lucrative sex industry and was very proud and flashy in her tastes. In any case, she gave the go-ahead over the phone, agreeing to the extra fee.

Săteni houses appear through an open-ended, complex technological and social process with multiple interrelated actions and transactions (see Figure 6.1). Asymmetric information, new ideas, choices between alternatives, ecological affordances, or serendipity makes the construction of Săteni houses a process in time with a dynamic trajectory of prices where the initial agreement is as provisional as the first drawings and the first conversations. To make sure prices fairly compensated his services, Mihai worked to make his clients trust him in negotiations against inescapable economic uncertainty. Since each side benefits from the continuation of business in fair conditions, amiable negotiations over performance can ensure the mutual satisfaction of partners. But not only clients needed to trust Mihai. He also needed to trust them.

Figure 6.1. The social construction of a house

6.6. CHEATERS AND SUPERPARTNERS

A construction project temporarily interlinked clients and builders by aligning their interests. Until the project ended successfully as both parties desired, they co-owned a project in progress whose outcome depended on mutual trust. Mihai needed his client's trust in his skill and benevolence. Clients needed to assure him of their honest solvency and fair financial compensation. But the dependence upon trust was asymmetrical in terms of the time sequence.

Each Saturday evening, Mihai received money from clients to pay laborers and provide for his weekly expenditures (the wage of a skilled foreman). The final payment of up to half of the fee was due after completing the project.

This bulk money went to Mihai's capital investment and household consumption during nonwork periods. By that moment, he already relinquished any control over the project, without a guarantee for successful reckoning outside the capacity of parties to honor the agreement.

Transactions remained entirely informal since the construction was registered with the local government as a family-based project without legal proof of contractual relations. Everyone wanted to avoid taxes and bureaucratic interference, but this created a significant risk for both parties. There is no official framework for regulating transactions, no documents signed or exchanged, and everything depends upon honoring pledges or, otherwise, personal enforcement. Even at a disadvantage, Mihai often rejected intermediary payments beyond weekly fees to show his client he deserved money only if and when the job was well done. Sometimes, he felt tested and thought that accepting the money would show a lack of trust and financial overeagerness. But it takes two to cooperate for mutually successful promises.

Mihai built a small house for his friend Cristian. With the job almost done, the client announced that he ran out of money. In lieu of Mihai's payment, he offered to send his father to work Mihai's garden. The builder felt that his arm was twisted but accepted. But he had to chase away the old man when discovering his labor did not even pay for food and drinks consumed during work. Mihai was further incensed by remembering how he previously hired Cristian as a friendly gesture and not for his ambiguous skills. He refused to finish the house of his now-downgraded friend (who had to make do with a drunkard foreman) and swore to never accept barters again. "When you show kindness, people take you for fool," he bitterly concluded. And this was not the end of his entrepreneurial predicaments.

A friend told Mihai that Viorel, publican in a nearby town, was interested in his services. The builder extended and reroofed a large house and, as usual, proposed an initial fee that suffered ineluctable changes due to construction amendments. He vaguely knew Viorel, and they became socially closer during the job, but the final payment of around 1,000 euros was not honored. The publican blamed financial shortages, but Mihai found out he had just bought a new car. After a while, Viorel stopped answering calls and gave Mihai the cold shoulder or another evasive maneuver each time the rightful fee was mentioned.

Mihai was caught off guard by this turn of events. He knew about the publican's reputation as a rugged businessman but noticed no credible signs of potential malfeasance. The social interaction onsite and beyond had been smooth, although he felt Viorel was a bit too arrogant. The entrepreneur attended his client's mother-in-law's funeral and paid many visits to his town pub in the flow of conspicuous amity. He even wanted to believe that financial problems rather than malevolence caused the delay but changed his mind after several months. Mihai could understand and tolerate snags in a transaction as

long as clients would discuss matters with him and mutually rearrange a deadline for payment. In this case, he clearly misread the situation as one of covert shame instead of outright cheating.

Mihai had no efficient means of coercion. With no legal proof of contract (meaning his informal work was illegal in terms of tax and safety regulations), he pondered threatening or even roughing up the bad payer: just empty talk, as Viorel was a heavy man in many respects. To start with, he was the powerful town mayor's brother, enjoyed connections with local underworld figures and tough men, and could not be cowed by physical means, even by a sturdy builder. Overall, Mihai had no alternatives to enforce the monetary promises once the other party voided the moral contract. Social distance made things worse, as there were no significant social relationships Mihai could use to pressure the cheater. Their common friend was no better placed since also having a financial disagreement with Viorel. Other friends and relatives were sympathetic but had no available resources or motivation to risk a confrontation. Nor could he harm the reputation of his bad client, already known as a shrewd operator. Mihai should have known better. Eventually, he largely renounced any hope of getting his money while grinding his teeth each time the publican falsely promised to pay as soon as possible.

Aware of the problem of economic informality in enforcing agreements, Mihai became more scrupulous. He extensively but discreetly asked third parties about his clients' business history, refusing Razvan's father-in-law when his friend admitted his affine was a bad debtor. Mihai also began to split increasingly larger projects into distinct phases. Concrete structures, walls, roofing, plastering, etc., became separate items for negotiation and discrete payment. At each step, his strategy was not to rip off the client but to gain enough to keep his business for the subsequent phase.

In recurrent negotiations, each party looked forward in time. They feared not only a disadvantageous counterprestation but also that a disgruntled partner would quit the deal. Mihai had a little trick up his sleeve. Sometimes, he designed the entire structure for a special kind of roof only he could reliably finish. An intentional lowering of prices for earlier phases maneuvered clients toward his technologically monopolistic position where he gained a premium in exchange for a complex and rarely available performance. Yet Mihai could push the envelope only a little bit.

The builder often worried that dissatisfied clients would bad-mouth a substandard performance and cause reputational damage. After catching word that a former client had complaints after the end of the project, he went directly to his house and explained again the computation of labor and price. He even repaired an unrelated wall as an after-sweetener to avoid gossip that could spread like wildfire and hyperbolically damage his entrepreneurial image. Mihai paid extreme attention to his business reputation in his first two years of entrepreneurship. He also learned the hard way how to be more

careful about his business partners and to determine more precisely whose morality could be trusted.

The process of meeting new, unknown, or deceptive clients had major drawbacks but also opened new avenues for trust in cooperation over and beyond construction projects. Florin, another publican in the same town, accosted Mihai with a grandiose project: a three-storied mansion built from scratch aiming at hyper-modern amenities such as floor heating and solar panels. The businessman saw Mihai's work in town, including the infamous publican's project. He asked around about the entrepreneur's qualities to decide whether he was the right man for a once-in-a-lifetime job. Though wary of taking on a complex job needing many specialists and carrying large financial commitments, Mihai decided it was the moment crowning his reputation as the best builder around.

The first phase construction went on for 2 years, hindered by technological snags and temporary financial setbacks for both client and entrepreneur. Mihai soldiered on, and the client also hired him to refurbish a restaurant and a beer garden, increasing his income sources that were also invested in his expansive domestic project. Both partners delivered on expectations despite the length and complexity of their transactions, which continues unabated at the time of writing. After 10 years, the house is almost finished, but Mihai still has some work to do every now and then. Actually, they recently took their relationship to the next level when Florin gladly accepted an invitation to baptize Mihai's newborn daughter.

The cultural transformation of a business partnership into kinship flowed naturally from the reciprocal morality proven in economic transactions and the feelings of personal affinity between men of similar age, status, and tastes. For Mihai, his ritual brother offered a huge capital of economic trust. Florin socialized with businessmen, politicians, policemen, mafiosos, civil servants, and other local elites he treated to late-night parties, offering rounds of free drinks[8] and gregarious conversation. Some were relatives, some good friends, most were acquaintances, and all opened epistemic doors for Mihai. Florin vouched for the credentials of *cumătru* and introduced Mihai to an exclusive social network.

They served as new clients (he netted a profitable job for a first division footballer), useful connections to solve institutional problems (such as setting up a legal company and health insurance), and intermediary nodes in spreading his reputation as an honest, competent entrepreneur. Using such social resources, Mihai could better weed out the bad apples in the construction market, and few would dare risk the outrage of his ritual kin and his extensive network of associates. On his side, Florin secured the loyalty of an educated and witty person whose professionalism secured his business investment plans, who outdid himself producing the splendor of Florin's mansion envied by the entire town.

Theirs was a non-zero-sum game repeated without an end in sight. Mihai and Florin cooperated well economically and transformed their partnership using the socially acknowledged morality of kinship. Fictive kinship transformed empirical expectations into normative expectations (Bicchieri 2006). Their ritual and economic intertwining followed folk principles of axiomatic amity and became institutionalized on the basis of choice and verified trust. The cultural representations governing their relationship were no different from other ties of fictive kinship inside Săteni. But their case of extension of relatedness resulted from the transformation in the mode of production. Technological and social changes created the prospects of moral contracts of enduring quality from economic exchange in the "company of strangers" (Seabright 2010).

Florin and Mihai met as offer and demand in an open market modulated by reputation, and they then grew closer as cooperative partners in long-term economic projects sustained by generous and trustworthy interactions to such an extent that making kin was the natural thing to do. Yet their social paths would have never crossed were it not for the creation of an industrial market spanning beyond preexisting moral connections and narrow geographic sites. Behind the extension of social opportunities lies a subtle but momentous evolution. It is fascinating that Mihai chose to make friends and relatives out of trustworthy clients just as, before, he had to make reliable clients out of the kith and kin. In fact, the moral distinction between two categories of people became increasingly blurred for someone like Mihai.

