

HERMENEUTICS AND ETHNOGRAPHY: AN INTERPRETATION OF TWO TEXTS

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ABSTRACT: The postmodern approach to the writing of ethnographic texts is characterized by authorial self-reflection and a "dialogic" approach to anthropological fieldwork, techniques derived from the philosophical method of hermeneutics. But this method is problematic when confronting issues of political economy in ethnography. This paper presents an analysis of ethnographic works by Jean Comaroff and Michael Taussig, two texts that attempt to incorporate both an interpretive and a world-systems perspective. The paper examines the value of a hermeneutic method for anthropology, suggesting that while self-reflection is useful in cultural analysis, the hermeneutic method cannot be applied wholesale to the practice of anthropology.

As the so-called world-system paradigm has become more central in the discipline of anthropology, certain ethnographies have begun to focus on the "colonial encounter" as an important historical process in the development of local cultures. At the same time, "post-modern" ethnography has felt the influence of the interpretive perspective, with an orientation towards authorial self-reflection and symbolic analysis. Two recent ethnographic texts, Jean Comaroff's Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance (1985) and Michael Taussig's The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America (1980) study the clash of Western capitalist and traditional cultures, placing particular emphasis on the role of symbolic ritual as mediator of the cultural contradictions which this clash engenders. In this sense, both works can be regarded as attempts to unite the world-system and interpretive approaches to ethnography in a single text. However, a consideration of this attempt which focuses on the hermeneutic aspect of the two works reveals the inherent difficulty in uniting these two approaches.

The explicit formulation of world-system theory by Immanuel Wallerstein in 1974 sparked an important departure in anthropology. The notion that local societies are embedded in larger structures of world historical political-economy challenged the structural-functionalist approach to ethnography, which viewed cultures as synchronic isolates, "self-contained, homogeneous, and largely ahistoric," (Marcus and Fischer 1986:78). The effect of this position on the writing of ethnographic texts was to sensitize anthropologists to the historical complexity of the societies they observe, and to foster awareness of the influence of outside forces on the construction of indigenous cultural systems.

Interpretive anthropology, emerging primarily in the work of Clifford Geertz in the 1960's, has been greatly elaborated in the experimental, post-modernist texts of more recent ethnographers (for example, Rabinow 1977). In his studies of particular cultural events, Geertz:

approached his subjects of study without obvious commitment to any general theory of cultural functioning...The privileged perspective now was not that of the scientist but that of the native (Roth 1989:5-56).

Following this lead, post-modern interpretive anthropology has approached ethnographic fieldwork and text construction from a dialogic perspective, in which the anthropologist is seen as engaging in a two-way communication with another culture (Marcus and Fischer 1986:30). This approach constitutes a rejection of the objectified style of classical ethnographic writing, in which the ethnographer somehow hovered above his or her subject, a detachment which belied the realities of fieldwork practice and portrayed the anthropologist as capable of purely objective, "scientific" insight. From the post-modern perspective, the interpreter must consider the ways in which the natives themselves "decode" their own cultural "texts", while simultaneously reflecting on his or her own cultural biases--the method known as hermeneutics. In employing a hermeneutic mode of analysis, then, issues of political-economy would seem to be of obvious concern to interpretive ethnography:

In the face of undeniably global structures of political and economic power, ethnography, as the practical embodiment of relativism and interpretive anthropology, challenges all those views of reality in social thought which prematurely overlook or reduce cultural diversity for the sake of the capacity to generalize or to affirm universal values, usually from the still-privileged vantage point of global homogenization emanating from the West (Marcus and Fischer 1986:32-33).

As will be shown, however, a hermeneutic method of cultural analysis has proven difficult to apply in its strictest sense, especially when considering these issues of political-economy, raising questions as to the real value of the method to anthropology.

