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### Introduction

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# Introduction

## Freedom

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'Who or what can be free, or not free?' The opening question of Lino e Silva and Wardle's article in this issue can be seen as central to this edition of *Etnofoor*. Take for example Opono Opono, a former Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) child soldier. After spending sixteen years with the LRA, he managed to escape, and afterward tries to build-up a 'normal' life in northern Uganda. In the documentary *No Place for a Rebel* (Wegdam and Asimakopoulos 2017), we see how Opono learns to ride a motor bike, tries his hand at carpentry, and follows a business course. But we also see how the LRA is still very much a part of him. Opono suffers from injuries sustained during battles with the Ugandan military, he is traumatised, and he has to deal with the stigma of being a former LRA soldier. We see how Opono struggles in his attempts to settle down. In the end, he decides to do what he thinks he is best at:

that is, being a soldier. He enrolls into the Ugandan military and is sent off to fight the rebel group he was once part of.

*No Place for a Rebel* is a film about victims, about perpetrators, and about the hazy line separating them. But, ultimately, it is also about freedom. What does freedom mean to Opono? Does freedom mean not having to fight with the LRA any longer? Did Opono experience some degree of freedom during his time in 'the Bush', where he was among his peers and their camaraderie, and where status did not depend on income but on the cruel skills of a rebel? At the least, things were a lot easier there and then, or so Opono tells us. Is it 'freedom' to continuously worry about your livelihood, living with fear for revenge from your neighbours for what the LRA did to them, or to come to the depressing realisation that fighting is really the only

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skill you have, thus enrolling in the formal military? These questions are difficult to answer, and they remind us that 'freedom' is not an objective state 'out there'. Instead, freedom can be seen as an experience, a subjective state, and it should therefore be investigated as such.

Studies of freedom, or of what it means to be free, are often characterized by a focus on its relative absence. The emphasis is usually on what people strive to be free from, such as oppression or persecution. In that sense, freedom's political traction – as a rallying point for the dominated – is important to mention. Yet, this emphasis does not tell us much about the experience of freedom itself and the way it is interpreted by those who are striving to be 'free'. As Opono Opondo's example shows us, we cannot just assume the meaning of freedom. Too often the notion is not explored, even if there is an explicit focus on 'freedom' (see Steneker, this issue), as if we all know its implicit meaning. It is for this reason that we challenged authors for this issue to critically assess the approach to freedom, and help us to understand the subjective meanings of the concept.

As becomes clear from the current issue, freedom – both as an experience and as an idea – is a concept subject to semantic and ontological complexities. In their article *Testing Freedom: Ontological Considerations*, Moises Lino e Silva and Huon Wardle show how anthropologists, through their method of fieldwork, could combine these complexities of meaning and being, and come to a fruitful understanding of freedom. They conclude that we should start our inquiries into notions of freedom 'from the presence of a signifier of freedom in the concrete research context', one that can

lead us 'into the various meanings that freedom acquires in daily use' (24). Indeed, the concept of freedom has a multitude of interpretations. These interpretations have long been subject to philosophical and legal debates, relating to, for example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and freedom of opinion, religion, movement and freedom from want and fear. However, Lino e Silva and Wardle urge us to go beyond the philosophical and judicial implications of these debates, and stimulate us to focus on an ontological definition of freedom. That such a definition might lack clarity and acquires certain vagueness is something the authors tell us not to worry about too much. Indeed, we might arrive at the realisation that 'freedom may come to exist under a variety of understandings' (25).