6.7. THE ETHICAL FASHIONING OF THE ENTREPRENEURIAL SELF

Mihai was a man of his society, and a successful one at that: a proficient professional, a proper householder, a good relative and friend. Though romantically prolific when young, he was sexually and socially faithful to his wife. Mihai clumsily displayed affection for his family despite occasional outbursts of anger, though rarer than acts of lavish domestic generosity. Like the peasants of old, he shunned flamboyance for utility at every step. He smoked like a chimney, especially when entertaining with friends in taverns or when trying to wrap his mind around a construction problem, but he was one of the very few male teetotallers in Săteni.

Changes in the economic environment offered Mihai the opportunity for cooperation in market interactions driven by division of labor and affluence. But he did not change moral codes when building houses. His entrepreneurial morality belonged to a broader outlook. I will start from a blanket statement qualified by partiality: Mihai was a very kind person. He displayed a general goodwill toward many other people. Accepting the bias of my personal

inclinations and circumstantial position, I can reliably report from my first-hand experience of Mihai's inclinations for care, reliability, generosity, and honesty.

He paid costs for investing in my welfare, from feeding me and introducing me to people, to taking on board a clumsy and annoyingly verbose apprentice and sharing some very close secrets. He even wasted a week of paid work to build a stove to prevent me from freezing to death. Above all, he was the least suspicious informant who understood the intended impartial, theoretic, generalizing aspect of gathering sensitive social information in ethnography.

Despite coming from different Romanian backgrounds, we converged upon a morality defined in impersonal, universal, non-particularist terms. We often diverged over the importance of ethnicity or kinship but also agreed that people can and should be nicer toward a wider part of society than prevalent Săteni representations limit to domains of family, relatives, or cultural intimates. He was also tolerant of social diversity in religion, ethnicity, eccentricities, and even unorthodox sexual inclinations that Sătenis loudly abhor.

His reflections on divinity and theology were quite limited, Mihai being something of a science-fascinated agnostic. Church and its leaders received little reverence, and he especially mocked the local priest for venality and hypocrisy while overtly respecting his holy status. Yet Mihai felt and followed the force of religious customs. Some from superstition (fear of misfortune for working on a saint's day), some from habituated pleasure (as in the feasts of patron saints, Christmas, or Easter), and some from fear of ridicule (accepting the priest's blessing of the house though he believed it amounted to just splashing water), but other gestures had stronger moral content.

As all Sătenis should, he felt eternally indebted to parents (and past ancestors in general) for the gift of life and identity and punctiliously honored their memory in home, church, and graveyard commemorations. Mihai knew but cared less that villagers gossiped about such things, since he was driven by honest feelings of love for parents. But unlike most villagers, his ritual alms more often went to hospitals and orphanages outside Săteni and less often to relatives and friends. Mihai considered it more moral to direct his increased financial means to help the poor than to strategically and symbolically exchange gifts with kin, and he acted without much fuss.

Mihai also invested in the public good, like few Sătenis. A man recently released from prison and two brothers, all past convicts, came into the village tavern to celebrate and started picking on weaker patrons and passersby. No one dared challenge the crew-cut, tattooed, slang-sputtering hoodlums except Mihai. He first tried to talk some sense into them, only to avert a switchblade. Mihai delivered a single debilitating blow with his enormous fist, aiming at the body and not the head, fearing he could kill the opponent. The gang suffered a couple more physical corrections before leaving with a promise for retaliation by arson.

Mihai took upon him the costly task of enforcing village security even though he himself and his mates were in no peril. He needed not enhance his well-known and deserved reputation as a never-defeated, first-rate fighter and much preferred a tavern profile shining through wit and generosity. He was a builder, not a hoodlum, but someone had to do something. Mihai thought and felt compelled to act against aggression despite personal risks.

Mihai was not politically active in terms of canvassing for a party or seeking election to office but had strong opinions over principles of local or national governance. He hated government corruption or stupidity, even though he benefited sometimes from personal interventions of high-placed connections. Officials should strive for the good of the village, not fill their pockets by impoverishing others. He scolded but also took pity on the mayor's "doggies" and their dependency. Mihai supported Emil's adversaries out of personal resentment of bad experiences but also moral anger at their public venality, only to be become cynically disappointed when Razvan became the crooked politician' mirror image.

I often pushed him to run for mayor or at least local councilor, but each time he deflected the issue, saying people would think he also pursues the "meaty bone" rather than trust his good intentions, and he argued that he had little patience or diplomacy needed for politics. Instead, he threw the ball right back, saying someone like me should run for mayor in Săteni: an educated outsider but knowing the village. My independence would make a neutral, objective politician: once mayor, I would not treat him any better than anyone else—even worse perhaps, he laughed pointing at our recurrent quarrels. He also pointed out a rule-based view of governance and honesty as good qualities for an administrator, though in the next sentence he derided my naiveté and starry-eyed expectations. Pessimistically, he concluded they (i.e., the rest of local politicians and public servants) would "eat me up," profiteering from my lack of social power and unwarranted trustworthiness.

Mihai also had ideas about politics in general, though it is hard to pinpoint exactly what they are in abstract or Romanian-relevant ideologies. He criticized wasteful and patronage-ridden state institutions delivering few public goods at immense costs and thought hard-working entrepreneurs like himself should be supported by the state or at least left alone. The state should provide the poorest with means of basic subsistence, education, health, and opportunities for employment. Taxes were justified as long as the people in power used them wisely and fairly. He often spoke of society, Romania, and the state as moral communities bound by reciprocal commitments beyond private networks of mutuality. He not only talked of social redistribution but walked the walk, at least a few steps, by giving to the needy and protecting the vulnerable.

Another way to describe his ethical worldview is a weakening of the zero-sum-game approach to life. He bemoaned the constant conflicts, petty cheating, and miserly opportunism that kept villagers poor and mistrustful.

Though he personally knew how dysfunctional the collective farm had been, he deplored the squandering of property and the return to subsistence agriculture, as well as the vicious internecine fights over inheritance and predation between relatives or neighbors. He often said that villages in Western Romania were better off because "people there help each other, are united, not like here."

Without suggesting Mihai was morally unique, many of his choices and ideas were quite rare for Săteni standards. One is his greatest failure so far. Despite the many years of well-paid migrant work followed by Săteni entrepreneurship, he is yet to finish his mansion—admittedly an overoptimistic project. Other migrants put all their hard-saved finances into houses built over several years, but at least they had something to prove their social worth, unlike Mihai who, ironically, was hired to build them. The cobbler's children walk barefoot, he bitterly joked about the sore spot of his pride.

Putting money in capital investments first could create the means for a comfortable life and a proud household in the long term, but not the other way around. When flush with money, he bought an expensive multipurpose electrical saw and only renovated the garage where he kept his tools—an extension of business, not a domestic investment. Mean relatives mocked his incompetence, yet many a migrant fallen on lean times had nothing to show for years of toil except a half-built house while Mihai slowly increased his means of production and portfolio.

Here lies a difference between trust in the long term over the short term (Parry and Bloch 1989). Most migrants and newly rich put their resources in the safe but capitalistically barren materiality of houses. Mihai bet on his entrepreneurial prospects of finding high-quality economic partners outside the secure domain of family or the increasingly uncertain domain of relatives. All Sătenis have a long-term perspective over the world, but Mihai's was wider and sensibly different. It was not building one house, but housebuilding. It was still the family and the kith and kin, but also the market of potential clients. To run a good business, he needed the trust and mutuality of personalized relationships to extend, with discrimination but without necessary limits, to all economic transactions.

6.8. MORAL INCLINATIONS AND MORAL ENVIRONMENTS

The temptation to use one man's story and worldview as expressive of societal processes needs the rigorous methodological warnings about generalizing from isolated cases. But science can benefit from the unique ethnographic insight into the complexity of mental representations and social situations analyzed in detail at the individual and sub-individual levels. As Evans-Prichard noted, "A single informant known intimately is often a more reliable source of

information than the pooled statements of many informants less well known" (1976:70). Ultimately, society is composed of many individuals such as Mihai, with their thoughts and emotions, guiding actions and social relationships through internal processes consciously or unconsciously available to actors. Moreover, the study goes beyond the anecdotal when we integrate and compare the interior life of an individual with his society and culture and their structural patterns and mechanisms.

One hypothesis in need of more rigorous testing is that Mihai's widened and long-term moral outlook owed something to his early environment. A life history approach (Sheskin et al. 2014; see Safra et al. 2016, for an experimental study in urban Romania) can explain how the moral inclinations of Mihai and other well-to-do children developed differently from those of other less fortunate Sătenis. Many, especially among the older generations, remember how they slept on many an empty belly in times of famine or after fighting over scarce food with many siblings, how they wore the torn clothes of elder siblings, how they had to work rather than go to school, and how their families unraveled from violence or alcoholism.

Like other people his age or younger but radically different from the generation of his parents and many poorer Sătenis, Mihai benefited from relative affluence during childhood and avoided chronic or episodic deprivation way until his migration experiences, which he met with fortitude and optimism. By and large, he experienced constant if moderate increases in personal welfare and exposure to cooperative environments in Săteni and elsewhere. In this developmental hypothesis, structure and serendipity caused a long-term strategy of favoring cooperation over predation, trustworthiness over deception, and a reputation for honesty and generation rather than formidability.

