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Cultural Truth and Ethnographic Consequences

Michael Levin



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FROM METHOD TO MODESTY: ESSAYS ON THINKING AND MAKING
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Résumé de l'article

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Cultural Truth and Ethnographic Consequences

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Fieldwork in an increasingly literate world presents new dilemmas for anthropologists. The information recorded in ethnographies may have consequences in the cultures and for the people with whom the ethnographer has worked. The political system of the peoples' nation may be able to use ethnographic information and the politics of the local community can be affected by the permanent record an ethnography creates. This paper uses an old baseball story as a metaphor for the decisive powers of the ethnographer, and illustrates the issues with four instances calling for decisions from fieldwork in southeastern Nigeria.

Faire du terrain dans un monde de plus en plus alphabétisé présente de nouveaux dilemmes pour des anthropologues. L'information rapportée dans les ethnographies peut avoir des conséquences pour les cultures et pour les personnes avec qui l'ethnographe a travaillé. Le système politique des nations de ces personnes peut être capable d'utiliser ces informations ethnographiques et les politiques d'une communauté locale peuvent être affectées par les archives permanentes qu'une ethnographie a créée. Ce texte se sert d'une vieille histoire de baseball comme métaphore du pouvoir décisionnel de l'ethnographe et illustre les résultats de quatre exemples de prise de décision d'un travail de terrain dans le sud-est du Nigéria.

To speak of the position of an anthropologist as being between two cultures is by now a truism. The very distance of these cultures allowed this place between them to be a comfortable position; at one time it was possible to learn from, and about one culture and speak and write in and to members of another and be secure that like East and West for Kipling "never the twain shall meet". Those cultures themselves were also quite limited: a primitive world or place, and an academic, scholarly community. The comfort of these limited worlds has been lost; the security of separation no longer exists. Regretting the loss of this comfortable division is merely nostalgia, surely one of the more tawdry of sentiments. Our world is not now divided, nor can we even think it is, if we wished to, between the expanding rational Western civilization and those peoples, cultures and nations being drawn into this world system willy-nilly. Our informants now have interests, rights, reputations and a place in this world and these matters are issues of contention for them as for us. Our informants now read our books; they comment on our views, our understandings, our portraits of them and their culture. They adopt new perspectives, new concepts; they invent themselves and others. The monopoly on conceptualization, the one-way flow of

definition, the unilateral power of definition, the unique privilege of translation, the power to capture another culture is now a contested field. The two audiences are now more truly contestants and both must be kept in mind.

The different expectations, interests and feelings of these two audiences in the telling of our cultural or historical stories are not easy to accommodate. The need to balance the sense of identification or connectedness one might have with the aspirations and destinies of people with whom one worked against the ideals of scholarship is demanding but may be possible. This possibility may require more than one form of anthropological writing.¹

Other readers, not party to this relationship of understanding and mutual respect, can use our work. Among these readers may be officials in their governments and in international agencies, whose purposes are likely to be not so scholarly. Our local friends and people from those parts in agencies of government have differing interests from others in the capital city, and those from dominant, majority cultures in the state in question may have competing interests, or desire confirmation of the superiority of urban culture. I am suggesting, however tentatively, that what an anthropologist says and writes might have some impact, that there are some moments when our ethnography can have consequences and where the cultural truth is perhaps indefinite, or fluid, and may be inappropriately defined, made concrete and specific, by how we write about it.² If we as anthropologists recognize our multiple audiences, we can become cautious when aware of situations where the impact of an anthropologist's work, the consequences of our ethnography, although not usually seen as particularly potent in the world of affairs, politics, business, and development can have real effects. The metaphor of the baseball umpire nicely illustrates the situations I have in mind. A baseball story suggests the powers of the umpire.

It's an umpires' convention; three umpires are standing aside conversing. The most junior remarks "Baseball, nuthin' but balls and strikes. I calls 'em as I sees 'em." After a pause the umpire with somewhat more experience says, "Baseball, nuthin' but balls and strikes. I calls 'em as they are." Finally the senior umpire says, "Baseball, nuthin' but balls and strikes, and they ain't nothin' till I calls 'em."

