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COMMENTARY and DEBATE

Scholarship, Politics, and Dialogical Anthropology

DENNIS TEDLOCK

> The dialogue of cultures . . . characterizes our age and . . . is incarnated by ethnology, at once the child of colonialism and the proof of its death throes: a dialogue in which no one has the last word, in which neither voice is reduced to the status of a simple object.
>
> —Tzvetan Todorov

There is a great dialogical potential in social and cultural anthropology. I say potential, but the dialogue has been there all along in the very doing of anthropology, or at least the part of the doing that takes place in the field. Anthropology is in fact founded upon the very possibility of dialogues that might reach back and forth across rifts of linguistic, cultural, and social difference. But once the field is left behind and books are published, dialogue has a way of disappearing beneath forms of writing that keep anthropological voices and native voices segregated in separate volumes. In ethnographic monographs we mostly hear the voice of an omniscient narrator, declaring, in the third-person plural, what the natives think and do. If we want to hear a native voice

Dennis Tedlock is a member of the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, NJ.

for longer than the time it takes to utter what anthropologists call a "native term," we have to go to a separate book, a volume of "native texts," in which only the natives speak and the anthropologist all but disappears, as if no one had been there asking for texts, recording them, and responding to them. Considering these two kinds of books together creates a dialogue of sorts, but with a very long wait for the change from the anthropological to the native voice. And even then, after all that third-person anthropological narrative, we hear mostly third-person native narrative. In both cases the voices of individuals are subordinated to the voices of traditions.

If we want to hear narratives of first-hand experience once again we have to look for separate books, and once again they fall into two main types. One of these is the native life history, a counterpart to the native text collection, and the other is the anthropologist's confessions of what goes on in the field before ethnographies come to be written. The strange thing is that even in most confessions there is very little quoted dialogue. In this particular sense they are quite similar to the very ethnographies from which they supposedly break away. On the native side of the matter, one thing native text collections and native life histories have in common is a great deal of quoted dialogue. Even if only one person is speaking a long narrative, many different voices may be acted out, even down to their dialects, foreign accents, and personal idiosyncracies, as they narrate, make speeches, cite proverbs, say prayers, or break into song.

It used to be that the same anthropologists who worked at producing ethnographies also worked on text collections, but that ceased to be the case when American cultural anthropology was diverted from its course by British social anthropology, which tended to treat the utterances of natives as falsehoods and illusions concealing truths that could be revealed only by anthropologists. The collection of texts fell to separate field workers whose concerns were narrowly linguistic and who increasingly pursued their careers in separate academic departments. In hindsight we can see that only within an anthropology thus impoverished would it become possible for theorists to speak of metaphorical conversations with other cultures, to describe cultures as assemblages of metaphorical texts, or to call for the metaphorical hermeneutics of these metaphorical texts, all without pausing to consider the existence of actual conversations, actual texts, and

actual hermeneutics. The language of this "interpretive" anthropology is haunted by ghostly murmurs of departed texts, and the articulate voices in those texts have only just begun to speak again.

The call for an anthropology in which the dialogues of the field situation are carried over into publication is both old and new. Thirty years ago Paul Radin called for dialogues, citing a couple of promising examples that had already been published by that time. One of these was an exchange that took place between J. R. Walker, a physician, and Finger, an Oglala holy man; the other was between Marcel Griaule, a French ethnologist, and Ogotemêlli, a Dogon priest.[1] If dialogical anthropology has founders, Fingers, Walker, Ogotemêlli, and Griaule must be reckoned among them. More recently Kevin Dwyer and I have published articles that renew Radin's call.[2] Dwyer's advocacy came after the fact of his actual dialogues with Faqir Muhammad in Morocco; in the same way, I was moved by my exchanges with Andrew Peynetsa in New Mexico and Andrés Xiloj Peruch in Guatemala. Dwyer and I began our advocacy separately; he did not learn of my work in time for his book, *Moroccan Dialogues*, but I added a mention of his article when I reprinted my own article in *The Spoken Word*.[3] Meanwhile Allan F. Burns, stimulated by his dialogues with Alonso Gonzales Mó and others in Yucatán, published an article and then a book, *An Epoch of Miracles*, demonstrating that even the performance of narratives can have dialogical implications for the would-be observer.[4]

