ONTOGRAPHY AND ALTERITY

Defining Anthropological Truth

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Abstract: This article holds that deeply entrenched assumptions about the nature, provenance, and value of truth can be brought into view and examined critically when set against the backdrop of a radically different set of concepts and practices that are associated with truth seeking in contemporary Afro-Cuban divination. Drawing briefly on an ethnographic analysis of the ways in which Cuban cult practitioners use oracles, the article seeks to formulate a radically alternative concept of truth. This viewpoint eschews common premises about the role of 'representation' in the pursuit of truth in favor of a notion of truth as 'conceptual redefinition'. If the ethnography of divination in Cuba forces the analyst radically to reformulate the concept of truth, what effect might this new approach have on the project of anthropology itself?

Keywords: alterity, anthropological truth, Cuba, Ifá divination, negation, oracles, redefinition

The call for 'an epistemology for anthropology' seems justified—laudable, even—at a time when the discipline may appear somewhat to have lost its way under the pressure of successive self-critical reorientations and due to its success in terms of sheer growth. As Pina-Cabral argues in his contribution to this issue, one of the effects of anthropology's numerous critical turns in recent decades (e.g., the feminist and Marxist critiques in the 1970s, the reflexivism of the 'writing culture' in the 1980s, and the discovery of 'globalization' and even 'professional ethics' since then) is that the discipline has tended to retreat into a theoretical timidity of sorts. The problem is not necessarily that most anthropologists have come to eschew generalizations about 'the human' (Bloch 2005) or systematic attempts at regional comparison (Gingrich, this issue), and that ethnographic 'particularism' has become a habit—even the recent insistence on doing ethnography, often 'multi-sited', of 'globalized', 'diasporic',

Social Analysis, Volume 53, Issue 2, Summer 2009, 80–93 © Berghahn Journals
doi:10.3167/sa.2009.530205

'transnational', or other putatively infra-cultural phenomena, seems just to draw the premise of particularism on a larger canvas (cf. Tsing 2004). The problem is more that the sedimentation of self-critique—more an attitude now than a task—has contributed to a situation that could best be characterized as theoretical idiosyncrasy. While still tracing loose allegiances to national 'styles' of anthropology (US, UK, France) and more firm ties to influential individuals (the 'star-system' and other forms of patronage), anthropological arguments nowadays tend to be elaborated without much reference to overall analytical frameworks or paradigms. Worse, when such references are made at all, it is habitually through 'in' catchphrases—'Foucauldian' this, 'phenomenological' that, 'post-' the other—that take the place of substantiated and developed arguments. So anthropological debates continue to rage, while their premises and their wider analytical significance to the discipline are left opaque. One might say that compared to previous generations of students, the main challenge for those entering the discipline today is not so much to take a position with respect to existing models of anthropological work, but rather to try to determine what the apparently available models actually are. And since this is an almost impossible task in the cacophony of contemporary debate, the confusion seems set to be perpetuated.

In this atmosphere, an image conjured by this issue's call to epistemological appraisal is that of rolled-up shirtsleeves. Is there scope for sorting out this mess, or at least for achieving some clarity about what is at stake in the pursuit of the knowledge we call anthropological? Indeed, the very notion of epistemology has the promise of such clarity built into it. If anthropology, by analogy to other disciplines, is imagined as the pursuit of a certain type of knowledge (if, in other words, it is assumed to be an 'episteme'), then any serious attempt at disciplinary housekeeping must, it seems, be 'epistemological' in nature. It was, after all, primarily by virtue of its epistemological branch that philosophy was once called the 'queen of sciences'. So just as mathematicians, economists, or literary critics might wonder about their own disciplines, we too, as anthropologists, may ponder the following: For what kind of knowledge might anthropology strive? What are the conditions of possibility of such knowledge? What is its object? And so on. Such questions are epistemological through and through, and asking them seems not just reasonable but downright imperative at the present juncture of the discipline.

