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.

Antropologia, ontologia e alteridade

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

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