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*The efficacy of exclaiming uiat in Kyrgyzstan*

McBrien, J.

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**JULIE MCBRIEN**  
University of Amsterdam

# On shame:

## The efficacy of exclaiming *uiat!* in Kyrgyzstan

### ABSTRACT

*Uiat* is a word ubiquitously spoken in Kyrgyzstan. It is hurled at children to stop improper behavior and thrown by adults to evaluate conduct. It is a relational practice that textures everyday life, cultivating discomfort in the body when spoken, gendering and aging those involved in its practice, and setting the boundaries of propriety. *Uiat* is most often translated as “shame.” The earliest work on honor and shame in anthropology established the prevalence of shame and outlined its basic work as a social mechanism of control, but the discussion, especially when considering Muslim societies, largely died out. Yet shame remains a prominent practice ripe for investigation. Looking at *uiat* as a dense, knotty practice carried out over time shows how shaming practices, in Kyrgyzstan at least, work to exert control and why they are so very efficacious. [*shame, material semiotics, gender, age, embodiment, performativity, Muslim societies, postsocialist, Kyrgyzstan*]

Уят - бул бардык жерде айтылып жүргөн сөз. Бул туура эмес жүрүм -турумду токтотуу үчүн балдарга берилген сөз. Жаштарды жүрүм -турумун баалоодо улуулар тарабынан айтылат. Муну мамилелер практикасына байланыштырып, ал күнүмдүк жашоону көзөмөлдөйт, сүйлөө учурунда денеде ыңгайсыздыкты пайда кылат, катышкандардын жынысын жана картаюусун жана адептүүлүктүн чектерин белгилейт. Уят көбүнчө “уят” shame (англисче) деп которулат. Антропологиядагы ар -намыс жана уят боюнча эң алгачкы эмгек уяттын таралышын аныктады жана анын негизги ишин социалдык көзөмөл механизми катары сүрөттөп келген, бирок, айрыкча, мусулман коомдорун кароодо илимий талаш -тартыштар негизинен өчүп калды. Ошентсе да, уят практикасын изилдөө маанилүү бойдон калууда. Уятты убакыттын өтүшү менен жүзөгө ашырылган тыгыз, баш аламан практика катары көрүү, уялуу практикасы, жок дегенде, Кыргызстанда көзөмөлдү ишке ашыруу үчүн кандай иштээрин жана эмне үчүн ал абдан эффективдүү экенин көрсөтөт. [*уят, материалдык семиотика, гендер, жаш, ишке ашуусу, аткаруучулук, мусулман коомдору, постсоциалист, Кыргызстан*]

**U***iat* was among the earliest words I learned in Kyrgyz.<sup>1</sup> It did not appear in my language manual, but during my language training as a Peace Corps volunteer, I lived with a family, and it was from them, and more specifically from Dinara,<sup>2</sup> my 16-year-old host sister, that I learned the word. Over the months, Dinara became my guide, friend, and disciplinarian. Despite my best efforts, I made many mistakes in daily village life in northern Kyrgyzstan. Some were considered simply, or fantastically, stupid. “Jindi!” (Crazy!), Dinara would shout out at me, often in Kyrgyz, English, and Russian for good measure. She did this when, for example, I tried to turn a giant pot into a double boiler and nearly split it, a mistake that would have been very costly.

But at other times she would shout *uiat!* at my errors, like the time I threw some stale bread into the field for the birds or when I walked a few steps into the house with my shoes on. It was not just at me that she directed her corrections. Her verbal incantations of *uiat* trailed behind her niece Rosa, just a toddler then, as often as Dinara ran after little Rosa herself. Dinara was her daily minder. Rosa reached her hand down her grandmother’s shirt. “Uiat!” Rosa stepped on the tablecloth while trying to reach her grandfather. “Uiat!” Rosa got angry and hit me. She hit another child. She hit Dinara. “Uiat!” “Uiat!” “Uiat!” “Rosa! Uiat! Uiat bolot! Your father will punish [*urushuu*] you.”<sup>3</sup> I could not translate *uiat* then, but I understood what it meant. Rosa could not even speak the word, but she too knew what it entailed. It marked our behavior. It warned of something malicious arising that affected us all. *Uiat!* was often painful to hear. I recoiled at the rebuke. The utterance of *uiat* hurt Rosa too, for it was regularly accompanied by a slap or a shake.

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*Uiat* is not only a word, an utterance, but also a practice that has movement and force. When deployed in the present (*Uiat!*), it marks an unacceptable act. It aims to halt, to prevent, as it did when Dinara spoke it to Rosa or me. When deployed in the future tense (*Uiat bolot!*), it simultaneously interrupts the immediate moment and bodes an amorphous future malignancy. Ubiquitous in Kyrgyzstan, exclamations of *uiat!* pepper the soundscape of everyday life.

*Uiat*, when exclaimed, works on the body; you feel it. Its utterance is accompanied by a pinch, a caress, or a slap. Cheeks flush and eyes avert when it is heard. Speaking *uiat* aims at creating discomfort. It is a verbal slap.

*Uiat* is performed in a web of relations. It emerges between Dinara, Rosa, and Rosa's absent father. It evaluates others when it is whispered during gossip. *How much did he drink? Uiat!* It surfaces in stratified relations, marking the authority of its speaker and calling the aged and gendered subjects of its performance into being—Dinara, the authoritative elder; Rosa, the obedient minor. Exclaiming *uiat!* creates abstractions of others. *Uiat! What will people think?* It makes sense and comes into being only in relation to objects and other people, who are often nonpresent.

In the anthropology of Central Asia, *uiat* has been analyzed as an emotion or as emotion work (Beyer 2016, 147–51). Some sketch it as a concept or discourse (Borbieva 2012; Werner 2009). *Uiat* is most often translated into English as “shame.”

Shame has a long history in anthropology. It has most often been paired with honor, famously in J. G. Peristiany's (1965) volume on the topic. This work inaugurated a body of literature that would use the honor-shame complex to interpret Mediterranean societies (e.g., Davis 1977; Pitt-Rivers 1977; Schneider 1971). Honor and shame were understood as notions used pervasively in social evaluations across the region, and they were taken as values or, in Pierre Bourdieu's (1965, 216) formulation, as a part of a “mythico-ritual system.” The focus, in any case, was on decoding their meanings (see also Stirling 1969, 126–33). This literature, which focused on ideas, productively got at the prominence and prevalence of shame in certain societies. Nevertheless, several scholars objected that it tended to overgeneralize, to reduce the study of shame to female sexual purity, and to use the latter to create, and then characterize, homogenous “cultures,” often those of Muslims (Abu-Lughod 1986, 2013; Gilmore 1987; Herzfeld 1980; Wikan 1984).