For the 1984 meetings of the American Anthropological Association, Bruce Mannheim, Burns, and I organized an all-day session entitled "The Dialogic Emergence of Culture," with Dwyer among the participants. The most intensely dialogical presentations were those of Alton L. Becker and Mannheim, which took the form of a dialogue between them, and that of Billie Jean Isbell, in which she quoted from a four-way dialogue involving herself and three speakers of Peruvian Quechua—a mother, daughter, and granddaughter.[5] As might be guessed from the session title, by this time we were all reading *The Dialogic Imagination*, a collection of essays by the Russian literary theorist M. M. Bakhtin that first appeared in English translation in 1981.[6] Our allusion to Bakhtin may be partly to blame for the widespread but erroneous notion that anthropological interest in dialogue somehow got its start from Bakhtin, but it was probably also a factor

in making our session one of the liveliest and best-attended of the whole convention. Perhaps this is what prompted two recent commentators on anthropological developments to call dialogue both "fashionable" and "modernist," simultaneously wishing it away as faddish and implying that it was already out of date anyway (instead of deserving the label "postmodernist").[7] In any case, the 1986 meetings again included a lively session on dialogue (with myself among the participants), this time organized by Tullio Maranhão, whose *Therapeutic Discourse and Socratic Dialogue* had just been published.[8]

In *The Spoken Word*, my first essay on dialogical anthropology became part of a four-chapter section entitled "Toward Dialogue." Arnold Krupat, in a review of the book that was published in the pages of this journal,[9] devotes most of his attention to this section. Quickly disposing of the first essay of the section (chapter 13 of the book), Krupat calls it "a late-stage variant of that ethnographic genre James Clifford calls the 'fable [. . .] of rapport,'" a narrative in which the anthropologist "presents results which could not have been obtained without a considerable degree of acceptance" (50). Nothing of my own words is quoted; they disappear beneath the label borrowed from Clifford. I had thought the chapter showed me getting into all sorts of trouble, even making a clown of myself, and that its main point was that neither artificial nor spontaneous contexts can produce pristine native texts unaffected by their collectors. "Comedy of errors" might come closer to the mark than "fable of rapport." And what is "late-stage variant" supposed to mean?

Submitting a piece of writing to a sort of archaeological dating, even in the act of reviewing it soon after publication, is not what one would call a scholarly move, but it is a recognizable move in the game of academic politica. In effect this move deprives writers of the right to speak to their readers except from out of the ever-more-irrelevant past. It is a move that runs directly counter to the spirit of dialogue, in which all the parties to a given exchange enjoy the status of contemporaries. And it is analogous to a familiar anthropological move, well documented by Johannes Fabian, by which an exotic culture is treated as if it existed not only in a distant place but also in another time.[10] This time might be a fictitious "ethnographic present" in which nothing ever changes, or it might be a "stage" in a universal scheme of evolution or progress that is different from the "stage" occupied by

the anthropologist's own culture. But at least Krupat did not find my essay "primitive"; whatever "stage" it may belong to, it is "late."

As he continues his discussion of the dialogical section of my book, Krupat repeatedly cites an essay by Clifford that deals (in part) with dialogue,[11] remarking, in a footnote, that "Tedlock and Clifford are concerned with many of the same issues although neither mentions the other's work" (55). My book appeared in 1983, but Krupat mistakenly cites Clifford's essay as having appeared in 1977, which would seem to put me in a bad position where the politics of who-should-have-cited-whom is concerned. I hope at least a handful of readers will know, or will discover by means of scholarship, that Clifford's essay appeared not in 1977 but in 1983 (the first year the journal in which it appeared was published), and that my initial essay on the subject of dialogue was first published in 1979. So as far as this particular citation game is concerned, the shoe is on the other foot.

A combination of the citation game with the denial of contemporaneity emerges when Krupat states, again in a note, that "Clifford is attentive to Bakhtin; Tedlock is not" (55). The Bakhtin volume cited by Krupat (also cited by Clifford) is the same one cited above, published in 1981. I could not have cited it in 1979, and it might very well have appeared too late for the production deadlines on my book. In any case I willingly confess that my own copy of this volume is not a first edition but comes from the second paperback printing, dated the same year as my book, and I plead no contest in the race to cite Bakhtin. Clifford's first writings about dialogue and his first citations of Bakhtin appeared together in 1983, but by 1986 he was also citing what Dwyer and I had said.[12] As a postscript I should add that he was among the invited commentators at "The Dialogic Emergence of Culture" session in 1984. The irony is that in his remarks he took pains to dissociate himself from any allegiance to any particular movement within anthropology, including any such thing as a dialogical movement.

