TRIBAL EPISTEMOLOGIES: ESSAYS IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF ANTHROPOLOGY


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Tribal Epistemologies has been a hard book to review, its opinions and methodologies in large measure opposed to my own. First published in 1998, and reprinted in 1999, it seems to have evaded engagement with many of the debates - on questions of representation, the visual bias of Western culture and philosophy, the imbrications of anthropological projects with those of colonialism and area studies, and finally the teleological understandings of time and modernity characteristic of most anthropological studies — that have animated and divided anthropology departments since the 1970s.

Anthropology tends to articulate difference in temporal terms. The ethical and epistemological problems implicit to the anthropological strategy of objective or participant observation of ‘native’/‘indigenous’/‘folk’/‘tribal’ communities stems from an understanding of these communities as coherent, collectivist, and occupying a non-modern temporal space. This analytical context brings to mind a necessary antidote — the conceptual move Vivek Dhareshwar (1998) was attempting to make in his proposal that we, in the post-colony, the over-represented objects of anthropology, and subjects of development, move beyond our often pointless engagements with representations of ourselves undertaken by Orientalists, colonials and developmentalists, and direct attention instead to representing the moment of our ‘vanishing present’ (Sivak 1999) — creating, in other words, an analytic archive of ourselves, our contexts and our contemporary moment.

Structured in five parts, this book comprises an introductory section on definitions of philosophical anthropology, a second which deals with methodology and the need to uncover the epistemological foundations of other cultures in relation to Western systems, a third section that presents ethnographies; the fourth concerns ‘shamanistic mediations of meaning’; and finally the fifth section focuses on the possibilities of converging knowledges through an affirmation of cultural diversity.

The collection makes do with the most cursory of critical gestures towards the insights provided by the critique of anthropology. Helmut Wautischer’s introductory essay, “Pathways to Knowledge”, is a case in...
point. Here the writer summarily dismisses post-modernism as a form of ethical relativism, which sought to reduce all pursuit of ‘knowledge’ into ‘politics’. Wautischer’s critique of politics, in turn, is based on its submission to the processes of change, which subject, in his opinion the invariable body of knowledge about cultures, to flux.

One question that *Tribal Epistemologies* asks repeatedly concerns the *raison d’etre* of anthropology — why do it? What is the rationale behind going to the ‘field’, ‘going native’? How does this help expand our understandings of ourselves? Hoyt L. Edge, provides an answer, which typifies many of the opinions expressed in this book:

This approach is appropriate for two reasons. First, it offers a clearer picture of the classical Western understanding of self. While it is possible to make progress in this task by examining the empirical data, through conceptual analysis, and from studying the historical development of concepts of self and personhood...a more productive perspective on our view of self can be achieved by juxtaposing it against other concepts. The second reason to compare notions of a unitary self with those of a relational self is to broaden and expand our limited notion of self, and to develop other possible concepts of the self and other terminology by exploring non-Western cultures. (31) Unsurprisingly, interest in the ‘other’ provides an occasion to explore, expand and reconstitute the hegemonic Western self.

Among the most interesting of the essays is Roma Mere Roberts and Peter R. Wills’ “Understanding Maori Epistemology: A Scientific Perspective”. Addressing concerns raised by New Zealand’s multi-ethnic ethos, and recognising the need to promote a diversity of cognitive structures, this essay contrasts Maori knowledge systems with Western, scientific forms of understanding the world. It is particularly interested in bridging the cultural divide that separates the Maori from the Pakeha (non-Maori) through a mutual re-cognition of these different epistemologies.

E. Richard Sorenson’s essay “Preconquest Consciousness” is distinguished by its seemingly deliberate refusal of any of the more recent research on anthropological methodology. Sorenson persists with the use of a framework based upon a progressivist narrative that advances from pre-conquest to post-conquest mentalities. Of all the essays in this book, this is the most disturbing, compelling one to almost declare the institutionalised ‘looking’, which is anthropology, illegal. Sorenson indulges in every discredited anthropological practice imaginable. He ventures into ‘the field’ with a warped neo-Rosseauvian desire firmly in place — human beings are, therefore, conveniently classified as possessing pre- and post-conquest mentalities. Given this framework, it is unsurprising that his
'pre-conquest savages' live in a time-space entirely distinct from that of the European modernity, which he himself occupies. It is clear that Sorenson has not encountered the work of the 'post-modernist' Johannes Fabian, who declared famously that "the radical contemporaneity of mankind is a project" (1983: ix). The ethical complications, which ensue from this temporal disjuncture between the observer 'and the' observed, are more numerous than can be elaborated upon in this context. Suffice to say that Sorenson seeks, as did the 'classic' colonial anthropologists, the uncontaminated indigene. In doing this, he simultaneously refuses the 'fruits' of modernity to the native, while absolving himself of all responsibility for the developmental processes, which inevitably 'corrupt' these pristine narratives, transforming them in a trice from noble to "savage savages". Sorenson significantly does not see himself as bringing with him the baggage of post-conquest mentalities. (An important issue concerns the very complicity of the anthropologist within schemas of colonial and post-colonial power and development. Most of the essays in this collection present the anthropologist as apolitical and outside power.)

