

# KNEELING AND THE EXPRESSION OF MORAL EMOTIONS IN RELIGIOUS RITUAL

Eva Kundtová Klocová<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>LEVYNA Laboratory for the Experimental Research of Religion, Masaryk University  
\*eva.klocova@gmail.com



## Introduction

Some cultures consider the kneeling posture the most salient bodily expression connected to religious ritual practice. Closed, collapsed and lowered postures are generally perceived as either expressing submission and obedience or shame and atonement. Therefore, depending on the associated affective state (submission or shame), these postures might either emphasize power asymmetry (between the superhuman agents and human participants), or signal conformity with moral norms.

## Study I

Examination of the evolutionary origins of kneeling in rituals and its link to the emergence of high (moralising) deities.

### Hypotheses

- H1:** Belief in moralising high gods predicts kneeling in religious ritual directed towards a deity.
- H2:** Belief in high gods predicts kneeling in religious ritual directed towards a deity.
- H3:** Kneeling in religious ritual expresses submission/shame.

### Methods

- 535 ethnographic descriptions (81 cultures) of ritual practices containing explicit mentioning of kneeling (HRAF World Cultures [1]).
- Culture level beliefs in moralising gods and high gods coding (SCCS [2]).
- Coding: 1) *addressee of the kneeling*, 2) *what does the kneeling express*.

### Results

Type of deity beliefs and the kneeling orientation.

Cell Contents: Count; Chi-square contribution; Std Residual	Kneeling before deity	Kneeling before something else
High god absent	46 0.266 -0.516	94 0.146 -0.382
High god	46 1.401 1.184	63 0.769 -0.877
Moralising high god	14 0.783 -0.885	36 0.430 0.656

Pearson's Chi-squared test  
 $\chi^2 = 3.795$   
d.f. = 2;  $p = 0.150$ ;  $n = 299$

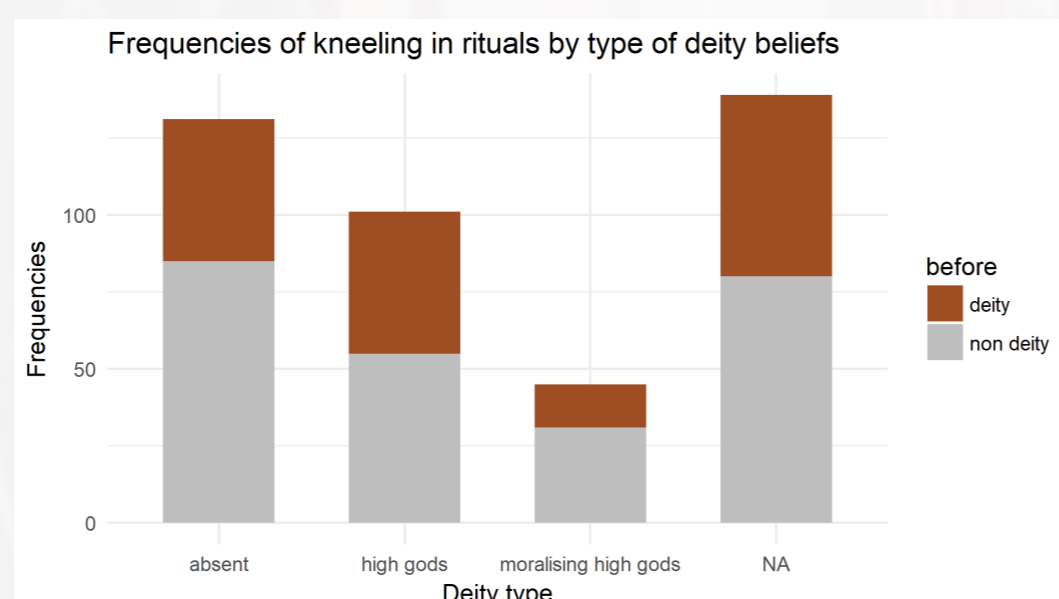


Fig. 1: Frequencies of instances of kneeling before deities and other objects/addressees in rituals, depending on type of beliefs.