To address some of these shortcomings, Unni Wikan (1984) focused attention on the predominance of shame as a matter of concern and as a quotidian practice (see also Asano-Tamanoi 1987). Using a Geertzian framework, she discussed honor as an “experience-distant” concept, while shame was a near and ubiquitous one (Geertz 1974; Wikan 1984, 637). Working in Cairo, she said the word *shame* was “constantly heard among the poor in the back

streets” (Wikan 1984, 636). Honor and shame as practice and idea were similarly important in Lila Abu-Lughod's (1986, 257) work, but she likewise attended to emotion in her explorations by, for example, situating the Awlad 'Ali people's poetry recitation, and the expression of emotions it allowed, in complex dialogue with dominant discourses of honor and modesty. Equally important to her work was the way she conveyed this to her reader. Practices were shown not merely to decode “cultural systems” but to present the performances themselves and suggest the quality of the sentiments they evoked; communicating practices and emotions in this way were central to Abu-Lughod's intervention. Abu-Lughod's work on shame and modesty influenced another body of work that treats shame as emotion, emotion work, or an affective response to moral failure (e.g., Bloch 2011; Collins and Bahar 2000; Gideonse 2015; Plesset 2007), though most of this work does not concern the Mediterranean or Muslims. Most anthropological research, however, left behind the honor-shame complex—not only because it focused excessively on female sexuality, often producing Orientalist caricatures of Muslims, but also because new approaches to gender developed in anthropology and because the larger critique of structuralism, like those used in analyses of shame, began to change the course of the discipline.

Shame, nevertheless, still appears as a salient quotidian practice in many places around the world, notably in Central Asia—a region largely missed by early Euro-American anthropology, owing to Cold War politics. Given the concept's troubled history, most contemporary anthropologists working on the Mediterranean and Muslim societies abjure investigations of shame, yet it pops up regularly in the contemporary social science literature on Central Asia, though mostly in passing (e.g., Beyer 2013, 2016; Borbieva 2012; Isabaeva 2011; Ismailbekova 2018; Kleinbach and Amsler 1999; Kleinbach and Babaiarova 2013; Kleinbach, Ablezova, and Aitieva 2005; Reeves 2011, 2016; Temirkoulov 2004; Temirkoulov 2010; Werner 2004, 2009; Wooden 2014).

Returning to Wikan and Abu-Lughod's emphasis on practice in their studies of shame and modesty (respectively), I approach *uiat* as a quotidian practice, one that works on the body to provoke discomfort and that emerges in stratified relations. I examine a variety of fields in which *uiat*, as a ubiquitous sensuous practice, seeks to mark out propriety, female sexuality being but one of them. Using Annemarie Mol's (2014) material-semiotic approach, and drawing particularly from her work on the Dutch word *lekker* (tasty, pleasant, agreeable), I bring together two elements: the focus on practice and embodied experience found in Wikan and Abu-Lughod, and the emphasis on meaning in the earliest literature on shame. In doing so, I analyze how exclaiming *uiat* affects the body by provoking discomfort and how it simultaneously maps out and attempts to stabilize ideas of correctness.

Mol wrote her article on *lekker* as a part of a long debate with Marilyn Strathern on the relative strengths of meaning- and practice-oriented approaches. Mol, commenting on Strathern's work, recommended that instead of trying to understand what others are thinking, we might want to compare their sociomaterial practices; Strathern pushed back, wondering how we would know which practices to consider if we did not know how they were classified by the people involved (Mol 2014, 94). Mol aimed to find a way out of this debate by tracing "socio-material practices and semiotic specificities together" (95) in her exploration of the word *lekker*. Mol followed traces of *lekker* in various events, but much of her material was gathered in Dutch nursing homes, where she observed practices of asking "Is it *lekker*?" (Is it tasty? agreeable? pleasant?). Mol's work is particularly productive for work on shame because she makes the double move of tracing the simultaneous emergence of meaning and sensuous experience in practice.

Mol's approach is helpful here for two further reasons. First, by using a practice approach, she helps us transcend a problem that afflicted much of the earliest work on shame: a kind of static indexing of cultural notions, in which ideas somehow float freely and separately from the people and things that create and use them. Indeed, despite broader correctives to structuralist analysis, including practice approaches outside material semiotics (e.g., Ortner 1984), such notions of stasis have nevertheless dogged the literature on shame until the present. Mol's focus on practice instead reveals the relational, situated emergence of meaning, and it draws attention to the moment of *doing* when notions develop.

Second, Mol's emphasis on the body allows us to connect the experience of shame with shaming practices and the notions of propriety they produce. In her work on *lekker*, she shows the impact of asking "Is it *lekker*?" on the body and how this is bound up with the marking of pleasurable acts. The question "Is it *lekker*?" Mol asserts, is not a pragmatic one that aims to get at whether someone liked what they were eating.<sup>4</sup> Rather, it intends to nurture pleasure in that person while performing care. Asking if something is *lekker*, Mol (2014, 99) argues, is a way of "acting out appreciation" and of cultivating bodily pleasure. "It is not sensible, but sensual" (100), she concludes, distinguishing her approach to words-in-action from those she calls pragmatists (she explicitly refers only to Wittgenstein [1953]). Its work is to cultivate pleasure, which occurs in a relational act between not only people but also things—like you, your food, and your body. Pleasure, if it happens, is "a relational achievement" (101).

Mol's work on *lekker* thus enables a joining together of the three strands—meaning, emotion, and practice—in the early work on shame. Using this approach, we can understand the exclamation of *uiat!* as a dense, knotty practice in which the material (the body, its sensations) and the

conceptual (ideas about social propriety) emerge coevally through a relational (people, things) practice (uttering *uiat!*). Just as the point of asking "Is it *lekker*?" is not to identify an essence of agreeability in something but to cultivate a feeling of pleasure, the aim of exclaiming *uiat!* is not to point to an already-established inventory of all things shameful but rather to cultivate discomfort and, in doing so, to mark out correctness and stabilize the sometimes-blurry boundaries around propriety.

