

Sense & Shibari: A Sociological Re-evaluation of the Knowledge of
Rope bondage

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Undergraduate Dissertation

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Glossary

BDSM Acronym for **B**ondage & **D**iscipline; **D**ominance & **S**ubmission;**S**adomasochism.

“activities that involve the mutually consensual and conscious use... of pain, power, perceptions about power...for sensory or erotic pleasure...” (Newmahr, 2010, 3)

Haptic The sense of touch in any form

Kinaesthesia Sensations of the movement of limbs and the body, connected to the sensations deriving from joints, muscles and tendons (Paterson, 2007)

Play When one participates in a specific scene.

Rigger The one who ties. May, or may not indicate an established relationship of expressed dominance and submission.

Rope The material object used but also a verb; one can 'do' rope.

Rope-bottom The one who is tied. May, or may not indicate an established relationship of expressed dominance and submission

Session/Scene A time and a place for when one engage in a BDSM practice. Often pre-negotiated.

Takate Kote A common tie used to restrict the upper body with the forearms horizontally parallel behind the back

Tsuri Rope-suspension, partially or fully lifted up in the air through using rope

Introduction- the single leg Futomomo Tsuru



Figure 1

There is an image of me (Fig.1). I am upside down. My left leg is tied with several strands of rope that connects to a karabiner¹ and another rope which holds me up, upside down, twenty to thirty centimeters above the black floor. My right leg is pointed backwards, horizontally and my arms are locked to the chest with several other strands of rope.

What is seen in this picture is a Futomomo style single leg inverted Tsuru, or rope-suspension. The picture was taken in December 2010, during a week of research in Berlin. I was tied by someone whom I know and trust. When thinking back of the experience, it reminds me of a description of the feeling of being in a airplane, moments before it takes off; “a kind of thrill mixed with a small dose of fear when the aircraft in which we are travelling starts its take-off” (Law 2003, 5). Before take off into the suspension I was tied into the rope while first sitting

¹ A metal loop with a screwed gate, used to connect and secure components in activities such as climbing, sailing, construction, rescue.

down, then standing up; and gradually increased in the entanglement with this material. The roped tightened to then flip my body over from standing on one leg to hanging upside down. This quick change of the placement of my body to upside down was disorientating for a second. That was where I could feel every strand of rope that pressed against my leg and chest, allowing me to move but only within certain parameters. Why did I do this?

Research Question and framework

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine how Shibari practitioners understand their own practice. I will consider if Shibari can be understood by contemporary theories on bondage and BDSM. In trying to understand the practice, this dissertation also considers if it is possible for Shibari to some extent reframe and expand the sociological knowledge on bondage. Furthermore, the intention is through ethnographic research to explore what tactility means in this bodily practice; how touch can be understood as something active and communicative, reaching out to others as well as reaching towards the self.

Shibari and Kinbaku-definitions and history

The practice itself is called Shibari or Kinbaku. While a singular definition of Shibari cannot be agreed upon, Osada Steve (a professional Shibari-artist and teacher) defines it simply as Japanese styled rope bondage (Steve 2009). Kinoko Hajime, (professional rope-artist, club promoter and teacher) defines it in another way. For Kinoko, Shibari is the practical activity of tying another body. Kinbaku on other hand is what happens when it is not just about the tying, but about the people engaged with the rope (Field notes 2010). Kinbaku is the *relational* experience, with a (often wordless) dialogue between those who tie and those who are tied, or even those who tie themselves up, as one of the participants in this research did. Knowing Shibari could be likened to the technical and aesthetic mastery of dance, like the

Tango. However, it is only danced as Kinbaku when led by the feeling of symbiotic flow with one's partner (Argue 2009).

When comparing Shibari/Kinbaku to western styles of bondage, Steve asserts that western bondage is more utilitarian. The tied body is the focal point and the overall intended effect is rendering someone helpless. In Shibari the focus is on the process itself, the body that is being tied. Thus western bondage and Shibari have a different dynamic throughout the tying and even untying. Shibari is a process which places continuous focus on the tactile, physical and emotional experience. The emphasis is on continued action and reaction, rather than an action that leads to a position of 'only' being restrained (Steve 2009).

The history of this practice and its influences stem mainly from the Edo-era of Japan (1608-1868). One heavy influence is the Hojojutsu, where the fighter restrains their opponent using rope. It was also used in the feudal judicial system to restrain, incarcerate and transport prisoners. Another influence comes from judicial torture and punishment, some of which was based on using rope. Although these influences can be traced, certain contemporary ties have an aesthetic resemblance to the era in which it was used for torture, the intention and practical enactments of the ties has changed immensely, especially with a specific attention to safety (Master 2008).

Rope is also an element which features heavily in both social and religious contexts in Japanese culture. One example of this is the Kabuki-theatre, as well the graphic arts such as woodblock cuttings and erotic print, the 'Shunga'. Later, illustrators and photographers, such as Itoh Seiyu combined these influences when photographing women tied up; a departure from the images of torture of mostly male subjects (Master 2008). Although still considered to be very much underground in Japan, connected to alternative sexual 'perversions', the first international Shibari festival took place in Tokyo in 2011.

On Parameters

As a participant researcher I was keen to maintain a critical approach to the subject. Initially, I was interested in the cultural forms of practice; but quickly realised that the academic understanding of this particular subject (Shibari) was non-existent. Due to the lack of a basic understanding I decided to look at the actual practice itself and what it meant to the practitioners.

As a researcher I was aware of (historical) debates on so called 'deviant' sexuality, first pronounced by Sigmund Freud (1938) and Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1959[1859]), but I still wished to engage beyond the narratives of pathological bias of that which is considered to be sadomasochistic behaviour. I also seek to move outside of the assumed boundaries of what it means to research practices linked to BDSM, inspired by the ethnographic work of Staci Newmahr (2011). This means that the literature review as well as the whole research project is an attempt to break with the self-reproducing academic discourse on BDSM.