It is my ethnographic impression that an increasing number of Sătenis shared Mihai's moral trajectory, benefiting from economic development and a demographic transition to smaller siblings sets. Increased affluence could also work in another way of changing moral attitudes and behaviors. The transformations in the local construction industry were one example of larger Săteni market integration. Economic or political processes made some Sătenis move away from the autarky of a domestic mode of production, and even beyond the sphere of tested but limited long-term reciprocal relationships.

Even if we focus on a single individual, we can still see how Mihai's trials and tribulations, improvisations, errors, fears, and strategies responded to a societal shift. The Săteni mode of production slowly changed from a domestic affair to a market interaction, and Mihai stood in the forefront of economic transformation. Division of labor spurred by advances in technology and resources made house construction an economic partnership open to potentially any individual having something relevant to sell or buy. Mihai, as any ambitious entrepreneur, became a citizen of the entire economic world affording and needing his business, provided it offered trustworthy and profitable

interaction. Personalized relationships between relatives or friends offered the drawing board and testing ground for trust and cooperation in construction at the same time that deals with real kith and kin strenuously turned into market exchanges.

Unlike Sătenis more removed from markets and especially long-term, complex transactions, Mihai experienced and sought more of the reciprocal satisfaction that came from economic contracts with generic customers. Lifelong, a family may need a builder once or twice. Mihai needed one new client after another. The important and difficult requirement was to carefully select and cultivate trustworthy partners and to be recognized as such by them. Here is where Mihai's ethical personhood served him very well.

Apart from skill and tools, Mihai thrived on selective partner choice. He knew and continuously learned whom to trust and how to make himself trusted. But he did more, going one step ahead of caution. Mihai gave a bit from himself before receiving something in return, costly but pedagogical episodes of ungratefulness or cheating notwithstanding. "Compared to what or whom?," you may rightfully ask. The easiest contrast comes off in business interactions with the likes of Gelu, Cristian, Viorel, or even Ana. In their cases, real social interaction did not deliver on expectations of fairness and mutuality. Yet Relu, Florin, and other clients such as Ana's neighbor or the star footballer, be they kin or stranger, met Mihai on his moral terms, and all benefited from reciprocal trust and generosity.

Time and again, Mihai proved trust in him was not misplaced. He never defaulted on his promises and only influenced clients with skillfully enacted and moderate price hikes. He inspired and proved moral trustworthiness apart from technical competence, more than compensating for less favorable traits such as stubbornness, outbursts of anger, fixations, or perfectionism. All in all, Mihai had the right edge needed for the uncertainty of Săteni construction. Whereas I described his effortful proving of fairness and competence, it needs repeating that he was seldom deceptive. Mihai truly desired mutualistic business interaction and sought like-minded partners, and his inclinations and behavior paid off economically. His moral agency combined with his position at the forefront of changes in Săteni economical structure might, in the future, make Mihai push for social norms of generalized trust in economic exchanges (Bicchieri 2017), but he cannot do it alone.

For all his reflections on moral ideals, Mihai remained a hard-nosed realist. He knew that many people did not share or did not follow up on expectations of generalized mutualism. Consequently, he constantly adjusted his behavior to external patterns of social interaction and restricted his benevolence to trusted social partners. Like most Sătenis, he sees society as given and impossible to change through individual actions. "You turn after people," he confessed, when he had to act vigilantly and prudently in choosing whom to trust or not.

Social division of labor (Durkheim 2002[1893]) under a market system may increase trust and generosity in a society (Henrich et al. 2010) by increasing the quantity and quality of social interactions conducive to mutualistic cooperation. In the case of Săteni, however, we can observe a low penetration of market exchanges, focused on particular villagers like Mihai with more access to cash, skills, infrastructure, or opportunities. Moreover, major social and economic resources in Săteni were governed by politicians such as in Emil or Răzvan and their transactions based particularistic relationships rather than generalized morality or common ideology.

There is no heroism in ending up the generous fool against deceptive actors, as he constantly scolded me for letting too many misdeeds slide past. The force of moral obligations only applies when others are moral too, in economic transactions just as we saw it happen in the sphere of kinship. For Mihai as for all Sătenis, principles of fairness apply in negative fashion as well (Baumard 2016:171). Bad relatives and bad clients who betray the trust of moral contracts must be met on their own terms, fighting deception with deception, meeting force with force, responding in kind to negative reciprocity.

However, he was neither the first nor the only one in the village to hold broader moral horizons. Mihai sought the company and business of people proving to be moral partners driven by non-zero-sum attitudes. Such long-term oriented actors might become "trendsetters" (Bicchieri 2006:33) in stabilizing new social norms of increased trust in generalized cooperation, extending the circle through new economic transactions and shared expectations of goodwill.

Increased affluence might change moral attitudes and behaviors in the future of this Romanian village. The transformations in the local construction industry are one example of Săteni market expansion and integration. Economic or political processes made increasingly more people move away from the autarky of a domestic mode of production, and further beyond the sphere of tested but limited long-term reciprocal relationships. Their story remains to be written some other time, but they are actively constructing it just as Sătenis did over time.

CHAPTER 7

To trust or not to trust

A painting by a little-known Romanian artist spread fast on social media. Ironically entitled *The Romanian Revolution*, it depicts a pastoral scenery in the 1989–1990 winter, centered on the ruins of a collective farm squirming with people from a village amusingly called "Woetoyou" (see Figure 7.1).

A woman waves a flag with the socialist effigy removed, a man throws down Ceaușescu's portrait, but most have other plans in the revolution. Alone or with their families, men and women, and children and elders, all grab something to take home. One has a goat under his arm, a family pulls a cart overloaded with furniture, some heave under sacks or tools or furniture, others are taking the roof off, and latecomers hurry inside to find anything left. The procession is led by the priest balancing a demijohn and the policeman with a bound turkey, each on one side of a Rubensian woman making a bundle out of her skirt and impudently showing her undies.

Social media overflowed with comments from Romanians describing similar rural stories. I too was struck by the uncanny analogy with Săteni eviscerated stables. The artist keenly captured the energy and social coordination in the total annihilation of collective farming, and the feelings of historical retribution and opportunist acquisitiveness. Something in the style and assembly of people and things in "The Inheritors" made me think of Old Dutch masters depicting peasants in collective revelry. Here is Bruegel the Elder's *The Wine of Saint Martin's Day*, which also involves a body of peasants, this time centered on a gigantic barrel dispensing the first wine of the season (see Figure 7.2).

Merry and energetic—at least before over-quenching their thirst—they all face inward toward the cask and each other, unlike Romanian "revolutionaries" carrying the loot outward toward their homes. With the exception of a mounted nobleman, the society depicted evokes unity, equality, and similarity.

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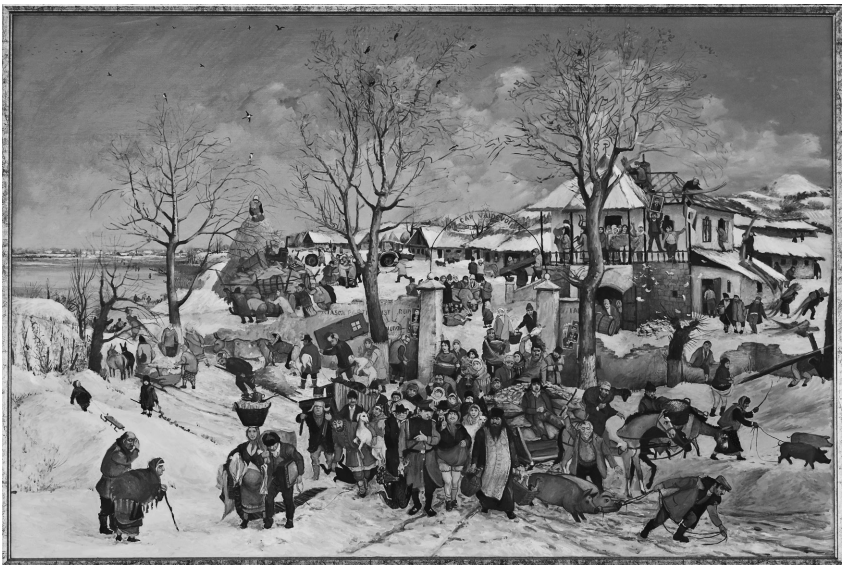

Figure 7.1. *"The Romanian Revolution,"* by Eugeniu Barău, in the private collection of Prof. Mircea Cinteză, Bucharest

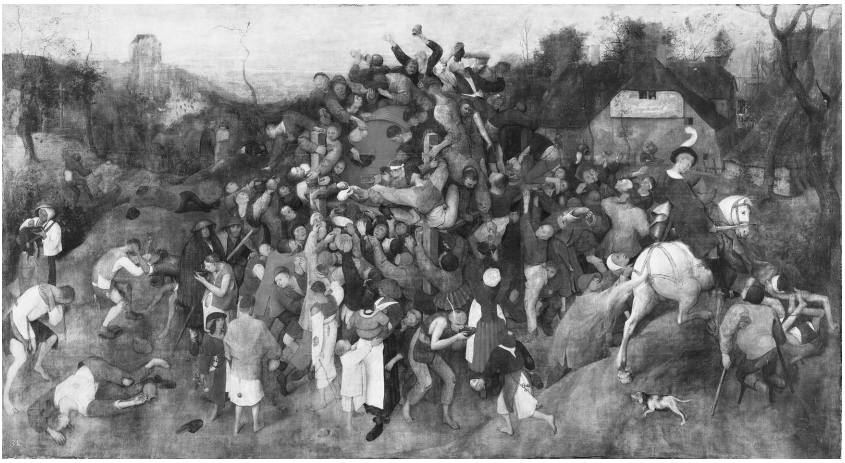

Figure 7.2. *"The Wine of Saint Martin"s Day,"* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Museo del Prado, Madrid
Source: (commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bruegelsanmartin.jpg)

Eager and crammed as they are, each will get a saucer of precious liquid as those closer to the barrel generously pour down on those below and away.