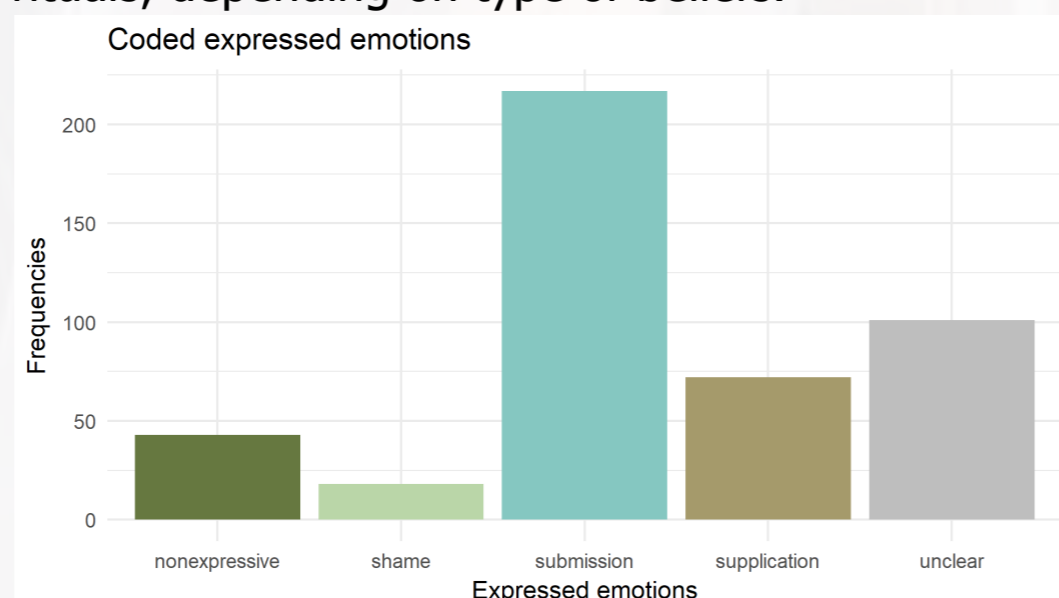


Fig. 2: Frequencies of coded expressions of kneeling.

## Study II

Cross-cultural comparison of shared cultural models related to the use of kneeling in religious rituals.

### Hypotheses

- H1:** Czech and Mauritian cultural models differ in the salience of reasons for the use of kneeling in ritual posture.
- H2:** Czech and Mauritian cultural models differ in the salience of the addressees or objects of kneeling in ritual posture.

### Methods

- Free-list technique [3] exploring semantic structures associated with kneeling in two different cultures.
- Czech sample ( $n = 169$ , online questionnaire), Mauritian sample ( $n = 35/40$ , interview)
- Responses translated and coded before analysis
- Lists: 1) *reasons for kneeling in religious rituals*, 2) *addressees/objects of the kneeling*.

