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Review: Anthropology and Its Engagements; Ifá and Its Engagements

Reviewed Work(s): Truth in Motion: The Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination by Holbraad

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Anthropology and Its Engagements; Ifá and Its Engagements

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Truth in Motion: The Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination. By Martin Holbraad. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

In late nineteenth-century Lagos and Abẹokuta, a group of young Yoruba men undertook what they considered a politically significant cultural brokerage project. They felt this task necessary to ensure the future of cultural resources they valued highly. The work of these young men involved

extract[ing] from a vast dynamic and heterogeneous indigenous culture a set of values and exemplary texts, cultural monuments and touchstones, that could stand in opposition to, as an alternative to, or in combination with, the European culture that this élite had thoroughly assimilated. . . . Theological and philosophical discourse was the most important arena in which the[se] appropriations, translations and conversions . . . took place. In this discourse the Ifá system of divination, with its vast corpus of texts, had a central place. (Barber 1990:196)

In writing about this project nearly a century later, anthropologist Karin Barber draws to our attention a text that might be called Ifá as a Christian-style truth, or perhaps it is Christianity as Ifá's truth. This text was not the work of the group of young cultural brokers, but it was perhaps the most significant of the texts generated in this wave of cultural genesis. It is

a text situated right at the point of intersection between "Christianity" and "traditional Ifá": a bible of Ifá verses produced by a "church" of Ifá [t]he *Ìwé Odù Mímó* (*Holy Book of Odù*). . . . It exhibits the interpenetration of Christianity and Ifá at every level, from surface style right down to the roots of its ideological assumptions. . . . In the *Ìwé Odù Mímó* we see the strategies of Ifá argument at full blast. (Barber 1990:199–200)

Rereading Barber's paper almost 25 years later, I find her descriptions of the discursive strategies adopted in this work of cultural brokerage oddly reminiscent of those adopted by a young Danish anthropologist in his cultural brokerage work over a century later, "extract[ing] from a vast dynamic and heterogeneous" academic discipline of anthropology a "set of values and exemplary texts, cultural monuments and touchstones, that could stand in opposition to, as an alternative to,

or in combination with" the culture of Afro-Cuban Ifá divination practice into which he had been partially "assimilated." Just as for the young Yoruba men, theological and philosophical discourse is the most important arena of appropriation, translation, and conversion. I begin this review then by juxtaposing Holbraad's book with the *Holy Book of Odù* to suggest that what Holbraad proposes is an Ifá-style truth in anthropological form. To put it in a more neutral form—in a way that Holbraad does not—anthropology should learn to do truth iconically rather than indexically.

Some young men propose engagement around alterity and opposing truth regimes at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as Ifá and Christian universality engage each other in a cultural milieu of nascent nationalism. A century later we see a similar a similar sort of engagement around alterity and opposing truth regimes, this time between the cultural forms of anthropology, with its universal relativism, and Ifá, with its confident holism. The latter project is situated at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in Havana, newly emerging into a global market economy in which the iconic truths of the market circulate and against which the indexical truths of anthropology, constituted in doubt, seem powerless. Can we learn anything from the parallelism of these projects? Perhaps it is a matter of valuing the seeming absurdity of both and of learning how to nurture that absurdity.

Holbraad offers an ethnographically rich and careful articulation of Ifá's indubitable truth regime, an elegant and sensitive revelation of its iconic form, where truth and pronouncements of truth are metaphysically one and the same. As readers we see again and again how in Ifá truths are effective reproblematisations, or reformulations, of myriad profound existential tensions.

In contrast to this rich empirical evocation of the lived reality of the truth of Ifá, the truth of anthropology is presented in a brutal, short first chapter. I will come back to this asymmetry later in this review, agreeing with the author that it does not limit what is achieved here. In contrast to Ifá, anthropology's truth is constituted in an indexical representationist regime. Here truth and its pronouncement are metaphysically distinct. This truth regime is suited to articulating problems for which solutions might be found. For anthropological truth, the further the distance from (re)problematization of profound existential tensions, the better.

The reader of Holbraad's book comes to understand in a full sense how Ifá's truths are received by those who seek them. I would have preferred to read Holbraad's informants' actual words rather than have quotations presented only in English. Nevertheless, I appreciate his economical use of informants' words set alongside helpful commentary drawing attention to exactly what has and has not been expressed. For example, we feel for and with the young woman who is told she will never prosper until she kneels at her mother's feet and is forgiven. She does not doubt the *babalawos* even though neither she nor her mother, to whom she is close, can identify

the offense for which she must beg forgiveness. Holbraad's rhetorical strategies help us accept the woman's response as both proper and comprehensible (204). We feel what indubitable truth *is*.