Both paintings illustrate a cornucopia yet convey different meanings. Some are destroying wealth and cooperation; the others reap its fruits. The first feast is final, the other cyclical. One is a tragedy masquerading as joy, the second a

true carnival. Anthropologists are schooled in the art of teasing out symbolic inversions and the liminal moments where the social world turns topsy-turvy only to recreate and legitimize social order (Turner 1969). Was there a Săteni counterpart?

Săteni society had its moments of collective revelry at weddings or holy days and even harvest, but none were truly universal and really reversing the everyday society and its worldview. Weddings involve particular families, religious celebrations, or folk customs such as carolers or young men masquerading in fantastical roles and focus on domestic arenas. Winegrowers did bring a few dozen liters to share around village taverns but, rather, to show off their unique product and distribute it preferentially to relatives and friends.

Either due to ethnographic inability or standards too strict, I concluded that Săteni had no real cultural institution challenging the moral principles of everyday life by offering a symbolic unity and amity between each and all to move beyond the widespread and normative distrust. No tradition or event contradicted the epistemic and moral separation between social spheres, the underlying suspicion, conflict, and lack of cooperation. But just as the 1989 revolution came unpredicted, so did an event sending the village on a whirlwind of benevolence. A few weeks before my departure while wrapping up and chasing ethnographic loose threads, Sătenis received their cornucopia.

The river crossing the village swelled after heavy rains, and the dam of an aquafarm collapsed a few kilometers downstream. Fat carps madly swam upstream through Săteni but stopped before another dam in Catuneni. All able-bodied villagers, from mayor to disheveled shepherd, dropped everything and went fishing. Some leisurely laid out rods, umbrellas, and barbeques while others dusted off their poacher seines and nets. All went home with tens of kilos, up to cartfuls of fish, after easy and pleasurable work.

Men did most of the catching, organized in teams for bulk harvests. Women and children helped with cleaning, cooking, and storing the fish. With so much perishable food, even those unable to capture anything received plenty of gifts, given the extraordinary glut. No one had the slightest qualm over the bounty's provenance; some schmuck lost his wealth, but that was just fortune, God's will. Appropriating a natural resource was the sensible thing to do, absent any interdiction or punishment. If anything, all villagers were willingly participating in a minor conspiracy to exploit a natural boon. But something else transpired in this incredibly lucky event.

For a few days of production and consumption frenzy, Săteni social attitudes changed sensibly. Villagers carried a smile on their faces, happily shared their resources, cooperated or at least did not hinder others, and collectively celebrated their good fortune. No one had time or reason to quarrel, since spoils were enough for each and everyone. Everyone took a break from other orders of business to focus on making the most of the situation. Even tavern

interactions turned impressively friendly when anglers boasted noncompetitively of their skill and technology. Each one had a story to tell; all bags were full. There was no need or opportunity for conflict, competition, deception, or predation since everyone got as much as needed and more as minor accomplices to a victimless crime.

One moral of this story is that people's representations and behavior adapted to circumstances. A fortunate disaster turned suspicious and latently hostile Săteni villagers into a friendly, bacchanalian community. At the risk of overreliance on an anecdote, those merry days suggest a natural experiment that falsifies the notion that Sătenis are distrustful in a paranoid manner or chronically uncooperative or fundamentally selfish in an essentialized, fixed, constant way, be it from culture or psychological inclinations or the intersection of the two. A sudden upward shift in available resources induced a surge in generosity and benevolence in social relationships. Their moral principles did not change, but one variable involved in moral choices was modified. All shared a common interest when the context offered a non-zero-sum game where one's benefit did not decrease the others'. All could end up gaining without deception or predation.

The canvas, however, was temporary. Fish exhausted, Sătenis returned to their social lives as if nothing had happened. Life went on without villagers marking in any symbolic manner the reproduction of social order—just as the inversion appeared out of thin air. Actors turned on their feelings of generosity and enthusiastic collective agency to reap the non-zero-sum fruits of hazard and switched them back off when the extraordinary harvest ended. I asked why people never threw back small fry to ensure stock reproduction. A man sharply rebuked my proposal: "it's easy for you to talk, but if I take away your scholarship and you have to feed your family, what would you do?!" Short-term familiar orientations trumped long-term collective prospects, just as when villagers coordinated to demolish the farm stables.

In social interactions around the communal pasture, local governance, graveyard, or sundry neglected public goods, Sătenis showed recurrent failures to reach cooperative arrangements at a larger scale and longer-term orientations than the safe sphere of strong personal relationships. The ethnography described and interpreted these cases of low-level social equilibrium. It analyzed social expectations, moral norms, incentives, formal and informal institutions, ecology, or historical forces that inhibited large, stable, long-term cooperation and generalized norms of morality beyond personal networks of mutualistic interactions. To live up to its promises, the book shows how living in a culture of distrust made villagers coordinate on partition rather than coownership of the two ill-fated stables.

7.1. LIVING IN A CULTURE OF DISTRUST

This book explored how Săteni live with distrust given their cultural representations of morality and cooperation. "Culture" or "cultural" are problematic terms (Kuper 1999), but the perspective employed here is that of an epidemiology of representations (Sperber 1996). Săteni culture is a distribution of mental and public representations, and some are more cultural than others when they are shared by more people over a longer period of time. Change and variation notwithstanding, these relatively stable and widespread representations and their associated behaviors form the bulk of my empirical material.

Trust and distrust are cultural phenomena grounded in how minds and societies work (Boyer 2018). In old-fashioned anthropological terms, this book offered a study of social structure in Săteni. I have described and interpreted patterns of moral expectations in social interaction and suggested some mechanisms governing the reproduction and change of representations and practices. Yet it is just one account proposed by an anthropologist, while other ethnographers could find many more angles from which to understand Săteni society. Given my perspective and anthropological path into Săteni, it was "convenient enough" à la Radcliffe Brown to make sense of what I found fascinating and puzzling by studying how trust works in this village society.

Although lacking a unified theory to inform observations or to be tested in interviews, my ethnographic interpretations became theory-like when I began to develop causal explanations. Some remained at the purely micro-level, such as why did this man treat that neighbor that way. Others reached more middle-range levels, involving recurrent practices in everyday life such as rituals or family feuds. And still others aimed at more general, long-term phenomena: representations and practices widely spread in Săteni, their persistence and transformation evident in the recent and distant history, the Săteni culture proper, so to speak. This book proposes that a red thread connects all these models under the ethnographic method of thick description (Geertz 1973) as an anthropological explanation of mechanisms linking minute behaviors with institutions, minds with cultural practices and representations, and ecology with history. Without seeking a general theory of Săteni society, I analyzed the crucial role of trust and distrust in several of its key domains in extensive case studies of social interactions.

A previous working title for the book was *To Trust or Not to Trust*, since Sătenis' social choices made sense when seen as always oscillating between cooperating and not cooperating, between moral bridges and amoral boundaries. In the end, the choice of the final title insisted upon Săteni as an exemplary case study of a low-trust society. Moreover, social expectations are never simply black or white, always trust or always distrust. They come in various shades, conditional upon other expectations, amenable to change, and

connected to past or future choices. However, Sătenis do seem to choose more often distrust over trust in fellow villagers and people in general.

In the first two chapters, I showed how personal interests so often collide between Sătenis. Whether fighting over prestige or money in taverns or scrambling to make a living from a limited environment, villagers encounter contexts where competition prevails over cooperation in social interactions. Bodies may be harmed, reputations soiled, property stolen, or promises broken. Land and prestige are among the many limited goods that pit Săteni against Săteni, and men or households are responsible for their welfare without expectations of external generosity. If anything, grounded or ungrounded suspicions of threat make the wider society seem like a dangerous place in which each Săteni person and family has to carve up living for themselves. A state of constant vigilance pervades social life.

However, where there is competition, there is also cooperation. Sătenis do not expect benevolence from random, generic social interactions, but they expect and offer help in mutualistic relationships. From thinly woven tavern cliques in Chapter 1 to close-knit families in Chapter 2, from dyadic relationships like friendship or patronage to multilayered relationships of kinship presented in Chapter 3, Săteni individuals create a universe of personal ties based on reciprocal moral commitments. Some of the fundamental relationships begin at birth; others appear through marriage or ritual; friendship grows from work, business, politics, weddings, funerals, tavern play, or random encounters. Some relationships endure forever, some only appear shortly before death, many come and go. Fairness intuitions and cultural norms govern how relationships appear, reproduce, change, or disappear. The systems of domestic mode of production and kin morality have constantly adapted to historical changes, yet cooperation always seemed to plateau at the level of personalized relationships.