Literature Review

This literature review will situate Shibari within current academic debates. It will also point out a need to approach rope bondage through a focus on what it means for the practitioners in the moment. The purpose is to identify the gap in academic knowledge focussed on the experiences of those who practice Shibari. Within existing BDSM-theory the parameters from which Shibari is understood are often defined purely as sexual phenomena; rather than focussing on the innate practices. Framing BDSM-activities only within the sphere of 'the sexual' is a reductionist approach which needs to be critically challenged in order to dismantle the legacy of the pathological bias that is still palpable when it comes to researching BDSM practices and practitioners (Reynolds 2011 Taylor & Ussher 2001).

I will explore (1) how BDSM-theory and bondage has been situated within the parameters of the 'sexual', (2) outline a more open notion to frame the practices from a socio-cultural context within the sphere of 'serious leisure' (Newmahr 2010) and understanding BDSM as an interaction between practitioners who consider the practice as a mean to itself. (A practice that does not necessarily stand as a tool which will inevitably lead to sexual intercourse.) Finally, the third section will move towards a theory of the embodied sensory experience as one that is inter-relational, synchronic and interconnected through several schemas constituting the corporeal understanding of the body as 'actively feeling' (Paterson 2007). This literature review is concerned with how to phrase the practices not merely as a precursor to the intended sexual activity but rather to open up the possibility of understanding rope bondage in its own right; as a physical practice which can include multiple expressions and desires. Through doing this I wish to focus not only on the physical experience, but on the inter-relational and the dialogical element of rope bondage as well.

Although a vast field of research and theory on BDSM-practices and politics exist, (see Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006, Langridge & Barker, 2007) studies into bondage specifically, as far as this research has found, has been limited. In relation to rope bondage, there are mainly 'technical manuals', which serve the purpose of introducing the reader to safety concerns, basic knots and bindings (known as

ties) and how they can be used, all demonstrated mainly through text and illustrations such as photos or drawn images². These manuals are serving the purpose of learning through following step by step instructions, dealing only very briefly with the motivation of rope bondage. Only a few books go a little further such as *Rope, Bondage and Power* (Harrington 2009), *The Seductive Art of Japanese Bondage* (Midori 2001) and *Kinbaku Mind and Technique* (Arisue 2009). An increasing amount of material is published online, such as various interviews with notable practitioners from Japan on internet-communities like Fetlife or in journalistic blogs such as the SM-detective. These interviews mostly deal with the background of the practitioners and their motivations for tying and stand in stark contrast to the technicalities of the published books.

When turning to academic work on BDSM, one can immediately detect the presence of a pathological bias (see Cross, 2006, Ernulf & Innala, 1995, Weinberg, 2006 for examples). This is seen by insisting on a narration of the ‘historical background’ of BDSM in relation to its position as a perversion or deviance of sexuality from the normality of heterosexual intercourse. While the paradigm of deviance and pathological sexuality itself is refuted, sex is still the lens through which the practices are understood; through which subsequent work is framed, despite the problematic assumptions and discourse it maintains (Newmahr, 2010; 2011). As a consequence of the normative assumptions of what the ‘sexual’ should contain, every practice which deviates from that of the ‘normal’, is understood as an ‘add-on’ or a precursor to the ‘real’ sexual activity; the (preferably) heterosexual intercourse (Reynolds 2011).

From within groups of practitioners, there are tendencies to phrase these activities as a sexual practice or an ‘erotic power exchange’. This is done together with self-policing attitudes and behaviours of those inside the community; to delineate that which is acceptable to practice as a BDSM:er and that which is not. Many times this is done for political purposes in order to gain acceptance from the wider public (Downing, 2007; Newmahr, 2011). On one hand there is a clear sexual/erotic narrative; the element of the corporeal practices that BDSM-practitioners engage with, and on the other there are those who feel that even if it can be erotic, there are very few sexual elements to it, or even none.

² Examples of these are: Midori (2001); Arisue Go (2009); Knotty Boys (2007); Harrington (2006)

Overlapping both of these approaches are those who consider their practice as a part of their sexual identity; i.e. something that they are, not something that they do. (Langdrige & Barker, 2007; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006; Newmahr, 2011).

The only readily available academic work on bondage is the article ‘Sexual Bondage: A review and unobtrusive investigation’ (1995). It sets out to explore individual experiences of bondage through an analysis of 514 messages posted in an online message board about ‘sexual bondage’ (Ernulf & Innala 1995). The objective of the research was to seek out “what experiences in sexual bondage are sexually stimulating, what experiences lead to sexual gratification and how experiences differ between individuals” (Ernulf & Innala 1995, 639). In other words, driven by a sexual framework and assuming the goal of sexual activity as ‘orgasm’. They found that these experiences were: play/exchange of power; intensified sexual pleasure; tactile stimulation and bodily sensations; enhancement of visual enjoyment of partner; partner’s sexual pleasure and; control of the sexual stimulation (Ernulf & Innala 1995, 642).

BDSM is understood as an umbrella-term, covering a wide sphere of practices and identities. Ernulf & Innala (1995) and Moser & Kleinplatz (2006) argue that the most common underlying structure behind these is the enacted, negotiated and perceived notions of dominance and submission directly connected to the sexual activity. It is acknowledged, however brief, that some of the behaviours might be solely for the benefit of the sensation itself rather than the expressions of dominance and submission. However Ernulf & Innala (1995) still use a fixed taxonomy in their research, defining them reflexively within the realm of dominance and submission. The direct effect of this becomes one in which bondage is seen as a way of expressing dominance and submission, done through labelling the rigger as the ‘Dominant-Initiator’, and the rope-bottom as the ‘Submissive-Recipient’. The reason stated for using these descriptive roles is to describe the ‘agency’ of those involved more accurately than previous research; which has used the labels ‘active’ and ‘passive’ (Zimmer *et al* in Ernulf & Innala, 1995) in their stead. I would like to argue that quite aside from describing the ‘agency’, it inscribes them automatically with an assumed relationship of power, even if those involved would not necessarily define it in the same way. It also assumes a rigid definition of the binary of those who are

tying. Furthermore, it assumes that the dominant is the one who ‘initiates’ the activity, while the submissive merely ‘receives’ it. This constructs an atomized binary in which other modes of interaction cannot be accounted for. Someone who is submissive might tie the dominant person as an act of submission; or the experience may be one which any of the involved can initiate; or the activity may be a mutual experience; and last but not least, such taxonomy completely neglects those who tie themselves up (self-bondage). With this, the narrow framework and the insistence of ordering the sample according to sexuality and gender, the recorded experiences of bondage become secondary to the ‘sexual’.

