Humanitarian Fables:
Morals, meanings and consequences for humanitarian practice

ABSTRACT

This article describes how events are turned into fables in humanitarian organisations. It explores how these fables circulate, the lessons they come to embody and their influence in maintaining an organisational status quo. The article argues that such stories teach new humanitarian employees certain 'facts' about 'the field' and help form and consolidate consensus about why things are the way they are in an organisation. By describing three such fables circulating amongst *Médecins Sans Frontières* 'international' employees in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, each of which suggested a need for foreign humanitarians to maintain a certain distance from local citizens (including their nationally hired colleagues) as a means of personal and organisational security, the article illustrates how such fables can 'justify' certain organisational decisions which ultimately reinforce structures of unequal power relations between different humanitarian employees.

KEY WORDS

Humanitarianism; Inequality; Fables; Local; DRC

INTRODUCTION

As I travelled between different organisational offices and project sites of the medical humanitarian agency *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF), it soon became clear that I was not travelling alone. In locations in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), as well as humanitarian offices in European capitals, I kept coming across the same stories. During interviews with humanitarian employees, these recirculating tales appeared so often that I came to recognise them as travel companions. They appeared to be based on someone's personal experience, and although each story differed slightly with each telling, the different versions shared a collective meaning, a lesson. I came to understand these stories as organisational fables.

This article describes how fables circulate in humanitarian organisations, the meanings and lessons they come to acquire, and the sort of 'work' that they do in maintaining an organisational status quo and its associated power structures. I argue that such stories teach new humanitarians certain 'facts' about 'the field,' and help form and consolidate consensus about why things are the way they are in an organisation. In this article, I track the work of three fables in justifying certain institutional practices which ultimately reinforce structures of unequal power relations in humanitarian aid. These three fables turned specific events into stories which illustrated a supposed need for foreign humanitarians to

maintain a certain distance from local citizens (including their nationally hired colleagues) as a means of personal and organisational security. These stories were not used in official briefings, nor actively utilised by the organisational hierarchy. Instead, they spread by word of mouth among informal networks of 'international' humanitarians. My aim is not to argue that the empirical content of these stories is not 'true': all three are based to some degree on real events. Rather than focusing on their veracity, however, I focus on their symbolic meanings, the decisions they help to justify, and the tropes and representations they reproduce in the process, as well as the power relations that they help to maintain.

I situate these fables in recent debates about 'decolonising' aid. In 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement sparked renewed calls for reform. After oft-repeated statements about the need to 'transfer power' to actors and organisations in the Global South, the humanitarian sector was finally forced to confront the deep-rooted discriminatory structures of the contemporary system. Humanitarians, activists and academics highlighted the colonial attitudes towards populations in the Global South, their knowledge and skills, the dominance of former colonial powers over formerly colonised regions, the structural racism embedded in everyday practices, as well as the hierarchy of trust, opportunity and pay which discriminates locally hired staff (Peace Direct 2021; Ali and Murphy 2020; Hirsch 2021a; Khan 2021; Khan et al., 2021; Chaudhuri et al., 2021). In MSF, a *Decolonise MSF* group formed, and an Open Letter which denounced MSF as institutionally racist and reinforcing white supremacy in its work was signed by over 1,000 current and former members of staff.[1] Yet, there remains a lack of consensus about what 'decolonising' means, with growing concern that it has become a metaphor, another 'comfortable buzzword' for Northern actors and institutions (Tuck and Yang 2012; Khan 2021). In this article, I describe fables as discourses of power which justify and reproduce structures of inequality intrinsic to humanitarian aid. Their production and circulation of meanings shape who is considered a competent and 'neutral' humanitarian and help rationalise institutional practices which maintain structural inequality. By describing this interconnection between symbolic meanings and material practices, I suggest that challenging such fables is an important part of ongoing discussions about 'decolonisation', alongside challenging the practices that such fables help justify.

The article draws on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in European capitals and the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (2017-2021), as well as examination of MSF's internal archives. During this period, I travelled between different MSF projects and offices to better understand how humanitarians approach 'security management.' I spent 15 months in eastern DRC, which included several periods living in MSF accommodation under the organisation's 'security rules.' The article draws on ethnographic observation and material from over 200 interviews with humanitarians and political authorities in the provincial capitals of Goma and Bukavu, as well as the rural territories of the *Petit Nord*. Interviews focused on the politics of humanitarian presence, how humanitarians negotiate

their access to work in a conflict and the experience of Congolese staff in this process, as well as the security rules which dictate suitable behaviour for both inside and outside work hours. It was during these conversations that fables emerged. All names have been changed and some details have been disguised to ensure anonymity.[2] The fables here have been gathered in the sphere of MSF. MSF was sufficiently open to allow an outside researcher to study its operations and, in particular, the difficulties and challenges involved in working 'on the ground' in conflict environments. However, it is likely that similar fables circulate in all aid organisations. The focus of this article is on the phenomenon itself, rather than the organisation in which I examined it.

It is important to note that my own position is inseparable from the relations of power which this article describes. 'Studying up' is always relative and contextual - our own positionalities shape the nuances of 'up' in different contexts (Peters and Wendland 2016:252). As a white European, I held an important form of privilege in DRC, of which there is too often limited discussion in aid, as well as academia (Benton 2016b; Marchais et al., 2020). In the 'spaces' of the international humanitarian industry (Smirl 2015), I conformed to the racialised stereotype of a young, white humanitarian. This, no doubt, facilitated my access and enabled me to shift with ease between exclusive 'expat' spaces and those of Congolese aid workers. This article, then, is a critical reflection on the stories that I encountered whilst occupying this privileged space, and on the importance of deconstructing their implicit meanings.