Understanding *uiat!* in this way not only provides a more precise rendering of *uiat!* as it is lived in Kyrgyzstan, but it also lets us ask new questions about it. Seeing *uiat!* as a relational practice, for example, draws attention to the relations within which it is exclaimed and allows for asking about their qualities. Differing from Mol, whose attention lies elsewhere, I turn my gaze to these relations and ask about their nature and how exclaiming *uiat!* helps (re)create them. For while *uiat!* works on the body and marks out propriety, it also (re)asserts the aged and gendered relations within which it is spoken. Its sensuous, semiotic practice simultaneously creates age and gender. Its gendering and aging work resembles the effects involved in Judith Butler's (2011, xii) notion of performativity—that "reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names." Exclaiming *uiat!*, like a Butlerian performative act, generates gender (and age).

Butler's notion of performativity is part of a broader poststructuralist paradigm that points to the body as a product of discourse, a concept that has been critiqued and improved. A helpful early corrective, articulated by N. Katherine Hayles (1999), argues that poststructuralist conceptualizations ignored the experience of embodiment. Hayles (1999, 193) suggests instead that we interrogate "the body as a cultural construct and the experiences of embodiment that individual people within a culture feel and articulate." In exclamations of *uiat!*, for example, the utterance works discursively to construct elders and juniors, and men and women, while it simultaneously provokes discomfort. Doing age and gender are embodied experiences as much as they are discursive.

Looking at *uiat!* through this lens also draws attention to the embodied qualities of the practice, the way they are experienced, and the way they cocreate notions of propriety. This stands in contrast to viewing the embodied qualities of *uiat!*'s practice as simply an emotional response to violations of correctness. Examining *uiat!* as practice furthermore reveals that it is always conditional and provisional, yet nonetheless largely successful and rather conservative. Exclaiming *uiat!* is chiefly a maintaining force, but propriety is in flux. In greater and lesser ways, it is not quite the same in one place, or time, as it is in another. Proclaiming *uiat!* works to stabilize this mutability.

Finally, understanding *uiat!* as practice helps us see what exclaiming it does over time, since its temporal

rhythms are what make it so effectual. Certainly, *uiat* is efficacious because it is a dense practice. That is, it arises from, entangles, and generates a sensuous experience, (hierarchical) social relations, and notions of correctness. But its potency derives likewise from its practice over time. Here I move beyond Mol to investigate the accumulative effects of a sensuous, sociomaterial semiotic practice. Exclaiming *uiat!* works so well because of its ubiquity, breadth, and repetition (in a single day and over a lifetime). Each enactment of *uiat* adheres to the previous one, increasing its affective density and sticking it relentlessly to the material, semiotic, and social relations in which it arises (cf. Ahmed 2013). It is this sticky density that makes practices of shame, at least in Kyrgyzstan, so very efficacious.

### ***Uiat* in contemporary Kyrgyzstan**

In the early post-Soviet years, Kyrgyzstan was discussed in the broader literature as an “island of democracy,” hallmarked by relative stability and, after the nadir of the post-Soviet economic decline was reached in 1998, steady economic improvement (Anderson 1999; cf. Laruelle and Engvall 2015). Much of this economic growth has been driven by circular labor migration, primarily to Russia. Today, Kyrgyzstan is consistently ranked in the top five countries that depend on remittances for their GDP (Ratha et al. 2019). This economic growth alleviated much of the poverty of the 1990s and enabled important social practices, such as the celebration of life cycle events through large feasts and parties (*toy*). But labor migration also produced profound anxieties about the well-being of individuals and families (Isabaeva 2011; Reeves 2012). Moreover, the last 15 years have been politically tumultuous, marked by a series of revolutions, increasingly ethnicized and gendered violence, and the rise of a sometimes-virulent nationalism, not to mention a relatively weak state plagued by inefficiency (Engvall 2015; Gullette and Heathershaw 2015; Ibraeva, Moldosheva, and Ablezova 2015; McGlinchey 2018; Reeves 2010).

Unlike other post-Soviet Central Asian nations, Kyrgyzstan has a vibrant public religious life, which began growing in the early 2000s. Today, the religious field is varied. There are multiple interpretations of Islam found in the country, and public debates feature a diverse range of ideas about living a good Muslim life (Artman 2019; Louw 2013; McBrien 2017; Montgomery 2016; Nasritdinov and Esenamanova 2017).<sup>5</sup> Also new to the public landscape are a novel politics of gender and a strong feminist movement, which have further diversified an already-dynamic field of national politics (Beyer and Kojobekova 2019; Botoeva 2012; McBrien 2020; McGlinchey 2018; Suyarkulova 2016).

In the animated public spaces where this shifting political and social life is debated, people have used *uiat* to mark boundaries of propriety. Not merely located in domestic discussions of correctness, cries of *uiat!* crop up in

(social) media, during public meetings, and at political events. Newspaper headlines call out the behavior of politicians and diplomats as “*uiat!*,” such as when they fail to properly execute a public works project or when their public duties seem to be at the service of private leisure.<sup>6</sup> Cries of *uiat!* have also been used by nationalist leaders to disparage collusion with “the West,” while citizens and their defenders have thrown it back at the state and the failures of its criminal justice system (Otorbaev 2018). In addition to its ubiquitous use in private settings, the exclamation of *uiat!* is pervasive in politics, providing a means through which contemporary publics debate the boundaries of propriety, including the behavior of elected officials or the aims and effects of government policy.

Yet despite the prolific use of *uiat*, little has been written about it. Since the collapse of the USSR, the social science literature on Central Asia has occasionally mentioned *uiat* in studies on other topics. These have included conflict resolution, borders and migration, energy and water supply, remittances, lineages and member control, and state building and revolution.<sup>7</sup> The diversity of topics in these investigations speaks to *uiat*'s breadth of use, while its regular appearance shows its salience as a quotidian practice.