Moser and Kleinplatz (2007) suggest several motivations for why practitioners of rope bondage enjoy what they do and the feelings that they experience. They point out that some like to struggle where others relax. It can be focused on specific parts of the body, with or without clothing, contain elements of exhibitionism, voyeurism, humiliation, tenderness etc.

“... for some the process of being tied or tying someone up is the essential turn-on. After [being] immobilized, [they] are quickly untied. An entire evening may be spent tying and retying...For others it is the feeling of being immobilized that is erotic. ... [In such instances] the submissive would not be untied until after the scene is completed.”(2007, 40)

We are made to understand that the tying can be a process of tying, retying and untying; in which the untying, coming undone, is a part of the scene; that it can be changeable and somewhat dynamic rather than only serving as an immobilizing element.

Newmahr (2008; 2011) engaged in deep ethnographic work during 4 years, immersing herself into the real-life BDSM-scene of a city in the United States. Her work is concerned not with BDSM as primarily a sexual practice, but rather as a socio-cultural semi-public practice in which people intentionally seek out spaces away from the bedroom and the internet. This kind of social interaction takes place in clubs, classes, discussion groups, conventions, parties, and, by extension, also private play.

She frames the practices not as atomised individual preferences but as a recreational and social activity, highlighting the proportion of her interviewees that do not necessarily think about it as a

practice directly related to sex, or even desire sexual release (orgasm). It is also something which is enjoyed and understood in its own right, with a focus on the activity at hand, rather than the potential sexual intercourse it might lead to (Newmahr, 2011). This recreational behaviour is understood within the concept of 'serious leisure' which is "a devotion to the pursuit of an activity that requires specialized skills and resources, and provides particular benefits" (Newmahr 2010, 318). The 'serious leisure' concept is different from the 'casual' leisure, which is defined by being relatively short-lived, offering the reward immediately and does not require any specific knowledge or skills in order to enjoy. There are six specific qualities that differentiate the serious from the casual leisure which are the following: (1) A 'need for perseverance'; (2) The activity as a career; (3) Efforts demanding learning skills, training and acquiring knowledge specific to the practice; (4) Lasting personal and 'social-psychological' advantages deriving from the practice; (5) A sense of a community unique to the sphere of activity and (6) the leisure activity is one in which the individual identifies personally (Stebbins in Newmahr, 2010; 2011). The activities and the social settings become entrenched within discourses of learning how to: how to use different implements; how to communicate; how to play safely, discourses which are maintained through in both formal and informal settings such as classes, policing of shared space as well through self-surveillance (Downing 2007, Newmahr 2010). Entire events and conventions are organised by organizations and groups, geared towards providing learning spaces and opportunities for play as well as social interaction beyond the activities of BDSM (Herman, 2008; Newmahr, 2010). This is learning that is not only concerned with the technical, but also with how to communicate in-scene, how to handle emotional and physical feedback as well as any safety concerns in-scene or in the community. With this learning, the leisure in itself can also become a 'career', in terms of the way in which one develop skills and involving oneself in the local community. It can also turn the practice into business careers such as club promotion, manufacturing and/or selling products or services, etc. (Newmahr, 2010; Newmahr, 2011).

When undertaking the research it became clear that minimal in-depth research has been carried out on the practices themselves. It became more and more clear to me that the physical and emotional experience which Newmahr (2008; 2010; 2011) explores has largely been neglected, despite the

physicality of many BDSM-practices. I became interested in focussing on what the overt concept of 'touch' could offer. A layman understanding of the feeling body is that it has five senses. However this does not adequately mirror how touch works on the body or how the senses interact with each other. To focus a moment on the sense of touch; it does not just reside within the skin receiving, reacting to stimuli or reporting its sensations, but through multiple lines of information that cross each other, working in conjunction with other senses which are mobile, exploratory and orientating (Gibson 1968). Senses which are not just passive receptors, but seek to position themselves in relation to the world of sensory impressions and expressions (Paterson 2007). The perceptive body is thus in 'momentum' of actively sought sensations rather than in a "subjective synthesis (blending)" (Vasseleu 1998, 31) of impressions upon a passive body acting as a receptacle.

Consider the handshake as an example of touch as not only active, but also reactive and communicative. The hands that are shaking each other follows the others' pattern of movement; and the handshake can be used as a marker for an encounter to start, a greeting or settling on an agreement, all depending on cultural, social and political contexts (Finnegan 2005). If we treat touch as a manifold expression, we could also consider touch as having a language not necessarily based upon the verbal, but dependent on how touch is expressed and perceived but also with the power to indicate a relationship; a kiss on the hand does not convey the same meaning as a stiff handshake (Classen, 2005a; Finnegan, 2005). The body itself becomes used to certain movements, habituated to positions and recognizing certain types of sensory information (Classen 2005a, Paterson 2007). A lengthier discussion on the focus on the bodily practice itself will be undertaken in the chapter on Methodology.