Nevertheless, the main premise of this article is that such questions are in a crucial sense inappropriate for anthropology. In particular, I want to show that the notion that the clarity for which anthropologists ought to strive must be epistemological contradicts what is arguably the most distinctive characteristic of anthropological thought, namely, that it is oriented toward difference—what used sometimes to be called 'the Other' (e.g., Fabian 1983) and is now often designated as 'alterity' (e.g., Evens 2008; Kapferer 2007; Povinelli 2001; Taussig 1993; see also Holbraad 2007a). My central argument turns on the idea that alterity proper must be construed in ontological rather than epistemological terms. The questions that alterity poses to us anthropologists pertain to what exists rather than what can be known. They pertain, if you like, to

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differences between 'worlds' rather than 'worldviews' (see Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Latour 2002; Viveiros de Castro 1998). So the syllogism is that since anthropology is centrally concerned with alterity and since alterity is a matter of ontological rather than epistemological differences, it follows that anthropology must reflect upon its modus operandi in ontological rather than epistemological terms.

In the main body of this article I pursue this approach with reference to an issue that may be assumed to fall most naturally under the remit of epistemology—the notion of truth. In particular, I seek to align two concerns: the methodological question of what may count as truth in anthropology, and the substantive ethnographic question of what counts as truth for practitioners of Ifá divination in contemporary Cuba. In doing so, I argue that thinking of truth in epistemological terms, as a property of one's knowledge about the world, inhibits the attempt to make sense of the role of truth in Ifá divination. In fact, as I show, epistemological assumptions about truth would render Ifá diviners' claims to wield it quite absurd. This analytical predicament places the onus on us as anthropological analysts to come up with an alternative conceptualization of truth—one that does not make nonsense of diviners' own claims. Hence, with reference to the ethnography of Ifá, I formulate a concept of divinatory truth that avoids the epistemological assumption that truth must be a property of representations that make claims about the world. Rather, I argue, diviners' claims to pronounce truth turn on an essentially ontological operation. The role of the truths that diviners pronounce is not to make a claim about the world but rather to change it—to interfere, in other words, in its ontological constitution. As I explain, diviners are able to do this by effectively redefining the entities 'about' which they appear to speak in divination, with speaking 'about' things being the mark of an epistemological frame (see Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007). So pertaining to the definition of concepts (what counts as 'x') rather than their application (what does x say about the word), divinatory truths have ontological effects. This is meant literally. Inasmuch as it invents new concepts through acts of redefinition, divination brings novel entities forth into existence.

But if divination populates the world, in this sense, so does anthropology (see Holbraad 2009). Thus, the strategy of the argument that follows may best be described as recursive: my attempt to redefine truth as an act of redefinition must, by its own measure, count as an act of truth (see Holbraad 2007a: 218; Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007: 20–22). In other words, the aim of this article is to offer an argument about the need to redefine the notion of truth for anthropological purposes in a recursive manner, in the sense that the argument is also made by its own performance. As will be shown in the final sections of this article, the upshot of this exercise is an ontologically revamped conceptualization of truth as, precisely, conceptual revamping. Elsewhere I have called this approach to anthropological analysis 'ontographic', to indicate that what is at stake in it is the attempt to chart out the ontological presuppositions required to make sense of a given body of ethnographic material (see Holbraad 2003, 2009).

Truth in Anthropology

Anthropologists do all sorts of different things, and the truth stakes are not necessarily the same in each case. For example, my argument about redefining anthropological truth is in no way meant to cover ordinary data collection, without which anthropological analysis could most likely not get off the ground. Thus, when we say that a certain group are horticulturalists, or that suicide rates are going up, or that a particular informant is ill, or any other such statement of fact, we may assume that we are doing our job as anthropologists properly insofar as those statements are accurate representations of the phenomena that they are about, that is, that they are true in a straightforward sense. But what makes this admission relatively uninteresting in the context of this discussion is that this kind of data collection is one we share with other social sciences.