There are limitations to the role described in this little joke about powers of definition and reality, but

it conveys well enough the relation of perception, definition and choice.³ The origin of the word "umpire" is in Old French *nomper, nonper* "not one of a pair (of contestants)", it's a position structurally not unsimilar to Simmel's *tertius gaudens*, the happy third. This place of anthropologists, being between two cultures, is it a happy place? It was once a comfortable position; is it still? The anthropologist is a third person whose position is today more and more likely to be described as the troubled third, faced with being an intermediary between two audiences which have quite different criteria for approval and success. Because these audiences remain unequal in their capacity to affect our lives, the responsibility to our informants becomes more demanding not less.⁴

It is through the publication of what we find in field work that we discover the potency of anthropological description and the range of our unempirical discretion. In my fieldwork experience there are a number of moments when I have faced that unempirical decision "what should I call 'em?" Some of those moments which stand out are moments of realization, moments when my preconceptions of Bette⁵ life, or social structure, or history were rattled by statements, or responses of Bette people. Although the baseball story really applies only to the last of the four moments I'll recount here, the question of what I as an anthropologist *calls 'em* might have wider consequences in all four instances than I might intend, or expect, and certainly more than I would wish.

My first encounter occurred very early as I was being shown around the village in the first few days. I had come from the New World with a copy of the recently published *Peasants* by Eric Wolf (1966) under one arm and my mosquito net under the other. I wanted to write about African cultivators as peasants. We, I, had all read about the traditional segmentary systems, but few ethnographies recognized the transformations that *had* to be taking place, but were not acknowledged in the literature. And the way to do it seemed to be to test one *structural category* against another, in this case, segmentary opposition of local groups, against corporate peasant community. Lloyd Fallers had written a suggestive, but short, article on the question, but the issue was unresolved (Fallers 1961). Works from southern and east Africa suggested possibilities, but they were cast in what seemed to a brash graduate student, archaic language, or seemed to be special cases. *Townsmen or Tribesmen* (Mayer 1961) seemed to deny the individuality of people, the reality of social

change, to emphasize the displaced and inappropriate character of such people, to echo the earlier contempt for educated and political Africans. William Watson's *Tribal Cohesion in Money Economy* (1958) was a study of remittances by, and absences of, miners; and the effects of these factors in a bounded reserve-like community. Kenneth Little (1957) wrote about *landschaftmen* associations, tribal voluntary associations, in African towns. Such organizations did not seem particularly African or arising out of that tradition, but more a concomitant of migration to the city, being present in remarkably similar form as representations of sentiment and cooperation in immigrant associations in the New World. These works, impressive in their own right, seemed only to extend the cultural divisions into the city, but did not deal with emerging, modern forms of rural social organization. *Peasants*, on the other hand, was somehow more contemporary, more modern; it importantly took into account the relationship of individuals and communities with the larger economy and society, and with the state. It might allow for the study of the nature and direction of change in a rural African community. It was invested with some important theoretical implications. West Africa on the world map in Wolf's brilliant little book was shaded to show peasants, but the references were sparse. There were two, to Forde's work in Yakö and some work on the Ashanti. And there was reference to the work of French geographers and agronomists, whose use of the terms *paysan* was quite uncritical. So there was a place for this kind of modelling.

This was my plan when I arrived in this village with a mixed agricultural economy. I met with people, the chief, elders, school teachers, the local literate adults, and I attended the frequent meetings of savings groups in the first few days while setting up a household and engaging an assistant. One of those early Sundays, as I have said, as I was being shown around the village a man said to me "It's a shame you have come so late. It will be difficult to understand us. We used to live together, one brother next to another. Now we have moved away from the old homes and are scattered. It will be difficult for you to understand us." What good to me was Wolf's wonderful structural category: agnatic kinship was the beginning of explanation and interpretation. Lineages, in the sense of groups agnatically defined, were some aspect of life. Concepts which embraced kinship and collectivity were used. Did lineages exist? The problem became what form did they take? What was to become of the categories of ceremonial

and rent funds? peasant coalitions? and peasant ecotypes?⁶

This was the problem in the specific sense. Broadly, it was one of preconceptions and intentions. I had theoretical preconceptions, perhaps theoretical presumptions. Should these preconceptions determine my perceptions? Was I to call 'em something they were not? Was I to see a social formation, *peasants*, where some other social formation was working?⁷

It was not only the conscious models of society, against which we, as anthropologists, have been warned by as diverse scholars as Marvin Harris and Claude Lévi-Strauss, that made me doubt the utility of the peasant concept in this setting. In southeastern Nigeria the main products are food stuffs, making the economic dimension much less clear and less structured than where crops are non-consumable export crops like cotton or coffee. In many ways the concept *peasants* did not help organize the information I was getting. Setting up two models, however, peasants and segmentary systems, forced my attention to what was being said and done.

It became clear that to use this model, I would be making of these people "paper peasants", who out of perversity, or lack of true consciousness, do not fit the theory. I must begin with what the Bette people say, if I dare use the term, *their discourse*. It must be what they say that comes first. It is here that there is some chance of beginning to say something that means something to them as Bette and is valid for me as an anthropologist. These communities are becoming occupationally differentiated, yet residence, rights, property and at some levels collective action are expressions of tradition, expressions of segmentary forms of solidarity, or of forms of communalism, that is, lineages and clans.