This literature review has focused on the how bondage has been understood within BDSM-theory. We have examined the discourse of bondage as sex, and presented a different way of understanding BDSM through the work of Newmahr, who considered the social aspect of BDSM. I have also presented a brief outline of a way to think of touch or the haptic not merely as a machine of organizing input, but as an active and communicative process. The angle from which Ernulf and Innala (1995) describe rope bondage is one in which the power-relations are assumed and fixed, according to who is the rigger and who is the rope-bottom, as well as who 'initiates' the activity and who merely 'receive'

it. This is a very atomized, almost didactic view of the experience of bondage. One which, again, is not found in the research they undertook themselves which instead spoke of joint mutual pleasures such as the ‘enhanced visual enjoyment of partner’ or ‘partners’ sexual pleasure’ (Ernulf & Innala 1995, 642)

I do not intend to deny elements of sexuality within the practice, but wish to point out that through widening the scope of inquiry into bondage the research will not fall into continued assumptions on the role of sexuality; what it should contain in relation to ‘alternative’ sexual practices. In the following chapter on methodology, this dissertation will suggest a different approach in which the sensation of bondage itself can move to the forefront; in which the ontological position of the felt experience is moved towards an understanding of the interaction between those involved. Specifically an interaction that pushes the practitioners themselves to feel and be felt together, and not phrasing the person who is tied as merely a submissive receptacle of an ‘initiated’ dominant ‘expression’.

Methodology

This chapter will map the theoretical foundations of the research, the methods of the research and the way in which the research will be analyzed. The first section will attempt to rephrase the ontological assumption of the interpretation of bondage as a purely restrictive (sexual) practice through understanding the haptic as the intersection rather than the crossing of a physical body. The second will consider the position of the researcher when undertaking the sensory and the intimate research. Finally, the third section will present the methods used in the research, the sampling and the analytical approach to the research material.

I wish to take feeling bodies seriously, to focus on them not only as objects but also subjects of social inquiry and thinking. Sarah Ahmed & Jackie Stacey (2001) asks us to think how skin is touched; how is it felt, how is it moved, what and who moves it. What does it mean to touch or be touched? This is a rejection of the assumed binary of the mind and body, the self and the other, where the skin is the set boundary of individual self. Instead they describe the feeling body and skin as active points of crossing, where subjects want to feel, and seeking sensation instead of only being passive recipients of sensations (Ahmed & Stacey 2001). It can be illustrated with hands that touch each other. Not only is the hand that touches the other a perceiving subject but also an object of perception, since both hands are touching each other respectively. This is what is referred to as “the reversibility of tactile perception” (Vasseleu 1998, 26) and can be defined as ‘transitional’; touch is that which happens between and through bodies (Vasseleu 1998, 31). This enables a notion of Shibari as an embodied phenomena, one feels the rope, but is also letting themselves be felt; as a way of touching each with and through the rope.

When I started to focus on what happened in the ‘lived experience’ (Bentz & Shapiro in Groenewald 2004, 12) it became apparent to me as a researcher how physical Shibari was,

how the experience was not only dependent upon the restraining element of the body using rope, but also dependent on who was doing the tying and how. It was here that I decided to focus on the sensory component, the touch of rope bondage and the possible affects it could bring.

The role of the researcher- 'objectivity' in distance?

As an 'insider' prior to the research and as a participant observer, clearly my position was different from someone who would come into it as a field of research for the first time. This presented me with some advantages, as I could use my unique position and what I already knew within a familiar context. I knew the codes of conduct, how to move physically, verbally and socially, gaining trust and establishing rapport was not a problem (Fontana 2007). Riemer describes the 'insider' position of the researcher as an 'opportunistic research strategy'. However we can also see the potentially negative aspects of this kind of proximity including emotional involvement affecting the objectivity, and the difficulties in replicating research results (Riemer in Lieshout 1997); all of which I fully take into account. This work is not seeking to make claims about a particular, essential or monolithic truth waiting to be uncovered. Instead, this work aims to validate a research of the 'lived experience' as it is practiced, understood and reflected upon by those who engage in it. It is an attempt to generate data in order to understand how practitioners make sense of their engagement with the practice (Taylor 2001) and in this case, how they make sense out of Shibari. It is in the words of Newmahr: "a jointly constructed narrative rather than an accurate objective depiction of social reality" (Newmahr 2008, 619). In this study, with the role of the researcher and ethnographer mingling with a level of personal engagement, this became even more evident. Sometimes my role was that of a participating observer; taking part in the practice that was studied, otherwise I adopted the role of a pure observer. (For more examples of this approach see Lieshout 1997 and Newmahr 2008).

During the fieldwork the sensing body became literally entangled in the research itself in which the intimacy of the encounters were powerful and could elicit very strong reactions, both physical and emotional. A strong response is not unusual for studies concerned with the experience of sensory research (see Newmahr 2008; 2011, Paterson, 2007). However, rather than deny the role of intimacy and its perceived potential for the destabilisation of objectivity, it was instead engaged and acknowledged within the research (Puwar 2008). It contributed to the candidness of questions and interviews and enabled an in-depth perspective on the ‘felt experience’, a depth not possible for those coming from the ‘outside’ (Lieshout 1997).

Parameters, ethics and consent

The primary research for this thesis was conducted through several periods of sustained ethnography between October 2010 and March 2011. In this time four ethnographical observations and four interviews took place. In addition numerous participant observations as well as participating in the practice took place. The fieldwork took place in London, Japan, Berlin and in a variety of settings such as classes, parties and other events. Other material, such as web-pages and blogs were continually accessed, before and after the dates stated in order to keep up with news and topics of discussion relating to the practice of Shibari. Despite continuous exposure of BDSM-imagery in the media and efforts to de-pathologise sadomasochistic practices there is still a severe stigma attached and thus this is a field of research that is ethically sensitive. As a researcher, it was my duty to take all the measures that I could in order to protect the anonymity of those included in the research. This was done by avoiding using their real names, unless they specifically asked for their own named to be used, such as in the case of Felix Rückert. All other names are nicknames. All interview-participants gave their informed consent via a written consent form (see appendix 1) constructed after reviewing the BSA Ethics Statement. Upon completion of the project all data will be stored in a password-protected, secure location.

Methods and analytical approach.