As already indicated, however, the guiding intuition of this article is that what most distinguishes anthropologists from even their most immediate disciplinary neighbors is that they tend to deal also in questions of alterity (although clearly some of our neighbors, such as historians, can learn from us in this respect, and some apparently have). An easy way to tag alterity would be to say that it comprises data that resist collection, with the word 'collection' being used in the ordinary sense of accurate description. Why might some data resist collection in this sense? The answer I am arguing for here is that this is because the concepts available to anthropologists for describing them are inadequate. In order to get to that argument, however, we may begin with a weaker criterion of resistance by saying simply that what makes certain data 'alter' (as in the opposite of 'ego') is that the peculiar difficulty they present to the researcher is precisely that of determining how best to describe them, that is, how best to find concepts that distort them as little as possible. So if fieldwork is our trademark method, description (and its cognitive corollary, comprehension) is our trademark difficulty. And let there be no misunderstanding. Of course, all scientists struggle to find the right concepts to describe what they study. But the problem in our case is compounded by the fact that the data we seek to conceptualize are themselves concepts (for 'practices' too are determined conceptually). Moreover, we are typically working with concepts that are initially alien to us.

Thus, the question to determine is how alterity relates to truth. The answer is intimately. For what is the most obvious index of alterity as we have defined it? With regard to data that we find difficult to describe, the one thing that they all have in common is that they appear to be a form of negation of what we are used to describing, and negation (the 'not', as it were) is what is ordinarily taken to be the opposite of truth. In other words, the 'difference' of alterity initially takes the form of negation. So to take our example, divination appears 'alter' (and therefore anthropologically interesting) to the extent that it negates a number of key notions that I—not as a person but as an analyst—would assume to be obvious: that deities do not really exist; that even if they do, they probably will not be inclined to tell me whether I should stay with my partner (as they are often purported to do in Cuba); that the palm nuts that Cuban Ifá diviners use to divine with are not really imbued with sacred substance; that

their casting by the diviner is a random matter rather than one of divine necessity, and so on. Cuban divination seems 'alter' just because it negates what I assume to be true when writing anthropologically.[1] The same could be said not only of other classic anthropological exoticisms (cross-cousin marriage, say), but also of the more 'right on' topics of contemporary anthropology, such as the power of identity, the cosmology of technologies, or the workings of post-industrial institutions. All of these become anthropologically compelling only after having been shown to be more surprising than they might initially appear—that is, only after they have been 'othered', as people used to say.

P/ o projeto

Appeals to negation are the most efficient and obvious heuristic for identifying alterity, as it were, by its symptoms. But it seems to me that anthropologists are inclined to treat negation as the cause of alterity, or at least to identify the two, as if what makes, say, Cuban diviners 'different' is that they are different from 'us'. The slip is that of projection, and the prevalence of this kind of a lapse in anthropological thinking is remarkable. Indeed, spelled out, the slip sounds pretty legitimate. If I described my research project as that of explaining why some Cubans believe in their oracles, you would be forgiven for agreeing that this is a perfectly legitimate line of inquiry. Nevertheless, in doing so, you would be joining me in a tremendous muddle of projection—'negative projection', let us call it (see Holbraad 2009). The flawed syllogism would be as follows. Cubans habitually use oracles, and we do not. We do not use oracles because we do not believe in them.[2] So if Cubans do, it must be because they believe in them. This application of excluded middle would be fine, were it not for the fact that the assumption that the only way of having oracles is by believing in them is a baseless projection—the result of a lack of ethnographic imagination combined with a remarkable self-confidence that our own conceptual framework is rich enough to describe those of all others.

Nevertheless, this presumptuous approach is second nature to much anthropology. Consider, for example, the apparent dilemma between 'universalism' and 'relativism', which, although hackneyed, arguably continues to guide our instincts when it comes to placing anthropologists in theoretical space. The alleged dilemma, put simply, is about how best to deal with alterity, as we have defined it. A 'universalist' takes Cubans' apparent belief that oracles work and seeks to explain it with reference to processes that are deemed to hold for all humans (conceptually, psychologically, sociologically, etc.). A 'relativist' seeks to interpret this belief with reference to other local beliefs and practices with which the one about oracles coheres. The common premise of the two approaches is that what requires analysis (be it of explanation or interpretation) is a datum that is understood as the negation of something familiar, as with our commonsense distrust of oracles.

