Martin Holbraad


Martin Holbraad’s challenging and often mind-bending study of Cuban Ifá practice is not your padrino’s Ifá manual. Nor is it a typical ethnographic account of Cuban Ifá, if such a project is construed, as it usually is, to be an attempt to represent Ifá practice in anthropological terms. Holbraad proposes the inverse project of reading anthropological theory through the ontological lens of Ifá divination—what he calls “recursive anthropology.”

He begins by questioning the goals of anthropology as “representation” and instead proposing to peer back through the other end of the telescope, using the “ethnographic object” of Ifá to focus analytical attention on the way anthropologists go about making sense of and discovering truth in our ethnographic endeavors. He asks: what happens if we accept Cuban babalawos’ claims to produce truth through their manipulations of palm nuts and aché, taken to mean both powder and power? A recursive anthropology, he suggests, would refigure the notion of truth—anthropological truth—away from what he shows to be a deeply problematic project of “representing alterity.” In the place of representational truth-propositions he suggests a motile and open-ended truth-making through inventive definition, or “infinition.”

Holbraad starts with the premise that Cuban babalawos approach Ifá divination as infallible truth in a way incommensurable with anthropologists’ commonsense notions of truth as (un)falsifiable propositions. Such ethnographic encounters with incommensurability drive the anthropological construction of alterity, reducing Others’ understandings of the world either to belief (e.g. “magical thinking”) or to some half-baked notion of “alternate rationalities” of the sort no longer called “primitive mentalities,” at least not out loud. The problem, he argues, is not a matter of logic but of ontology, and specifically of how we understand truth. With meticulous precision and an impressive mobilization of Western analytic philosophy and classic anthropological theory, Holbraad develops an account of non-representational truth-as-a-verb through motile recombinations of truth-trajectories that create new entities through infinition: making, rather than defining, world and subject. Holbraad’s “motile” ontology of truth-making might, after all, approach the ontographic premises of Ifá “papers” and manuals of the sort your padrino jealously studies to develop his practice.

This is not your advisor’s ethnographic monograph either, unless perchance your advisor is Marilyn Strathern or Roy Wagner, two of Holbraad’s major interlocutors in the text. (Caroline Humphrey was his advisor, for those who share
babalawos’ penchant for tracking ritual lineages.) What he takes from them and from Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (and yes, Bruno Latour too, looking back to E.E. Evans-Pritchard) is an abiding metatheoretical project of questioning the production of anthropological knowledge. These scholars have variously engaged in reflexive examination of anthropology, including its very “invention of culture” (as Wagner would have it). Viveiros de Castro (2002), for example, provides a starting point for Holbraad in his critique of the idea that anthropologists should pursue the question of “belief”; instead we should be interested in what Others’ understandings of the world tell us about their experiences and ontologies and, by extension, Holbraad argues, our own (pp. 49–52).

Holbraad’s project is therefore not “reflexive” in the sense of doing the ethnography (or ethnohistory) of scholarship, and as such it does not directly engage the concerns of scholars such as Lee Baker, Stefania Capone, Lorand Matory, Stephan Palmié, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, or Brackette Williams. Instead he builds his subtle but powerful argument as philosophers do, by taking readers through a series of reductio ad absurdum exercises to show the inadequacy of mainstream representationist theories of truth. In tone and approach, his text instead resonates with natural language philosophy (e.g., Hallen 2000). He is less than convincing in positioning his project as fundamentally anthropological rather than philosophical, to “demonstrate that anthropology is equipped to advance its own answers to its own questions in its own way, by showing, recursively, how this can be done” (p. xx).

Fair enough, but as audaciously contemporary as Holbraad’s metatheoretical concerns are, there is something rather old-fashioned, let us say, about a style of argumentation that reduces what we all know to be considerable ethnographic messiness to normative statements about what babalawos do, and why, in which solitary, largely decontextualized ethnographic examples are made to stand for sweeping generalities, and historical context is sidelined as irrelevant. (Here is where scholarship exemplified by those listed above might deserve more than a cursory nod.)

This is not a book for those seeking an introductory ethnography of Ifá in Cuba, nor answers to questions about who babalawos are, who consults them (beyond “mostly women”), nor how Ifá divinations matter in the Cuban context in any but the broadest ontological terms of being taken to be indubitably true by some (but not all) Cubans. Indeed, just how the incommensurable ontologies of divinatory infinition and skeptical representationalism co-occur would be an excellent follow-up project of “ontography.” Especially jarring to my own obsessions as a linguistic anthropologist, Holbraad gives only cursory attention to what we know about the workings of language, meaning that his text is not informed by post-1970 developments in semiotics or performativity.
theory that also critique the representationalist accounts of structuralism and speech act theory. And yet, caveats aside and skeptical thinking cap firmly in place, this is a compelling and important read.

The book accomplishes what it does set out as its aim, which is more ambitious than speaking to other Caribbeanists or scholars of the Black Atlantic. In rigorously pursuing our analytical aporia, Holbraad’s work will be indispensible to those of us who seek to understand the “truth” of these locales.

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References