The focus on many sensory encounters complicated the identification and selection of appropriate methods of research. Many methods exist to textually represent a felt experience;

“can deal poorly with the multiple-...that which takes different shapes in different places...with the complex...Dealing poorly with the sensory - ...vision, sound, taste, smell; with the emotional...pain, pleasure, desire; or [they deal poorly with the] kinaesthetic- the pleasures and pains which follow the movement ...of people [and]objects (Law & Urry 2003, 10)

It became apparent that the research must be performed using a range of techniques in order to gather a wide sample of findings, in which the different advantages of each methods could come together (Reinharz 1992). This led to the selection of observation and semi-structured interviews as the primary methods, backed up by ongoing ethnographic studies in different rope-related events and settings as well as engaging in the practice itself. The primary method of the research was thus; observation of a specific rope-scene, interview and participation.

The sample³ of those participating in the specific scenes, the interviews and the memos' were selected according to the relevant experience in the field of research (Kvale 1997). They are all individuals who in one way or another approach their practice as something other than purely restrictive bondage.

The choice of utilising the method of participant observation is in line with the ontological and epistemological position of this research, which is not intended to discover a 'truth' but to generate data that can increase our understanding and widen the perceived knowledge. In the participant observation, the focus is on the action, the interactions and how the observed reacts in relation to these (Mason 2002). All of the observations took place in spaces that were

³ The participants have been tying between 2-12 years and engage in rope bondage on a minimum of a couple of times a week. They are to some extent 'switch', i.e. are both tying and getting tied. Two of them tie themselves, one ties more often than getting tied, another one is more often tied than tying. Although tying is not restricted to a coupled activity in general, only coupled constellations were studied in this research.

more or less designated for and dedicated to rope bondage. During the observation, I took notes, trying to locate what Geertz call a ‘thick description’ (2000) focusing on what was in front of me; (re)actions, communication (verbal and non-verbal), movement, environment, details, the small and the big gestures, sounds; trying to see what was there, in the moment of the tying and its effects. By attending to this I was able to see how the form of Shibari ‘articulates’ (Geertz 2000, 17) itself through the bodies of those involved.

It became clear that in order to understand how practitioners of Shibari make sense of their practice, participant observation would not suffice as a method. It was here that the (semi-structured) interview came in. It has the ability to lead towards situated knowledge via directed conversation, an understanding that can tell us more about the relationship with the practices investigated (Kvale 1997). The interviews can be understood as processes of mutual dialogues guided by a loosely structured topic guide (see Appendix 2) (Kvale in Groenewald 2004). This topic guide was constructed not to force desired answers from the participant, but to encourage them to speak of how rope is featured in their lives, as well as what happens in the moment of tying, as they understand it. At this point it was important to be flexible when listening and asking, trying to be as ‘non-directive’ as possible (Seale 1998, 147).

Since none of the observations were exactly the same, the guides were remodelled slightly to follow up on specifics that had become evident in the moments of the observations. The interviews took place either the same day as the observation took place, or a couple of days later, depending on circumstances. The interviews were recorded and after repeated close listening to the content, keywords and phrases was partially transcribed (Groenewald 2004).

The material gathered was closely listened to, read and re-read and then grouped into two larger sections, in which themes common themes was distinguished and then analysed. This is where the next chapter on analysis comes in, which we can start to distinguish an

understanding of Shibari as a multi-stranded/layered, haptic and visceral experience with diverse meanings and intentions.

Analysis

The first section will map how, in the moment of tying, the rope acts as an intermediary tool; an 'extension of the hands' with the ability to create stimuli specific to the scene. The second section is on the effect of tying. This is where we will start to map an understanding of how Shibari can be seen as a joint venture for those involved, with a consistent focus on the state of mind of both the rigger and the rope-bottom. We will find that it is like most BDSM-practices, based upon an on-going, active dialogue, but not necessarily one that will lead to sexual intercourse. In this section we will also explore the correlation with the experiences of 'flow'; an expression describing the state of mind experienced by people who focus intensely on a completely absorbing manual activity, such as river rafting, climbers, those who play a musical instrument (Csíkszentmihályi in Newmahr 2011).

Rope as a material object

“...there are pleasures in trusting enough to ‘allow’ the distribution of agency out of the body into other materials...” (Law 2003, 6)

To ground the sensory element of this analysis and research, please feel free to pick up the strand of rope that was included with this dissertation. If you have not done so earlier, take a moment to close your hands around it, pulling it through your closed hand. Then feel the weight of it; if it is heavy or light. Look at its colour and texture. Try making a common overhand knot (like the first step of tying your shoestrings) and tighten it, attend to any possible sounds it makes, creaks when it is pulled, or a kind of rattling sound or a thump when thrown on the floor. Pull it over your arm while your eyes are closed. None of these things might mean anything specific to you, as it is just a rope without the context from which the participants of Shibari experience it. I enclose it here to give you a sense for its texture and sensation during the process of handling this object. Natural ropes such as Jute and Hemp (for

more on rope see appendix 3) can be ‘treated’; a process which can include washing, drying under tension, burning off excess fibres over a gas flame, waxing or oiling with specially made mix of oils, in some cases bees-wax, and even dying in different colours. All of these procedures are down to personal preference, but is also something which is an ongoing discussion on websites and amongst enthusiasts when they meet in person.

“I am a rope geek...Rope is important”

Shadow, Interview no. 2, 2010- 12-11

Shadow takes an interest not only in using rope but also how it is made. She makes her own ropes and tries different techniques. She speaks of it as a way of ‘discovering’ the material and how it behaves. In the context of rope bondage, the obvious tactile formation of the rope itself is manifested, as she demonstratively uses her hands to feel the ropes; engaging physically with the rope as a means of discovery. While we acknowledge the physical properties of rope, it is important to recognize that all of the participants in the research explicitly stated that rope on its own, without the context of bondage is rather un-interesting;

“I am not a rope fetishist; it is about the handling of the rope, the manual labour, the enormous complexity created by the use of a very simple object”

Felix, Interview No. 4, 2011- 02-04

Practitioners take care to involve themselves in the lifecycle of the rope as a material. Engaging with the rope on a regular basis can also be a question of safety, knowing its state by way of making sure that they have not broken under any strain or have been damaged in storage. All of the participants in the research have a close relationship to rope as a material object. It is the object through which they become wilfully entangled with their practice, either as making a living from selling, teaching, performing, practicing or just engaging with its regular maintenance.