To begin, I outline the concept of organisational fables, situate them in debates about inequality and aid, and give some background to MSF in the eastern DRC. The second section describes three fables that circulated among MSF employees who had worked, or were working, in eastern DRC: *Sales Putes, La Fuite Interne,* and *The Magic Padlock.* It examines the 'morals' of these fables, the organisational structures and practices they justify, and the kinds of tropes they reproduce in the process. In the third section, I argue that it is important to understand the sort of 'work' that these fables do, and the sort of symbolic power they hold, in the humanitarian sphere: providing explanatory frameworks for certain organisational decisions which reproduce power hierarchies between different staff, as well as a certain degree of distrust towards nationally hired humanitarians.

FABLES AND HUMANITARIAN PRACTICE

Fables in 'Aidland'

Stories are rich repositories of meaning. As people reflect upon events, they transform them into stories with meanings. Storytelling is the social act of transforming private experience into public meaning (Arendt 1958): in other words, experience acquires meaning through narration (Jackson 2002). Fables are a form of storytelling which usually take the form of succinct tales which illustrate moral lessons, or 'morals.' Fables are one of the oldest traditions of folklore and have been found across the ages and

across the world. Events in organisations are also turned into stories which become 'symbolic reconstruction of events; they infuse facts with value' (Gabriel 1991:427). Rather than simple descriptions of events, organisational stories have *functions* in conveying meanings and messages, for relieving tension, or for building social cohesion (Gabriel 1991). A story changes when it is told and retold, with distortions, embellishments, and omissions between the different accounts (Arendt 1958:50). In effect, stories take on a life of their own – they travel and become imbued with meanings as they are passed on. Ultimately, organisational stories tell us about what people believe to have happened in an organisation, why, and with what consequences.

This article examines the oral tradition within the humanitarian sphere: how stories circulate, become fables, and the forms of power they hold. My approach builds on the literature on 'Aidland' which explores the everyday practices and contradictions of aid (Apthorpe 2005; Mosse 2011; Fechter and Hindman 2011). This literature demonstrates the importance of studying everyday relationships, habits and the social and cultural spheres of aid, because they shape interventions, and can generate larger problems (Autesserre 2014). Scholars have focussed on the 'bunkerisation' of 'Aidland': increasingly, foreign workers occupy an 'aid archipelago' that stands apart from the local environment (Duffield 2012). 'Bunker politics' govern humanitarians' lives, with security practices that further reproduce inequalities by transferring risk to 'national staff', normalising the segregation of foreign intervenors from local populations, as well as different categories of staff (Weigand and Andersson 2019). 'The field' is constructed in 'humanitarian enclaves' by compounds, cars and hotels (Smirl 2015), and access to these spaces is restricted, as local citizens (including humanitarian employees) are increasingly posited as potential security threats (Beerli 2018).

To better understand how this social world is created and maintained, academics have turned their attention to the interaction between narratives and everyday practice. This work examines how aid workers narrate and explain their practices (Mosse 2011; Fechter and Hindman 2011). In her analysis of peacekeeping in eastern DRC, for instance, Autesserre (2014:35) describes how practices sustain dominant narratives, whilst narratives about the cause of violence justify some practices and preclude others. Indeed, stories from 'the field' play an important role among aid workers, both in forging their identity and in staking out their legitimacy. As humanitarians move from 'mission' to 'mission,' they bring with them a collection of stories which they share with colleagues. The practice of storytelling is institutionalised in some agencies: experienced fieldworkers are invited to share their wisdom with others. In telling stories, aid workers pass on certain 'facts' about 'the field.' This practice of storytelling is central to the construction of the sector's field imaginary (Smirl 2015): a site of action 'out there', which is often imagined as a place of hardship and danger (Malkki 2015), and which is rooted in colonial history (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Stories from 'the field' become a central guide for mobile humanitarians as they 'fumble in the dark' and try to make sense of the new environments where they

work (Autesserre 2014). In sum, stories are central to how humanitarianism is 'understood, narrated and performed' (Smirl 2015:21).

This article focuses on how personal stories become organisational fables. Examining these fables and their meanings is important because such fables justify certain decisions in aid organisations which, in turn, help maintain unequal power structures. Rather than a 'separate world' with its own 'time, space and economics' (Autesserre 2014:5; Apthorpe 2005), 'Aidland' is an arena of interaction between different groups – a set of relationships and negotiations (Harrison 2013). Indeed, the majority of humanitarians work in their country of origin. Racialised, gendered and national power dynamics continue to shape humanitarian practice in this complex social terrain (Benton 2016b; Redfield 2012). Below I illustrate how fables are a product of Aidland and are also crucial to its operation: their meanings support daily practices which construct Aidland's imagined frontiers, creating the boundary between insiders and outsiders.