The apparent paradox is how an atomized society survives in relative stability without a strong moral code uniting all villagers, without universalistic principles of cooperation. Chapter 4 showed how Sătenis endured across time and beyond earthly existence by investing in restricted social relationships as means to a transcendent existence. Sacred values symbolized a personalized morality linked with households and kinship, and so did their political strategies for local or national governance discussed in Chapter 5. Abstract, impersonal duties never gained much ground among Sătenis, and private interests surpassed universalistic religious dogma or modern democratic ideologies in the villagers' representations and practices. Social fragmentation led to a stable equilibrium where individuals, their families, and their networks of relatives and friends competed for earthly or spiritual ascendance. A market of ritual prestations and political brokerage delivered private goods even at the expense of the collective good. Moreover, neither religious nor party identity solidified into stable cooperation groups that would splinter Săteni society

into irreducible conflict. Private transactions and personalized trust made the social world of Săteni go round.

Various forms of distrust protected Sătenis against failures in cooperation, predation, or other costly asymmetries of interests. The social equilibrium resulting from this precautionary approach to social interactions remained at a low level, its limits imposed by objective factors such as ecology, technology, history, and national politics but also by subjective factors such as narrow trust, generalized suspicion, imperfect knowledge, or short-term opportunism. Yet moral expectations and patterns of cooperation have always changed, as observed in the transformations of kin relationships and the local responses to political turns in the past century. Though ethnography tends to offer more of a static X-ray of a society, it may also capture the signs of the change to come.

Across history, Sătenis have changed the way they marry and hold on to relatives, the way they earn property, prestige, or political power. They also changed the way they work, as documented in Chapter 6, which followed key informant Mihai and his struggle in the transition to a new mode of production. Spurred by technological evolution, social mobility, and economic affluence, his entrepreneurship grew in the safe ground of kinship and friendship and then outgrew the limits of interacting only with known and tested partners. Specialization, financialization, professional reputation, and labor management pushed Mihai toward open markets with extensive networks of partners. New economic opportunities and incentives aligned the interests of clients and providers in the social division of labor in the local building industry. As it has always been the case in Săteni society, trustworthy behavior toward trustworthy partners brought long-term benefits, and new economic arrangements can extend cooperation beyond the personal sphere of family, kinship, and friends.

By focusing more on the anthropological encounter, this book offered only a brief account of the many phenomena involved in the social distribution of trust. In particular, the ethnographic approach would benefit from more attention to local and regional history and ecology. The heightened sense of distrust may have origins in causal processes outside the agency of Săteni actors, which adapted their social interactions to cues from the social and material environment. A brief overview of the past suggests some structural consequences for the cultural representations of distrust.

7.2. THE WEIGHT OF HISTORY

The fish windfall and other events of moral transformation described in this book showed that people can change their social expectations and interactions. But a long term perspective indicates the rarity of free lunches. Fate

seldom treated Săteni kindly. Elders remembered another 1950s flood when water got so high that they could fish from their porches, but that event destroyed crops and animals. The opposite of cornucopia appeared far more frequently in village history. Rinderpest, droughts, epidemics, famine, war, forced collectivization, and postsocialist collapse of agriculture and industry are all events that unexpectedly and heavily hit Săteni society over the past century. Going back further in history, we find deathly epidemics, serfdom, and devastating invasions.

The social distribution between trust and distrust that seems to stop Sătenis from making a better deal out of their social interactions seems less surprising if we understand its historical context. Repeatedly over the past generations, villagers fought for mere survival against unpredictable crises and against each other. The 1946–1947 famine mentioned in Chapter 2 was one sequence in a historical cycle of social collapse that may have served as ecological attractors (Sperber 1996) to guide Săteni moral principles toward the primacy of basic survival, as in the case of the misfortunate Ik (Turnbull 2007). But how much do these life-or-death moments account for contemporary worldviews?

Such gruesome events might provide a cognitive anchor for long-term salient representations of social possibilities when the world turns out bad. The capacity for mutualism may vanish overnight, as told in stories known by young men about a time before even their parents were born. The memory of social trauma transmitted across generations and provided for a pessimistic account of human nature for folk sociology. The default position is to keep resources close to home base and aim for as much autarky as possible. For the rest, make sure to trust the right people and fear the desperation or greed of the wrong kind of people, and be sure you do not mistake one for the other. The images of cutthroat sociality, of zero-sum game interactions, provide a justification for suspicion, caution, and even hostility. When push comes to shove, anyone may end up looking after her own self above everyone else in the world.

This precautionary if realistic view of human morality also has roots in social institutions with historical depth. Low-efficiency technologies in agriculture and local economy made Săteni existentially vulnerable to ecological fluctuations but also kept them poor and politically weak during the past centuries when villagers had little more mastery over their social fate than they did over the weather. Romanian serfdom lasted longer than in Western Europe (Stahl 1980) and reproduced into other forms of peasant dependency (called "neo-serfdom" by Dobrogeanu-Gherea 1910). Relationships with boyars and leaseholders depended upon individual transactions, creating a system of patronage without a collective body of negotiation or political action.

Elders told me that there once was a land cooperative in Săteni, and they still called certain lands "*obște*," an ancient term for rural collective ownership.

I traced down the founding charter based on a law for collective buyouts of land from boyars. Eighty Sătenis associated in a credit and savings cooperative in 1906 with participations of variable size (17 to 1000 lei, mean 88, median 44, with 1 leu ≈ 5 gr silver). The document mentions many contemporary family names and shows that many high-status Sătenis are the descendants of the land rich more than a century ago. The teacher, the priest, the mayor, and several other notables held the lion's share. The collective was far from egalitarian and was short-lived. A combination of national politics and internal disagreements dissolved the cooperative. Once again, peasants internalized property and production to the domestic domain despite the meager returns of a subsistence economy.

Another form of apparent collective action was the 1907 jacquerie starting in North Moldavia, which spread to Săteni. Land records were burned and landowners threatened with expropriation. But even that was not a coordinated, cooperative event. Only certain villagers with special grievances participated, and most remained passive. The army violently crushed the rebellion in the last historical moment that peasants were a political threat in Romanian history. Land reforms turned indentured peasants into freeholders, especially after WWI.[1] They also received increased political rights, but with mixed effects. The increase in land endowment soon leveled off due to demographic-increase-cum-partible inheritance. Low market prices and technological inefficiency left little for capital or property investment for family social reproduction. Political life was riddled by patronage, discretionary use of local governance, and vast asymmetries of power between social actors (E. Weber 1964).

The natural and built environment, the social cues of limited prosociality in rituals and everyday life, relative deprivation, and historical unpredictability corroded trust and cooperation (Nettle 2013). Anthony Pagden (in Gambetta 1988) argued in the case of Southern Italy that rulers and states did much, intentionally or unintentionally, to erode or prevent public trust from replacing private trust. A similar scenario might account for the legacy of Moldavian feudalism, as suggested by recent empirical research. Economists conducted trust games in two localities about an hour's drive from Săteni (Karaja and Rubin 2021 in press). One of them belongs historically to Moldavia, closer to Ottoman and Russian influence and institutions, similar to Săteni. The other village was in Bukowina, under Austrian governance for 150 years until 1919. Although the two villages stood next to each other within the same commune, researchers found more generalized trust in the Western-ruled village if the respondent's grandfathers were born on the Austrian side. In this natural experiment, cultural (even indirect) exposure to institutions delivering public goods, rule of law, and efficient administration made people more trusting of strangers. Săteni, however, did not benefit from a political administration focused on abstract rule of law and bureaucratic depersonalization. Moreover,

the Romanian passage into modernity did not deliver trust in institutions or general social interactions.

The Săteni social structure dramatically transformed during Soviet-inspired communist rule, with collectivization of land, inhibition of social dissent, but also new forms of labor and technology. Forced industrialization offered opportunities for internal migration, and cooperativization of agriculture increased productivity. Sătenis had hardly any institutional means of control over their community or society at large in a totalitarian regime, investing more in small-scale, private, and covert social interactions. The end of socialism returned private property rights, free markets, and the trappings of democracy at the cost of immediate setbacks in productivity associated with the domestic mode of production and a dysfunctional political system.

History was seldom kind to Săteni villagers, yet they soldiered on. Moreover, they had their share of good fortune as well. Most people benefited from the redistribution of boyar domains; advances in public health and education; electrification; the socialist mechanization and professionalization of agriculture and urban industrialization; the return of private property and economic and political freedoms in the 1990s; and integration into the European Union and access to foreign labor markets. An uneven, fluctuating, and far-from-spectacular increase in living standards make contemporary Sătenis better off in material terms than most of their ancestors. A part of this good fortune comes from beyond their agency, as in national policies or larger economic trends impacting their lives. They have, nonetheless, actively created a good amount of their welfare, from the frugality of self-denying elders to the sweat and toil of migrants, workers, and entrepreneurs.

Across these many changes, the only stable and resilient structure of morality was the private sphere of family, relatives, and friends, variously defined in time. The long-term fate of each individual relied on cultivating personal relationships within existing cultural institutions. Civic, political, or state organizations; religious ideology; or formal economic institutions provided no serious or predictable source of trust and cooperation. Instead, personal networks of reciprocity served as limited avenues for cooperation. Villagers trusted people, not abstract institutions, and managed to make rules work to their advantage by co-opting the benevolence of officials.

Another form of impersonal trust took a severe hit across history. Some steps toward social modernity backfired, as in the case of institutions of epistemic trust in science or justice. Sătenis encountered the clamoured scientism and egalitarianism of socialism but noted its many contradictions and failures. By this day, they scorn abstract, theoretical propositions that remind them of myopic bureaucrats "which cannot tell a sheep from a ram" (i.e., those "seeing like a state"; Scott 2008). Instead, they embrace customs and practical knowledge as a safe and tested way of life. Laws attacking their livelihood, directly when unjust or indirectly when enforced, discretionary, made

them wary of recourse to blind justice and, rather, tried to gimmick the system by their own social means. It may seem ironic that people living under such conditions of powerlessness and vulnerability developed a strong discourse of independence and self-reliance. Yet Sătenis managed, for all the precarity of their existence, to survive against all storms of history, and so did their cultural representations of trust and distrust.