Though fully cognizant of the lessons of the world-system approach, both Taussig and Comaroff offer a critique of that paradigm's assumptions, using it as a point of departure in their works. Comaroff explicitly challenges a major weakness of the world-system approach, which tends to view all of global history as a product of the penetration of the world capitalist system into local societies, effecting unidirectional change on those indigenous systems (Comaroff 1985:154). In this, world-system theory denies the impact of pre-existing local formations on the intrusive elements of capitalist penetration, positing instead a mechanical determinism which universally shapes local cultures to the will of the colonist. By contrast, Comaroff employs the concept of "articulation" to describe what she sees as "the reciprocal quality of the interaction" (*ibid*:154) that occurs in the colonial encounter. She defines articulation as:

the multi-level process of engagement which follows the conjuncture of sociocultural systems...[I]t is indeed the joining of systems, rather than the en-compassing of one by another (*ibid*:154).

The colonial encounter is a conjuncture of unequally powerful entities, which Comaroff feels must be viewed as an historical problem, the product of specific forces conjoining at a particular moment to produce a unique cultural formation.

While not as explicit as Comaroff, Taussig, too, is clearly sensitive to the particular historic considerations of the colonial encounter. Like Comaroff, Taussig refutes the implication that global history is the product of a unilateral injection of capitalist systems into local cultures. Rather, he sees this intrusion as mediated by the local culture, which itself is a historical

product. "Societies on the threshold of capitalist development", Taussig states, "necessarily interpret that development in terms of pre-capitalist beliefs and practices" (1980:11). In his portrayal of pre-capitalist South America, however, Taussig describes "a baseline of cultural purity--a sort of golden age" (Marcus and Fischer 1986:185), against which he contrasts the disruptive effects of capitalism. It is in this pre-capitalist era that the traditional systems emerged, systems which would later mediate the contradictions of the colonial encounter.

Both Comaroff and Taussig view ritual as the specific mechanism which performs the mediating function. These rituals combine elements of traditional culture with symbols appropriated from Western culture in a unique synthesis, by which indigenous people render sensible the cultural changes which conquest has wrought. In synthesizing the contradictions, then, these rituals are more than simple syncretistic operations; rather, they construct a complex dialectic through which the domination of the West is confronted and resisted. An analysis of this process in each text will begin to illuminate the authors' critical methods and purposes in writing.

Comaroff on Tshidi Zionism

Social action is...not merely an 'expression' of structural principles; it is an attempt to reconcile contradiction inherent in these principles and in the relationship between them and embracing material realities (Comaroff 1985:18).

In her analysis of Tshidi life under the domination of the South African apartheid system, Comaroff examines the forms of resistance taken by the indigenous people against the oppressive alien force that has intruded upon their lives. What she discovers is that in the context of apartheid, where explicit political resistance is prohibited by law, symbolic discourse through ritual becomes an effective means of subtly breaching the authoritative codes of the dominant culture (*ibid*:196).

All ritual, of course, is based upon the construction of messages through a symbolic medium; in a context of contact and resistance, however, a unique type of message is created. The ritual process in this case involves the construction of an elaborate *bricolage*, a blend of both traditional symbols and symbols appropriated from the conqueror and resituated in a new ritual. This process is essentially a form of covert resistance, of iconoclasm, for in appropriating signs from the dominant culture and investing them with new meaning, the subordinate group is attempting to:

undermine the very coherence of the system they contest...[The ritual] appropriates select signs of colonial dominance, turning historical symbols of oppression into dynamic forces of transcendence (*ibid*:225).

The ritual process, then, is more than just the construction of messages; for in struggling to control important symbols, it actually constitutes a form of resistance.

The Zionist Christian Church is a religious movement which began in urban America in the early part of the 20th century, in a context of black proletarianization in some ways similar

to that which was occurring in southern Africa. The movement was exported to Africa, where it underwent important changes appropriate to the local context. Today it continues to function as an alternative to the Protestant church which, with its work ethic and Western ideology, served as the forerunner of the economic and political imperialism which was to follow. This historical association with colonialism marks the Protestant church as a distinct arm of the conqueror, and hence of dubious value to the conquered.