I directed my focus to *uiat* during a half year's fieldwork stay on marriage in 2015. For a large portion of the project, which examined controversial modes of concluding marriages, I carried on with the longitudinal research I have been conducting over 17 years with a group of middle-class Kyrgyz men and women. I expanded the research to their friends, colleagues, and kin and opened up a new field site in a village near the city of Karakol. The summer of my 2015 fieldwork stay was particularly hot; temperatures topped 45 degrees Celsius in the Ferghana Valley, where I conducted some of my research. When I could no longer work, I spent many a hot afternoon attentively listening to the sounds around me from the slightly cooler room where I was sequestered. I knew the word *uiat* well, and like most, I had never focused on it. Yet I had long been frustrated by the reductive readings of the honor-shame complex in the literature on Central Asia, and conducting research on controversial marriage forms meant that I would eventually have to tackle it. On that hot afternoon, I heard shouts of *uiat!* with fresh ears as my interlocutor, Nurjamal, repeatedly yelled it at her particularly naughty child. At that moment, it hit me—*uiat* is practice, it is important in marking out propriety, and it very often has *nothing* to do with female sexuality. I began explicitly observing it as a part of my research and wondering what exactly this exclamation was doing.

### ***Uiat* as embodied practice**

Six-year-old Medetbek often heard the word *uiat* when I was around. I usually brought gifts when I visited him and



his mother, Vera. Once, I had given him a book about animals. He forgot to say thank you. “*Uiat*, my son,” his mother whispered in his ear. “Tell Julie thank you,” she said as she embraced him. Another time, I brought candies and juice. Vera added them to the bounty that covered the table. While she was in the kitchen preparing food, Medetbek entered the room, took candy from the table, and started eating it. When Vera entered, she saw him and said softly, “*Uiat janyym*. Shame, my love [lit. ‘Shame, my soul’]. We should offer them to Julie first. Here, take these two and go to the other room.”

Medetbek was lucky. Vera was quiet and very gentle. Her rebukes were measured, her voice calm, her face relaxed; her pronouncement of *uiat* often came with, or was followed quickly by, an embrace or a kiss. Others were less lucky, like Rosa in the opening vignette. In these families *uiat* was often shouted and followed by a forceful swat. Tears and screams often accompanied *uiat!* Faces turned red, mouths and eyes opened wide, and sometimes they narrowed and bunched up as breath was sharply drawn in.

Exclaiming *uiat!* is a bodily practice, occurring within a bundle of registers—aural, visual, and kinesthetic. Uttering it involves movement. Hands point, seize, pinch, or caress. An arm is grabbed, and a child is pulled away from the edge of the tablecloth just before, or after, he steps on it. A hand reaching for food is slapped. Little children might run away or hide when it is spoken.

After being admonished this way, one’s cheeks might flush with a sudden rise in body heat. *Uiat!* often comes in a shout, but it is also whispered intimately. *Uiat* can be laughed about, such as when the speaker, a close friend, is recounting a humorous mistake or mishap—a button left open with a bra revealed or an argument with a merchant over a price that turns out to be one’s own miscalculation.

Among adults, *uiat* is rarely, if ever, accompanied by the touch of another, though the touching of one’s own face may occur. A specific gesture often accompanies *uiat*’s articulation. The speaker places her index finger high on the cheek, just below the eye, not too far from the nose, and brings it down, in a line. *Uiat*. It marks the body, like a sign or stigma. The two—word and gesture—are often performed simultaneously, but one can suffice; in some cases, the silent gesture alone carries more weight.

*Uiat* is rarely shouted between adults to halt immediate action, as it is with children. They speak *uiat* to one another in a different time modulation. A village elder or a boss may not shout *uiat* at the moment of offending action but will do so later when relating the behavior or performance to others. In these moments of evaluation *uiat* may be shouted with a scowl and a jerky, threatening move of the body.

The bodily involvement of exclaiming *uiat!* and of receiving its admonition are as elemental to its practice as the ideas about propriety that it conjures. The exclamation of *uiat!* is first and foremost felt in the body. It is from the

outset an embodied experience, and it perpetually remains one. The palpable way that *uiat* is hurled and the bodily way the invective is received are the earliest and most basic ways it is comprehended. The feeling that comes with hearing *uiat* is necessarily part of how the notions of propriety, which *uiat* also marks, are generated and how the two are interwoven until one can abstractly speak of the kind of “emotional regimes” (Bloch 2011, 318–22), “cultural demands” (Collins and Behar 2000, 36), or “moral systems” (Plesset 2007, 432) that incite a feeling of shame in a person for their transgressions. This, however, can occur only after years of sensuous, relational, and semiotic practice have cultivated an intimate and immediate bodily experience.

Over a life course, *uiat* hits the body less and less as an invective thrown by others. Yet its work on the body never ceases. Even when others do not exclaim *uiat*, it is uttered internally, to oneself. After decades of regularly, nearly insistently, hearing and feeling *uiat*, an internal voice is cultivated that launches *uiat* at itself when no one else is around. And just like the external exclamation, the internal utterance of *uiat* exerts itself on the body. It too aims at control, impediment, and discomfort.

The internal work of *uiat* becomes clear to me in a discussion I have with Begaiym, an old friend in her late 50s, who lives in a small town in southern Kyrgyzstan. I haven’t seen her in several years. We are eating together, and, after I properly perform some table etiquette, Begaiym laughs in delight. “Oh, Julie,” she says, “you know our ways so well! You didn’t forget.”

I chuckle and reply, “Begaiym, you don’t know the half of it!” I tell her what happened to me in the capital city of Bishkek, where I live alone. One afternoon, after leaving my apartment, I realized I’d forgotten something. It was on the table just a few steps inside, but I had my shoes on. On my tiptoes, with as big a stride as I could manage, I strained to reach the item, touching the floor as little as possible. *Uiat!* I thought, as I looked around and awkwardly maneuvered toward the object. I couldn’t bring myself to simply walk over and get the item. *Uiat!* Though I wear shoes in my own apartment in Amsterdam, I felt quite uncomfortable doing so in Bishkek, even when I was alone. *Uiat!*

Begaiym laughs again. “Waaai ... Julie!” she says. “Of course! *Uiat!* You are a real Kyrgyz woman!”

I, too, had come to feel the discomfort provoked by *uiat*. Dinara’s early lessons, and the admonitions of so many over the years, had marked out for me the terrain of what was allowed. As a result, I felt unease and thought *uiat* even when I walked into my own apartment with my shoes on. The internal utterance and the sense of bodily discomfort arose hand in hand.

