

# Anthropology Newsletter

## Anthropologists Dig Collaboration

Elizabeth M Brumfiel (Albion College)

Can sociocultural anthropology and archaeology establish a mutually beneficial relationship? Participants in the 1996 AAA annual meeting session "The Place of Archaeology in Anthropology" answered with an emphatic yes. Discussion centered around 4 proposals and a testimonial.

The proposals were summaries of archaeological research that has direct relevance to sociocultural anthropology. Research such as this could serve as the focus of archaeology core courses aimed specifically at sociocultural graduate students. Such a focus might prove more intriguing and relevant to sociocultural students than the current emphasis "origins" research (hominid origins, origins of food production, origins of complex society). The testimonial came from ethnographer Gayle Rubin, who as unlikely as it seems, applied her coursework in Near Eastern and Mesoamerican prehistory to her study of the gay male leather community in San Francisco.

Tim Earle, president of AAA's Archeology Division, observed that archaeologists deal with the fundamental materiality of human experience and with the ways that materiality structures social relationships and systems of belief. The material dimension of human culture has not been thoroughly investigated by sociocultural anthropologists. Ethnographic studies

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## 1996-97 AN Theme: The Known, Unknown and Unknowable in Anthropology

### Culture: In and about the World

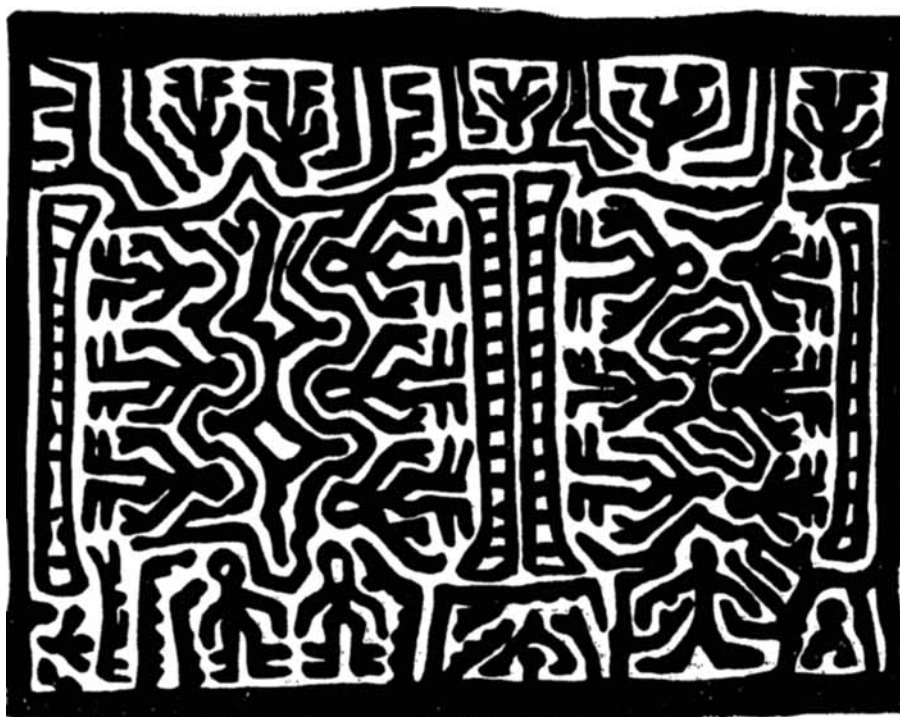
By Greg Urban (U Pennsylvania)

Anthropologists talk about the relationship between language and reality or between culture and the world, but those formulations are fundamentally flawed. Furthermore, they are the source of debilitating quasi-philosophical dilemmas of knowing. The question should not be: What is the relationship between culture and the world? Rather, because culture is both in the world and about the world, the question should be: What is the relationship between culture that is out there and culture that is a representation of what is out there?

#### Myths as in and about the World

This insight has guided my research over the past decade. I have been particularly intrigued by myths in Amerindian societies, especially in Brazil. I was fortunate early in my field research to stumble on an acoustically stunning myth-telling style. The indigenous people residing at the government post known as Ibirama in southern Brazil had a fascinating way of telling their origin myth. The telling involved two men, seated opposite each other. One man would utter the first syllable of the myth, and the second would repeat it. The first man would then utter the second syllable, and the second would repeat it, and so on, through the entire myth. What a hearer like myself heard was thus something like "In In the the be be gin gin ing ing," uttered in quarterback play-calling style and unfolding very rapidly, with no pauses.

I recorded these dialogical tellings and later analyzed my tapes using com-



Are aesthetic experiences of culture, in its material manifestations, forms of knowing? (Design based on a mola from the Kuna Indians of Panama, taken from the cover of Greg Urban's *A Discourse-Centered Approach to Culture*. © 1991. Courtesy of the U of Texas Press)

puter sound-analysis equipment. There are probably few better ways to get a sense of this dyadic myth-telling as a thing in the world than by computer analysis. You can see each syllable as a complex sound-wave form on the screen, nicely separated from each other syllable. The rhythmical structure of this sound is rendered visible.