As described more generally above, the Tshidi Zionist church appropriates key signs of the Protestant church and, by subtly blending Protestant with traditional Tshidi symbols, produces a syncretistic bricolage of dominant and subordinate signs. The Zionist ritual costume, for instance, is "a beguiling cultural patchwork" (*ibid*:227), representing in itself the entire process of synthesis and mediation. The costume appropriates Protestant styles, such as the long flowing robes of church leaders; but, instead of Protestant white, Zionism casts these garments in blue and green, traditional setswana symbols of water and fertility. The mitre of the Protestant bishop is appropriated by Zionism, but significantly is placed on the head of a woman, women representing the center of domestic life among the pre-conquest Tshidi. Men in Zionist rituals carry brass staffs, at once reminiscent of the bishop's staff, of the military dress-sword of the conqueror, and of the ritual baton used to orchestrate pre-colonial Tshidi initiation rites (*ibid*:226).

Thus, Comaroff interprets the Zionist movement as seeking to establish a new identity for its followers, one that is neither Western nor traditional setswana, but one that is uniquely transcendent of both. The Zionist costume, like many other aspects of the faith, represents a kind of dialectic a careful balancing of tensioned opposites. Through this dialectic, the disruptive contradictions which Western culture has imposed on the indigenous people are mediated, and a new identity endeavors to emerge.

Taussig on Andean Mining Rites

There is a moral holocaust at work in the soul of a society undergoing the transition from a precapitalist to a capitalist order. And in this transition both the moral code and the way of seeing the world have to be recast. As the new form of society struggles to emerge from the old, as the ruling classes attempt to work the ruling principles into a new tradition, the pre-existing cosmogony of the workers becomes a critical front of resistance, or mediation, or both (Taussig 1980:101).

In his analysis of the reactions of Colombian peasant farmers and Bolivian tin miners to the intrusion of a capitalist market economy, Taussig studies the "preexisting cosmogony" of the peasants as a source of vital images, beliefs and rituals, which the people reinterpret to meet current needs. He finds that capitalism fosters numerous material and ideological contradictions in the lives of the local people which are mediated by this cosmogony, which is likewise transformed in the process of mediating. In much the same way as Zionism functions among the Tshidi, the rituals in the Bolivian tin mines attempt to forge a transcendent identity through the blending of traditional and Western images.

In the mining rites, miners seek to reconcile the contradictions imposed by the exchange-value system of capitalism on their traditional use-value orientation. This traditional

orientation was based on reciprocity, and in pre-capitalist times tin miners insured their safety and success in the mines through a ritual exchange with the mountain spirit. With the coming of capitalism and wage labor, the vast amounts of ore being taken from the mines far exceeds the miners' ability to reciprocate, thus jeopardizing their very lives. The sense of wholeness, of balance, inherent in the pre-capitalist cosmology, was shattered; "The original totality was split at every point" (Taussig 1980:204). The rites which have emerged as a result attempt to reconcile this imbalance by constructing a dialectic, opposing symbols of the traditional and capitalist systems that attempt to mediate the danger that has emerged.

The mining rites dramatize the conflict between Pachamama, the earthmother, a traditional symbol who protects the miners, and Tio, the devil, and "spirit owner" of the mines. The Pachamama represents the spirit of an Incan princess, who watches over the miners, and embodies the spirit of use-value reciprocity which has been lost in the modern era. The miners retain the favor of the Pachamama through traditional ritual process of reciprocal exchange, thus reinforcing her symbolic position as traditional guardian of the miners (*ibid*:220).

The Tio, on the other hand, represents the capitalist mine owner who seeks to consume the miners. He is often portrayed as a North American, a gringo, with a grotesque red face, lanky physique and cowboy hat. Perhaps more significantly, the Tio is the embodiment of pure evil, a concept not indigenous to Andean cosmology. Traditional Andean beliefs were based on a patterned dualism, a balance not between the dichotomies of good and evil, but between a variety of spirits who embodied both of these essences simultaneously; "the idea of a pervasive spirit of evil was an import of imperialism" (*ibid*:177). In conceptualizing a purely evil being in the Tio, the Andean was employing a Western Christian concept as a point of juxtaposition with the traditional Pachamama spirit.