At the most general level, Krupat structures his critique along the lines of a contrast (borrowed from Clifford) between "experience" and "interpretation," the former corresponding to work in the field and the latter to work that gets done in an office or study (49). Having set up this dichotomy, he then ignores the section of my book entitled "Hermeneutics" and argues that my

call for dialogue valorizes "experience," whereas there are others (including himself) who place greater value on "interpretation" (50–53). This is the same sort of maneuver as the one by which anthropologists have cast the natives in the role of producers (or "performers") of texts while reserving interpretation for themselves, only now it is the anthropologists (or at least the dialogical ones) who are to be producers, leaving interpretation to those whose discourse is (in Krupat's words) "unapologetically . . . academic" and who hope "to achieve . . . scientific status" (53). This invocation of the awesome authority of Western science, a familiar move in academic politics, runs directly against the grain of intercultural dialogue.

The kind of science Krupat has in mind is "self-critical" (53), which means that it might have dialogue going on inside it and on its own terms, but the intercultural discourse of dialogical anthropology necessarily requires science to be subject to criticism from outside itself. The movement from the field to the study does not require an end to intercultural dialogue; not only do interpreters ask questions of texts, but texts can ask questions of interpreters. I make an argument of this sort in my book (333–36), and Krupat, despite his declaration of allegiance to the ruling discourse of academia, makes a similar point when he says "I value the voice-within-the-text" (53). But if it is true that a departure from the field does not mean the end of dialogue, it is also true that an arrival in the study does not mean the beginning of interpretation. The natives themselves possess the capacity to interpret texts, in the sense of talking about what is handed down in tradition (*The Spoken Word*, 51, 169–76, 293, 310). They not only tell stories but also comment on them, and they even make interpretive moves in the very process of the telling (10–11, 17–18, 235–44, 255). An interpreter from outside is, in effect, joining a discussion that is always already under way. This is at the heart of what makes the interpretation of texts so different from the scientific investigation of natural phenomena.

One of the marks of past and present dialogical anthropology is that the movement from the field to the study does not draw a mask of anonymity over the people anthropologists talk with in the field. They are not dubbed Informant A, Informant B, and Informant C, nor do they live in such places as Zoomie, New Mexico or Tecpanaco, Guatemala (which appear in anthropological publications but not on maps). Rather, they emerge as real

individuals who have real names and live in real places. In all the cases I know of, including my own and that of Dwyer, the decision to use real names was made in consultation with the persons named. At the same time, there is probably no one on the face of this earth who says everything "on the record." In many, perhaps most, countries it is dangerous to express any but a rather narrow range of political views, and there is no lack of countries in which a safe view can suddenly become a dangerous one. In some ways the most dangerous views of all are those that are long, complicated, and well thought-out, and therefore not easily subsumed under whatever current slogans may be used to sort out shining heroes from mortal enemies.

Whatever the situation in Morocco, Faqir Muhammad made it quite clear to Kevin Dwyer that discussions of politics were not to be made public, and Dwyer honored his wish. In the case of Guatemala, the political climate changes fast enough to make safe views dangerous (and vice-versa) several times within an individual's lifetime, a situation that has obtained at least since the time of Guatemalan independence. It should hardly come as a surprise to anyone that most Guatemalans, Indian and non-Indian alike, who live in Guatemala and plan to go on doing so are reluctant to talk about national politics at all, even when asked to, and would be horrified to have their views published in any way that would make it possible to trace their exact sources.

Clearly, our personal political risks here in this country are vastly different from the risks of individuals living in Guatemala. Krupat takes no notice of this difference when he introduces Guatemalan politics into his review of *The Spoken Word*. He does it by way of a footnote, which makes the whole matter seem secondary, but then the footnote goes on for the better part of a page (55). He brings in outside sources to demonstrate the existence of important political events I failed to mention, but then he adds a disclaimer: "I am neither an historian nor a political scientist"—neither am I, by the way—"and I have quoted only from two popular, media sources." However much the sources may require an apology, Krupat "wishes to thank Claude Lehman for his research on Guatemala" (47). All through the note are words and phrases such as "it should be mentioned," "do not seem," "seems to have," "it seems to me reasonable to wonder," "as I tend to think likely," "perhaps," and "one

might want to know'' (55). Just what is it ''one might want to know,'' and for what purpose? Krupat writes as if the intended audience of this footnote ought to know perfectly well what he means. He leaves the realm of forthright criticism and argumentation and enters into that of innuendo. It is hard to escape the conclusion that he raises the question of Guatemalan politics not for scholarly purposes, but for the purposes of academic politics.