When *uiat* is spoken, it has force, marking the body while simultaneously marking the practice the body was engaged in as improper. The experience and meaning of *uiat* emerge together and are inseparable. *Uiat* does not name

an emotion that already exists; it provokes a bodily experience. The practice of exclaiming *uiat* incites discomfort, but *uiat* cannot be reduced to this experience itself, because it also consists of the social relations and ideas bound up with it. Moreover, while the one who shouts *uiat!* may hope to provoke the emotion we call shame, this does not always take place. The resulting emotion can vary.

Kunduz, a single mother, often struggles with the unpredictable effect of exclaiming *uiat* in her relationship with her 10-year-old daughter, Ainura. I have been living with the two, and Kunduz's mother, Bermet, for a few weeks in a small village near Karakol. Ainura variously responds to Kunduz's pronouncements of *uiat*. Sometimes she rolls her eyes. Other times she sighs. Occasionally her lower lip juts out, and tears well up in her eyes. Sometimes, she pretends not to hear or even refuses to acknowledge the utterance. She pays no attention to its instruction and continues doing her own thing. Sometimes she talks back with a raised voice. At other moments she lowers her chin and casts her eyes down.

In Ainura's responses we can read exasperation, resignation, sadness, frustration, ignorance, avoidance, anger, and sometimes shame. Kunduz may have wanted Ainura to feel shame, but this was never guaranteed. *Uiat*, then, while utterly sensuous and bodily, is not the emotion that arises in response to its exclamation (though it is inseparably involved in fostering it), nor is it simply an attempt to halt action. It is this practice and feeling together.

### ***Uiat* as relational practice**

Kunduz spends a lot of time saying *uiat* to Ainura. We finish eating lunch. I ask to help clean up. "No, we'll do it, Ainura and I," Kunduz says. "She can help," Ainura chimes in, smiling and looking at me. "*Uiat*, Ainura! That's not allowed. You do not speak to a guest like that. *Uiat*. We will clean up," Kunduz says. Ainura sighs and rolls her eyes, reluctantly following instruction.

Ainura is sitting on the couch with her feet up. "Don't do that," Kunduz says. "*Uiat!*" Ainura moves her feet.

Ainura is sitting on the couch with her feet up near her grandmother. "*Uiat*, Ainura! Don't put your feet near grandmother. *Uiat!*" Eyes downcast, she obeys.

Ainura is excited. Something has happened between her and her playmates. We are in the house, and she is relaying the event to us. "Don't talk so loudly! *Uiat!*"

Ainura is moping. She quietly picks at her food, not really eating. Her mother notices. "You aren't eating. *Uiat!* Eat!"

Ainura is in the other room. She calls for her mother over and over. "Don't call me so many times from the other room!" her mother finally answers back. "*Uiat!*"

*Uiat* is a part of the texture of Ainura's everyday life. She has heard it since her earliest childhood years, though

as she has aged, the moments and causes for its utterance have shifted. Like little Rosa, she still hears *uiat* when her feet are on the tablecloth or when she walks indoors while wearing shoes. But *uiat* is now tied to guests and how one talks to and acts around them. The extent of its reach expands as she matures, encompassing ever more fields. It is linked to when and how she demands her mother's attention and that of all her elders. Does she shout at them and interrupt? *Uiat!* Does she wait deferentially in relative quiet? *Silence*.

Exclaiming *uiat* always involves other people—a mother or aunt, the other children involved in an escapade—and the discomfort it provokes in the body is a "relational achievement" (Mol 2014, 101) between the speaker of *uiat* and its hearer—Ainura and Kunduz, Dinara and Rosa, Medetbek and Vera. *Uiat* also emerges in relations between people and objects—a framed photograph knocked onto the floor, a candy stolen from the kitchen cupboard, the body feeling discomfort. It can surface when money is exchanged for preferential treatment or the wrong type of carpet is gifted. *Uiat* is also exclaimed at the improper relationship of objects themselves. Bread belongs on a tablecloth or in a tin, but not *uiat!* on the floor or ground. Bare feet may enter a home; if they are shod—*uiat!*

*Uiat* is spoken to children not only by parents but also by aunts, older brothers, elder neighbors, and grandparents. Mothers-in-law might invoke it to criticize the behavior of their daughters-in-law. Parents occasionally use it to assess adult children's decisions. Courts of elders invoke it to chide, warn, or reproach those in their sphere of influence (Beyer 2013; Temirkulov 2010). It is weighed in designs about where disputes should be adjudicated (Beyer 2016, 68) or in which spaces and in front of whom discussions among adults can be held (Isabaeva 2011). *Uiat* is spoken within social relations and is used to appraise them.

From these social relations emerges the discomfort that *uiat!* aims to provoke. These are not just any relations. They are relations of hierarchy, making the practice a stratified one in which the shouter of *uiat!* has authority over the person at whom the invective is aimed. These hierarchies form part of *uiat*'s specificity and are therefore elemental to the particular attributes that the practice takes on and to how it works. This quality is illuminated especially well in Azamat Temirkulov's (2010) interpretation of *uiat*, which he discusses as a "tool of punishment" used by courts of elders to elicit desired behavior. When the elders exclaim *uiat!*, they mark boundaries of propriety and assert their authority as elders. *Uiat*'s exclamation becomes part of constituting that hierarchical relationship. Discomfort in the body, then, is not the only relational achievement of exclaiming *uiat!* The discomfort in turn also participates in (re)generating the stratified relations.

In Kyrgyzstan authority is cultivated in a variety of modes, but age is one of the most dominant. In most cases,

*uiat* emerges when an elder hurls it at someone younger. Its speaking does age, marking out the distinction between the elder who speaks *uiat* and the younger who is its target. Age can be inflected in many ways. In most cases, “elder versus junior” signals the elder’s strength, though there are times when elders are regarded as feeble, senile, mistaken, or out of touch. When *uiat* is spoken, however, it generates the authority that comes with age. If *uiat*’s articulation works well, it creates its speaker as a good, older educator and the hearer as an obedient, well-behaved, (somewhat) obsequious younger.

*Uiat* not only creates difference between older and younger but also genders the target of its articulation. Some things result in *uiat* for anyone who does them, regardless of gender—shoes in the house, bread on the floor, or mistreatment of a guest, for example. But other things result in *uiat* only for boys and others only for girls.

Kanykey (girl) and Kasym (boy) are a sister and brother very close in age. They are playing in their grandparents’ yard. Kasym takes Kanykey’s toy. Kanykey begins to cry. Begaiym goes to her. “I want my toy. Kasym took it,” Kanykey says. Begaiym comforts her and sternly tells Kasym to return the toy car, taking it out of his hands and giving it to Kanykey.