Autarky was part and parcel of their survival kit, next to renouncing any hope for external support and preparing for the worst. Peasants held fast to the basic means of securing a livelihood and adapted to everything the world threw at them. By cunningness or force, by improvisation or custom, they reproduced a social order of a household society with private spheres of morality and a prudent worldview where anything bad can and will happen. Distrust served well as deterrent to exploitation (Yenkey 2018), though it has also led to equilibria of low cooperation across history. However, peasant atomization also prevented the development of irreducible social conflict and protracted violence. Distrust could not coalesce into coordinated aggression when the definition of stranger or enemy was flexible and more preoccupied with the foes within Săteni society than external actors.

7.3. THE FLEXIBILITY OF PERSONALIZED TRUST

There is one sort of evil that Sătenis never experienced in discernible history: threats from a certain category of person or social group inside or outside the village society. The "other" in Săteni did not define a qualitatively distinct kind of person as opposed to "us," no matter who did the conceptual separation. In folk-theoretical moral terms, a villager living next door could be just as much a stranger or a mutualistic partner like anyone else in Săteni, the surrounding villages, Moldova, Romania, or the entire world.

No social classes or political organizations appeared as collective units in ideological or social struggles. Rich, middle-class, or poor villagers were all peasants in cultural and social terms, divided not by essentialized and qualitative boundaries but by transactional hierarchies, socially permeable and inclusive. Săteni had no religious or ethnic out-group that could deliver a Romanian or Christian identity and parochial altruism. Seasonal Roma camps traveled through Săteni, and villagers transacted goods and services with them though they feared stereotypical Gypsy thievery and deceptiveness. Though seen as exotic and weird, Sătenis sometimes accepted requests to baptize their children. The recently sedentary Roma in a nearby town evoked no better feelings, but they rarely interacted with villagers and were seen as more of a minor nuisance.

A large Jewish community used to dominate the same town, and older Sătenis remembered their strange customs as well as keen commercial

acumen. Peasants felt cheated and exploited by crafty traders yet benefited from imported goods, professional services, or business opportunities offered by the industrious minority. Many Sătenis developed long-term mutualistic contracts with merchants and professionals, and an old woman tearfully described how a Jewish doctor saved her from deadly pneumonia with antibiotics. Many local Jews were expropriated, deported, and killed in the Romanian Holocaust, with the participation of Romanian townies and nearby villagers including some Sătenis, especially those associated with the fascist Iron Guard. Except for a handful of people, the survivors migrated to Israel as part of the post-WWII aliyah, and their once prominent presence stays hidden in seven derelict synagogues, schools, and houses occupied and transformed by Romanian and Roma townspeople. Yet some people protected their Jewish associates, and some older survivors remained to live on good terms with majoritarian Romanians.

For all their representations of ethnic essentialism, tense social interactions, and stereotypes of untrustworthiness, neither Jews nor Roma had been a functional out-group structured against or radically apart from Romanian Sătenis. For better or for worse, none coagulated as an enemy, as an all-out competitor or cooperator with Săteni villagers taken as a whole.[2] They interacted in particular transactions, mutualistic or predatory, not as a representative of an allied group, but as a contextual partner or opponent.

Listening to Sătenis, one can easily realize that the enemy was within, not outside the gates. The conditions of life pitted villagers against each other, Romanian against Romanian, Orthodox against Orthodox, Săteni against Săteni, neighbor against neighbor, brother against brother. The moral other was an opposed mirror of oneself, and not perceived as an essentially different kind of person. Sătenis distrusted other Sătenis because they understood how another like them could be similarly opportunistic in the absence of verified commitments.

Representations of in-groups and out-groups appeared everywhere in Săteni society, from families to political alliances, but they were neither transcendental nor narrowly or essentially defined. Each individual could form many cooperative or conflictual alliances at various moments with different people. Each person had an ego-centered classification of friends or foes based on culturally shared norms. The identifiable set of moral partners changed all the time. No corporate groups beyond families transformed into perpetuating institutions beyond the mortal span of individuals or their everyday interactions. Even within a family, a member had her own unique sphere of relatives and friends as an extended group of reciprocity and intimacy. As seen in the ethnography, who was in and who was out of the moral sphere remained a perennial question with temporary answers across the life of social actors.

To the absence of culturally marked social borders beyond the family level, we should also add other signs of social flexibility in defining and acting one's

identity. The amnesia over the potentially Slavic and Bukovina origins of many villagers, the absence of material culture or oral history reaching more than 100 years, and the shallowness of genealogies reinforce the image of social fluidity. Moreover, migration and marriages have transferred people in and out of Săteni for many generations through the porous boundaries of the geography-based administrative unit. Actors continually defined and redefined their identities and social relationships without an ascribed and transcendental group identity.

There is nothing essential in being a Săteni villager or a competent and acknowledged social person. As observed in ethnography and experimental data, one could become a Săteni without a biological or historical root, or even coming from a different kind of people such as Roma, and still received the full identity, rights, and obligations of a villager. Săteni peasants have in their turn transformed into villagers in Moldova or other regions, or into city dwellers in Romania or abroad, adapting to new realities to the point of cutting and forgetting their ties with their natal place. This social flexibility may be the element that allowed Săteni to reproduce as a society across *la longue durée* while villagers responded to changes in technology, economy, politics, and religion at the local, regional, national, and international levels.

Their cultural representations offered the ideational and practical means for social reproduction in a changing world, as for centuries in these parts. Once in the field, I could not understand why anyone would think that Săteni, a fairly isolated and poor village, represents a bastion of traditionalism, resistant to change. It is true that villagers lack trust in experts, academic or otherwise. All expertise must be proven to be considered relevant, and Sătenis almost never defer to someone automatically, in matters of knowledge as in everything else. But elements of modernity have already been present for some time and have continued to be embraced by villagers eager to keep in touch with technological advancements, imitating and adapting social practices from outside their society.

My abstract theoretical suggestions about agriculture or construction work received little attention from villagers. But once I built a stove using an online Russian design and described the combustion process in a tavern using cans and sticks. In a matter of weeks, many of those present were browsing the Internet for similar models, adapting them to their new uses, such as heating water. Each day I saw a new smartphone, a cutting-edge tool, or a brand-new pesticide someone acquired to get ahead of the local competition and make it known so. Even in little things, from clothing to houses, Sătenis imitated and innovated on external models, in or outside Săteni.

The postsocialist return to horse-and-plow agriculture was not a Luddite rebellion, but a consequence of institutional collapse without other available means for cooperation needed to rise above the domestic mode of production. With time, accumulation of capital, technological improvement, and market

penetration allowed some villagers to move toward intensive, industrialized agriculture at household or farm level, just as they did in commerce, animal husbandry, or construction. Rituals of passage such as weddings have transformed across time, importing fashions or transforming roles in response to societal transformations. Across history, the reproduction and transformation of Săteni worldviews tended more toward the pragmatism of palpable results than the dogmatism of abstract principles. How could this flexible evolution guide the future social organization of the village society?

7.4. THE FUTURE OF COOPERATION AND MORALITY

This book described the way Sătenis see trust in other people as a social contract between persons. One acts morally with those she believes to be committed to reciprocal morality. Without such an implicit or explicit promise and its empirical confirmation over time, there can be no banking on future returns. This does not mean that people can only act morally when bound by such reciprocal commitments. They may and often do. But they don't have to, meaning there is no social norm, no socially shared expectation to demand generalized generosity to each and every person in Săteni and in the world, no system of commonly enforced sanctions.

The circle of trust may include just another person, or a family or maybe a few dozen people, but it never was wide enough to extend at a level allowing for large-scale social cooperation based on reciprocal morality and trust. To return to the stables opening this book, only a twist of fate, probabilistically and socially impossible, could have allocated a building to a set of people already bound by strong moral commitments to each and every one of them to pave the way toward a cooperative endeavor. A more plausible but still absent scenario would have been one key actor related to all others, managing to either organize or buy out the others into a collective or individual form of organization that could have reached a higher level of economic equilibrium than partible dismemberment.

Alas, none of these scenarios materialized, and Săteni villagers found themselves facing people with no pre-existent commitments. No entrepreneur arose among those two dozen families, nobody ambitious, wealthy, or socially persuasive enough to organize people and things into a collective arrangement. Left without the means to establish and confirm trust, each actor chose to put his chips on the safe choice of getting a little but certain bit for his family, just like everyone else.

So was the failure of collective action caused by Săteni culture, by their ideas about society and world that somehow keeps them from enjoying the fruits of cooperation? Yes and no. No, because if you or I or probably anyone else would have been teleported to make that decision, we would have behaved just like

the other Sătenis. It is the rational strategy when all others don't trust each other to forgo immediate profits for long-term results.

But I have already argued that Săteni culture offers such means for cooperative decisions when moral relationships connect individuals. Had Săteni had a cultural repertoire of cooperation between generic villagers, such as religious, military, or economic collective organization for common ends, perhaps they could have fallen back on common knowledge, social expectations, and norms and adapted or reproduced them for a new goal. As it stood, Săteni culture and history did not offer that shared representation of a successful or necessary strong social contract of all with all.