Even though Krupat is writing a ''review essay'' with my book as his subject, he never does offer an argument as to why a mention of the events he discusses in his footnote would have shed any light on the issues discussed in the book. Tracing the footnote back to his main text doesn't help. Here is the sentence to which it is appended (with Krupat's elisions and bracketed insertions): ''Tedlock's essay ' . . . answers the question as to why Don Andrés laughed [at a passage Western translators and interpreters had not previously found funny] . . . while I [Dennis Tedlock] looked on at what he was reading' '' (50). What Don Andrés was laughing at, by the way, was a parody of sexual intercourse in which a crocodile tries to get it on with a crab. Krupat begins his footnote this way: ''It should be mentioned that Tedlock's 'looking on' at texts and listening in to stories do not seem to be accompanied by any looking out at the context of his and his informants' acts'' (55). He does nothing to substantiate ''any'' with respect to ''context,'' and given the content of the rest of the note, ''context'' comes off as nothing more than an ironic reference to the fact that I do not mention recent political violence.

Despite his use of disclaimers, innuendo, and irony, Krupat asks the reader to accept certain statements as simply factual. He gives the Indian proportion of Guatemala's population as 55%; anthropologists would put that figure between 60% and 80%.[13] His most important point is that Momostenango, the town where I did my field work, is ''in Quiché province,'' which is, in the words of a media source (but in Krupat's italics), ''*one of the areas most affected by political violence*'' (55). Here he throws scholarship to the winds in his haste to play politics. Quiché is first of all the name of a Mayan language and the people who speak it, who are spread across six of Guatemala's twenty-two departments (not ''provinces''). One of the six is the department referred to in Krupat's sources, properly called El Quiché, a department which has *no town named Momostenango anywhere in it*. Quichés share El

Quiché with the Ixil Maya, who live in its three northernmost towns, separated from the nearest Quiché town by a formidable mountain range. It is in the rural areas near the Ixil towns that the guerrilla activity referred to in Krupat's sources was focussed—activity that continues, if on a reduced scale, today. From an Indian point of view, Momostenango is a three days' journey from these towns.

Momostenango, which happens to be one of the most Indian of all Guatemalan towns (98% even by the official census), is located in the department of Totonicapán, which is the most Indian of all departments—and, at the same time, one of the areas *least affected* by political violence. The people of Totonicapán have long been successful at deflecting such violence. During all the years under discussion there were no army occupations of their towns and no massacres, and the "civil guards" of these towns, which never had much to do, have been disbanded by now. I mention all this because in general the media are interested in Guatemalan Indians only as victims, a theme that has a certain resonance in the white North American ear. Another story that sells easily is the one that says (in words quoted by Krupat), "Support by the Indians for the guerrillas . . . immediately increased" (55) following some incident. What about the thousands of people who saw themselves as caught in the crossfire and fled for their lives?[14] What are traditionalists to do when a secular ideologue tells them that present-day Indian culture lacks any legitimate ties with the past and is nothing but false consciousness? Or when a clerical ideologue combines talk of political liberation with a renewed call for the renunciation of all gods except the One True God, the one that was brought by Europeans? The popular film *El Norte* is distorted along such lines; it does let the Indians have languages and costumes of their own, but it reduces Indian religion to a local variant on Catholicism, accompanied by strange superstitions.

It is certainly true that many thousands of Guatemalans have been killed, injured, or exiled during recent political violence there, violence that first reached a large scale in the Panzós massacre of 1978 (in the department of Alta Vera Paz) and is now returning to a level that has long passed for "normal." But in the absence of spectacular violence, it remains to be seen how much interest the media will continue to take in Guatemalan Indians—other than the ones who built cities there a thousand years ago.

The *New York Times* (one of Krupat's two sources) is far more likely to run a double-column, illustrated front-page story under the headline "Untouched Mayan Tomb Is Discovered" (May 23, 1984) than to devote space to the complexity and richness of the knowledge possessed by contemporary Mayan peoples, knowledge without which hieroglyphic decipherment (a hot topic for the science section) could not have gotten nearly as far as it has.