A few days later the kids are playing again. The tables are turned. Kanykey has taken something from Kasym. Kasym begins to cry. “*Uiat!*” Begaiym scolds him. “Stop crying. What’s wrong?” Begaiym asks rhetorically.

Kanykey is not reprimanded when she cries to get what she wants; Kasym is. His tears provoke the exclamation of *uiat*; hers do not. Speaking *uiat* works to gender children and adults. It marks out behavior that is appropriate for girls and sanctioned for boys, and its repetition over the years begins to mark these children as boys and girls, creating and molding their behavior and their gender. A young woman is alone with a man. She is admonished, and her behavior is evaluated with *uiat!* The young man hears nothing. A boy experiments with his older sisters’ jewelry or makeup. “*Uiat!*” A girl does the same. Silence. Again and again, *uiat* is spoken, marking appropriate behavior for boys and girls, men and women, and it thus creates boys and girls, men and women.

The work that exclaiming *uiat!* does is performative; it discursively creates the gendered and aged subject. It is also, however, felt. The two are impossible to disentangle. *Uiat*’s efficacy in performing age and gender must therefore be seen as deriving, in part, from its embodiment. Its efficacy must also be seen as related to its deployment over time. It is uttered multiple times a day, day after day over a lifetime, (re)inculcating the speakers’ age and authority and marking again and again the gender of the exclamation’s target. This repetition secures and seals *uiat*’s work, and it aims to enforce the boundaries it marks out. It is a sensuous semiotic utterance practiced in time.

In addition to generating age and gender, the embodied impact of exclaiming *uiat!* also helps create the idea of “the social” in the abstract. This performative achievement is connected to the sometimes-hidden aspect of its relationality. *Uiat*’s relationality is most obvious between the one who utters *uiat* and the one at whom it is aimed, but it also extends beyond, explicitly referring to a third, often nonpresent other.

Begaiym and I, sitting in the courtyard of her home, look up. Kasym has sneaked inside the guest room again and is crawling out the window. “Aiii ... *Uiat!* *Uiat bolot!*” she shouts at him. Stop it! Don’t do that. She gets up, runs to him, barely catches him by the arm, and pulls him down. “*Uiat!* Your grandfather will punish [*urushuu*] you when he gets home.”

Like the grandfather who is away, distant or absent others are often drawn into practices of *uiat*. The invoked other is of particular weight, someone of authority, often more so than the speaker. A mother may be invoked if an elder sister is correcting her younger sibling, a father or a grandparent if the mother is shouting.

In these instances, the authority of the absent other lends weight to the call of *uiat*. Beyond the immediate intervention—a pulled arm, a slap, a verbal reprimand—the punishment, threat, or consequence of *uiat* comes not so much from the one who vocalizes it as from the absent other. She or he is invoked as a deterrent. This absent person gives extra power to *uiat*, infusing it with not only the displeasure of the immediate rebuke but also the looming sense of future misfortune—the threat of punishment (*urushuu*)—at the hand of the other. *Uiat* thus invoked, *uiat* as now but also yet to come, *uiat* at the hand of a more authoritative other than the speaker—all this portends an unknown deleterious consequence. This is part of its power.

When *urushuu* is invoked, one can never anticipate what will actually happen when the indicated authority arrives. There is an initial discomfort and rebuke when *uiat* is spoken; *urushuu* adds an additional uneasiness about what might happen. Sometimes, when the absent authority arrives, they yell, strike, or otherwise reprimand and punish. Sometimes they do not. More frequently, the speaker of *uiat* and *urushuu* simply forgets to inform the authority of the infraction. But the one at whom *uiat* and *urushuu* have been hurled never knows; uncertainty arises with discomfort, and both are aimed at the future.

The web of relations involved in speaking *uiat* can widen further, beyond a mother at work, to include less specific, somewhat abstract “others”—kin, neighbors, “people,” or society. They will know what you have done and *uiat bolot!* “Julie, be sure not to tell anybody about this. *Uiat bolot!*” Jamila, my interlocutor, said to me about a difficult encounter in a fraught relationship with her daughter-in-law. She was worried about what people would think, presumably her neighbors and our friends and acquaintances



in common. Thus, *uiat* as a relational practice can include “others” at higher levels of abstraction—the “somebody” in my interlocutor’s fears or “people,” as in the perennially heard expression “What will people say?” (*El emne deyt?*). It creates the social in the abstract.

The relationality of *uiat* thus shifts from those physically present, seeable, and touchable to absent-yet-known others, and finally, to an abstraction. Simultaneously, *uiat*’s exact sensuous qualities—its form, place, and time—likewise becomes increasingly unknown. What once was a slap, or a heated glance, becomes the threat of these things when “your mother gets home” and eventually an unspecified deleterious consequence.

There is also a multidirectionality in the exclamation of *uiat*, one that further adds to its potency. It is found in the tension between how Eliza Isabaeva and Judith Beyer treat it. According to Isabaeva (2011), actions labeled *uiat* spark social condemnation; according to Beyer (2016, 149–51), however, they disrupt social harmony, and speaking *uiat* aims to prevent this disruption. In Isabaeva’s articulation, then, the direction of discomfort seems to move from society toward the transgressor. The threat is aimed at him or her. In Beyer’s it is the other way around. The amorphous threat emanates from the transgressor and puts at risk those in (in)direct relation to her or him—friends, kin, or “society.” Exclaiming *uiat!* attempts to halt this.

These interpretations are not mutually exclusive. *Uiat* emerges when an older sister or a father yells at a child for speaking out of turn—*uiat* moves from them to the child. But speaking out of turn disrupts the expected or desired mode of (not) talking and proper social interaction—from child to those in the room. *Uiat* is spoken, halting the child’s disruption. The practice of *uiat* happens precisely in this back-and-forth between transgressor and his or her immediate and absent others, all of whom may be touched by *uiat* as it emerges in their interaction with each other. Understanding *uiat* as a dense, knotty practice enables one to see it simultaneously as evaluation, reprimand, preemptive strike, and threat.