However, new forms of cooperation may always become a cultural possibility. For all its moral fragmentation, Săteni society does not put upper or lateral bounds to trust. Nothing in Săteni folk sociology negates the possibility of a united, trusting village, as they think of other places such as Western, Transylvanian, or even mountain Moldavian places. But Sătenis believe theirs is not such a place. Moreover, they have the empirical evidence to justify their belief system limiting morality to personal relationships of kith and kin and putting family first, and the devil take the hindmost.

The distribution of ideas about trust, what one may call the Săteni culture of trust, varied in dynamic relationship to context. Distrust increased in times of hunger and peril, but more people tended to trust others and to a deeper extent when social and economic opportunities allowed for mutualistic cooperation as in the contemporary building industry. Similar people, different situations. The Săteni preoccupation with trust and distrust reflects this awareness and preparation for all possible scenarios and making sure one does not mistake one for the other. The fail-safe mechanisms of Săteni folk epistemology tend toward precaution and the avoidance of false positives in identifying cooperative partners. Perhaps villagers could spare efforts and resources if they would trust each other just a little bit more. It worked for Mihai and could work for others. But then again, so would it for all of us.

One could suggest many factors that could make Sătenis trust each other a bit more. An external enemy perhaps might lead to an extended coalition. But the predatory agency of the state, for example, came from outside and did not increase internal solidarity in Săteni, quite the opposite. Nor do neighboring villages or large agribusinesses come off as menacing for each and every Săteni, though some unrelated villagers may end up with a common enemy and a temporary alliance. Rather, the solution might come not from a threat, but an opportunity. Something to be shared collectively. An entity or symbol to make all responsible for its welfare. A football team. A musical chorus. A sauna. The church, but organized less through the office of the priest and more as a body of empowered and responsible parishioners. A factory to employ many of them, or a fiesta organized by the whole village. A collective pool for burials or a social club for dances, games, and trivia nights. Village-wide

referendums on key decisions. Participatory budgeting. Some changes might increase trust and cooperation, many others not. Top-down reforms may fail to make Sătenis involved with one another under extensive commitments of prosociality, of cooperation and trust, but not because Sătenis cannot learn to trust each other. Perverse incentives in the current political structure, murky epistemic atmosphere, or past grudges may undermine efforts at a collective. Yet a successful institution might appear from the ground up. The potential might be there already.

Any discussion about the future of trust in village society should include these actors, who will at some point carry on the social reproduction and transformation of ideas and practices. One topic I regret not studying in detail is the world of Săteni children. I spent almost all my time with adults and only laterally observed the life and development of their offspring. With the benefit of hindsight and insightful suggestions,[3] I would now look more attentively at how contemporary children develop as social actors and how similar or different their childhood is compared with past generations.

The pedagogy of trust and distrust showed continuity over time, but economic and demographic changes give children novel opportunities. Few of them grow up malnourished, in crowded households, or utterly bereft of educational chances. Săteni families have one to three, rarely more, offspring, investing considerably in each and lowering the likelihood of sibling conflict over petty inheritance. The hopes of Săteni parents to fashion a better future for their children than they had experienced drive the great wave of international migration, justifying short-term sacrifices for long-term welfare of future generations. On average, Săteni children grow up in more affluent households and a more prosperous society than perhaps at any time in recent and distant history.

Unfortunately for Săteni as a whole, young people also have a choice unavailable to their ancestors: the freedom and capacity to pursue their dreams elsewhere, in big cities or abroad, following their parents or leaving the village straight after adolescence. The region cannot offer enough jobs and business opportunities to stem the tide of migration, and, at the time of writing, Săteni looks more and more depopulated of youth. Even worse, many remain out of social disadvantage or personal shortcomings, a negative self-selection process depriving the village of a workforce, entrepreneurialism, and contenders for social leadership. With little trust in the prospects of Romanian politics or economy, many youth vote with their feet (Hirschman 1970).

The future remains to be written for Săteni and there are reasons for optimism. By the agency of villagers, especially the younger generations experiencing positive transformations in social and economic opportunities, the moral circle of trust may expand to more and more people and interactions. Săteni villagers could change their ideas and practices toward a larger sphere

of mutualistic expectations, toward social norms institutionalizing collective action and cooperation, toward more social exchange and wider social interaction, or toward a communitarian or universalistic morality.

Things could turn, however, in the opposite direction if current opportunities lead not to voice, but to exit or loyalty, to employ Albert Hirschman's alternative social responses. Current transformations might make Săteni actors either leave the village or keep on doing business as usual in terms of trust, morality, and cooperation. We already saw how the structure of local politics and ritual transcendence have a largely conservative, reproductive effect on moral ideas and social interactions. Could increased market integration create wider and depersonalized trust, as Mihai's story suggested and was argued by some (Henrich et al. 2001)?

What should happen to make future Sătenis come together and sort out their dysfunctional cemetery? Will there be enough cases of successful, large-scale cooperation and universal benevolence to counterbalance the history of domestic reliance against distrusted others? Can such cultural representations emerge spontaneously from the confines of Săteni society, from invention or radical technological change, or merely appear as emulation or adaptations of external cultural models? Such questions require empirical answers beyond the scope of this book. The ethnography offered a footing for building more precise theoretical hypotheses and methods of research.

7.5. THE REASONS FOR DISTRUST

This book is an ethnography of trust and its role in Săteni cooperation, morality, and social organization. I interpreted various social events and structures, representations, and practices, following Sătenis from taverns to graveyards, from weddings to elections, from building a house to making relatives. From the sound and fury of each moment, I tried to sort out the distinction and tension between expectations of morality and fear of deception.

This book served its purpose if it made you see trust or distrust toward the world from the perspective of a Săteni villager. Unlike more rigorous methods, ethnography is not an experiment on its subject, but on the observer. As a metarepresentational tool, it puts you in the shoes of actors, at least for a little while and with necessary simplification, but tries to catch as much as possible of the complexity of mental representations and social interactions at play. It makes them intelligible and could also teach us something about ourselves.

In my research, I have always tried, but perhaps have not always succeeded, to get to the truth of the matter. I wanted to test whether my informants were right, truthful, and knowledgeable. Facts do matter, but the vantage point of ethnography is the collection of subjective interpretations, of the reasons people give for their actions and the actions of others. The anthropologist

listens to people telling stories about the objective reality not as a theoretical reflection, but as a practical engagement with the world.

In particular, the ethnography offered a representation of Săteni metarepresentations. The "how I think they think they think" (Bloch 2018) perspective described and interpreted the interpersonal point of view, the way they interpreted the minds of others, how they communicated to other minds, what representations they shared, and what representations they kept secret. The fabric of society comes more from the interplay between minds reflecting and responding to one another in social interaction than from the agency of monadic, self-sufficient cognitive systems. Social choices depend on personal qualities and idiosyncratic contexts, but they also depend on the choices of others. A choice is free only within the constraints and opportunities offered by other choices.

I once told Mihai that destroying collective buildings was stupid. With him, I could already lower my epistemic threshold to total honesty in sharing personal feelings. Having a few too many drinks helped me abandon my anthropological impartiality. He smiled bitterly. Naturally, it was wasteful, and he in particular could evaluate all the building effort destroyed by social fragmentation. But what can one do? In fact, did I not know that Mihai had helped his father cart home their own share of the stable, side by side with other Sătenis I was judging?

This book explained the reasonableness of choosing to take apart those stables. For each and all, immediate partition was the best available choice against potential conflict and deception. Cultural expectations of familial unity informed distributed agency toward separation without any available cultural or formal institution to organize general cooperation and mutuality. Any other choice would have lowered one or more actors' welfare when a majority of people think that others cannot be trusted and a majority believes that a majority believes that others cannot be trusted. If one knows everyone distrusts everyone else, default trust is not an option. In that meeting which decided the future of the stables, I would have taken my pick to those walls just like Săteni villagers did, and for good enough reasons.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. For ethical reasons, I have changed all names and remained intentionally vague about details that could identify the village or people.
2. Party names are fictionalized since ideological identities play an insignificant role in Săteni politics, but they could jeopardize the anonymity of informants.
3. *Nu te încrede în români*, "trust no Romanian," warns about default trust in Romanians, but some people even add *aici trebuie să fugi de români*—"here, you must keep/run away from Romanians."
4. One should be both wary and extremely fortunate of having such key informants as Mihai. The ethnographic examples include Griaule's Ogotemmeli or Castaneda's Don Juan. For me, Mihai was a guide to the life of Săteni but only took me as far as making the field. We often conflicted but always ultimately saw eye to eye in the important matters to keep our social relationship alive beyond and separated from my professional identity. He remained one of my best friends in the world of Săteni, a generosity I could never reciprocate.
5. A viral YouTube video records the humiliation of a phone prank peppered with colorful invectives quite familiar to Săteni ears.

CHAPTER 1

1. Following tavern life, this chapter discusses only men, since almost no women frequent taverns. The very few who do are social outliers, such as an alcoholic outcast with a reputation for prostitution or a transgender shepherdess known for her tomcat behavior. Only lately have I seen youngsters bringing their girlfriends on the verandas, but they would rather go to town for a date, away from gossip and public shaming.
2. Echoing Azande insistence upon human agency without denying objective facts in the explanation of witchcraft (Evans-Pritchard 1937).
3. I would see him again a few months later single-handedly pacify a clash of four drunken wedding guests.
4. This was not rigorously accurate, as many clashes pitted Gheorghe against fellow Catuneni villagers, especially rival sheep owners, yet rang true in the context of an out-of-village fight.
5. Home visits were perceived as clear indexes of prosocial relationships, since only trusted and significant people were welcomed in the most private of places, as seen in the next chapter.
6. I refer here to a dichotomy between reflexive and intuitive cognition (Sperber 1997), but I do not aim to disentangle it in my ethnography. It is a moot point

whether Razvan defended Gheorghe because he reflectively knew that such behavior was expected, or whether he acted out of intuitive emotions. Most likely both, as a theory of morality based on fairness and reputation would predict (Sperber and Baumard 2012).