So if we can agree that the dilemma between universalism and relativism captures most positions in anthropology one way or the other, we may conclude that mainstream anthropological thinking relies on a remarkably uniform image of what counts as anthropological truth. Supposedly, whether our goal is causal explanation or adequate interpretation, we are basically in the business of representing others' concepts and practices that are not only interesting but also

available to us (i.e., understood) as negations of our own. Indeed, the premise of negative projection is crucial to both approaches' claim to representation. For in order even to hope either to explain or to interpret something (in any case, to represent it), we must first understand it, and saying that Cubans 'believe in' oracles helps us to do so. With such an Archimedean point in place, the rest of the business of representation can get underway. Thus, universalists' explanations are 'true' if they accurately describe the causal processes that bring about native representations, while relativists' interpretations are 'true' (or adequate) insofar as they cohere with the natives' own interpretations. In both cases, truth is assumed to be a matter of 'reflecting' one set of representations (those of the natives) in terms of another (those of the analyst), and this in turn presupposes that the representations available to the analyst must in principle be suited to the job. The difficulty of producing anthropological truth, then, is supposed to lie in choosing the right concepts, that is, those that reflect native ones.

However, this image of anthropology ignores what seems like a strong possibility, namely, that ethnographic data may pose a challenge to analysis precisely to the extent that they elude description in the first place. In this view, the fact that 'alter' ethnographic data present themselves initially as negations of what we commonsensically take to be true is a result of the fact that our commonsense assumptions are conceptually inadequate to describe this data. We are getting the 'wrong' answers because we have been asking the wrong questions. Such a possibility would imply that what makes anthropological truth so special is precisely that it cannot be a matter of choosing representations that match the phenomena that they describe—that is, of getting things 'right'—since such representations simply do not exist. Rather, anthropological analysis must begin before the step of testing one set of representations against another can even be made. In other words, anthropological analysis, in this view, must turn on more than the ordinary concept of truth—that of 'telling it like it really is'. We need a different concept of truth. I argue that such a concept can be culled from an anthropological analysis of Cuban Ifá divination.

Divining Truth

Giving a full ethnographic image of Ifá divination in Havana would be beyond the scope of this article.[3] For present purposes, we need focus only on the main ethnographic point that relates to my argument on truth. This point is one that Ifá diviners (called *babalawos*) emphasize again and again when faced with doubting anthropologists or, indeed, doubting clients during divinatory séances. Their oracle, they say, is infallible: "Ifá no se equivoca" (Ifá doesn't make mistakes) and "en Ifá no hay mentiras" (in Ifá there are no lies). *Babalawos* themselves may certainly lie or make mistakes—since they are "imperfect humans," as one practitioner put it—but not the oracle of Ifá. During fieldwork, the most telling conversation on this matter was with a young *babalawo*, who was complaining about "exploitative" *babalawos*, as he called them. One of his main complaints was that some *babalawos* seek to impress their clients by attaching

the oracle's verdicts to specific dates or to people's names (e.g., "your daughter will fall ill next Tuesday" or "the witch is your neighbor, Rossío," etc.). He told me, "I don't give people dates. Ifá speaks past, present, and future, and gives advice, but [clients] should know for themselves their own situation and act on it as they see fit … Some [*babalawos*] do give them, but that's just showing off, and clients complain when things don't turn out that way. How can they [i.e., the *babalawos*] know these things? Ifá doesn't work like that."

