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Book review: truth in motion: the recursive anthropology of Cuban divination

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HOLBRAAD, Martin, *Truth in Motion: The Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination*, 344 pp., preface, illustrations, appendices, references, index. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012. Hardback, \$78, £54.50. ISBN 9780226349206. Paperback, \$26, £18. ISBN 9780226349213.

In this intellectually challenging and rewarding treatise, Martin Holbraad sets out to do for 'truth' something similar to but ultimately different from what Roy Wagner (1981) did for 'culture', namely, subject it to the transformative impact of ethnographic alterity and explore the consequences for anthropology.

Holbraad's core argument unfolds in three main movements. First, he contends that the divinatory verdicts of *babalawos*, the expert practitioners of Ifá divination in Cuba, defy representational notions of truth (that is, truth as the accurate depiction of stable real-world referents). This failure of representational truth, he then suggests, prompts him as ethnographer to conceptualize a new kind of truth—a motile truth that *babalawos* continuously innovate by mediating transformative collisions between the life paths of their consultants and the mythic paths of Ifá divinities. Holbraad then asks to what extent such ethnographically motivated conceptual innovations are indicative of an analogy between anthropology and divination.

There are many ancillary elements to the rigorous exposition in this book; here, however, I limit my discussion to two key aspects. First, I further elaborate the three main movements of Holbraad's complex argumentation, which—because it recurs to and seeks to renovate the premises of anthropology—he terms a “recursive analysis.” Second, I question

why Holbraad appears finally to short-circuit the full recursive implications of his thought-provoking insights.

Recursive analysis begins for anthropologists, according to Holbraad, whenever we encounter alterity, defined as that which our representational notion of truth cannot characterize without either imputing irrationality to our ethnographic interlocutors or resorting to the language of contradiction. Examples might include: the once commonplace assertion that practitioners of so-called primitive religions ‘confuse’ holiness and pollution, descriptions of mythological figures as ‘ambiguous’ because they display seemingly incompatible attributes, or my own claim that there is what I term a ‘tension’ between images of ontological autonomy and images of underlying identity among the Arosi matrilineages of the island of Makira in Solomon Islands.

This means, in other words, that for Holbraad the problem of alterity is a transformation of the classic problem of “primitive mentality” in the study of religion. Alterity, like “primitive mentality” according to Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1926: 78), may be detected by any apparent violation of the law of noncontradiction, the representationalist logic that says no two mutually exclusive predicates can be simultaneously true of the same subject. A shrine cannot be both holy and polluting; a deity cannot be both child-like and a fierce warrior; Arosi matrilineages cannot be both autonomous and in some way ingredient to one another. It eventually emerges, however, that Holbraad does not simply correlate this alterity with an inverse “law of participation”; rather, informed by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s Deleuzian account of Amerindian cosmogonic myth, he suggests that it is indicative of an ontology of heterogenic continuity, a relational ontology of intensive and extensive multiplicity. It likewise emerges that the representational truth that runs up against alterity indexes a contrasting ontology of discontinuity, an essentialist ontology that puts entities

before relations. The anthropologist's experience of alterity is thus cast, not in terms of two types of mentality, but in terms of "ontological divergence" (p. 254).

In Holbraad's encounter with Ifá divination, the ethnographic particularity that flags alterity is the phenomenon of divinatory verdicts. Holbraad is at pains to demonstrate that the verdicts of *babalawos* are phenomena that representational truth can only describe as impossible or absurd. The realist essentialist principles underpinning representational truth dictate that every truth claim is subject to doubt; there is always the possibility that the truth claim is not an accurate copy of reality. But practitioners of Ifá divination treat the verdicts of *babalawos* as truth claims that are indubitable, thus assigning two mutually exclusive predicates (true and indubitable) to the same subject (verdicts). Such verdicts as "you are bewitched," "your guardian *oricha* [divinity] is Changó," or "you have a tendency to impotence" are all, from a representationalist perspective, patently subject to doubt. Within Ifá, however, they are not, provided they have been delivered by an authentic *babalawo*.

