



Ontologizing Difference: De- and re-naturalizing boundaries

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Abstracts

Annelin Eriksen, UiB

Going to Pentecost: Experiments in Anthropological Comparison

This experiment grows out of an intellectual problem our comparative work on Pentecostalism in Africa and Melanesia has given rise to. The concept of Pentecostalism becomes blurred as we move between the ethnographies of the different case studies. The contexts for the studies (“Africa” and “Melanesia”) also seem to become arbitrary when we zoom into the ethnographic descriptions. Both the “figure” (Pentecostalism) and the “ground” (the regions) for our comparative endeavor are thus questionable. In this paper, which is the work-in progress- introduction for the jointly authored book based on the Gender and Pentecostalism project, we suggest an alternative frame for our comparative project. This alternative implies making “Pentecostalism” the ground for the study, as if one could “go to Pentecost/alism”, in order to move beyond the classical dilemmas of anthropological comparison. This experiment allows us to identify local concepts through which we can understand the processes which are significant to Pentecostalism in the different field sites. We suggest an approach based on the one hand on what Holbraad (2012) calls the onthographic method but on the other hand breaks with what we call the "controlled

equivocation" (Viveiros de Castro 1999) paradigm, in order to enable an analytical gaze that can move beyond the primary comparative relation (the anthropologist-the field site).

Kathinka Frøystad, IKOS, University of Oslo

De-naturalizing religious boundaries: preliminary observations from a Kali temple

Who would have thought that an academic discipline such as ours, whose object of study now includes most thinkable topics throughout the world and analyses them through a bewildering number of analytical lenses, would ever again converge around a new attempt at formulating a Grand Theory? Yet this is what seems to have happened, and the recent effort to bring about an ontological turn to "rescue" a discipline that allegedly is in crisis, is now about to attract as many critics as followers. Though I largely side with the critics (e.g. Bessire & Bond, Vigh & Sausdal, Moore) given my ethnographic positioning in a hypercomplex society saturated with negotiations over meaning and dominance wherever one turns, I also acknowledge some of the points that the ontologists are trying to bring across. This paper thus moves beyond the heated pro/con debate of the present to ask how certain elements from the ontological turn can help us rethink religious boundaries and de-naturalize essentialized religious categories. In terms of ethnography I discuss the case of a Hindu priest who doubles as a *tantric* (a kind of magician), the latter endeavor of which constantly makes him cross official religious boundaries to learn additional ritual specialties from Muslim mystics.

Lars Gjelstad, Dept. of social anthropology, UiB

Disrupting Book Smartness: Critical ethnography of schooling and the 'ontological turn' in anthropology and educational studies

Modern schooling is perhaps the principal institution in naturalizing concepts of nationhood, religion, and democracy as well as key scientific categories related to subjects like biology, economy, and sociology. Modern education also naturalizes concepts of personhood, including the nature of intelligence, thinking and skills. Schooling is vital in disciplining young people into text-oriented modes of apprehending the world. The central problem addressed in this paper is whether a dominant 'culturalist' approach in the anthropology of

education, from Mead to recent Cultural Studies perspectives, actually helps to reinforce a naturalization of propositional knowledge. The paper will discuss whether a recent ‘ontological turn’ may afford some disruptions of this epistemological confinement by opening up alternative modes of world-making. As suggested by Haraway and others, a ‘relational ontology’ may potentially reconfigure the notion of critique itself, and it may therefore offer an alternative to a post-structural legacy of doing ‘critical ethnographies of schooling’. I consider vocational education as a felicitous starting point for exploring alternative ontologies, given its broad range of assemblages of materials, tools, skills and sensory engagements. My empirical point of departure is an ethnographic study of vocational education in Norway. The field is typically constituted by ways of knowing growing out of practices of ‘making’ (Ingold) rather than interpretation or reading. I will also link up with Henrietta Moore’s recent engagement with STS, her argument that although materiality is immanent to sociality, anthropology needs a solid theory of the distinct capacities of human beings. This and other recent efforts to develop an ontology of human subjectivity and bodily movements (Ingold, Toren, Farnell) may actually represent a ‘strong’ alternative to a post-human ontological turn that is also emerging within the interdisciplinary field of educational studies (Leander, Sørensen, Fenwick), where human subjects are often considered as merely effects of shifting assemblages.