So how are we to understand the claim that "Ifá doesn't work like that"? Why can Ifá give advice but not dates and names? When I asked my informant to elaborate, he reverted to a point to which *babalawos* often appeal in such conversations, namely, that "Ifá is interpretation," implying that interpretation by itself could not yield specific names and dates. Admittedly, the implication is moot since, like the famous Zande benge oracle, among many others, Ifá is sometimes used to give unambiguous yes or no answers to specific questions posed to it by the diviner. I would suggest rather that the import of *babalawos*' normative insistence on terms such as *consejo* (advice) and *interpretación* (interpretation) has more to do with the question of falsifiability than with ambiguity. Indeed, this is the gist of my informant's complaint against exploitative *babalawos*: by adding dates and names, they present the oracle's verdicts as statements of fact that may be verified or falsified according to how things actually turn out. By contrast, advice seems to him a good example of something that can be acted upon, perhaps, but not falsified. Similarly, the idea that 'Ifá speaks past, present and future', which *babalawos* often emphasize during the séance, is another normative mitigation of falsifiability. When, in a divination conducted for me, I queried—in falsifying mood—the oracle's contention that I am prone to impotence, one of the *babalawos* reminded me with macho gusto that, after all, I have no children. "And don't forget," he added with emphasis, "Ifá habla pasado, presenty, y futuro [Ifá speaks past, present, and future]".

Normativity is important here, for like the statement "your daughter will fall ill on Tuesday," an oracular verdict such as "you are prone to impotence" could easily be mistaken for ordinary, falsifiable statements of fact. My informant's dispute with exploitative *babalawos* who give names and dates can be cast precisely as a dispute over whether oracular pronouncements ought to be taken as falsifiable truth claims or not. In fact, as their occasional doubts indicate, clients—let alone anthropologists—are liable to confuse divinatory verdicts in this way, and this logical pitfall is readily exploited by *babalawos* who wish to impress. No wonder that *babalawos* should find it necessary to stress normatively that oracular pronouncements are not affirmations that might, least of all in principle, be falsified.

So it would seem that *babalawos* are inviting their clients (and us anthropologists with them) to imagine an alternative concept of truth—one that ought not to be defined by opposition to falsehood. However strange it may sound to suggest a notion of 'true' that is not the opposite of 'false', such a conceptual possibility must nevertheless be enticing for our purposes. It would seem that the notion of truth that *babalawos* are keen to avoid is the same as

Truth-functional

the one that we are trying to overcome meta-anthropologically here—namely, the idea that truth is a matter of producing statements that get things right by accurately reflecting phenomena.

Defining Truth

On definition

At this point, it is useful to introduce the concept of 'definition' because, I argue, there is a sense in which this word may yield the concept of truth we need to make sense of divination—and anthropology, too. For present purposes, we may ignore the best part of philosophical debate about what constitutes a definition, just to point out that Anglo-Saxon philosophers of language in particular tend to assume that a definition cannot but be a species of ordinary truth claim. For example, here is a horse, and the problem is to decide whether and how, say, an *Oxford English Dictionary* phrase, such as "quadruped with a flowing mane and tail," may serve to define it. Truth conditions in the sense we are seeking to overcome—let us call them 'truth-functional'—are central to this enterprise. We have a sense of what a horse is, so defining it is a matter of getting this sense right. This requirement must at some level involve using terms that hold true of horses, such as 'quadruped'. And note that this sense of definition coincides exactly with the classical anthropological strategy of negative projection. Through it, anthropologists assume that they have a sense of diviners' attitude to oracles, so defining that attitude ('representing it') is a matter of identifying concepts that, like 'belief', supposedly hold true of it—truth-functionally so.