An analysis of the symbolic power of fables helps to better understand the micro-politics of inequality in humanitarianism. As a rich body of literature on global health, development, humanitarianism and peacebuilding has shown, intervention procedures often reinforce inequities amongst the populations they are meant to help, as well as between aid workers themselves (Hirsch 2021a; Benton 2016a; Peters 2020; Kothari 2006). Interventions reproduce inequalities between 'national' and 'international' staff which reflect and reproduce global structures of postcolonial inequity. These take the form of unequal access to opportunity, mobility and security provision and of pay differences, as well as a hierarchy of trust that imagines foreigners as neutral, and locals as entangled in particularistic attachments (Aloudat 2021; Ali and Murphy 2020; Hirsch 2021a; Fassin 2007; Redfield 2012; James 2020). Intersecting hierarchies of gender and race are embedded in aid practices (Read 2018), as authority, expertise and knowledge remain racialised, with whiteness operating as a marker of authority, competency and progress (Pailey 2019; Benton 2016b; Kothari 2006; White 2002; Adeso Africa 2020). This literature on intersectional dynamics of inequality in aid fits into a broader postcolonial critique which describes the imperial traces that continue to shape aid intervention - embedded in discourses and practices, imaginaries and representations of the 'Other,' as well as narratives about 'progress' (Kothari 2005, 2006; Escobar 1995; Benton 2016a; Vaughan 1991). In this article, I describe how discourses of power in the humanitarian field circulate in the form of fables and how they shape and reproduce some of these power structures in aid.

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, the push to 'decolonise' global health, humanitarianism and development gained prominence. Activists and humanitarians highlighted the long-standing structural racism underpinning aid, calling into question how humanitarianism works, for whom, its funding and practices, and its discriminatory treatment of the people it is supposed to help

(Ali and Murphy 2020; Hirsch 2021a; 2021b; Aloudat 2021). Yet, there remains a lack of clarity on the scope and definition of 'decolonising.' Recently, academics and practitioners have challenged the idea that structural change will be achieved whilst working *within* existing systems. In line with Fanon's definition, they stress that 'decolonisation' requires a systematic overhaul that removes a system's power, rather than reforming it through existing channels (Hirsch 2021b; Chaudhuri et al., 2021; Affun-Adegbulu and Adegbulu 2020). Themrise Khan (2021), for instance, has expressed concern that 'decolonisation' has become a buzzword 'for those in the North, driven by the need to not give up power and remain relevant', a project of 'image-restoration.' Here, 'decolonisation' becomes a metaphor, superficially adopted to alleviate feelings of guilt (Tuck and Yang 2012). A prominent voice calling for reform in the humanitarian sector, Tammam Aloudat (2021), defines 'decolonising' as 'the imagining and construction of a humanitarianism that replaces the Eurocentric ethos of the current regime, that does not reproduce the oppression of the current hegemonic politics, and that moves away from being the left hand of empire.' This article suggests that the deconstruction of humanitarian fables is an important part of these discussions: providing insight into how unequal power structures are justified and maintained and revealing the power of such stories in supporting material practices of inequality.

MSF in eastern DRC

The article focuses on dynamics within MSF in the eastern DRC near the Ugandan and Rwandan borders. North Kivu province has become known as an archetypal site of Aidland or Peaceland (Autesserre 2014). Aid organisations arrived *en masse* after the influx of Rwandan refugees following the genocide in the 1994, and the subsequent protracted conflict has led to the continued presence of a significant aid and peacekeeping infrastructure. During the second Congo war (1998-2003), social services were almost entirely provided by international aid organisations. After the peace deal, there was a proliferation of NGOs, with much service provision still outsourced to foreign agencies. The complexity of how governance functions in this region eludes any neat narrative. The 'state' is one actor among many, governing through collaboration with a range of other actors, including over one hundred armed groups. Power lies in the alliances between armed actors and local authorities which partially oppose and partially collaborate with the state (Vlassenroot and Raeymaekers 2008). The long-term presence of NGOs has reshaped the urban landscape, as well as the employment opportunities in the area (Büscher and Vlassenroot 2010).

MSF is a medical humanitarian organisation created in 1971 by a group of French doctors who had come of age during May 1968. Today, the organisation is a complex transnational network which employs more than 35,000 people worldwide. The majority of MSF fieldworkers are not European doctors, but 'national staff' working in their countries of origin. MSF aims to save human lives, irrespective of where they are. Its work is underpinned by the concept of an 'emergency', the idea of a

break from normalcy that requires immediate response in the name of shared humanity (Redfield 2013). The organisation sees its role as responding to immediate suffering, and adopts the symbolic principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence in order to do so. MSF is defined by medical work and speed of provision, but also by its positioning in insecure areas. The caricature is doctors in warzones – the 'cowboys' who stay to work, despite the risks.

MSF has a long history in the DRC and today Congo remains central to MSF's field imaginary. Many employees are sent there on their 'first mission' and many experienced fieldworkers have passed through the region. MSF conducts a broad range of medical activities in the DRC in partnership with the Ministry of Health. This includes supporting large referral hospitals as well as peripheral health centres in delivering basic and secondary care and responding to cyclical outbreaks of epidemics. In 2018, MSF ran 54 medical projects in 17 of the DRC's 26 provinces, employed almost 3,000 staff, had an expenditure of over €100 million.[3] The imaginary of an 'emergency' with a short, immediate response does not apply in the region, where some MSF projects have been running for over a decade.

THREE FABLES

This section describes three stories which I heard from foreign MSF humanitarians working, or who had worked, in the eastern DRC. In writing these stories, I have inevitably created another version – one that attempts to include details I thought were necessary to ensure the reader's comprehension. All three of these fables are based, no doubt loosely, on events that happened to MSF staff. By being narrated as symbolic stories, these events become exemplary cases for broader trends. In other words, these events became stories and then became fables because they communicate a specific 'moral' – a lesson that justifies security rules which structure humanitarian practice.