For those who would like to go beyond the popular media (and beyond the tracts of political and missionary organizations) in following recent turmoil in Guatemala, I would suggest *Cultural Survival,* a magazine published at Harvard University; *Guatemalan Scholars Network News,* published by an organization of scholars who have done research in Guatemala; and *Guatemala News in Brief,* published by the Americas Watch Committee.[15] The latter two sources are rich in bibliography. The most interesting and detailed narrative by a Guatemalan Indian about violence inside Guatemala occupies several chapters in *I, Rigoberta Menchú.*[16] Menchú told her story in exile in Paris. Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, who transcribed it, writes: "She talked to me not only because she wanted to tell us about her sufferings but also—or perhaps mainly—because she wanted us to hear about a culture of which she is extremely proud and which she wants to have recognized" (in Menchú, p. xx). Currently Jerónimo Camposeco, Alan Saperstein, and Allan Burns are making videotapes in the large community of Indian refugees from the department of Huehuetenango now living in Indiantown, Florida; one of these, "Maya in Exile," has already been released.[17] The usual division of labor between ethnographers and filmmakers has been broken down, and Camposeco is himself a member of the community in question. The tapes are given public showings within the community, and the comments and suggestions received are taken into account in editing and further taping. In other words, this project is guided by a dialogical spirit. Such a spirit is directly in keeping with the ways of Mayan peoples, for whom the very creation of the world was the result of a dialogue.

NOTES

1. For Paul Radin's discussion of dialogue see his *Primitive Man as Philosopher,* revised edition (New York: Dover, 1957), pp. xxx–xxxi. The dialogue between J. R. Walker and Finger was first published in Walker's "The Sun Dance and Other Ceremonies of the Oglala Division of the Teton Dakota," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* 16 (1917):154–56; that between Marcel Griaule and Ogotemêlli first appeared in English in Griaule's *Conversations With Ogotemêlli* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

2. See Kevin Dwyer, "On the Dialogic of Field Work," *Dialectical Anthropology* 2 (1977):143–51; and Dennis Tedlock, "The Analogical Tradition and the Emergence of a Dialogical Anthropology," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 35 (1979):387–400. The latter article has been translated into Italian (*I giorni cantati* 2, no. 4 [1983]:74–90), German (*Trickster* 12–13 [1985]:62–74), and Brazilian Portuguese (*Anuário Antropológico,* in press).

3. Kevin Dwyer, *Moroccan Dialogues: Anthropology in Question* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); Dennis Tedlock, *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 336n.

4. Allan F. Burns, "Interactive Features in Yucatec Mayan Narratives," *Language in Society* 9 (1980):307–319; *An Epoch of Miracles: Oral Literature of the Yucatec Maya* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

5. Alton L. Becker and Bruce Mannheim, "Culture Troping," and Billie Jean Isbell, "Bicultural Dialogues," papers presented at the 1984 meetings of the American Anthropological Association.

6. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination,* translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

7. George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 68.

8. Tullio Maranhão, *Therapeutic Discourse and Socratic Dialogue: A Cultural Critique* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986).

9. Arnold Krupat, "Mythography and Dialogue in the Study of Native American Literature," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 8, no. 4 (1984): 47–55.

10. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

11. James Clifford, "On Ethnographic Authority," *Representations* 1 (1983): 118–46.

12. James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography,* ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 15.

13. The official census systematically under-counts Indians, overlooking many who live in rural areas and ignoring the ethnic identity of most Indians who both are literate and live in urban centers (even the centers of thoroughly Indian townships).

14. For the full complexities of an actual case, see *Voices of the Survivors: The Massacre at Finca San Francisco, Guatemala. Cultural Survival Occasional Papers* 10 (Cambridge: Cultural Survival, Inc., and the Anthropology Resource Center, 1983).

15. *Cultural Survival* (including many back issues) is available from Cultural Survival, Inc., 11 Divinity Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138. The other two sources are available from Guatemala Scholars Network, c/o Marilyn Moors, 705 Owens St., Rockville, MD 20850; and Americas Watch Committee, 36 West 44th St., New York, NY 10036.

16. Rigoberta Menchú, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, ed. Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, translated by Ann Wright (London: Verso, 1983).

17. Allan Burns and Jerónimo Camposeco, "Maya in Exile," paper presented at the 1986 meetings of the American Anthropological Association. For information on the videotapes write to Burns at Dept. of Anthropology, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611.