It is remarkable that philosophers, who do nothing if not muster powers of clear thinking and creativity in order to enrich our conceptual repertoire, should presume that definitions must 'conserve' meaning in this way. Maybe defining a horse is a matter of articulating a sense one already has, but who could even begin to have a sense of a Platonic Form, a monad, the transcendental ego, and so on before philosophers ventured to define them? Indeed, those philosophers who have followed Nietzsche in thinking of philosophy as an 'untimely' enterprise have sought to theorize this possibility of conceptual invention (e.g., Deleuze 1994; Heidegger 1968; cf. Nietzsche 1997), and so have anthropologists who see the creation of new meanings not just as a philosophical prerogative but as an irreducible aspect of social living (e.g., Ardener 1989; Latour 1999; Strathern 2005; Viveiros de Castro 2002; Wagner 1981; cf. Holbraad and Pedersen in press; see also the contributions of Goldman in this issue). Here we may venture a distinction between the truth-functional definitions with which analytical philosophy is mainly concerned and what I propose to call 'inventive definitions', by appeal to Roy Wagner (1981). The distinction pertains to the question of truth. As we have seen, conventional definitions are truth-functional. Now, as an example of what I take to be an inventive definition, consider a definition of inventive definition—as pudding to the proof, as it were. Let us define inventive definition as a speech act that inaugurates a new meaning by combining two or more previously unrelated meanings—something that I did just now. I took the meanings 'speech act',

'inauguration', 'novelty', and 'meaning' and combined them in order to inaugurate a new meaning, which I call 'inventive definition'. The crucial point to note here is that such a definition cannot be an ordinary truth-functional claim. 'Speech act', 'inauguration', etc., cannot be construed as properties that predicate 'inventive definition' like 'quadruped' predicates 'horse', for this would imply that the concept 'inventive definition' is not new after all: it must already exist in order to serve as the testing ground for the predicative truth claims that purport to define it. Posited as a condition for its own definition, the *definiendum* (the word to be defined) takes logical precedence over its *definiens* (the word or words that are used to define it), and hence the latter cannot be said to inaugurate it. Thus, since inventive definitions are defined as inaugurations—as inventions of (new) meanings—it follows that, unlike truth-functional definitions, inventive definitions are not predicative truth claims.

My suggestion, then, is that oracles pronounce inventive definitions in just this sense. Take the common verdict "you are bewitched" as an example. Treating this as an inventive definition implies that being bewitched is not a predicate that 'holds true' of me. Rather, it is a meaning that is being related to me so as to redefine me. The oracle transforms me from a person who stands in no particular relation to witchcraft into a person who is being bewitched. To ask whether such a shift is true or false is fundamentally to misunderstand the ontological character of the transformation by confusing it with the epistemological question of how the shift may be ascertained. The fact that practitioners of Ifá might be as likely to fall into this trap as analysts explains why *babalawos* put such normative emphasis on the requirement that the oracles' pronouncements be interpreted as non-falsifiable. Their point is that treating the truths that oracles pronounce as representational is a category mistake. Oracles turn on an alternative concept of truth, namely, that of inventive definition.

This way of thinking about divination may seem awkward. A concept can be defined afresh, but can the notion of invention really be stretched to include people as well? For, more than just a meaning (e.g., 'inventive definition'), I am a flesh-and-blood person, and it is unclear how, as such, I can be 'brought together' with ideas ('meanings') such as 'being bewitched', just as it is unclear how I, flesh and blood, can be a 'new meaning'—or new at all. In fact, is not this talk about the ability of oracles to transform people philosophically suspicious? It would seem that what is being propounded here is a version of social constructivism ('oracular constrictivism', if you will), based on the preposterously idealist notion that entities of the world can be brought in and out of existence by mere human fancy—divinatory or otherwise.

Such appeals to common sense are cheap in their professed transparency. As Bruno Latour (1999) has pointed out, from a properly anthropological perspective the dilemma between realism and idealism is false. Constructivism is indeed preposterous inasmuch as it comes as a remedy for a bias of its own premise, namely, that 'our ideas' and 'the world' cannot but constitute distinct ontological camps. Only on this premise does it become even possible—let alone necessary—to say that what 'appears' to be real and mind-independent is actually 'only' a human construct.