At the same time it is not their Bette-ness, their essence, which is of interest but, their development in the Nigerian context, their use of tradition, of their social relationships, of their culture to act within the state and secure their rural and their national place that is important. To describe local communities as peasants would imply a uniformity of village structure and an extreme degree of individualization which does not represent present realities. The collective action of individuals is mediated through and organized on the basis of kinship-defined relationships. In Moore's words they "...have neither broken with their past nor have they reproduced it" (Moore 1986:319).

What seemed like a crass comment marked the second moment of new understanding. I was told "money is a good thing". But this was not a crass comment; it went straight to the heart of vital daily relationships. The novelty of this statement struck me immediately: the corrupting dimension of money is what one hears about most often. Bohannon had reported that the Tiv thought that money had spoiled the system of exchange and undermined distinct values found in pre-monetary spheres of exchange (Bohannon 1959). Yet Bette men and women thought money and the bride-price it allowed them to pay liberated them from an oppressive exchange system of marriage. In this system of concrete exchanges the only equivalent of a woman was another woman. The oppression of the system was felt in the connection imposed between pairs of marriages and in father-daughter and brother-sister relationships. Money allowed divorce. A wife could stay with her husband, despite his sister's leaving hers. Without money a father, a brother, had to force a daughter or sister to stay married, to stay with her husband, or he had to surrender his own wife to her family. Certainly in this situation marriage was a contingent relationship!

My awareness of the novelty of linking the approval of money as a progressive innovation with the possibility to pay bride-price, was heightened once back in Canada listening to various levels and forms of feminist argument. Was the welcomed relative liberation of Bette men and women from the bonds of custom to be appreciated as such, or are they misguided, victims of false consciousness, not realizing the oppression capitalism is visiting on them?

What should I be calling these beliefs, these cultural practices? Are they balls or strikes? Has money liberated women and their brothers and husbands? If a woman says she knows that she is properly married when her husband had paid something to her father is she deluded? Must I impose our dichotomy between the personal and the material to be correct? Am I to insist to people who are quite poor by world standards that money is corrupting? I think they would think me a particularly naïve kind of preacher.

Clearly everyday relationships, everyday life, was being affected by the consequences of world system expansion, of capitalist penetration, of colonialism, but linking such broad macro-categories to the possibilities of divorce in Bette was an awkward

problem. The problem again was found not in the experience of Bette people but in diffuse and undifferentiated categories, such as capitalism and colonialism, which lead to undifferentiated judgements. Such concepts, when used as a variable, as in the sense of the phrases "capitalism causes...", or "as a result of colonialism...", also keeps the background against which local changes take place out-of-focus, fuzzy and indistinct.

One solution is to approach the issue more specifically and in a more focused way as monetization itself, and to emphasize comparison with the system of the past. In this specific situation money is *liberating*. And it is especially liberating when you can substitute it for persons (cf. Simmel 1978).

This issue has two aspects: one is the anthropological audience which disapproves of the impact of our Western culture on other cultures, the other is a full understanding of this stated appreciation for money in the political context that never considered British rule legitimate. Appreciating the utility of multi-purpose money is not the same as approving of everything new, of everything European. Acknowledging that some rational recognition and valuation of change can be made both by informants, in this case, Bette people, and by anthropologists, is important in such an analysis.⁸

This encounter of competing interpretations also raises the whole question of the romantic view of the past, pre-colonial, pre-capitalist society. Is every aspect of tradition worth preserving? Is all change corrupting? Is any desire to change inauthentic? Evaluating change is beyond the scope of this paper.

The third moment was more one of confusion of roles and naivete about communication. It arose over the issue of "the creation of states". (Nigeria as of 1989 has twenty-one states. The number has increased from twelve created out of the four regions in 1967.) This question brought into confrontation questions of theory versus questions of power, local aspirations and political practice. Nigeria was set up by the British as 3 regions, later one was divided making 4 regions. The minorities question has predated independence, with the major concern of minorities being their subjugation in some sense by the larger ethnic groups which were the majorities in each region. Each region had been centred around one majority ethnic group. In the Eastern Region this was the Igbo. The minority peoples of this area had