"Truth [is] the common-yet-different concern of diviners and intellectuals" (237). This is the key motivation for the work: to engage anthropology and Ifá over their different truth regimes. The core question of the book then is this: having seen Ifá's truth regime, do we think of anthropology's truth regime differently? The answer is yes. Anthropology's representationist truth is certainly parochialized as a truth originating in modern Europe. Perhaps even more to the point is the question, should we now learn to "do" anthropology's truth regime differently? Before we consider that, however, we must note that the book does not offer anything like an analogous presentation of anthropology's truth regime. The treatments are radically asymmetrical as stated:

At the outset of this book I made clear that the analogy between divination and anthropology (or intellectual work more generally) is due to the fact that both activities are centrally and explicitly concerned with truth. Much of the main body of the book has been devoted to corroborating and clarifying that claim with regard to divination, using the majesty of Ifá as the case in point. In devoting so much energy to just one side of the analogy however, I have taken the other for granted, as a matter of course. (241)

Holbraad's answer to the charge of asymmetry is also central to the book's accomplishment. As a delightful absurdity, this book uses, and thus adequately (if implicitly) reveals, the orthodox form of anthropology's truth regime to argue against anthropology's indexical truth and in favor of anthropology's cultivating a robust iconic form of truth. Such a truth would be formulated in certainty, not doubt, in much the manner that Ifá's truth is formulated.

What Holbraad proposes for anthropology is an Ifá-type truth—a form where the truth and its articulation are metaphysically one and the same; an Ifá-type truth in anthropological, that is, ethnographic, form. The question that needs to be asked now is whether, with such a refit, a robust anthropological truth will be able to claim a more prominent place in a world where, currently, the indubitable truths of the market dominate.

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Power and Its Alibis

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Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality. By Margot Weiss. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

Techniques of Pleasure, an excellent interdisciplinary engagement between philosophical questions and ethnographic evidence, is a landmark study of the BDSM "scene" in San Francisco in which anthropologist Margot Weiss stages a critical intervention in a long-standing, unresolved debate in gender and sexuality studies over the politics of sadomasochism. Identifying an impasse between radical feminists who argue that BDSM replicates patriarchal violence and queer theorists who celebrate alternative sexualities as subversive departures from social norms, Weiss draws on participant-observation and interviews with practitioners of BDSM, pointing to ways in which, ultimately, neither position is empirically sustainable—establishing *Techniques* as a key text in an emerging ethnographic turn in the scholarship on sadomasochism.

The book opens with a vignette of a charity "slave" auction at the "Byzantine Bazaar," an event that marks Weiss's entrance into what she terms her "real" fieldwork, and figures rhetorically as an ethnographic origin story for the theoretical line of inquiry *Techniques* sustains. In this vignette, Weiss highlights two contrasting moments in—and readings of—the auction. First, there is the dominant white heterosexual man being sold as a bottom "for one night only." Weiss narrates the events unfolding as other participants encouraged the man to strip: "He faced us, blushing, while we took pleasure in his discomfort, shouting for him to remove the final barrier: his tightly whities. When he did, the crowd roared" (3). The next paragraph cuts to a white, male "Master," who brings to the stage his African American, female "slave." She writes: "he yanked up her dress to display her shaved genitals. . . . He said she was very submissive and guaranteed to make us happy. . . . I was uncomfortable during this scene, and I felt sure that the rest of the crowd was, too. I strained to read the woman's expression, to see if she was all right . . . but I couldn't tell" (4). This contrast between clear communication of parody and uncomfortable slippage between play and reality underpins the work's ambivalent tacking between replication and subversion as untenable alternatives.

Theoretically, Weiss grounds her analysis in what she terms "performative materialism," which "insists on a method of reading that pays careful attention to the dynamic ways subjects are produced in and through social power" (25). This interpretive approach, combining Foucauldian-Butlerian and Marxian interpretive frameworks, "neither ignores the materiality of discourse nor effaces the performativity of material inequality" (229). Weiss moves beyond positions that would render consensual sadomasochism as either exactly the "same" as the violence of torture, slavery, and rape or as entirely "bracketed" from the symbolic forms of power that sustain the erotic repertoire of BDSM from which such practices derive their