Having thus met with the Ifá equivalent of "twins are birds," Holbraad proceeds to the second, most intensively ethnographic, phase of his recursive project. Rather than asking, How can Ifá practitioners believe that verdicts are both true and indubitable? he asks, What kind of truth would verdicts have to be in order to be indubitable? Holbraad acknowledges that philosophical speculation alone can conceptualize the motile truth he posits in answer to this question, yet his aim is to show that anthropology offers uniquely powerful methods for precipitating and addressing such problems. To that end, he takes the reader deep inside the workings of Ifá divination in search of the kind of truth that transpires there.

Some readers will deem Holbraad's ethnographic focus on a few *babalawos* and their ritual consultations too narrow and insufficiently contextualized within various scales of contemporary Cuban life. This book is probably not the place to begin one's study of Cuba or Afro-Caribbean religion. But, with a wink at Clifford Geertz, Holbraad proposes that, by

“thinning out” rather than thickening his description of divination (p. 85), he is able to observe the problem of truth at its center. As Bruno Latour might say, he purifies divination, isolating it in a kind of experimental vacuum chamber in order to detect the kind of truth that is the condition for the possibility of indubitable verdicts.

Based on a detailed account of the rituals of Ifá divination, Holbraad seeks to show that these rituals support a Deleuzian analysis of Ifá cosmology. In this project he acknowledges his debt to Marcio Goldman’s Deleuzian account of Afro-Brazilian cosmologies and Viveiros de Castro’s Deleuze-inflected theory of perspectival animism. Holbraad infers that the dynamics of Ifá divination necessitate the conclusion that Ifá cosmology is predicated on something like Deleuze’s concept of the ‘virtual’, an underlying plane of “self-differentiating relations” (p. 164), or fractal multiplicity. Entities in the Ifá cosmos are diverse actualizations of this virtuality and are thus intrinsically pre-related; they inhere in all possible relations and all possible relations inhere in them. Quoting Viveiros de Castro’s (2007: 158) claim that the ontology posited in Amerindian cosmogonic myth is “a heterogenic continuum, where transformation is anterior to form, relation is superior to term, and interval is interior to being,” Holbraad accepts this account as applicable to Ifá ontology but adds the further dimension that motion is prior to rest.

Ifá cosmology thus entails a “motile ontology” such that every entity that exists is not a self-identical static form but a self-differentiating motile trajectory, or path of becoming. This is true of divinities as well as people; the gods of Ifá cosmology are “vectors of ontological transformation” (p. xxii). And the universal mechanism of change—the means by which new motile trajectories come into being—is collision, the generative intersection between paths as conditioned by all previous intersections. Truth, therefore, is likewise motile. Truth becomes. Truth is a verb, not a substantive.

The work of *babalawos*, according to Holbraad, indexes this motile ontology and effects this motile truth, par excellence, for the work of *babalawos* is precisely to mediate new generative collisions. The crux of any divinatory consultation is the interpretive process whereby a *babalawo* brings the *oddu*—the mythic path—of a particular divinity into conjunction with the life path of a consultant. The indubitable verdict is therefore not a statement of pre-existent fact, but an innovative insight, the actualization of something previously only potential. Divination transforms the consultant ontologically, remaking her or him into a path in whom the mythically informed verdict of the *babalawo* is newly integral. *Babalawos* refer to this interpretive mode as “metamorphosis” (p. 189), but Holbraad gives it his own neologism: he terms this form of truthing “infinition,” the theoretically limitless production of ontologically efficacious “inventive definitions” (p. 220).

By this point, the upshot of the final recursive movement of the analysis seems, as Holbraad says, “predictable”: anthropologists, like diviners, are “in the business of infinition” (p. 238). Yet as soon as Holbraad articulates this analogy between diviners and anthropologists, he begins to qualify it in ways that seem surprisingly to block the implications of his own analysis of motile ontology from flowing in ethnographically and politically problematic directions.

