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',

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'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