In adulthood, *uiat* arises as abstraction and indeterminacy, whether as the unspecified other who might be involved in hurling *uiat* or as unknown deleterious consequences. This quality of *uiat* further roots and inculcates its power. *Uiat* is now experienced as an undefined harm, delivered by an unspecified other. This stimulates worry about the amorphous nature of its (potential) arrival, the uncertainty of what exactly will trigger *uiat*’s discomfort, and the decreased capacity to deal with it. Beyer’s (2016, 149–51) translation of *uiat* as “shame-anxiety” productively gets at the affective quality generated when *uiat* is spoken: anxiety. The anxiety about just how, when, and in what form *uiat* will arrive becomes located nowhere (Heidegger 1962) and yet, potentially, everywhere (Ahmed 2013), strengthening its efficacy.

### *Uiat*’s accumulation

Over the years, Zarina has often spoken about her mother-in-law’s strict adherence to tradition (*salt*), which Zarina is unaccustomed to. Zarina therefore consistently makes “mistakes” when carrying out *salt* for the family, at least from her mother-in-law’s perspective. Gifts are improperly prepared, tables set incorrectly, protocols inattentively followed. It is 2009. Zarina is several years into her marriage, and she has been trying hard, for quite a while, to do things correctly. She is worn out, and there is so much *uiat*. She does not understand. She was an obedient daughter. She did everything her mother asked of her. Her performances of household tasks rarely, if ever, resulted in *uiat* in her childhood home.

*Uiat* is not invoked uniformly, nor is it uncontested in its practices, meanings, and sensuous force. It is not always the same thing here as it is there—Zarina and her mother-in-law are a case in point. Propriety is not set; it shifts, and the boundaries demarcating it from impropriety can be blurry. How *uiat* hits also varies: Vera’s gentle nudges are a world apart from Dinara’s loud shouts. The exclamation of *uiat*, what it marks—a notion, a body, a practice—is conditional and provisional; it always differs slightly from one situation to another, playing on a common repertoire but improvising, adding, subtracting. There is room for adjustment.

*Uiat* does not always work. It cultivates things it does not intend. It may aim at discomfort in the body and, in the end, the emotion we call shame. But it often cultivates anger, fear, or apathy. And so too with relations. Sometimes, children disobey. They continue on with behavior marked as inappropriate, or they question their parent’s opinion, contesting authority. Adults scoff at certain incantations of *uiat* too, no matter who wields the power.

Unsurprisingly, ideas also change about what *uiat* is. *Uiat*, in the literature on Central Asia, has most often been discussed in reference to bride abduction, a practice in which, in many cases, women are forcefully and nonconsensually captured and married to their abductors; the focus in the literature has been on how the fear of shame plays a role in perpetuating these kidnappings (Borbieva 2012; Werner 2004, 2009). Abducted women speak of the *uiat* that would befall them if they were to refuse the marriage. Family members of the bride and groom worry about the shame that will touch them all if the abducted bride does not stay in her new marital home. Yet after years of concerted political action against bride abduction, the use of *uiat* in debates about it has expanded. *Uiat* has recently become an exclamation used in public discussion to mark the abductors’ behavior and that of police who ignore or mishandle the rare cases reported to them (Otorbaev 2018).

Joking and humor too play roles in altering what should be marked as *uiat*, as seen, for example, in a recent

popular television comedy called *El emne deyt?* (What will people say?).<sup>8</sup> Here, laughs are provoked by poking fun at social propriety—exactly the kind of correctness marked off by exclamations of *uiat!* The show explicitly reflects on social conventions and even mocks them, especially those it considers outdated.

Finally, responses to the exclamation of *uiat!* also change over time. So even when *uiat*, shouted again and again, fails to provoke what it intends, it may do so later. Conversely, while *uiat* used to hit its mark quite forcefully, it may start to miss.

By 2015, Zarina has been listening to her mother-in-law shout *uiat!* at her for about a decade. She has given up trying to do things right. She cannot please her mother-in-law no matter how hard she tries. She keeps the house, sets the table, and prepares the gifts just as she is told, but still, *uiat* is spoken, *uiat* surfaces, touching her and the family. But she no longer hears nor heeds it. She is defiant. After years of feeling distressed and trying to perform tradition, Zarina gives up. For her, *uiat*—when uttered by her mother-in-law—has lost its power.

And yet *uiat* is not endlessly adaptable; it usually cultivates what it intends. If it did not, it would not be so powerful. *Uiat* is efficacious enough to have the potency to do age and gender, and to provoke discomfort. It is an inherently conservative force that re-creates, in its every deployment, the relations, notions, and feeling from which it sprang. Part of its force comes from sheer repetition. *Uiat* is ubiquitous. It is heard and felt multiple times a day over the course of a lifetime. The pervasiveness and expansive nature of *uiat* in everyday life may be what underlay Isabaeva's interpretation of it. She notes that "everything that is bad is considered to be shameful (*uiat*): that is, to arouse the condemnation and gossip of the surrounding community" (Isabaeva 2011, 548).

*Uiat* is so utterly a part of everyday life, the work it performs becomes nearly invisible. Its repetition is part of what conceals its function and makes it appear natural. The work that goes into producing the shame is lost until it becomes self-evident that, for example, boys do not cry. As argued by Sara Ahmed (2013, 12), building on the work of feminist and queer scholars, "Social forms ... are effects of repetition," and they "appear as forms of life only through the concealment of the work of this repetition." Practices, repeated over time, have effects, and part of their work is that of naturalizing what is (socio) cultural. Mol's work on *lekker* asks us to stop and see this work happening. I ask us not to forget that these practices are repeated over and over and over again. This repetition generates power and adds to the efficacy of practices like exclaiming *uiat!*<sup>9</sup>

*Uiat's* articulation over time is intrinsic to its successful work. Whether it succeeds or fails can be accounted for only by its deployment in time; its dynamism is revealed when we attend to the temporal component of its use. Each

time *uiat* is uttered, it builds on every other exclamation, gathering up and carrying with it their histories and their effects—on the body, on the social, on the aged and gendered person, on notions of propriety. In its nearly ceaseless repetition, it adheres all these together in each enactment, a quality Ahmed (2013) has called the "stickiness" of emotion. *Uiat's* power is rooted in its stickiness and invisibility, both of which arise through repetition. The steady incremental accrual, and the stickiness that facilitates it, increase *uiat's* density, compacting and tangling the knot even further until its individual strands are lost to sight and all that is left is its terrible efficacy.