Each instance of such a telling is a thing or object in-the-world, but the important point is that the different instances resemble each other and, together, make up a distinguishable species of object.

This is perhaps a dramatic case of myth as thing-in-the-world, but an examination of other less dramatic cases in this community reveals that

they too have objectlike qualities. I have been able to collect different instances of narration of what is recognized as the "same" myth. The different tellings can be compared for their word-for-word similarities and also for similarities in such physical properties as intonation contours. Such an analysis makes clear that myths in this community are recognizable cultural objects. It makes sense to speak of tellings of the "same" myth.

But myths are not only things in the world, like ceramic pots or arrowheads; they are also representations of the world. They are representations of the past of the world and of how the world got to be

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## 1997 Annual Meeting Forms

The 1997 Annual Meeting forms are in this edition, pp 27-34. We appreciate your understanding of the delay, pending Executive Board action on a registration fee increase. All forms are included in this edition, and the new rates are reflected on p 28. Please note that the deadline for all submissions remains April 1, 1997.

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## Culture

Continued from page 1

as it is today. In the beginning, according to the origin myth just discussed, people were under ground, and the first ones came out and began to explore the bewildering new environment around them. Not only did they explore, they also created. They made the jaguar, which was fashioned from araucaria pine wood, and they made the snake, which was molded out of beeswax. Myths render the world meaningful. Through them, the world becomes intelligible to the understanding, and it gets imbued with feelings and significance.

### From Experience to Culture

In the Ibirama community, the representations of the world contained in myths as cultural objects do not exhaust experience. They do tell some things about the present world. They tell you, for example, how the snake you see before your eyes came into existence. But there is so much more to experience of the world, of reality. The representations contained in myths cannot hope to comprehend the uniqueness of each event.

In my Ibirama research, I attempted to explore the problem of the infinite richness of the unique experience by looking at dreams. Each individual dream is a novel experience. The only way it can come into contact with the representational side of culture is through its narration. Each dream must be put into words, if it is to have the possibility of becoming a cultural object.

Importantly, in this community people do have an interest in telling their dreams. My wife and I recorded a corpus of these. Each dream narrative in the corpus is distinct from every other. It is not the case that the dream narrative, at least initially, is a cultural object in the sense of a species of thing-in-the-world. Rather, each narrative is unique.

This does not mean, however, that there are no commonalities among the narratives. In fact, a study of dream narratives revealed at least one distinctive dream type. In this type, the dreamer is usually experiencing some ordinary object, which is also accessible to the waking senses. The object might be something as mundane as a rock. More commonly, however, it was an animate object, such as a wild pig or howler monkey. The dreamer would be interacting with the object in an ordinary way, when it revealed itself to be a spirit. In one dream narrative, for example, the dreamer was about to shoot a howler monkey, when all of a sudden it shouted out, "Don't kill me!" adding later, "Why didn't you talk to me instead of trying to shoot me?" The howler monkey at first looked like a monkey but then later appeared just like a man. It was really the spirit of the howler monkey.

It is important that people tell their own dreams in this culture, but they also tell the dreams of others. Dreams thus have a social life. They circulate. Not all of them do so, however. There are many dream narratives that fail to survive their initial telling. They are representations of experiences, of the world, but they are not yet themselves fully things in the world. They are only incipient things. They can become cul-

tural objects in the world only if and insofar as they achieve a wider circulation, a longer social life.

We may ask the question: which dream narratives come to circulate most widely? The answer my research has turned up is that the ones that survive are the ones that tend to conform to already circulating dream types and already established ideas about dreams.

This strikes me as important from the point of view of the relations between culture as representation of the world and culture as thing in the world. If dream narratives encode novel experiences of the world, the novel representations by which they are encoded must undergo a long journey and process of careful selection and editing before they can become cultural objects in the world. What connects the representation of novel experience to recognizable cultural objects in the world is the process of circulation.

In my own research I have come up with evidence that some dream narratives are especially long-lived. These narratives are contained in stories about shamans who have died. The shamans were actual individuals whom I could locate on my genealogies. In some cases, the individuals had been dead for generations. From the genealogies, I could estimate the antiquity of these dream narratives. Some of them are 100 to 150 years old.

When dream narratives persist for this length of time, they have become fully recognizable as cultural objects. They are part of received wisdom, received understanding of the world. By comparing these long-lived dream narratives with some myths, indeed, it became apparent that dream narratives may ultimately transmogrify into myths, as knowledge of the genealogical connections of the original dreamer are lost. One of these myths tells the story of a woman who visits the land of the dead. Another tells of a journey to a land above the sky.