sought a separate state for many years, going back to the period of nationalist agitation before independence in 1959. The first campaigns were for a large state, basically a division of the region into Igbo and non-Igbo states. Later when the region was divided into 4 states, Imo, Anambra, Rivers, and Cross River, the campaign shifted to arguing for a division of Cross River State into two, a division that has recently been effected. There is a theory of development underlying this argument that is quite simple. Its central premise is that development is achieved through the multiplication of the structures of the state. This question is not an hypothetical one, it is a question of solidarity; to doubt the aspirations is to be disloyal. To doubt that more government jobs for "our boys and girls" is important is to be hopelessly naive if not unsympathetically cruel. At a certain point in the last civilian regime in Nigeria (1979–1983) local governments (formerly divisions) were multiplying, at least on paper, at a phenomenal rate. One state had subdivided its 17 Local Government Areas (formerly Divisions, equivalent to Municipalities) into 54! One LGA kept the dump truck to carry the gravel for roads and the other got the graderto spread it! I voiced some restrained academic doubts about this wasteful proliferation of bureaucracy and was told very firmly that I was wrong, a new state was necessary and that I did not understand. I left it at that, thinking we had had a nice chat over beer and nothing more. A few weeks later someone not present at my original conversation (and I thought not connected to the people I had been with) stated that he had heard I was against the new state! What I had seen as a bar-room political theory was real-world political practice. I realized immediately that I could only lend some vague authority to dissenting opinion, but not do any good. This was a question of team loyalty and I had better stay with the team that had already brought me so far.

When I returned in 1987 to Nigeria to do some more detailed work on village history, I was told "now you could say we are three sons of one father". This was the fourth moment of realization. The village is divided into three segments, none named eponymously and the three segments operate as equal political parts of the village. In my early period of fieldwork there, only for about 6 months until the outbreak of the Biafran War, I had not worked on historical questions as such, but on language, kinship terminology, residence, and related questions. I had learned that two of the segments had a ritual society,

a deity and an associated dance that the third did not, but I had thought little of it.

Although it was clear the villagers were aware of the slave trade on the coast of what is now Nigeria, slavery and slaves were not mentioned even in private. Nor was slavery or trade in slaves given much importance in the ethnographic literature on West African peoples, although as a "status" of some persons and as a privileged activity of some men it was mentioned almost in passing. Perhaps its illegality prevented the investigation of its presence by white anthropologists.⁹

By the late 1970's, however, the incredible growth of publication and debate on slavery forced one to recognize the hidden inequalities even in vociferously egalitarian communities.

This statement "now you could say we are three sons of one father" by one of the elderly men in the course of more detailed inquiries into the village history drew my attention by his careful qualification of the claim to common ancestry. *Why could one say we are three sons of one father? Why did not one simply say we are the sons of one father! And why now? What did one say then?* The account went on to describe the origins of the village, one of the ancestors being a foundling, the others being brothers. Later I was told candidly and in the hearing of a member of "the foundling" segment that the ancestors of this segment had been slaves of one of the other segments.

I continued the series of interviews over the next few weeks and confirmed this information. I thought this was a marvellous transition to write about: the change from a free-slave community to an egalitarian-free community. But in this village writing was no longer an innocent process of recording peoples' statements, the facts, making a realist ethnography. At the very end of my stay, the very morning I was leaving, two retired school teachers approached me and made a request. They knew it was not a simple request. They asked that I write very carefully about what I had learned. It could do a great deal of damage, they said. This was not a heartfelt simple plea from someone who might be stigmatized by being labelled. It came from both sides of the divide. Nor was it a request that I distort the historical truth. Somehow I had to come to terms with telling the truth and avoiding the ethnographic consequences.¹⁰

I had considered this sentence “now you could say we are three sons of one father” as an alternative title for this paper, because the implications of the decisions made about this question are so intertwined with theoretical problems of temporality, history and literacy. It also raises most acutely what we may call, perhaps belabouring the metaphor, the umpirical dilemma. In one reading of it there is no doubt this statement is a clean uncomplicated pitch, a good straight-forward fast ball belt-high and across the plate. A strike! Another reading of it, a crucial understanding, is the request for discretion in labelling part of the village as *slaves* which I would be doing if I wrote that they are descendants of slaves, is also a pitch, but a change-up, sinking, down low and inside. If I were the batter I would have to go for it. But is it a ball or a strike?

What kind of umpire am I going to be, what kind of umpire should I be? Shall I call ‘em as they *are*, compressing time and making the past more important in the present by labelling *in print* some of my friends and scholarly co-workers? Shall I call ‘em as I see ‘em, showing progress and the triumph of universalistic values over oppression and cultural difference, but still stigmatizing by identifying *in print* with the slave label, identifying *in print* some members of this village community that has been so good to me? Or shall I be the umpire makin’ ‘em somethin’ when I call ‘em, equals to their ‘brothers’, or inferiors to their ‘brothers’, putting this history into print making it more important in the present than it already is and extending this history that some wish to forget into the future by giving it permanence in a village Doomsday Book?