7. My take on the duality in agency maps unto a characterization of agency as composed of accountability and flexibility (Kockelman 2007), although I would furthermore argue that tavern behavior in its communicative aspects is especially agency oriented because people have flexible choices, and they are to be held accountable for their actions vis-à-vis social relationships in a communicationally rich milieu (see Enfield 2014).
8. Given the aforementioned-claim for generalized reciprocity from another generous patron, it may seem that Marin's accounting and testing of partners is rather peculiar. However, the difference is merely apparent. Generalized reciprocity must be protected from predation if it is to survive, and monitoring for fairness may coexist with rhetorical indifference to costs. The alternative is the collapse of reciprocity itself.
9. As any costly signal, a minor win at arm wrestling may be a sound investment if it signals to potential predators the superior endowment of the emitter, thus avoiding bigger conflicts.
10. Losing a game of arm-wrestling to a younger adversary might not seem like a big deal, but I witnessed the disappointment and rhetorical explanation on the part of my master builder when he conceded an arm-wrestling round with a young upstart. Mihai was quite affected by the outcome and blamed an old work injury. Back at our table, he privately confessed to the superior force of the young wrestler, adding that the youngster must certainly be endowed with strength to compensate for his stupidity.
11. As shown later, rummy games may be as diverse as the social relationships between players.
12. If collusion appears, friends cooperate in order to exploit third parties, adding a sub-play of mutuality to the main zero-sum game. If it does not, the mere rumor indicates the relevance of tracking mutualistic ties.
13. Luck evoked again individual agency, since many can win the five-number prize, but only few do. Using your children's birthdate or other numerologically attractive entries could tap into one's capacity to be a winner.
14. Specialists use jargon (or pretense of jargon, better said) to achieve similar forms of covert communication in fool's errands (Buxman 2008; Zurcher 1965)

CHAPTER 2

1. Personal communication.
2. The socialist state generally used collective farms and forced quotas to extract surpluses from peasants (Verdery, 1985, Kideckel, 1993).
3. Săteni fears are not merely abstract, but also targeted and widespread. I have also heard about families being targeted as thieves, and their neighbors were particularly wary of their close presence. Others had a different idea, telling me that, just as ferrets don't eat chickens close to their burrow to avoid detection, thieves avoid nearby houses to allay suspicion.
4. Decorative flowers, an increasing presence in Sătenisăteni front gardens, are a perfect tool to communicate effort in presenting a proper appearance without exposing or implying wealth.

5. Clear rules of recruitment, boundaries toward the outside, and an internal social organization based on shared identity and goals make it the only corporate group in Săteni. Membership means to "act collectively in all the various contexts of activity, the same human aggregate being visible in each" (Nadel 1951:161). As Nadel observes, it is not necessary that all members be present and active in all moments, but when they aggregate, they do it qua members of the corporate entity. In abstract terms, the family functions as a social group defined by coresidence, common ownership, collective production and consumption, and solidarity in pursuing common interests. But the entitativity of the family is best expressed in the material culture of its environment.

CHAPTER 3

1. I owe this metaphor, of course, to Evans-Prichard's "*cherchez la vache*" among the Nuer (1940).
2. Poorer men forced to move to their wife's village were jokingly called "*măritat*"—the female term of marriage.
3. The Orthodox prescription was hardly respected entirely, since a few hundred inmarrying villagers often had distant blood links, but always enforced when the tie was known and close such as second cousins.
4. The lexical root for the word marriage (*căsătorie*) is "house" (*casă*), further emphasizing the family-household identity argued for in the previous chapter.
5. As a cheeky workmate that grew up in Southwest Romania succinctly put it, "In Oltenia, they jump if you swear their wifes. Here they kill you if you say something bad about their mothers."
6. I owe this insight to Catalina Tesar, who observed the same representations among Romanian Cortorari Roma.
7. For all their acuity in tracing kinship, Sătenis never do it in abstract or purely descriptive ways. A genealogy is provided to elucidate a particular relationship between two people, not recorded as a thing in itself.
8. At one wedding, cash gifts were slipped into a miniature wooden house, clearly communicating the destination of funds.
9. A wedding is a good place to strike a friendship that will lead to a direct invitation and the tightening of family ties between previous strangers, further evoking the shared trope of personal choice in relatedness and friendship.
10. Ideally wedding sponsors are not previously related, or have a distant relationship to the couple, but poorer families with smaller social networks often have to ask closer relatives for ritual support.
11. Just like the case of a brother-in-law coming as a bulk deal with the chosen spouse, as we saw previously, fair mutuality prevails over genealogical considerations.
12. The usage also appears in urban Romania.
13. Sătenis believe that children will feel closer to nurturing than to merely biological parents.
14. Experiments comparing Sătenis with Cortorari Roma were conducted in collaboration with Catalina Tesar.

CHAPTER 4

1. Men joke that women are so curious they would even furtively lift the skirt to see what stockings are worn by the dead.
2. Sometimes using the Slavic *bogdaproste*, meaning "May God forgive."

3. In other cases, however, families felt and expressed quite intense grief, but these are cut short by the quick procedures of burial.
4. Since most plots have been reused for centuries, this was a true but irrelevant argument.
5. Bloch and Parry seem to preempt the question, saying that "in contemporary western cultures, the individual is given a transcendental value, the ideological stress is on his unique and unrepeatable biography, and he is conceived of in opposition to society and his death is therefore not a challenge to its continuity" (1982:15). While Sătenis would agree to the image of the unique individual juxtaposed against society, their image of moral personhood would necessarily involve the enduring ties of trust and solidarity with a moral but limited social sphere.
6. The priest meanwhile receives an honorable seat and deferential attention, another departure from idealized equality.
7. This social strategy alas is mostly available for villagers of some means, since very few would accept unilateral burdens of social responsibility.

CHAPTER 5

1. The names of parties have been changed for reasons of anonymity, and their ideological position matters very little in Sătenisăteni, as we shall see.
2. In 2008, Romanian elections changed from party lists to individual candidacy. Chiru and Ciobanu (2009) presents an analysis of the reform's impact on political patronage and entrepreneurial politics. The new designation of smaller constituencies for electing MPs was presented in public discourses as a shift toward greater responsibility for elected officials, easier now to identify with local interests, rather than generalized party directives. The result was an electoral campaign where candidates became more active in investing in their own success, rather than adhering to a party line and image. Electoral strategies changed from party-centered to candidate-centered, party leaderships sought powerful candidates capable of self-financing campaigns, and political power came from activating social networks adapted to the social reality of a given constituency (Marian and King 2010).
3. All parties held similar events, irrespective of political orientation or situation.
4. Rivals parody their forced presence and laughter at Emil's bad jokes, recalling Stalin's acolytes in his waning years.
5. He had to "voluntarily" donate his land to the socialist state to avoid their expelling from university.
6. While regional agencies carried out the major asphalting of central Sătenisăteni, Emil took the entire credit, helped by the fact that people cannot easily distinguish levels of political decision-making and investment.
7. E.g., the intersection between multi-stranded moral relationships and political transactions prevents the institutionalization of social divisions in Maltese village politics (Boissevain 1980).
8. Unless he has to provide bosses with a mobile phone photo of his ballot, as recently used in a Romanian village.

CHAPTER 6

1. Patrons already complained of "baptized" (i.e., diluted) drinks and overcharging inebriated customers, especially fooling customers *pe caiet* ("on the notebook"), served on written IOUs until the day of state transfers. Failing to pay back debts

brought the end of credit or even a permanent ban, apart from a blemished reputation.
2. The owner also supplied unregistered products sold under the counter, recorded in double accounting in trustful complicity with employees.
3. The financial apex of his career allowed him to start building a large house in his home village, not before erecting a fence worth a year's earnings.
4. *Claca* events also included women spinning yarn together or people helping in focal agricultural processes such as mowing or turning hay.
5. *Cărți* – books - was his metaphor for professional knowledge and skill, as opposed to the folk techniques of illiterate villagers.
6. He also unsuccessfully asked Mihai to help him walk to his house, lest he meet with "the bear," meaning his hirsute nephew who once pushed him to the ground using just his pumped chest. Vasile's wit and grimace were unmatched and much missed in Săteni.
7. Preliminary negotiations at least are usually a male affair.
8. Mihai appreciated the cunningness of his *cumătru*. It was profitable to gift a bottle of expensive cognac, and to make the others indebted to buy the next ones of the all-night bender.

CHAPTER 7

1. After disastrous early battles, King Ferdinand of Romania and generals promised land to soldiers. Sătenisătenis and other peasants fought bravely afterward, sacrificing even their own lives knowing their families would be endowed, turning the tide of war.
2. Mixed marriages were frowned upon but tolerated and usually blended in smoothly with society. I thank Charles Stafford and Rita Astuti in particular for their advice.
3. I thank Rita Astuti and Charles Stafford for this advice and guidance for future work.

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