What this means is that to understand Ifá divination and initiation it is necessary to deny that the distinction between concepts (or meanings) and things (or people) is axiomatic (see also Holbraad 2007a; Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007). Instead of reducing to the absurd our claim that oracular pronouncements have ontological effects, appeals to common sense alert us to the fact that the sense of divination, with its seemingly bizarre entailment that assertions may be unfalsifiable at the level of logical principle, is quite uncommon. And it is uncommon in just the way that Latour has envisaged. What differentiates predicative (conventional) from non-predicative (inventive) definition, and what makes the latter rather than the former appropriate to the analysis of divination, is precisely that predication presupposes the 'common' distinction between word and world, while invention does not. As we have seen, the truth-functional character of conventional definitions is premised on the logical priority of their *definienda*. And although this logical priority does not imply that the *definienda* in question exist (e.g., defining unicorns as 'horses with horns' does not mean that they exist), it does imply the existence of a domain of entities—the 'world'—from which conventional definitions may draw their truth values.

By contrast, inventive definitions do not presuppose the existence of a world of entities: such a world is their conventionalized outcome. When the oracle of Ifá defines me as a person who is bewitched, it is not speaking of an entity (myself) existing out there in the world, of whom certain properties may be said to hold (that I am bewitched). Such a construal would imply that the definition in question is conventional and open to falsification—a notion *babalawos* are keen to deny. But nor does the inevitable consequence, namely, that in defining me the oracle is bringing me about as a new person, imply the idealist notion that the world's constituents exist insofar as people (such as diviners or anthropological analysts) think or speak of them. Just as with the notion of conventional definition, idealism is premised on a logical distinction between word and world, concept and thing—in other words, precisely the distinction that is obliterated by the logic of invention.

It follows that in committing us to a notion of invention, divination leads us *a fortiori* to posit an ontological parity between what common sense distinguishes as 'concepts' and as 'things'. Thus, our analytical imagination is further stretched to include a monistically construed plane of concepts-cum-things that incorporates elements like me, witchcraft, impotence, inaugurations, novelties, meanings, and horses with horns, too. Each of these may be brought together with others so as to engender new elements, such as me-as-bewitched, inventive definitions, or even fairy tales with unicorns in them.

Conclusion

The recursive conclusion I wish to draw from this thought experiment with Cuban divination can be framed in terms of a counter-argument to the above analysis of divinatory truth—one that I owe to James Laidlaw.[4] Fair enough, the counter-argument goes, divination may not produce truth in the ordinary

representational sense. But why should this be treated as an occasion for redefining truth in such a weird way as to say that the opposite of truth is not falsehood? Should we not instead just bite the bullet and say that divination is not about truth at all?

One response would be to point to the fact that diviners themselves unambiguously speak of their verdicts in terms of truth (*la verdad*), as we have already seen. However, this is a weak answer insofar as such an attempt to duck the question by appeal to ethnography would ignore the central problem that motivated our attempt to redefine truth in the first place, namely, that divinatory truth is 'alter' precisely in the sense that even our best translation (truth) is conceptually inadequate to it. A better reply would have returned to the meta-argument about the nature of anthropological analysis.

The premise of the approach outlined above is that the most interesting anthropological data are those that cannot be captured by the analyst's default concepts. Alterity, in this sense, implies that we must always begin analysis in the dark, mired in misunderstanding. We do, however, have two things to go by. First, we have our own default concepts. So when a diviner says that his oracle tells no lies and makes no mistakes, we mobilize our ordinary concept of truth and say that he is claiming that divinatory truth is unfalsifiable. Secondly, we know that when glossing native claims, our default concepts produce falsehoods. Divinatory pronouncements such as "you are bewitched" are at least pretty likely to be false, which means that they are certainly falsifiable (surely, I might not be bewitched).