'Sales Putes' (Dirty Whores)

The first time I was the told the story of *Sales Putes* was in Goma, the capital of North Kivu. After that, I heard several other variations in Europe, as well as elsewhere in DRC. Goma is the headquarters of NGOs in the region – a city dominated by white Land Cruisers and aid logos, the home of the UN's largest peacekeeping mission. One afternoon, I was discussing MSF's security rules with several foreign employees. According to these rules, at MSF's rural project sites sexual relationships between foreign employees and any Congolese citizen, including MSF's own staff, are forbidden. This is made explicit in the 'expatriate code of conduct', as well as the security briefings for newly arrived foreign staff.[4] The same rules applied to visitors. On my arrival to one MSF project, for example, I was told that if I slept with 'a national' – someone living locally, or a staff member - I would be sent home. This was not just a threat – people had, indeed, been sent home. This rule applied to all foreign employees who had been brought in to work in MSF, and in some instances, it also applied to Congolese staff who travelled with MSF to work in areas far away from their homes.

These rules had several 'operational and security logics,' I was told. That afternoon in the bustling restaurant, Ava, a white European woman working for MSF, told me the story of *Sales Putes* in order better to explain these logics. The story is as follows. In one project site in rural North Kivu[5], MSF ran a hospital and supported rural clinics in the nearby areas. The foreign staff lived in the 'expat house' (a walled compound), whilst Congolese employees lived locally. Several white European women working for MSF were employed in the hospital as nurses or doctors, working closely alongside their Congolese colleagues. Over time, it became clear that one of these MSF staff had been having 'intimate relations' with a Congolese colleague. Whilst the relationship had remained largely secret from the woman's colleagues, they had not remained a secret 'in town.' Indeed, the relationship caused 'security issues' for the whole team. The Congolese man involved in this intimate relationship was married and, once his family found out, the MSF team had a 'perception' and 'acceptance' problem. In other words, this tarnished the reputation of the MSF team, and thus the security of the team was in jeopardy. Ava leaned forward to tell the climax of the story over the music blaring from a nearby speaker: the team awoke one morning to find '*Sales Putes'* (Dirty Whores) written on the outside of their compound.

This fable has several variations, but the main narrative arc remains the same. In one version, *'Sales Putes'* is written on an MSF car. In another version, it was not members of the community or angry wives who wrote '*Sales Putes',* but a spurned male hospital worker who had been turned down by one of the foreign women. There is an underlying tension in these narratives: the fable centres on the potential risks of intimate relations between foreign women and Congolese men but does not comment on the sexual abuse perpetrated by male humanitarian workers working for international NGOs, which has been widely documented in the wake of the Oxfam scandal in Haiti, as well as during the recent Ebola response in eastern DRC (Flummerfelt and Kasongo 2021).

***'La Fuite Interne'* (The Internal Leak)**

The term 'internal leak' is imbued with meaning among aid workers in DRC, with a constellation of different anecdotes attached to it. In effect, it refers to a 'leak' of sensitive information from within the humanitarian organisation, which results in security risks to the team. *Fuite interne* stories have a common thread – information is leaked by a member of a humanitarian team about the location of money and supplies, which becomes apparent when the team are being robbed at gunpoint.

The most common story that I heard described a leak of information about the movement of a particular humanitarian convoy. In Goma, I met Bas, a European humanitarian security expert who was passing through eastern DRC. Over coffee in a popular café, he told me a story which was circulating among foreign aid workers. Bas explained that in one of MSF's projects in North Kivu, a team had a planned 'movement' in 'the field.' These journeys happen frequently: convoys of MSF vehicles transport

personnel, money, medicine or patients along rural roads between different hospitals, health centres or towns. Most people in the team know when a 'movement' is happening – indeed, many working in logistics are involved in the planning and then monitoring of these trips. On one such 'movement' between two project locations, the MSF convoy was robbed: there was a *braquage* (stick-up) on the road. Armed men, or 'bandits', fired at the vehicles, forcing them to stop on a rural mountain road. Holding the team at gunpoint, the armed men proceeded to ask for the money and mobile telephones of everyone in the car. An important detail is that the armed men appeared to know the sum of money which was supposed to be in the employees' '*envelope sécu'* – an envelope of money which humanitarians keep on them to hand over in the event of robberies. The armed men also employed MSF vocabulary, referring to specific job titles.

Bas explained that after the event, the team return, shaken. People start to talk and decide that there must have been some degree of 'internal collaboration' – a tip-off from inside. A climate of distrust is born in the team, accusations begin to surface. The foreign managers of the team begin to talk to the armed authorities, looking for answers and asking for security reassurances if the organisation is to continue working in the area. After several weeks, 'movements' begin again – the MSF Land Cruisers are back on the roads. However, soon after restarting, the team are travelling along the same road where the robbery took place, and in a similar fashion, they are robbed again. It becomes clear, Bas summarises, that the armed bandits know when the team is travelling.

The conclusion to the fable is the same: these events were caused by a *fuite interne.* In other words, someone in the MSF team collaborated with 'bandits' or 'criminal elements' by reporting the details about the convoy's movements, and then presumedly splitting the money afterwards. I heard variations of this story (and others like it) from a range of different Congolese and foreign humanitarians. In my conversations with Congolese employees, they agreed that during these incidents, the 'leak' was normally 'a local' – someone with contacts nearby. One Congolese MSF employee explained that *fuites internes* 'were always at the bottom of these stories': people leaked information when drunk, or because they felt disgruntled, or because they were under pressure.[6] Either way, this fable was narrated by foreign and Congolese humanitarians alike as a story of 'internal complicity,' and betrayal.