The book's fourth section concentrates on shamanism and comprises four essays. The first by Michael Ripinsky-Naxon, "Shamanistic Knowledge and Cosmology" offers a review of available methodology when studying shamanistic practice:

To contact the spirits, to grasp the essence of shamanism, one must perceive from the interior, travel whither the shamans go, and experience a shamanic journey. One cannot comprehend the actual nature of shamanism without a direct reference to ecstasy or trance-induced experience. (121-122)

The remainder of this section stages what seems to be the principle methodological debate in shamanic studies — whether to understand shamanism as pertaining primarily to spirituality or to see it in more secular terms as cultural performances with wider socio-political implications.

Michael R-Naxon's essay is an exposition of shamanistic practices and their connection to complex cosmological and metaphysical systems. The writer draws upon fieldwork amidst communities in the Amazon valley, the Arctic, Siberia and Tibet to point out commonalties and individual aspects of various cosmological systems. The shaman, as Naxon represents him, is a crucial part of the indigenous social and metaphysical framework; he/she is a seer, a storyteller, a performer and interpreter of the myths and beliefs of a people, mediates between the realms of earth and sky/light and dark/ the animal and human/ female and male principles. Interestingly, he also points out that, though the shaman both visualises and explicates the existence of more 'dimensions' than those visible to the non-shamanic eye, this did not suggest a "dualistic division[s] of the
universe, but rather...integrated parts of a single unified whole”. (125)
While the essay provides much detail on the subject of the relation of
shamanistic practices to Maya cosmology, there is surprisingly little
indication of the question or the problem it is attempting to grapple with.
Towards the end of the essay, Naxon indicates that the Mayas’ almost
obsessive preoccupation with shamanism and occult practices had a
connection with their transformation from an agrarian society to a complex
political organisation. These practices, he suggests, were a means of social
and political organisation and control (154). There is, however, no
elaboration of this aspect of shamanism.

Part of the problem with a book such as this is the refusal to look
beyond what are thought to be disciplinary (even intra-disciplinary) limits.
The pitfalls of this approach are clear from Ake Hultkrantz’s “The Meaning
of Ecstasy in Shamanism”, and “Rejoinder” to Roberte N. Hamayon’s essays
“Ecstasy’ or the West-Dreamt Siberian Shaman”. Critiquing Hamayon’s
attempts to secularise our understanding of shamanic practices (presumably
because the experience of faith is singularly difficult to communicate in
ontological terms), Hultkrantz accuses her of taking “shamanic research”
into the realms of social anthropology (189). This is clearly a methodological
problem wherein the investment in the anthropological practices of
immersion in and thick descriptions of other cultures allows little scope for
the contextualisation of these cultures within our shared present.
Additionally, such ethnographic narratives seem to fetishise difference in
their unwillingness to concede a functional or material aspect to ritual or
to belief-systems such as shamanism.¹

There is here an indication of another trope common to an
unreconstructed anthropology—the conviction that shamanism, like
indigenous lore represented (and/or opened access to) anti-rational and,
therefore, anti-Western modes of being. This is a perspective that is liberally,
if problematically, explored in the book’s final section ‘Converging
Knowledge in Cultural Diversity’.

Nina Rosenstand’s “Myths and Morals: Images of Conduct, Character,
and Personhood in the Native American Tradition” seeks to counter the
functionalism of cultural anthropology, which followed in the footsteps of
Malinowski, by exploring the philosophical, in particular, ethical
implications of Native American myth. Rosenstand focuses on the potential
offered by narrative to shape generalisable templates for conduct and
character building. She suggests that Native American legend was impelled
by “concrete” motives related to “issues” of survival (203). This is in sharp
contrast to the Western episteme and its desire to offer transcendental and
universalised statements.

Robert Torrance’s “Some ‘Shamanistic’ Affinities of Western Culture”
draws upon poetry and philosophy, particularly those strands which have
dealt with the spirituality and the desire to expand consciousness through techniques akin to those of shamanism. The motivation driving this argument seems to be to prove that shamanism was not the provenance of the non-West alone. Torrance argues instead that Westerners critical of native traditions of philosophical rationalism could access its insights. While this is not in itself a problematic desire, it is the familiarity of the argument that I find troubling — the effort to slot diversity into the regimes of the universal.

In the final analysis, this book’s potential strengths lie in its interest in a wide range of cultural practices and ethnographic sites. It’s conceptual problems, however, tend to preoccupy the reader and distract attention from the richness of its ethnographic detail. It is likely that these problems arise as a consequence of the book’s failure to define or nuance sufficiently the categories and concepts it deploys. Returning to the ‘Foreword’ after having reached the end of the book we encounter yet again the unselfconscious use of terms such as ‘Western’, ‘nature’, ‘us’ and ‘them’, ‘our societies’ and ‘folk societies’ (Douglass Price-Williams, ix-xv). From large portions of this book, it would appear that these categories are distinct, self-explanatory and devoid of a history of critical engagement. This is perhaps anthropology at its most naive, but given the complex, interlinked times we inhabit, naivete might not qualify as an adequate alibi.

Notes

1. I am not claiming, however, that these studies accord the ‘other’ the possibility of a ‘radical otherness’, by which I mean difference or alterity that cannot be incorporated into familiar economies.

References

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