### Quasi-Philosophical Dilemmas of Knowing

Let me return now to the question of what is wrong with the classical anthropological formulations regarding the relationship of language to reality or of culture to the world. The classical formulation imagines an isolated individual experiencing the world, his or her head filled with culture and language. The formulation asks: what is the relation between culture and experience? Is culture, as knowledge about the world encoded in words, arbitrary with respect to the world as experienced?

You can now see that this formulation is impoverished. In fact, it is hopelessly impoverished. A representation of the world that an isolated individual forms is at best only marginally cultural. It is, initially, asocial and inaccessible to others. We do not know whether it has the prospect of entering the realm of culture. If it is to do so, it must be socially transmitted, socially circulated. Otherwise, it cannot achieve the status of culture as thing-in-the-world that is also, simultaneously, a representation of the world.

Here is one kind of quasi-philosophical dilemma that arises from the misformulation regarding culture and experience: if culture as representation is arbitrary with respect to the world, then the world is resolutely unknowable. We have to give up on truth. Every possible

representation that an individual can form is equally as true as every representation that any other individual can form. This seems an absurd position. I am caricaturing this position, of course, but my caricature is really not so far from the point of view of deconstruction or radical cultural relativity.

The problem with the formulation is that it ignores the side of culture as thing-in-the-world. If culture is to get inside the heads of individuals, then it must first be outside those heads. It must be in perceptible reality. It must be an object in the world, something that is "out there." And our experience of what is out there must be in some measure determinate of the cultural representations we hold. Otherwise, how could those representations be cultural?

By no means do I think that all problems of representation and truth are thereby resolved. But I do think that my reformulation turns the quasi-philosophical problems into ethnographically investigable ones. The question becomes not "What is the relation between culture and experience?" but rather "What is the relationship between culture as experienceable object in the world and the representations of the world that are contained in it?"

### Getting Back to Reality

This reformulation spawns its own interesting problems of knowing. We need to ask: What kinds of discourse—and more generally, what kinds of cultural forms—are good to replicate? Which ones circulate more readily? Which ones die out?

And here we must open up the question of forms of knowing. Is an instance of discourse circulated because of the conscious content it encodes, what linguistic anthropologists call the "semantic meaning"? The latter represents one kind of knowing, but only one kind. This form of knowing is not directly applicable to other kinds of culture, such as ceramic styles or dance movements.

In the Ibirama case, culture as representation of the world becomes culture as object in the world only once it has taken on experienceable, objectlike qualities. The question is whether and in what measure the objectlike qualities of culture that also contains semantic meanings—and here I mean discourse—are responsible for the appeal of that culture. In what measure does discourse circulate because of its experienceable qualities? In what measure does it circulate because of its semantic meanings?

The experienceable qualities of discourse are empirically investigable, and indeed, my colleagues and I have been conducting precisely this sort of investigation for some time. In one example from my own research, I looked carefully at the appeal of one episode from a myth. In this myth, honey was originally encased in stone, and the birds tried to pierce through the stone. First one bird tried, but its beak broke. Then another bird tried, but its beak broke, and so forth, until finally a tiny woodpecker succeeded.

I have just described the representational content of this myth fragment. What I discovered about this fragment, as experienceable discourse, is that there is an overall intonation level to each of these episodes. Moreover, the level rises from one episode to the next. This gradually elevating intona-



Greg Urban (Photo by Donna Billingsley)

tion produces an emotional intensification. I conclude that the emotional intensification provided by these non-semantic qualities is in part responsible for the appeal of the myth fragment.

Such aesthetic experiences of culture as object represent forms of knowing. This kind of "knowing," through the aesthetic or feelingful characteristics of experienceable forms, is one way in which people make contact with the world, in which the world discloses itself to people. Furthermore, it is an ethnographically studiable way.

My claim here is that ethnographic research occupies a privileged position with regard to the study of knowledge and its limitations. Insofar as aspects of culture other than semantic or representational meaning are responsible for the appeal and circulability of cultural objects, there is reason to be suspicious of truth claims. All anthropologists ought to be able to agree on that. Truth claims contained in culturally circulating discourses need to be subjected to close ethnographic scrutiny. We need to ask: What is the basis of the appeal of this discourse?

Ethnography also allows us to study what we know must be the case, if our premise is that culture is socially learned. What must be the case is that there are interconversions between culture as representation of the world and culture as thing in the world. It is this process of interconversion, this positive tapping into the world, that we must also investigate ethnographically. It holds out to us the hope of understanding the variation in truth not as something that proves the equal validity of every truth claim, but rather as something that reveals the different ways in which the world can be positively tapped into, the different ways in which reality is disclosed to human beings.

[Greg Urban, professor of anthropology at the U of Pennsylvania, has spent 4 years in Brazil studying the languages and cultures of indigenous peoples. He is interested in the inner mechanisms of culture, especially processes of discourse circulation and replication. His recent publications include: *Metaphysical Community: The Interplay of the Senses and the Intellect* (1996), on which the present article is based, and *Natural Histories of Discourse* (coedited with Michael Silverstein, 1996), dealing with the closely related problem of entextualization.]