The Dialogical Rope Session

While I am aware of the semiotic theories on the Dialogical (Bakhtin 1998), ‘the dialogical’ in this thesis is defined as the communicative exchange of meaning, feelings and intentions, not necessarily based only upon the verbal but also the physical language of movement and touch. Although it could be understandable to try to separate the action of tying itself and the inquiry into what it produces in terms of reactions and states of mind, I will look at the tactile bodily practice and its consequences in a joint manner. This coupling of action together with the reactions and the feelings they produce will highlight how the essential experience of rope is not separate from, but intrinsic to how it is done. This dissertation wishes to emphasise the practice of Shibari as a dialogue between the rigger and the rope-bottom, with a strong focus on the inter-action and dynamics between these individuals.

The Greeting Ritual- agreeing to a scene and the moment before the tying starts

Most of the time a session starts with an agreement between those wanting to participate. Depending on the relationship between those involved, this agreement can take different expressions. Taking the initiative is not specifically linked to who does the tying. Depending on how well the consenting participants know each other; with if they have engaged in rope bondage together before, questions can be asked about the physical condition of rope-bottom. Do they have any injuries; old or new, (un)limited mobility, fears, phobias, personal limits (sexual or otherwise) any wishes in terms of how the scene should look like, et cetera. Conversely, as these concerns are not limited to role, these questions can also be asked by the rope-bottom, not just the rigger.

In all the studies undertaken apart from one, some kind of ‘pre-tying’ preparation took place. This could be manual, such preparing the physical space, setting up or checking the point of suspension (if suspensions are to take place), as well as preparing oneself. This preparation time is also when the location itself becomes the space where the rope will take place, and thus, a part of the scene. The scene does not necessarily have to start when the first rope is

tied. Instead, it could start much earlier, in a space of time between the preparations and the first rope. This is where the dialogue or exchange starts. For instance, in my observation notes from Berlin 2010, I have recorded:

“P sits down next to Tatjana who lies down on her back. He strokes her body with a bundle of rope; she hums in response, and then says that the light disturbs her eyes. P picks up a piece of cloth, tracing it over her body, pulls it under the back of her neck, lets her head rest in the fabric and then slowly moving it back and forth, so that it stretches the muscles while she again hums. He slowly moves her hands to the sides, touches her face, folds the cloth over her eyes, then lifting her upper body so that she sits up and he ties the cloth with slow movements”

Study 1

“Shadow skips with a rope while F is sitting on the floor. She stops and walks over to him, hugs him while standing up, caress his face with a piece of purple rope. Shadow sits down in front of him, looks into F’s eyes with a finger under his chin; they are looking at each other for 30 seconds, both breathing deep and slowly. Suddenly Shadows starts to laugh, an intense and joyful laughter while still looking straight into the eyes of F.”

Study 2

In his exploration of Reiki, Paterson (2007) covers the phenomena of a transfer of ‘energy’, through physical tactile activity. This is an affective touch that is active in the way that it reaches not only out to the other, but also towards and in between the self and the other bodies; it is directed, intercorporeal and focused. Felix describes it, a “sensory relation” (Interview No 4, 2010-02-04). This is also how Gibson (1968) describe the relationships of the senses as ‘perceptual systems’; systems which are not merely passive receivers of stimuli, but “mobile, exploratory and orientating” (100). Senses are that which receiving through the stimuli as well as reaches out; a communicative exchange.

In the observation notes above, one can immediately note the tactile elements at the start of both encounters. The ropes are there, but not yet central. It is in these initial moments that the practitioners feel that the session starts and that the focus and connection is established. During a class on non-technical components of Kinbaku, Kinoko Hajime discussed the first moments during a scene, in which he described that his role as a rigger was to ‘empty’ the mind of both himself and that of the rope-bottom. This emptying of the mind is very much about being present and directly focused one another and the self;

“Rope bondage is being in the moment”

Shadow Interview no. 2, 2010- 12-11

The responsibility of the rigger is to set the physical position of rope-bottom; making sure that if they sit, they sit comfortably, in balance and with a focus on their bodies’ centre of gravity. Kinoko Hajime spoke about a way of thinking, feeling and acting, which for him as a rigger was about a touch that was also a reading of the state of mind of the person he was about to tie. A reading of the body which meant he placed his hand on the top of the shoulders or a hand in the back of the neck of the rope-bottom. While doing so, he focused on their body temperature, pulse, tensions, and breathing. This was his tactile way of reading them, which also feeds and guides his judgement on the tying itself. In that same touch, he also said that he then visualized and ‘transferred’ his intent; that he was tapping into that information from the reading and what he felt in return. Thus, this ‘reading’ via touch seeks to localize the mood of those involved and to communicate, not always with words, what the session will bring. Someone who is nervous and stiff can end up in a relaxing (as a hug) tie; someone who responds to masochistic input can find themselves being tied in more physically demanding ties. All of these are generalizations, which can only be specified in negotiations prior to the tying, or in the moment of tying. There is therefore a loop of information flowing between those involved, but we can also see how this is something which affects those who tie

themselves. Shadow describe the difference between tying someone else and tying herself by saying that the “loop of information is shorter”, which means that she, when tying herself, feels the effect of the rope and the tying so much faster and can respond to it appropriately.