The Magic Padlock

The final fable emerged in conversations about how humanitarian agencies should shift power, responsibility and funding away from Northern actors to organisations and individuals in the Global South. Many foreign MSF employees expressed ambivalence at the idea that senior leadership or 'coordination' positions should be opened for Congolese staff rather than exclusively 'international staff.' Although they expressed discomfort at the way foreign nationals remained in the senior positions, many argued that 'localising' would bring significant risks. In order to explain what they meant, some

told a variety of stories about corruption: in particular, detailed systems of corruption among Congolese MSF staff. The particular material being siphoned off in such schemes changed slightly from story to story - pharmacy stocks, fuel stocks or mechanical parts. But the dynamics remained largely the same: MSF employees responsible for purchasing different materials, whether logistical items, fuel or hiring daily workers, overcharged the organisation and made profits by splitting the difference with providers.

One story described events which are said to have happened to a logistician in DRC, or perhaps the Central African Republic. Gérard, a young European MSF employee working in DRC, told me this story. Gérard first heard the story from a colleague whilst he was working in Bangui – the story circulated through different 'missions,' among foreign staff moving between different countries. In MSF, Gérard explained, there are different 'departments' – such as logistics and supply, human resources and finance, and medical. Each department is usually led by a foreign member of staff who is flown in from abroad. These top positions are paired with a locally employed 'assistant.' The logistician runs the technical aspects of health projects, and one of their tasks is to manage the 'stock': everything from mechanic parts to medical supplies. In this particular case, the logistician became increasingly perplexed because stocks kept going missing from the technical depot. This was particularly strange because the depot was locked with a padlock, and the logistician was the only one with the key. On a regular basis, the logistician and his assistant did a tour of the project depots. When they arrived at the technical depot, the logistician unlocked the padlock, and he and his assistant went inside to inspect the stocks before then closing the depot with the padlock and leaving again.

Gérard told me that the mystery was eventually solved. As it turned out, the assistant was behind the missing stocks. When the logistician and the assistant did a tour of the depot, the logistician opened the padlock with a key and left both the padlock and the key on the door. The assistant followed the logistician into the depot. Whilst the logistician was busy inspecting the stocks, the assistant quickly replaced the old lock and key with an identical (but different) lock and key. When the logistician finished inside, he left the depot and closed the lock, pocketing the key whilst unaware that the lock had in fact changed, and that the assistant now also had a key.

The first two fables recounted above were to some degree 'verifiable' through talking to wide range of employees and an examination of archives. *The Magic Padlock* fable, however, was slippery. It acquired an almost mythological character. It is probably based to some degree on 'true' events – much embellished and mythologised over time. But whatever the degree of veracity of the story, it held important symbolic value and was shared among humanitarian workers in different countries as a way of discussing 'corruption in Africa.'

MORALS, JUSTIFICATIONS & TROPES

As these stories circulated, they became imbued with meaning. Events became stories, and stories became fables with morals to be communicated to the listener. The fables constructed different forms of 'knowledge', shaping how people imagined 'the field' and the things that happen there. Crucially, the stories draw on, and reproduce, stereotypes about 'national staff' which become central to the humanitarian field imaginary, reproducing the colonial construction of the 'Other' (Vaughan 1991). This 'regime of representation' circulates in fables and represents an important form of discursive power which helps to 'symbolically fix boundaries' between us/them and maintain the 'social and symbolic order' (Hall 1997:258; Said 1978). Ultimately, the fables' morals help justify organisational decisions which maintain power imbalances between foreign staff in senior positions, and locally hired employees.

The Moral of the Story

What was the moral of each story? The moral of the first fable, *Sales Putes,* is that intimate relationships with local citizens are risky: not just for an individual, but potentially for the whole team. Your private life could be dangerous for everyone. The fable introduces a lesson central to MSF's approach to security: that employees are always representing MSF, and their personal behaviour has a potentially disastrous impact on the image and therefore security of the organisation. In the early 2000s, in response to high-profile attacks against humanitarians, 'perception' became framed as essential to security (Abu-Sada 2012). Impression management became seen as key to security management because perception is key to 'acceptance', which in turn is crucial for humanitarian security (Givoni 2016). As a result, 'codes of conduct' became central to security management, and rules about behaviour are also applied outside work hours. As one recent security guide summarises: 'in the eyes of the population, you always represent MSF.'[7]

The moral of the second fable, *Fuite Interne,* is that 'national staff' should not necessarily be trusted: they have ambiguous loyalties and possibly even links to armed or criminal networks. They might betray MSF for personal gain. As a result, it is best to keep some distance. The other moral of this story is that MSF needs to 'manage' these locally hired staff to avoid them becoming a threat or source of insecurity. As one senior employee in DRC explained to me, 'many security problems come from within.'[8] A Congolese nurse put it this way: MSF employees 'may betray *la maison*' by sharing information with 'bandits' if they perceive MSF to be partial or if they feel personally aggrieved. Therefore, the relationship between 'expats and local staff' is also 'key to security,' because if 'national staff don't feel it is also their organisation, that they are just working for the *muzungus* with all the money, there will be *fuites internes,'* he concluded.[9] The lesson of *Fuite Interne,* then, is that dissatisfied staff are bad for security. The moral of *The Magic Padlock* fable is that 'expat supervision' is essential to avoid corruption, and that national staff may try and deceive their colleagues. The message for foreign

humanitarians is to not let their guard down: to keep an eye out for corruption scams, for missing stocks, or for inflated daily worker number requests.