### Results

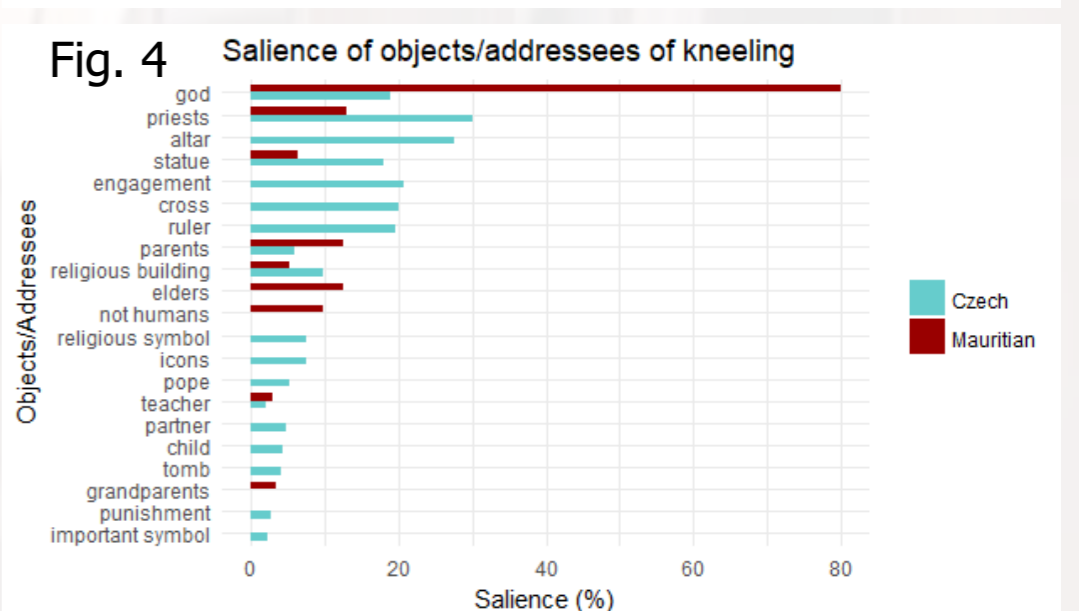
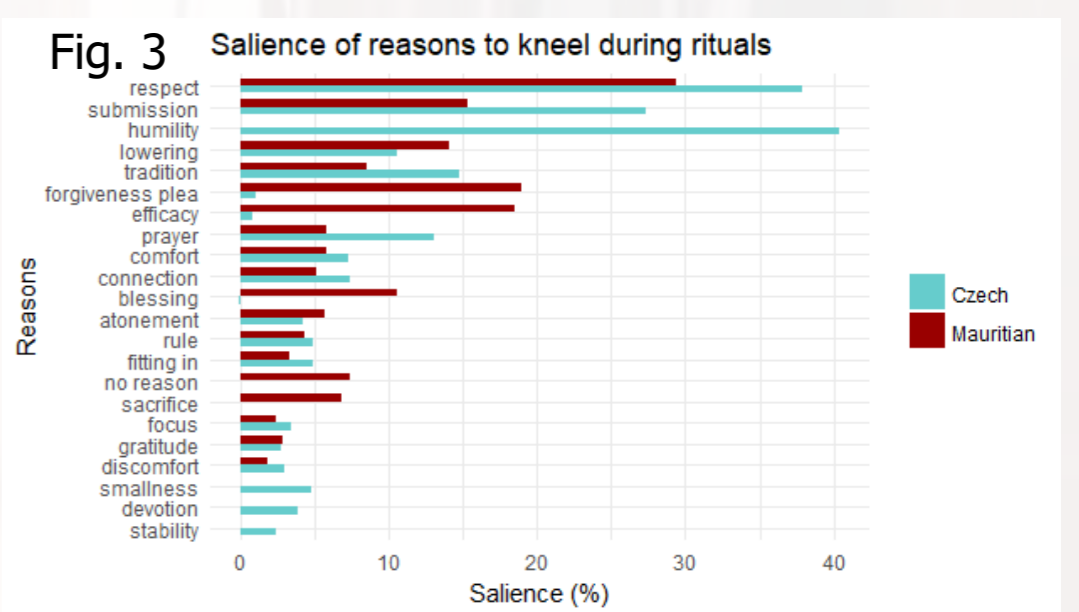
Mauritian and Czech cultural models of reasons to kneel in religious rituals are not significantly correlated ( $r = .329$ ,  $p = .136$ ,  $n = 22$ ). Highest ranking items are shown in Fig. 3.

**CZ:** *humility, respect, submission*  
**MU:** *respect, forgiveness plea, (supplication) efficacy*

Mauritian and Czech cultural models of the object/addressee of kneeling are not significantly correlated

( $r = .206$ ,  $p = .371$ ,  $n = 21$ ). Highest ranking items are shown in Fig. 4.

**CZ:** *priests, altars, fiancé(e)*  
**MU:** *god, not humans, priests*



## References

- [1] Murdock, G. P., Ford, C. S., Hudson, A. E., Kennedy, R., Simmons, L. W., and Whiting, J. W. M. (2008). *Outline of Cultural Materials*. 6th revised edition with modifications.
- [2] Murdock, G. P. and White, D. R. (2006). *Standard cross-cultural sample: on-line edition*.
- [3] Smith, J. J. and Borgatti, S. P. (1997). Salience Counts And So Does Accuracy: Correcting and Updating a Measure for Free-List-Item Salience. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 7(2):208–209.

## Discussion

- kneeling in rituals seems ubiquitous
- most likely pre-dating the emergence of both high gods not concerned with morality and morally concerned high gods
- kneeling is mostly used to communicate submission and respect (older type of behaviour and state compared to shame)
- type of deity belief does not predict use of kneeling

- kneeling have communicative (e.g. *submission, respect*) and performative (e.g. *efficacy of supplication*) function
- kneeling is not strongly related to communication of moral conformity
- cultural variation in models of the use of kneeling