Arguably, we have here the makings of a method that may allow us to approximate an understanding of native concepts and the strange statements that define them—a method I call 'ontography' for the reasons stated in the introductory comments of this article. One thing that we can do is to transform the sense of our own concepts. So what if, through conceptual analysis, we were to alter the premises of our concepts (here, that of truth), transforming them to such an extent that, when used to gloss native statements, they would yield statements of truth? Anthropological thought experiments would then proceed from the question, how can we redefine our own terms in order to make them behave—truth-functionally—like the natives' concepts appear to? How far do we have to change our assumptions about what counts as truth before we could say that oracles give truth? So the better response to Laidlaw's point would be that inventive definition is a new definition of truth, rather than something else, precisely because it emerged as an answer to that kind of question. Inventive definition constitutes an appropriate transformation of our default and initially inadequate concept of truth and, by that virtue, constitutes a new version of that concept.

Recursively, this brings us full circle. For, like divination, the analytic method I have just described is one that is designed to produce inventive definitions. In other words, in proposing such a method, I am proposing a new way of thinking of truth. And since the method is one of anthropological analysis, this new truth is a new anthropological truth—one, it seems to me, that is both new and radical in its consequences.

By way of closing, I would like to highlight two points. First, this image of anthropological truth is completely incompatible with what might be one of the most cherished assumptions we make about what we do as anthropologists—that we are in the business of discovering how other people (cultures, groups) see things, how they think, what they experience, etc. The version of truth I have outlined precludes this. All we have to go by are our misunderstandings of others' views—our initial descriptions of their statements and practices. What we then produce, if we are to avoid projection, is a series of concepts that imitate those statements and practices truth-functionally, but are nevertheless peculiarly ours. So let us not expect *babalawos* to have much to say on the notion of inventive definition. To subvert Maurice Bloch's (1998) formulation, anthropology is not about 'how we think they think'. It is about how we could learn to think, given what they say and do.

The second point, rather less dire in my view, is that the version of anthropological truth for which I am arguing puts clear blue water between anthropology and science, without thereby throwing us into the arms of soft interpretivism. As we have seen, both of those theoretical camps are playing at the old game of truthful representation. In overcoming that approach, we arguably come much closer to what one might take philosophers to be doing, namely, transforming concepts (coming up with new ones) through what the most rigorous philosophers—Anglo-Saxon analytic ones—sometimes call 'conceptual analysis' (see Holbraad 2007b). This is indeed contentious, although, again, recursively so, since defining philosophy is itself a philosophical problem.

Acknowledgments

This article draws on arguments that I have been developing in the methodological sections of a number of other publications, as well as on an oral presentation delivered at the 'Truth and Anthropology' conference at the University of Cambridge in 2005. I am grateful to João Pina-Cabral and Christina Toren for inviting me to participate in the present project and for allowing me to bring these thoughts together in an explicitly methodological context.

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Notes

1. Alterity, in this technical sense, should be understood as neither a psychological nor a cultural condition, but rather as a purely analytical one. I may, as a matter of fact, be a practitioner of divination—indeed, I could be a Cuban diviner. The point is that the interest such practices hold for anthropology resides only in their divergence from assumptions one chooses to take for granted when writing for an anthropological audience. I could certainly write about divination starting from the assumption that deities exist, that they are able to deliver truth through particular palm nuts, and so on. But this kind of exegesis (exemplified, incidentally, by the vast literature on Ifá written by practitioners) would hold minimal anthropological interest. If, as I argue, the game of anthropology is to 'make sense' of things, assuming that they already do so is a profoundly non-anthropological move.
2. Again, the 'we' of the syllogism is not meant as a psychological or cultural generalization. Naturally, there are plenty of people who could be included in the term 'us' (Westerners, academics, anthropologists) and who do, as a matter of fact, use oracles or horoscopes or what have you. In question here is a purely analytical 'we', namely, the position from which the use of oracles in Cuba seems *not* to make sense. This is the position—to invoke the best and most famous example—from which Evans-Pritchard ([1937] 1976) was able to write of the Azande and wonder why they should think that witches exist.
3. For more details on the methods and significance of divination in Ifá, see Holbraad (2003, 2007, 2008, 2009).
4. Personal communication with James Laidlaw.

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