This ontological approach to freedom resonates throughout this issue. Annelieke Driessen, Ilse van der Klift and Kristine Krause, for example, explore in their article *Freedom in Dementia Care? On Becoming Better Bound to the Nursing Home* the experience of freedom among people with dementia living in Dutch nursing homes with open door policies. The bulk of Dutch care houses tend to restrict residents' freedom, aiming to prevent residents from doing harm to themselves. However, the authors suggest, a care home with an open door policy 'leaves residents feeling less confronted with mobility restrictions' (30), and as such it enables residents to feel more at home. Moreover, staying inside (that is to say, not to make use of the 'open doors') is actively promoted by staff – something that is called 'will-making' by the authors – and made into an attractive alternative to going out. Again, the authors argue, this stimulates attachment to one's residency. Open doors stimulate feeling at home and feeling attached,

and instead of being confronted with mobility restrictions people experience freedom.

In the next article, *Migrants' Navigation of the Thai-Burmese Borderlands: Vision, Visibility, and 'the Art of Acting Thai'*, Frida Bjørneseth explores the ways in which Burmese migrants seek freedom in the Burma/Thai borderland. In particular, she focusses on how these migrants navigate and manage 'visibility' and 'invisibility' vis-a-vis the Thai state. While being 'visible' – having formal papers – means one has the relative freedom to move around without being arrested, having such papers also means one needs to present him/herself continuously to the state. In a borderland that is subject to ever changing policies, such visibility can have its downsides, while staying under the state's radar – and thus being invisible – can actually provide stronger feelings of freedom. This article thus highlights the dual-sided nature of how freedom is experienced.

Benjamin Bowles explores in *Gongoozled: Freedom, Surveillance and the Public/Private Divide on the Waterways of South East England* how Boaters, or boat dwellers, in England look for particular freedoms from society through their way of life. He shows that, while being free in many ways, these Boaters are, because of their life style, at the same time surveilled by the state and constantly looked at (gongoozled in their own terms) by passers-by. As such, their privacy is severely constrained and they are forced to give up one kind of freedom in their search for another.

Judith Farkas comes to a similar conclusion in her article *'To Separate from the Umbilical Cord of Society': Freedom as Dependence and Independence in Hungarian Ecovillages*. The ecovillages she described have been set

up by people looking for 'off-the-grid' living, provide people with a sense of freedom, as they can live outside mainstream society and its associated pressures of consumption, globalisation, and environmental issues. They do so, however, by subjugating themselves to a collective (the ecovillage) and to 'nature'. Hence, for ecovillagers, freedom means being independent and dependent at the same time. As Farkas shows, an ecovillage life creates many non-freedoms in order for people to recover some of the freedoms they feel contemporary society constrains.

We can find a similar ambivalent notion of freedom in the final contribution to this issue by Sjaak van der Geest. In *The Freedom of Anthropological Fieldwork*, he reminds us – as the title suggests – of the joys of doing fieldwork and the degrees of freedom that anthropologists can find in it. Or at least, that is how he experienced most of his fieldwork himself; others were less happy with their time in the field. In this respect Van der Geest refers to Malinowski (1967), who famously described (parts) of his fieldwork in terms of misery, boredom and frustration. Indeed, the wilful submission to alien rules, belief systems and symbols can result in experiences of loneliness and estrangement. Yet, to Van der Geest, it did not. Instead, the alien world he submerged in (among the Twi in Ghana) encouraged him to rethink his own categorisations, as if he was experiencing a second birth. Fieldwork, according to Van der Geest, is a disturbance of routine, which stimulates a 'recover[y] and awareness of our freedom.' Because 'Fieldwork calls us awake' (110).

To anthropologists, these final words of Van der Geest's article must sound familiar. Fieldwork – in terms of its long-term engagement with the people we

study – provides unique insights. It further offers freedom while at the same time restricts us in many ways. It is therefore that the articles in this issue do not only touch upon the philosophical and judicial implications of ‘freedom’, but go beyond them. They discuss people’s ideas about what would constitute their freedom and the ways they feel it is constrained. These ideas, as perhaps can be expected, are often conflicted, ambivalent and paradoxical. After all, it is this ‘vagueness’, to which Lino e Silva and Wardle already alerted us, that brings out the diversity of contexts in which we can find freedom.

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