

Coeval ethnographic research and allochronic discourse: Comment

Johannes Fabian

It was a pleasure to read an anthropologist who has invested energy, time, and imagination in getting to know an aspect of Sukuma culture. The account of his findings is rich in detail and, on the whole, convincing – in spite of what seems to me a misguided attempt to introduce ‘synchrony’ as a conceptual tool for a critique of structuralist and symbolist approaches to cultural semantics.

Well intentioned as this attempt may be, it does not work. Stroeken may or may not be right when he observes that an analysis of a set of Sukuma terms and expressions, used in connection with abnormal birth and kingship, that considers only the logical (oppositional or implicational) or analogical (metaphorical) relations between terms, concepts, and corresponding phenomena is likely to mispresent such thought as deficient causal reasoning (and call it magic, I would add). Sensing, quite correctly, that structural and symbolic interpretations fall short because they neglect to explore the pragmatic dimensions of sign-systems, he proposes that Sukuma think of relations between terms as ‘synchronous.’ That won’t work. Structural/semiotic and symbolic analyses are based on the premise that relations between elements to be analysed exist outside the flow of time; that is what structuralists mean when they speak of synchrony (a binary opposition is not more or less binary depending on whether it is found to obtain earlier or later).

What Stroeken tries to signal with the term (again and again; after a while the reader has got the point) is the opposite of its structuralist meaning: he pleads, not for eliminating the flow of time but for considering that Sukuma, when they employ the analysed terms in thought, communication, and in practices related to health and fertility, they do this in the flow of time. The terms and their relation then become scripts for cultural performances, a function they cannot have unless they are co-present to the performers. This, I suspect, is the ‘synchrony’ Stroeken is after. Put somewhat differently: what he discovered is not the ‘synchrony’ of terms and concepts but the pragmatic and performative dimension of a striking set of Sukuma notions.

But what of the instances where he does claim that concepts that may suggest some kind of linear or causal relations are thought by the Sukuma as ‘gelijktijdig?’ Here, suspect, he is groping with evidence of truly dialectical thought on the side of the Sukuma. But that is an issue for which there is no room in these brief remarks.

I am not particularly interested in protecting structuralism from being misunderstood. If Stroeken insists on using 'synchrony' for his purposes, he is free to do so, we can live with another case of polysemy (same word, different meanings) though the chances that his innovation will be accepted are slim. But I can't stay cool when I find that the paper contains an outright misunderstanding, one, moreover, that causes the author to place me among post-modern anthropological poseurs (meaning: ethnographic fakes). Whether or not my ethnography is pose can be judged by those who read it. Whether or not I ever maintained that ethnographers cannot attain 'synchrony' is not a matter of debate. I never claimed such a thing. First of all, I avoided speaking of synchronicity; the term I used was coevalness and I explained why it covers what synchronicity doesn't (it is, for instance, not given but must be achieved). Second, I addressed co-temporality as a pragmatic rather than (cosmo-)logical concept. Coevalness is a condition of all communication, hence also of intercultural communication, hence of ethnography to the extent that ethnography is communicative. Third, I said that denial of coevalness occurs on the level of the discourse we pronounce about our ethnographic experiences (and I examined structuralism and symbolic anthropology as examples). I made it clear that our problem is not a failure to attain 'synchronicity' with our interlocutors but the contradiction between coeval ethnographic research and allochronic discourse. So where is my pose?

I still like much of the paper and I learned from it. It's a pity that such a gifted ethnographer shows himself to be such a careless reader of positions he feels need attacking.

Note

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