Justifications

These fables explain and ultimately justify the way things worked in the organisation: they help employees understand (and accept) certain organisational decisions and structures. Indeed, these fables were presented to me so that I too could understand their logic. The fables were not promoted in any way by the organisation but had a life of their own. They spread partly because, in helping justify current ways of working, they enabled humanitarians to avoid the discomfort of questioning aspects of the status quo.

Sales Putes helps to explain the rule forbidding intimate relationships between foreign humanitarian employees of MSF and local citizens or colleagues in rural locations. It does so by introducing the idea that intimate relationships with 'national staff' colleagues might not only have a potentially negative impact on 'team dynamics' but might also pose security problems for the whole organisation. As one 'Responsible Behaviour' guideline explained, MSF 'strongly discourages romantic or sexual relationships during employment,' because they might 'jeopardise' the organisation's 'principles, mission (or team dynamics) and image.'[10] MSF is only what its employees do in its name. Employees are supposed to *perform* the organisational principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence through their everyday behaviour (James 2020). Foreign staff must therefore not become too socially entangled, because this would potentially tarnish MSF's image. In effect, private lives are part of the security realm.

Much like the colonial regimes of the nineteenth centuries, humanitarian organisations have an interest in the intimate details of the lives of their staff (Cooper and Stoler 1997). While colonial regimes 'cordoned themselves off from the native world' (Stoler, 1995: 112) based on notions of racial purity, humanitarian agencies endeavour to preserve the supposed 'detachment' of fieldworkers, who must not become 'polluted' by proximity to the social and political environment. 'Foreignness' is understood to hold operational functions in MSF (Redfield 2012), foreign staff are understood to help protect their colleagues, and are seen as central 'to safeguard impartiality in conflict settings' (Hofman and Heller Pérache, 2014: 1178). Being foreign is described as central to decision-making: international staff 'have the benefit of an external point of reference that hasn't already been appropriated by the local political landscape' (ibid.). In other words, in MSF, foreign-ness is described as part of a construction of 'neutrality': foreign staff are tasked with preventing any behaviour (including their own) that might jeopardise MSF's image or working relationships.

In Goma, I met several new MSF recruits who told me that they had discussed this rule about intimate relationships. At first, these new employees explained, they had felt uncomfortable – it seemed to encourage a separation between so-called 'international' and 'national' staff in the organisation. However, after working in eastern DRC and hearing several stories, they had come to understand the rule's 'operational and security logic.'[11] Fables such as *Sales Putes* are powerful in this way because they help build consensus around the potential risks of relationships with Congolese colleagues.

The second and third fables, *Fuite Interne* and *The Magic Padlock,* help to explain and justify an organisational structure in which foreign employees occupy senior decision-making posts. Although there have been calls to shift power and funding to southern-based NGOs and actors since the 1990s, 'emergency' aid work remains largely dominated by Northern actors (Ali and Murphy 2020). In 2016, the UN Secretary General argued that humanitarian action should be 'as local as possible, as international as necessary', triggering a flurry of commitments to giving more support to local responders – a process termed 'localisation.' This was part of a growing sense that it was time remedy North/South power imbalances and colonial continuities (Bennett et al., 2016:46). 'Localisation' aims to remedy neo-colonial interventions that marginalise 'local' actors, bypass their priorities and needs, and silence their agency (Ndaliko 2016; Adeso Africa 2020).

In MSF, however, decision-making power remains in Europe, with 'international' staff in top positions (Pechayre 2017). In 2016, MSF reemphasised its 'reservations' about a 'blanket endorsement' of localisation (Schenkenberg 2016) because in the politically volatile zones where it works and considers itself most relevant, MSF needs to pick the staff who are best placed to work despite the risk of manipulation and pressures, and 'safeguard' the organisation's (real or perceived) impartiality, neutrality and independence (Hofman and Heller Pérache 2014). Localisation, according to MSF, ignores the pressures faced by local actors in conflict settings, as well as the difficulty they may have in following humanitarian principles. One MSF employee with experience in DRC told me that, although his Congolese colleagues were crucial, he 'didn't pretend any of them were neutral.'[12] An MSF think-tank even argued that expecting 'local actors' to adhere to humanitarian principles in conflict zones 'might be nothing short of utopian': the reasons that these employees might not follow principles could be 'intentional (from a conscious decision to privilege a particular group), unconscious (such as a repetition of culturally normalized patterns of exclusion), or driven by a (perceived) fear of immediate or future retaliation by local power actors' (Schenkenberg 2016:23). In effect, the supposed 'detachment' of foreign employees is framed as central to decision-making, whilst humanitarians who are hired in their own country are portrayed as having potential particularistic attachments (Shevchenko and Fox 2008). Instead of the large-scale promotion of staff in their own country, MSF has focused on improving opportunities for 'national staff' to *become* 'international staff.'[13] One European MSF

employee concluded that 'national staff' could more reliably occupy 'coordination positions' *abroad*, because 'there, they can be neutral.'[14]

In effect, *The Magic Padlock* and *Fuite Interne* act as cautionary tales, suggesting that 'localising' may present significant risks in practice. These stories suggest that, rather than following and representing the organisation's principles, there is a risk that practitioners in their own country might follow personal interests and financial gain, using their ambiguous connections to do so. *The Magic Padlock* suggests that maintaining foreign staff in senior positions in MSF is central not only to 'safeguard MSF's principles', to prevent 'security incidents', but also because 'supervision' is essential to avoid systems of fraud.