These moments of realization of the ethnographic consequences are personal, but exemplify the broadening implications and uses of ethnography. It is in the awareness of the open context that literacy brings to the uses of ethnography that we must write about the cultural truth. All consequences cannot be anticipated; some can. What is certain is that uses of ethnography and its consequences are not in the control of its authors, nor of its subjects. Only that the unpredictability of consequences are certain. I do not want to suggest that ethnography can dominate politics, nor that the anthropologist can, or should, have some dominant role in the lives of the people he or she writes about, but that ethnography can have many uses and therefore requires care in its preparation. The revelation of cultural truth must take into account the ethnographic consequences, and they may not be trivial.

Notes

1. Renato Rosaldo’s *Culture and Truth* (Boston:Beacon Press, 1989) was published after this paper was written. Chapter 2, “Beyond Objectivism”, distinguishes the forms of writing that ethnography can take and deals with the understandings of these forms of writing by these two audiences, the anthropologists and the ethnographic subjects. His essays have been immensely useful in revising this paper.
2. Scholarly anthropological culture may be seen as driven by the needs of academic careers and by a popular culture that has few limits on what may be said and published. There is a temptation to renounce the pressure that comes from this culture, but such a renunciation of the consequences of literacy seems to me to be but an unrealistic attempt to maintain innocence in the face of change, to say one is totally outside of events. To choose not to speak at all about some aspects of a culture studied, or experiences that reflect badly on it, or illegal acts of individuals is a different, but related question.
3. Those who consider there are few ambiguities in sports and that most of the variation comes from an excessive zeal for winning might consider other baseball rules, such as the balk rule. To explore the umpire analogy a comparison with the much more limited roles and powers of the umpire in cricket is instructive.
4. On dyads and triads see Simmel, 1950:127ff. Simmel (1950:154) raises the possibility of the non-partisan using his “...position for purely egoistic interests.” One of the interests which drives anthropologists is the furtherance of their careers by publishing, and publishing in a culture which values the printed product. Nigerians in rural communities are well aware of the value of theses, books, etc., in university life and of the material benefit accruing to those who publish.
5. The Bette (biti, as in *Eng.* bit) live at the northern boundary of Obudu Local Government Area, Cross River State, Nigeria, neighbouring the Tiv and speak a Bantoid language. Fieldwork was carried out for varying lengths of time from 1967 until, most recently, July 1987.
6. I had been able to write of peasant aspects of social relations in Cameroun where classic commodities, cocoa and coffee are grown, and I could trace the inflation of ceremonial expenditures, primarily funeral feasts and bride price, following the rise of cocoa prices (Levin 1980). Yet the reviewer in the *American Anthropologist* of the book *Peasants in Africa*, in which the paper appeared, reported an African student asking querulously, but not unjustly, “Why do they call our farmers peasants. Peasants is a

derogatory term." (Dorjahn 1981:463). Perhaps this unhappiness with such social categories or labels is the consequence categories have in this kind of analysis, of labelling people as social categories and making the past relations of people, their culture and history, invisible. Bernard S. Cohn makes a similar comment: "Those anthropologists who continued to be interested in the transformation of societies, either in the right wing mode of modernization or the left wing mode of revolution, discovered that they were studying 'peasant societies', and this enabled them to continue indexing features without worrying too much about the content and context of civilizations they were studying." "History and Anthropology: the State of Play" in *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays*, Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1987:29. Originally published in *Comparative Studies in History and Society*, vol.22, 1980.

7. There are other ways, more scholarly, of putting this dilemma: Were my perceptions to be driven by theory? Should I choose the academic audience with an investment in concepts and theory over the local sense of reality? This debate is neither a brief nor a simple one.
8. This argument for a close examination of the impact of the world system, capitalism in its specifics, is in some ways parallel to suggestions made in "Imagining the whole: ethnography's contemporary efforts to situate itself" by George Marcus (1989:9) of ways to efface the macro-micro dichotomy.
9. This contrasted with my experience later in Cameroun, where the recognizable epithet *ninga* was used to refer to those of slave descent. In Cameroun slavery was spoken about openly and it was marked by degrees of distance, personal, linguistic and ethnic, but in Nigeria, the topic was suppressed.
10. The ambivalence toward public representation of slavery was a more general Nigerian attitude. I own two carvings which have been deliberately disfigured by cutting away the bindings at the mouth, although the ropes or shackles at the ankles and wrists remain. This disfiguring of the sculptures was explained as a reaction to the knowledge that slavery was illegal and had been abolished.

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