Exclaiming *uiat!* is a tangled, knotty practice, with sensuous, material, social, and semiotic strands. Its utterance is possible because of them, and their snarled density produces the power of each expression. Exclaiming *uiat!* is efficacious because it hits so many registers at once—the bodily discomfort it provokes; the emotional response it triggers; the way it ties the hearer and speaker into a web of hierarchical relations and produces them as a gendered and aged subject as it is uttered; the abstraction of the social it creates; the anxious sense of unknown impending doom it ties to this social; the semiotics of (im)propriety it constructs; and the multidirectionality of its menace, which threatens at once the one at whom *uiat* is lobbed and her relations. Its density is increased by its stickiness and its practice in time—by the fact that this tangled knot of a practice is repeated daily, in all sorts of circumstances, with all kinds of people and objects, and over the course of a lifetime, again and again, gathering together these histories and effects. It collects and binds each instance with all the previous instances, making it an efficacious, generative practice.

### Shame—a sensuous, semiotic, relational practice in time

Shame is a crucial quotidian practice in some areas of the world; in others it is not. *Lekker*, and the practice of asking after it, is also a located, specific practice. Yet they are both the kinds of things that anthropologists used to bundle under that term *culture*. While specialists in material semiotics generally discuss nature/culture, the fields of empirical investigation have largely been in science and technology. Mol's material-semiotic approach, applied to terrain usually seen as located at the other end of anthropology's spectrum—classic topics in so-called cultural anthropology, like shame—brings new insight to bear on old dilemmas typically not considered in science studies.

Shame has long been a topic of importance in anthropology. The early anthropological literature on shame established its prevalence and prominence; it outlined its discursive work in demarcating propriety (Bourdieu 1965; Peristiany 1965). A slightly later body of literature also established shame as a quotidian practice and as an

inherently embodied experience (Abu-Lughod 1986; Wikan 1984). Using Mol's material-semiotic work on *lekker*, I have joined these strands to see *uiat* in Kyrgyzstan as a sensuous, sociomaterial, semiotic practice. This has rendered a more precise and fruitful understanding of *uiat* in Kyrgyzstan, and it has demonstrated *uiat*'s ubiquitous use in reference to a wide variety of fields, most of which have nothing to do with female sexuality. It has also helped break out of the structuralist bent in studies of shame by enabling one to see the relationally achieved, ever-emergent, and therefore immanently alterable and unstable material-semiotic practice that is *uiat!*

Departing from Mol, I have examined how relations play a role in the practice of exclaiming *uiat!*, in the simultaneous cultivation of bodily discomfort, and in notions of propriety. Moreover, I have looked back to see how this practice of *uiat* is involved in constructing the very social relations from which the exclamation originated. For *uiat* in Kyrgyzstan arises not just in any set of relations. These are stratified, hierarchical relationships. Articulating *uiat!* creates these relationships and, ultimately, the aged and gendered subjects in them. Part of this work is accomplished because the act of exclaiming *uiat!* is relational, embodied, and discursive; its efficacy arises because it hits all these registers at once.

Another crucial component of *uiat*'s efficacy is its practice over time. Again, asking questions not central to Mol's concerns, or those more broadly in material-semiotic approaches, I have attended to the repeated deployment of *uiat* over time, in addition to its in-the-moment emergence. This reveals the accumulated work that exclaiming *uiat!* accomplishes. Its efficacy is accounted for by its temporal life—its repetition over a day, a lifetime—and the way this reoccurrence sticks together each individual articulation into a dense knot of conceptual, embodied, and social experiences. Each pronunciation of *uiat* reinforces and builds on previous exclamations, slowly creating things like gender and age, seemingly natural notions of propriety, and the idea of the social in the abstract, whether these are the same or (slightly) different from what came before. Attending to time shows how these relations, experiences, and ideas are (re)constructed, and it accounts for the efficacy of exclaiming *uiat!*

## Notes

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1. Also transliterated as *uyat* in the literature.
2. All names are pseudonyms.

3. *Uiat bolot* (future tense) can be translated as "*Uiat* will be," "*Uiat* will arise or occur."

4. Exclaiming *uiat!* prevents immediate action and aims to preempt future behavior. It could thus be classified as an illocutionary speech act (Austin 1962) or a directive (Searle 1969). It intends, and achieves something beyond the sensible halting of an action; it also deliberately works on the body to create discomfort.

5. About 93 percent of the population is Muslim. In ethnic terms, 73.5 percent of the population is Kyrgyz, 14.8 percent is Uzbek, and 5.5 percent is Russian. A number of other, smaller ethnic groups make up the remainder of the population (NSCKR 2020).

6. "Kyrgyz ökmötü uyat kylan jol" [The Kyrgyz government's shameful road], YouTube video, 3:55, 7-Kanal Kyrgyzstan, posted by "7-канал Кыргызстан," December 2, 2019, [https://youtu.be/6PsBEGM9\\_j0](https://youtu.be/6PsBEGM9_j0); "Kyrgyzstandy Düynögö Uyat Kylan Elchiler Jorugu," NTS Telekanal, February 13, 2018, <http://nts.kg/kyrgyzstandy-duinogo-uyat-kylan-elchiler-zhorugu-video/>.

7. See Beyer (2013, 2016) on conflict resolution and tradition; Reeves (2011, 2012, 2016) on borders and migration; Wooden (2014) on energy, water supply, and the Kyrgyz Revolution; Isabaeva (2011) on remittances, family absences, and moral economies; Werner (2004) on bride abduction; Ismailbekova (2018) on lineages; and Temirkoulov (2004) and Termirkulov (2010) on conflict and state building.

8. Thank you to one of the anonymous reviewers for reminding me of the program and drawing my attention to its significance in this discussion of *uiat*.

9. While Mol does not explicitly discuss the role of time in material-semiotic practices like *uiat*, it has occasionally been a theme in broader science and technology studies. Here, however, objects are typically investigated. M'charek (2014), for example, has recently argued for understanding the historicity of objects, both how they change over time and how they bear the imprint of the histories within them. She names these historicized objects *folded objects*, which, in the case of race, can be understood as "an irreducible, spacio-temporal thing, one that moves and changes shape depending on the times and places that are drawn together" (M'charek 2014, 48).

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Julie McBrien  
 Department of Anthropology  
 University of Amsterdam  
 Postbus 15508, 1001 NA  
 Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
 j.a.mcbrien@uva.nl