Fuite Interne illustrates how nationally hired employees might constitute a potential risk to the organisation itself. The fable therefore helps justify a hierarchy of trust in which foreign decision makers withhold certain information from their colleagues. 'Expatriate-only' meetings discuss sensitive information to avoid 'leaks.' The potential power of national staff's role is minimised: foreign employees usually lead negotiations with political and armed authorities in an official capacity. This hierarchy was summarised to me by a senior MSF manager who explained, 'national staff guide you, but in a certain direction; you need to diversify your sources.' Indeed, Congolese staff's role was described as helping 'to collect information, but not to take the decisions, because they cannot give an analysis that is not influenced by who they are.'[15] Although MSF relies on national employees' histories, networks and contacts in order to analyse the political environment, the organisation does not fully trust these employees *precisely because* of this embeddedness (James 2020). As Degan Ali summarises, conceptualisations of 'neutrality' are inherently exclusionary: only 'the foreign is neutral', whilst the 'insider' is tied up with particularistic attachments. This portrayal of national staff as 'risky' reinforces discriminatory practices, justifying their exclusion from senior positions (Adeso Africa 2020; Peace Direct 2021).

Tropes in the Field Imaginary

These fables explain and justify organisational structures which, in turn, maintain a hierarchy between employees in the humanitarian sphere. To do so, fables draw on and reproduce tropes which become central to the humanitarian field imaginary. Not everything in these stories is openly 'sayable' (Jackson 2002:21), but such tropes are nonetheless communicated to the listener as part of the broader system of 'knowledge' about the 'field'. These tropes draw on colonial imagery, a 'racialised regime of representation' which 'reduces, essentializes, naturalises and fixes "difference"' and becomes an organising concept that shapes practices and relations of power (Hall 1997:243; Spivak 1988; Mudimbe 1988). As Ann Stoler (2016:21) describes, colonial 'logics and sensibilities' leave 'durable marks' in 'our imperial present.' Imperial 'duress' is laced throughout these fables in the form of stereotypes

which ‘Other’ the people of ‘the field’ (Pailey 2019; Kothari 2006). Ultimately, these tropes are emblematic of the ‘white gaze’ of aid, a form of ethnocentrism which ‘measures the political, socio-economic and cultural processes of Southern black, brown and other people of colour against a standard of Northern whiteness and fins them incomplete, wanting, inferior or regressive” (Pailey 2019:733).

In *Sales Putes,* for instance, the ‘knowledge’ produced about ‘the field’ is that intimate relations with Congolese citizens are forbidden. Even if this rule is in large part guided by a desire to prevent abuses of power, by advising against intimate relationships with locally hired employees, these guidelines reproduce forms of exclusion, suggesting that it would be better for foreign staff to have relationships with each other. The rules against intimate relationships determine who can mix and to what extent, suggesting different degrees of sameness and otherness among colleagues working for the same organisation. This essentialises notions of difference, creating a racialised discourse which is ‘structured by a set of binary oppositions’, such as: us/them, foreign/local (Hall 1997:243).

Sales Putes revolves around foreign (and white) European women having relationships with (black) African men. These men are presented as pursuing intimate relationships with foreign women even though they are married. It is crucial to recognise the uncomfortable historical baggage associated with this portrayal – white people have long been fixated with the sexuality of black men (Fanon 1952). Stuart Hall (1992) describes how this hypersexualised portrayal of black masculinity is one of the most pervasive racialised stereotypes in the contemporary era, which infantilizes black men and presents them as lacking ‘family responsibility.’ This imaginary of oversexualised black men has long been represented as a threat (Hall 1997:262). The colonial encounter was one of tension: colonial regimes were ‘intent to mark the boundaries of a colonizing population’ (Stoler and Cooper 1997:5). Yet, everyday colonial administration involved a set of arrangements that continually ‘transgressed these distinctions’ (Stoler 1995:112). At the heart of this tension was the place of white women. The construction of European-ness was gender-coded: a European man could live with a ‘native’ woman, but a woman could not (Stoler 1995). The sexual practices of European women, in consequence, were policed as the boundary between the colonised and coloniser: the management of sexual practices was central to imperial order (Stoler 1995:4). Although of course the actors and their aims have changed, *Sales Putes* reactivates similar tropes by focusing on the ‘risks’ of sexual practices between white women and African men. This discourse holds symbolic power, supporting a form of ‘ritualised expulsion’ which polices the boundary of insiders and outsiders (Hall 1997).

In *Fuite Interne* and *The Magic Padlock,* only certain employees (foreigners) are presented as capable of not taking sides in a political arena: ‘national staff’, therefore, are rarely promoted to senior leadership positions. In *Fuite Interne,* for example, Congolese employees are presented as entangled in murky criminal networks. Meanwhile, in *The Magic Padlock*, the crafty logistician’s assistant and his

padlock ruse evoke a devious character who cannot be fully trusted. 'Trickery', here, is once again associated with 'the Rest' (Hall 1997:25). Both these fables also suggest that Congolese humanitarians are motivated by money, rather than 'humanitarian impulse.' *The Magic Padlock* presents corruption as an inevitable part of the 'culture,' whilst foreigners are somehow immune from corruption. As Mohamed-Saleem concludes, the focus within the humanitarian system on corruption solely among people from the 'Global South' is a dominant feature of aid's 'white gaze' (Peace Direct 2021:16).