Holbraad concludes that divinatory and anthropological infinitions are both unidirectionally curtailed with respect to their ontological efficacy; each is able to transform some but not other kinds of things. In the case of *babalawos*, Holbraad allows that the verdicts they infine when they bring the mythical paths of the gods into collision with the life paths of their clients transform the latter, but he avers that it would be “a cosmological non sequitur” (p. 257) for the *babalawos* to imagine that these verdicts also transform the gods. In the case of anthropologists, he allows that the concepts (such as motile truth) that they infine when their lives collide with ethnographic others constitute new realities that become integral

to the anthropologists who conceive them, but he disavows as “a kind of radical conceptual colonialism” (p. 259) the possibility that these concepts in any way redefine or become integral to ethnographic others.

But both these occlusions of motile truth feel arbitrary and at odds with the preceding discussion. First, without necessarily endorsing such reliance on Deleuze, I would note that, to the extent that Ifá gods are at all actual rather than indistinguishable from the virtual-in-itself, they must still be unfolding as motile trajectories and therefore susceptible to ongoing transformation via collision. They may be so close to virtuality that the motile/static binary nearly vanishes in them, yet an ontology of motile multiplicity would seem to demand that a divinatory verdict such as “your guardian *oricha* [divinity] is Changó” changes Changó as well as the client—whether or not *babalawos* acknowledge this. Either that, or the *babalawos* have infined that which is, according to Holbraad (pp. 113-114, 129), alter to their own motile ontology of continuity, namely radically transcendent gods that cannot be transformed. And second, it seems to me that once alterity has prompted an anthropologist to infine motile truth, it is difficult to put that genie back in the bottle. At points, Holbraad intimates that representational thinking presupposes motile ontology and truth as “hidden premises” (p. 209), latent realities made manifest by alterity. Once infined, therefore, these premises have a tendency to take over and hierarchically encompass essentialism and its representational truth regime. If, as Holbraad suggests in passing, the motile trajectories of two persons and their ideas are mutually transformed in the quotidian collision of ordinary conversation, can we escape the conclusion that the relationship between anthropologist and ethnographic interlocutors is likewise mutually transforming? Either that, or it is recursive anthropology that ends by (re)inventing transcendence, positing ethnographic others as like immutable gods (compare pp. 258-259).

Why, then, does Holbraad seek selectively to dam the flow of the motile truth he has infined? Holbraad provides at least two clues to his motivation. In his opening discussion of Wagner's recursive analysis of the culture concept, he points out that Wagner could be said to give 'truth' to the Daribi (p. 47). Wagner, in other words, endorses as truth the Daribi understanding of culture as invention and uses it to correct the anthropological error of treating culture as convention. Holbraad does not want to appear similarly to give truth to *babalawos*. He does not want to be read as saying that motile truth is true and should replace the error of representational truth. This, after all, would be a representational truth claim. But, arguably, such an eschewal of representation is itself an endorsement of or bid to inhabit motility. More importantly, perhaps, Holbraad clearly aspires to fulfil Viveiros de Castro's (2011: 128) mandate that anthropology be "a practice for the permanent decolonization of thought." Accordingly, he denies that his conceptualizations ever really intersect with and impinge on the becoming of the ethnographic others with whom he worked. In this way he hopes to achieve a recursive anthropology with no ontological footprint in the fieldwork context.

Whether or not one is persuaded that such a low-impact anthropology is possible, this book forces the reader to wrestle earnestly with this and many other difficult and intriguing questions. Is my experience of reading this book a collision of motile trajectories? If so, how has it redefined me? Is this review an infinition that transforms the book, or have I infined a whole new book? This project will not appeal to everyone. Readers whose trajectories have not previously collided with the ontological turn and its engagement with continental philosophy may find it obscure. But for those who have participated in and followed these developments with interest, this book is a major new outgrowth of that impetus. Its distinctive twists and turns will be controversial and will generate many transformative debates. Some

might even call *Truth in Motion* brilliant; for, like the best works in any discipline, its creativity moves the creativity of the reader in new and exciting directions.

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