This dialogue is present throughout each session. The way in which the tying thus takes place is guided by this dialogue and a mutual exploration of that moment in time. So in the same way that a conversation does not simply consist of the words spoken, the tying consists of the combined ongoing feedback loop of action, reaction, body language and shared experience. This is a dialogic touch which continues *through* the rope and is enabled by the rope. This is a notion which has also been expressed by Arisue Go, a Japanese Rope Artist; that “to tie is to embrace” (Arisue 2009). The rope, while still remaining as a material object, also becomes an ‘extension of your own hands’. While the hand that placed a strand of rope on a body might be taken away, the rope remains; a lingering yet dynamic record of the tactile occurrences within the scene.

Before moving on towards the analysis of the tying itself, I will take a moment to point out what kind of state of mind the tying can produce. Research by Newmahr (2011) has explored how the enjoyment deriving from BDSM can be understood in terms of the ‘the optimal experience’. This expression describes the state of mind experienced by people who focus intensely on a manual activity that is completely absorbing. Originally, the examples used to illustrate this were that of runners, musicians, climbers, river rafters, etc. Csíkszentmihályi defines the optimal experience as something encompassing some of the following: a challenge and utilization of specific skills, an intense concentration on the task at hand, a loss of self-consciousness; altered sense of time, and the feeling that action and awareness is conflated in that the activity happens automatically (Csíkszentmihályi in Newmahr 2011). Newmahr points out how this can also be framed around the experience of BDSM-practices, experienced by both those who ‘receive’ as well as those who ‘provide’ the sensations and

engage in the activities. The state of mind that can arise from the practices are described as being ‘in the zone’; ‘to fly’; a ‘buzz’; ‘weightlessness’, etc. (Newmahr, 2010; 2011). Shadow and Esinem both describe how the world can ‘disappear’ around them; a result of an altered sense of time and a property of the emergent nature of the practice of rope tying as an optimal experience. (The rope appears to happen without conscious thought.)

“My hands just went, I suddenly realised I had done none of that which I had planned... I had not even heard the second track [soundtrack to performance], did not see anything else except her.”

(Esinem, Interview No.3, 2011-01-11)

Tatjana explain how she feels a ‘release’ from everyday worries, a cathartic sense of relief. She enters ‘a bubble’ with the rigger, and the only thing that exists is the dialogue of the connection that they have established. The elements which define the optimal experience are also elements which can be found in the practice of Shibari; the rigger’s concentration on the interaction and the action of tying, the rope-bottom’s focus on the physical sensation, the pressure and tension of the ropes, to mention but a few.

All of the scenes I observed were different, both in terms of action, but also in the general ‘feeling’ that they gave me as an observer. (One was more playful, another was dramatic, and a third was focused much more on eroticism.) Therefore it would be difficult to try to map a default way of tying or search for a specific scene to be representative of Shibari as a whole. What can be considered, however, are the various techniques of tying.

The tying

There is physicality to the movement. The riggers used their whole body in the scene, not always looking directly at the rope, or which way the rope should go, but most of the time, focused on the person they tied. Tatjana constantly had her body shifted and moved by her

rope-partner. Shadow pushed Felix with her hip, Esinem pushed his rope-partner against the tensed rope with his shoulder.

The physical closeness also enables the continued dialogical touch; leaning yourself against someone, rather than standing at an arm length's distance makes you aware of the reactions of the one that you are tying. This kind of shared intimacy is considered crucial for all of the participants and is also one of the very strong characteristics of Shibari. A shared intimacy working together with the creativity and techniques of tying creating a joint experience:

'I often see rope being done on an arm lengths distance you know, technical and all of that...but I don't think it should be like that, I think you need to remember that you are tying a person, not a parcel...'

(Esinem, Interview No.3, 2011-01-11)

Bruce Argue (2009) develops this idea in an essay, where he wishes to move the focus from only the technical elements of a tie, to the level of the personal and inter-relational aspects. In his essay he makes the comparison to the Tango, and how it can be performed according to steps; technically perfect but mechanical and without emotion. Felix Rückert stated that it reminds him of Argentine Tango and that rope bondage is;

"... a form of instant composition: a physical, emotional and mental dialogue between two (or more) persons in order to create intense emotions, a dramatic scene, an interesting visual artwork and a deep spiritual connection. Ideally all of that together at the same time. In one word: a Dance"

(Interview No 4, 2010-02-04)

Finnegan (2005) describes dance as a "somatic interconnectedness, rooted in the movements, subjective experience and the control of the moving or still body" (2005, 23). It can be argued that the 'dancing-together' is a concept which can be used in order to understand this combination of physical closeness and movement in Shibari.

The tying itself is not a simple tying and knotting in one monotonous tempo. While the tying takes place, the rigger uses the ropes, applying them with different speed, using pressure and pace as a part of the session. The rope can be pulled quickly over the chest, or slowly traced over the skin, a knot can be 'emphasised' through an extra tug. One of the participants compared it to the way in which music is directed to be executed in musical scores, from pianissimo (very soft) to fortissimo (very loud), but also designating tempo and speed with crescendos or decrescendos. Thus the intention behind using changing speed, varying pressure, pulling the already tied rope, etc, is to add even more to the experience, refusing to allow it to become static. This dynamic approach also relates to the shapes in which the one who is tied is put in, positions that can change throughout the session, or perhaps focus on especially strenuous positions, so called 'predicament bondage.' One can also consider the active use of how the rope sounds and smells, such as the pull of a rope close to the ear, or a wrap over the face.

Untying

Through observation it became obvious that the untying was attended to with the same care and dynamic as the tying itself. Rope could continuously be tied and untied throughout the scene. But the final act of the rope being removed from the body is an experience which Tatjana describes as 'being brought back' from the intense experience she has shared with her rope-partner. She also states that she often feels naked and cold after the ropes have come off, as if they had been warming her. In the same way that the scene might not start at the moment that the tying begins, the scene does not necessarily stop as soon as the last rope has been taken off. It is considered important to take the time to 'come back' from the experience, where those involved can take their time, drink water and quite often, sitting quietly and embracing each other.

As a final note, when speaking to both riggers and rope-bottoms, none of them felt that their practice would automatically lead to sexual intercourse. None of them denied the erotic and the sexual elements of a possible session, but instead they all pointed towards how it was dependent on the negotiated limits and boundaries.

Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine how contemporary sociological knowledge about bondage and BDSM corresponds with Shibari-practitioners' understanding of their practice. I sought to expand but also reframe the way in which bondage has been understood and theorized; moving away from bondage as seen as a practice serving only as a tool of restriction in sexual intercourse or a practice that would inevitably lead to sexual intercourse.

Certainly the element of restriction was still present, the bindings were tight and snug, and could indeed be very erotic. Some of the ties enabled exposure and stimuli of erogenous zones; but to only frame rope bondage as a tool for a sexual practice lacks an acknowledgement and understanding of the full scope of the practices. Through engaging in ethnographic work and interviewing practitioners, I wished to engage with a more nuanced concept of Shibari; one which focuses on the practice itself and what it means to those entangled with it.

What became apparent was that the feeling of rope on the skin or in the hands is an immediate feeling. You know it when you touch it; you know it instantly if and when it is placed upon your body, even through clothes. This immediacy is used by the practitioners, not only as a tool for restraining the body, but also as a communicative and inter-personal practice, with the rope acting as an 'extension' of the hands.

As research into Shibari and rope bondage has previously been underexplored, it is possible to point out further possibilities of research. A couple of areas of interest have stood out during the time of research for this dissertation. One would be to explore the fetishization of the flexible female body within rope-practices especially in relation to the photographic image. Another interesting field would be the pedagogy of rope; how it is learned and how it is understood as a sphere of knowledge. A third suggestion for further research would be to examine the relationship between cultural authenticity and Shibari: an exploration of the connection between the ‘authentic’ Japanese Kinbaku and the rope bondage which is practiced in the ‘West’ and the perceived tensions between these two.

As a concluding note, this dissertation has sought to present nuances and techniques in Shibari which have previously been un-represented. Shibari can be seen as a shared/gestalt experience; a pronunciation of a moment in time where the physicality and intimacy become manifested through the rope. The dialogue of Shibari is thus as lively as any verbal conversation, but is instead relying on the direct physical interaction. To tie is to embrace, to feel, to push the sensing body. To tie is to listen, and to listen carefully; an interactive practice which produce adrenaline and a sense of intimacy. It is an example of how we as people interact and communicate not only through words but through our bodies; a physical articulation of emotion and a desire to bond with one another.

Appendix 1- Consent form

**Goldsmiths University of London
Department of Sociology**

Sense and Shibari; the experiences of those who tie

Student:

First name Surname

Contact details:

Email: ***@gold.ac.uk

Telephone: *****

Dissertation Supervisor

First Name Surname

***@gold.ac.uk

Project Information

I am a student at Goldsmiths University of London and I am conducting interviews for my third year dissertation. I am studying the ways that people make sense of the Japanese Bondage tradition called Shibari.

During this study you will be asked some questions about why and how you engage in rope-related bondage activities. I will also conduct an observation of you engaging with the practice. I have designed this interview to be approximately one (1) hour in length. However, please feel free to expand on the topic or talk about related ideas. Also, if there are any questions you would rather not answer or that you do not feel comfortable answering, please say so and we will stop the interview or move on to the next question, whichever you prefer

Your participation will be completely anonymous and all information will be kept confidential on a separate, password protected hard-drive. Only I and my dissertation supervisor will have access to this information. Upon completion of this project, all data will be stored in a secure location.

Participant's Agreement:

- I am aware that my participation in this interview and observation is voluntary.
- I understand the intent and purpose of this research.
- If, for any reason, at any time, I wish to stop the interview or observation, I may do so without having to give an explanation.
- I am aware the data will be used in a university dissertation project.
- I have the right to withdraw my participation at any point prior to the submission.
- The data gathered in this study are confidential with respect to my personal identity unless I specify otherwise.
- If I have any questions about this study I am free to contact the student researcher.
- I have been offered a copy of this consent form that I may keep for my own reference.
- I have read the above form and, with the understanding that I can withdraw at any time and for whatever reason, I consent to participate in today's interview and observation.

Participant's signature

Date

Interviewer's signature

Date

Appendix 2- Topic Guide

Age

Where from

Relationship status

When did you start with rope?

What got you interested in rope?

What attracts you to rope?

How often do you do rope?

What do you think rope bondage is?

In general, what do you look for in rope-related activities, any special preferences or dislikes?

Would you say rope is a learning process?

How would you describe rope itself, what role does the rope play as a material object?

How do you usually agree to do a session with you partner?

Is rope bondage always restrictive?

Would you agree that all bondage is a sexual preference directly linked to BDSM-practices?

If yes, why, if no, why not?

Do you think there is an art element to rope and how would you describe it?

Now, speaking of the least session, which you were kind enough to letting me study, would you say that is a typical rope-session for you? If yes, why, if no, why not?

How does the moment's right before the first rope feel like?

What do you think when the first rope is placed?

What do you think during the session?

Would you say that what you feel mentally and physically in a rope-session are connected? If yes, how, if no, why not?

Do you use language when being tied up? If yes, what kind of language? How do you communicate?

Your partner who tied you used a lot of different paces, applied different pressures and was very physical, in what way does this affect you?

Was that sexual and in that case, how?

In one part of the session, you were suspended in the air, how would you describe that?

Would you say that rope plays a big part of your life? Is it an important part of your identity, and if so, in what way?

How would you describe the role of touch when you tie?

How do you move when you are doing rope?

Anything else that you would like to add which you feel is important about your practice?

Appendix 3- About Rope

Most of the rope used in Shibari is made of natural fibres. It is not braided but twisted and with a high level of friction; holding knots and wraps really well. The most common fibres are Jute or Hemp. Jute is lighter than Hemp, which is also more tightly twisted, and with a very distinct smell. For Shibari, the standard is that every rope is about 7 metres long, with a diameter of 5.5- 7 mm. When used, it is folded in the middle. Instead of using very long lengths, if there is a need for more rope, another is simply attached to the first.

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