Though analyzing similar rituals in similar contexts, Comaroff and Taussig come to quite different conclusions regarding the outcome of these events. Comaroff, while viewing Tshidi Zionism as an effective expression of resistance, concludes that this resistance occurs at a fundamentally unconscious level. Though the rituals which Zionism constructs are complex interweavings of multidimensional symbols, the Tshidi themselves "remain largely unselfconscious...of the counterhegemonies they construct" (Comaroff 1985:261). Comaroff asserts that:

while the colonial encounter objectified Tshidi perceptions of the dominant power-relations in their universe, this has not given rise to an explicit consciousness of class or to modes of strategic class action (*ibid*:261).

Thus, while their rituals may represent an attempt at transcendence, in Comaroff's view the Tshidi people remain unaware of this attempt.

Although dealing with a similar process, Taussig claims that the dialectic which Andean ritual constructs results in a heightened revolutionary consciousness among the people engaging in these rites. In mediating the contradictions in the miner's lives, the rites "serve as forums for the development of critical consciousness and socialist transformation" (Taussig 1980:227). Significantly, the miners themselves seem to be aware of this transformation;

Taussig points out that in mines where the owners have banned the rites, miners claim that "the management suppressed the rites because they sustain proletarian solidarity and the high level of revolutionary consciousness for which the mining areas are famous" (*ibid*:144).

At many levels, then, the process which Taussig observes is more explicitly conscious than Comaroff's; though structurally similar, the outcomes of the two processes differ significantly. Yet this difference may depend as much on the mode of analysis employed as on any actual difference in the cultures themselves. For while Taussig has endeavored to create a highly self-reflexive ethnography, Comaroff has chosen to objectify her observations, thereby producing a more traditional, but less consistent, text. This difference is best illuminated by a brief detour into hermeneutics, as elaborated in the writings of Wilhelm Dilthey.

Hermeneutics and Ethnography

As a method of interpretation, hermeneutics involves the analysis of individual "texts", be they rituals, performances or literary texts themselves. In making this analysis, Dilthey suggested, it is vital to study the context in which the text is found; in considering how the parts relate to the encompassing whole, one can discover how "the parts receive meaning from the whole, and the whole receives sense from the parts" (Plantinga 1980:105). The so-called "hermeneutic circle" involves this alternating back and forth, from an analysis of the parts to an analysis of the whole, from text to context and back again. Therefore, Dilthey stated, the analysis can have no absolute starting point: As it alternates between text and context, assumptions and presuppositions must be continually reassessed in the light of new understanding.

The analyses presented by both Comaroff and Taussig, to varying degrees, fit some of Dilthey's basic criteria of hermeneutic analysis. The rites which they consider are regarded as "texts", in which the cultural patterns of contact and resistance can be "read". Both place the societies they study in an historical and world-system context: historical experience provides the "traditional" components of the rituals, the raw materials of resistance when juxtaposed with the contradictions of capitalism, and Western penetration provides the context in which this resistance is formulated and enacted. The rites which the two ethnographers deconstruct are blends of symbols from two cultural systems, and are thus impossible to understand without a consideration of the wider context in which their conjuncture has occurred. Taussig is particularly concerned with context, for "only when the region is considered as a whole" (1980:119) do the contradictory relationships of the parts become apparent.