Indeed, this description of nationally hired staff as tied to particularistic loyalties or open to corruption reactivates colonial discourses of Otherness, whilst the universal remains firmly 'encompassed by the Westerner' (Mudimbe 1988:46; Pailey 2019; Kothari 2006; Depelchin 2005). As aid worker and activist Degan Ali describes, assumptions that practitioners from the Global South working in their own country cannot be given leadership because of concerns about their neutrality, nepotism or mismanagement of funds helps perpetuate structural inequality in the aid system (Peace Direct 2021:18). Power is withheld from national citizens based on the idea that they are both 'risky' and lack capacity for sound decision-making in their own communities (Ali and Murphy 2020; Adeso Africa 2020; Devex 2019; Khan 2021). As a result, these tropes and representations have a direct impact on the maintenance of existing power structures within aid organisations, replicating colonial relations of power..

This was not lost on Congolese humanitarians, many of whom described their frustration at the narrative that only '*staff nat'* were involved in corruption. One MSF employee from North Kivu told me that 'racist stereotypes' explained why Congolese did not hold top positions: 'it's the idea that we are all corrupt, when in fact, we have stories about when expats gave things to armed groups for access. It's not only nationals that are capable of that kind of behaviour.'[16] His colleague from the region agreed: 'discrimination exists in NGOs. The expats don't trust Congolese people even though here they are in our country.'[17] Congolese employees involved in security management described how their connections were used strategically by MSF, but were also a source of mistrust: 'expats saw me as too implicated in local politics', one summarised.[18] In short, these fables reinforce a dichotomy between us and them: 'they' are a group to be observed and managed but not necessarily promoted to the senior leadership, for the sake of everyone's security.

CONCLUSION

This article illustrates the interconnection between the symbolic power of fables' meanings and representations, and the reproduction of material practices of inequality in humanitarian aid. It is important to examine the sorts of work these fables do in justifying certain humanitarian practices. Fables matter because they help construct organisational logics and support their associated power structures. They help people make sense of the way things are, and in doing so, these stories help maintain the status quo. *Sales Putes, Fuite Interne* and *The Magic Padlock* acted as cautionary tales

about the potential risks 'in the field.' These narratives solidified historically laden tropes of 'national staff', 'othering' the people who originate from a place termed 'the field.' This, in turn, helps shape what actions are seen as possible, and what is perceived to be beyond the realm of possible change. It helps to explain and justify current ways of working – in particular, the reasons for limiting the role of nationally hired employees and maintaining a distance between 'international' and 'national' colleagues. Such fables illustrate the pervasive ways that colonial representations continue to hold power: the humanitarian system in part legitimises itself and its unequal power structures through racialised 'tropes' (Pailey 2019:734; Kothari 2006).

In 2020, there were renewed calls for humanitarian aid to 'decolonise.' To better understand how unequal power structures are maintained, it is necessary to comprehend the logics upholding certain decisions – how these logics are explained and how consensus is reached. In other words, there is a need to understand how structures of inequality are reproduced at a micro-level. If reform efforts aim to critically examine and replace the Eurocentric gaze of the current system to ensure that it does not reproduce current hegemonic politics (Aloudat 2021), this article suggests that deconstructing organisational fables might be an important part of this process, because such fables come to hold a particular form of power in supporting practices and structures of inequality in the everyday. The tropes that circulate in fables are emblematic of the sorts of 'systems of representation' which become an 'organising factor in a system of global power relations', and shape ways of thinking and acting (Hall 1992:278; Said 1978; Mudimbe 1988). By linking certain people to different forms of risk and linking security rules about distancing to organisational security, these fables help collectively govern aid workers through anxiety. A closer examination of fables, their morals and tropes, is central to understanding the micro-dynamics of power in humanitarianism today.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

[1] 'Open Letter to Senior Management and Colleagues in MSF: Beyond Words to Anti-Racist Action' https://docs.google.com/forms/d/16TF7CTAP3S8BoV4MUOrZxYcIUk_-qT_MUYxSQKhThDU/viewform?edit_requested=true [Accessed February 2021].
[2] The research undertaken for this article formed part of a DPhil at the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford. Ethics approval was obtained by the Department of International Development's Departmental Research Ethics Committee. The DPhil was facilitated by MSF-CRASH. Interviewees were informed of the aim of the research and consent to their participation obtained on the understanding of anonymity.
[3] MSF International Activity Report 2018: https://www.msf.org/international-activity-report-2018/figures [Accessed February 2021].
[4] This was not specific to MSF – organisations commonly ask 'international' humanitarians to avoid having intimate dealings with 'locals' (Beerli 2018). However, these rules do not prevent intimate relations as well as sexual exploitation by aid workers, which has recently been widely documented during the Ebola response in eastern DRC (see Flummerfelt and Kasongo 2021).
[5] The name of the project has been anonymised.
[6] Interview, North Kivu, August 2018.
[7] MSF France, *Guide Secu Poche*. 2020. Goma. In authors possession.
[8] Interview, Goma, February 2018.
[9] Interview, North Kivu, September 2018.
[10] 'OCA 2012 standard framework responsible behaviour.' MSF, in author's possession.
[11] Goma, January 2018.
[12] Interview, Skype, August 2017.
[13] In 2006, the MSF sections agreed to try and improve diversity and inclusiveness in La Mancha Agreement, 25 June, Athens: http://associativehistory.msf.org/la-mancha-agreement [Accessed February 2021].
[14] Interview, Paris, May 2018.
[15] Interviews: Paris, May 2018; Goma, August 2018.
[16] Interview, Goma, November 2017.
[17] Interview, Goma, January 2018.
[18] Interview, Goma, August 2018.

ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7194-1287

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