From this discussion, it would appear that in addition to analyzing similar processes in similar contexts, Comaroff and Taussig employ similar methods in their approach to understanding the culture of resistance. Nonetheless, they come to fundamentally different conclusions regarding the conscious or unconscious outcome of these processes. The key to this dilemma perhaps lies not so much in the processes observed as in the method of analysis which the observers themselves bring to their studies. Taussig, for example, strongly rooted in Marxist tradition, seeks signs of life of a proletarian revolution, and he finds them in the Bolivian tin mines. Through their rites, the miners achieve a critical consciousness and a recognition of their resistance as a form of class struggle. This is not to suggest that Taussig has superimposed this interpretation on the events, for the tin miners are well known for

their historically high level of revolutionary consciousness (Nash 1979:2). Rather, one wonders if this foreknowledge did not in some way influence the analyst's choice of an object of study, as it could be predicted to fit his mode of interpretation and theoretical framework. In addition, Taussig's conception of precapitalist, "traditional" society is unproblematic and ahistorical, a "baseline of cultural purity" that operates as a foil to the capitalist present. This romantic version of "traditional" society undermines Taussig's critique.

In her introduction, Comaroff states that her purpose in writing is to "examine the reciprocal interplay of human practice, social structure and symbolic mediation" (1985:3) as it exists in the context of articulation, and she finds evidence of these dialectical processes in the rituals which she examines. The potential for consciousness-raising inherent in these rites is not essential to her analysis; not surprisingly, Comaroff does not detect signs of its existence. Tellingly, Comaroff is rarely self-reflexive in the course of her analysis. She does not consider the possibility, for instance, that the Tshidi were unwilling to reveal to her that an explicit critical consciousness was in fact generated in their rites. As a white, South African woman observing a black, male-dominated institution, Comaroff fails to take account of her own position in a larger social structure as a possible hindrance to her analysis.

This lack of self-reflexivity casts further doubt on the overall validity of Comaroff's work. At the outset, she admits to having had to rely on historical documents as sources of ethnographic data, stating:

in the final analysis, all historical accounts are historically situated, and I make no claims to being able to regard Tshidi society, then or now, with a gaze that is not prestructured (*ibid*:14).

Despite this recognition, the ethnographer does no further questioning of her sources or of her interpretation thereof. Thus, it is ultimately more difficult for the reader to accept Comaroff's assertion that Tshidi Zionism is an unconscious form of resistance.

Comaroff's assertion that the apartheid system effectively restrains all political protest is also questionable. Given the highly politicized activities occurring among other homeland peoples in recent years, as well as the numerous political movements detailed in Comaroff's event history of the Tshidi themselves, one wonders why modern Tshidi have no "political" outlet for their resistance. Again, the author's lack of self-reflection is apparent; her definition of "political" does not include Zionism, which she categorizes as "religious", despite its potential as a resistance movement against the state. Comaroff depicts the Tshidi as having little, if any, contact with other South African peoples: though her historical description is full of specific accounts of intertribal encounters, when she begins her ethnographic description the Tshidi assume the self-contained demeanor characteristic of structural-functionalist ethnographies.

Habermas (1970:298) has noted that in the process of self-reflection, "the naive consciousness is rid of a subjectivist as well as an objectivist illusion, under which it labors." Much of the strength of Taussig's study comes from his own self-reflection, and from his recognition of the importance of hermeneutics as a method. Taussig recognizes the existence of dual interpretations of the Andean mine rituals--his, and that of the miners themselves:

The manifestations of the culture...are subject to a dialectical reading of things as sacred texts. On the one hand, there is the reading beholden to the metaphysical principles of use-value, as those principles are confronted by commodity culture. On the other hand, there is the reading imposed by the analyst, and this is an inescapable activity. The two readings converge, emblazoned in the texts that the neophyte proletarians have themselves provided (*ibid*:125).

Taussig's acknowledgement that true understanding comes from the convergence of these two interpretations is distinctly hermeneutic, revealing the ethnographer's vision of himself as being part of the analysis he is attempting to make. As a result, Taussig avoids imposing a unilateral interpretation on the people in question; the process of interpretation brings to the analyst and the people themselves a greater understanding, and a heightened consciousness. In contrast, Comaroff seems to stand outside of the event she interprets, creating an analysis in which the people themselves serve as objectified, uncomprehending actors. Gadamer (1976:28) cautions that in this self-distancing, the analyst:

is seen...not in relationship to the hermeneutical situation and the constant operativeness of history in his own consciousness, but in such a way as to imply that his own understanding does not enter into the event.

But this, of course, is not the case; as Gadamer points out, the analyst herself is intimately involved in her own analysis. Comaroff may have chosen this self-distancing as an objectification technique; in her non-reflexivity, she stands above the Tshidi and their rituals, making "objective" interpretations which elude the participants themselves.

Ultimately, though, Taussig also fails to produce a strictly hermeneutic ethnography; for in approaching his analysis from a Marxian, historical materialist perspective, he contravenes the hermeneutic rejection of an epistemological starting point (Rickman 1988:66). As the title of his book suggests, Taussig is firmly rooted in the Marxist intellectual tradition, a framework which provides the analytic cornerstone of his work. Employing such Marxian concepts as commodity fetishism, alienation and the class struggle, Taussig crafts an ethnography by applying these concepts to the events he observes. Such concepts constitute the basic presuppositions which Taussig brings to his analysis, presuppositions which remain essentially unchallenged through the course of his study. His uncritical application of his version of the precapitalist past is another stumbling block to self-reflective analysis. By failing to engage his own assumptions in a hermeneutic discourse, Taussig is not fully self-reflexive, and falls short of producing a truly hermeneutic ethnography.

But, in addition to serving as a critique of Taussig's work, this failure also serves as a critique of the limitations of Diltheyan hermeneutics itself. For in its insistence on the absence of an absolute starting point, hermeneutics poses for the interpreter an insurmountable dilemma. Every individual is historically situated and culturally bounded, and even the most dispassionate observer has some epistemological foundation through which he or she perceives the world. But, as Gadamer (1967:260) has suggested:

Does the fact that one is set within various traditions mean really and

primarily that one is subject to prejudices and limited in one's freedom? Is not, rather, all human existence, even the freest, limited and qualified in various ways? If this is true, then the idea of an absolute reason is impossible for historical humanity.

Rather than an insistence on the overcoming of all prejudice (a starting point in itself), Gadamer proposes the recognition of the existence of legitimate prejudice, prejudice based not on the objectified authority of intellectual tradition, but on "the right use of reason in the understanding of transmitted texts" (1967:262).

Though part of a hermeneutic philosophy divergent in certain key elements from Dilthey's hermeneutic methodology, Gadamer's notion of legitimate prejudice adds a useful component to Diltheyan method. It recognizes that every analyst inevitably carries certain epistemological baggage, but that this fact does not preclude the possibility of employing a hermeneutic, self-reflective approach. While one may question "the right use of reason" as an analytic tool, Gadamer's meaning is clear: a hermeneutic method which acknowledges the existence of a starting point, and reflects on this foundation through the process of textual interpretation, could serve more profitably than one based on a rigid adherence to "external criteria of truth" as the sole determinant of interpretation.

By this definition, Taussig's work comes closer to being more fully hermeneutic. His failure to question his basic assumptions continues to be a stumbling block, for this ultimate form of self-reflection remains fundamental to any definition of hermeneutics. But the fact that he acknowledges the existence of his starting point, and builds a consistent, self-reflective work around it, can and should be viewed as a strength, rather than a weakness, of his approach. For in this manner, the unification of a historical materialist and a hermeneutic approach to ethnography becomes possible, a unification which could prove exceedingly useful in the analysis of cultural texts.

What is revealed by these reflections is a perspective on ethnography itself as a process, ongoing through the contributions of various anthropologists. No approach to culture has yet convincingly proven the existence of an absolute empirical reality, discoverable through stringently applied techniques. Rather, what has emerged, through fieldwork and self-reflection, is a notion that any study of culture invariably includes the analyst, and that any analyst invariably brings certain initial assumptions to his or her study. If, as Dilthey hoped, we conceive of hermeneutics as being able to somehow bring us closer to the objective "truth", we may be doomed to disappointment, and a never ending hermeneutic circle. But, if we regard hermeneutics as a method for writing increasingly consistent contributions to ethnography, we may be more successful.

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