Signe Howell, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo

SEEING, BEING AND KNOWING: THE RELATIONALITY OF SPECIES IN CHEWONG ANIMISTIC ONTOLOGY

Drawing on ethnographic material from Chewong, a hunting, gathering and shifting cultivating group of people in the Malaysian rain forest, I shall discuss how Chewong ontology and cosmology conflate with a comprehensive understanding of causal processes in ‘nature’ in which every object is a potential subject. Identity is a question of the particular physicality–interiority relationship in each case which is species-specific and which is manifested by the eye through which each perceives reality. I suggest that Chewong do not divide the world into human versus the rest of nature, but that they make a distinction between those species who have consciousness (*ruwai*) and those who do not.

My discussion will be linked to a trend in contemporary anthropology that dissolves the division between humanity and nature; a trend that leads one to ask if the “anthropos” that

has given the discipline its name, is destined to become an anachronism. The ethnographic study of animistic ontologies raises important questions of the wider ramifications of our studies. Despite the fact that Chewong subjectivity cuts across species, this does mean that they are not Chewong-centric. I am going to argue *against* the current post-humanist vogue and *for* human exceptionalism.

Marianne Lien, Sosialantropologisk Institutt, UiO

A salmon ceremony as an ethnographic event;

The simultaneous performance of capitalism and egalitarianism in West Norway

What is an industrial company? Is it a social fact, an organizational entity capable of harnessing people and things towards its own socio-economic reproduction? Or is it rather the fragile outcome of heterogeneous practices which now and then assemble to perform something that resembles a coherent entity? The question resonates ongoing debates in anthropology about the status of the human subject, the distribution of agency and the purchase of terms like culture, society, nature and the material.

This paper explores the analytical implications of each of these approaches through the ethnographic lens of an event that I witnessed during fieldwork in the aquaculture industry in West Norway. The event could be coded as ceremonial and generative of a feeling of belonging, as well as embracing egalitarian values. The ethnographic site happens to be fairly close to where John Barnes conducted fieldwork in the 1950's, where he coined equality as a value which was later inscribed as the egalitarian ethos descriptive of the Nordic region.

Hence, the event illustrates a familiar cultural trope, but is also, I shall argue, generative of hierarchies and more-than-human socialities that cannot be captured by this approach.

I approach the ethnographic event as a point of convergence between the generative theoretical ambitions in anthropology (cf. the Manchester school) and science studies asking: What are the ontological assumptions of each approach and what insights can be generated through them?

Jon Henrik Ziegler Remme, UiO

Ontology – chronically unstable: Ontological dynamics and the ‘difference within’

The ontological turn in anthropology has rightly been criticized for accentuating radical difference and analytically re-establishing boundaries between worlds. In this paper, I discuss how a more dynamic notion of ontology can help us think differently about what ontological difference might entail. I do that by drawing on ethnographic material from Ifugao, the Philippines, which shows how the modes of being of entities are chronically unstable and require particular relational practices to become momentarily stabilized. I use this material for developing a notion of ontological dynamics that emphasizes transformability and which sees the eventual boundedness of ontological difference as an emergent effect of ongoing practices. I show how in Ifugao all beings (or perhaps rather, becomings) have an inherent potential for becoming transformed into something different and explore how encounters with such transformations – mainly in sacrificial rituals – are forms of comparison with the ‘difference within’, i.e. the potential for becoming different that always exists in one’s own relational becoming. I thus try to creatively de-naturalize the connections between ontology, boundedness and alterity that the debate on the ontological turn revolves around and by that explore how an ontologically minded anthropology can avoid compartmentalizing difference.

Knut Mikje Rio, Universitetsmuseet

Ontology and globalization

This talk will address the question if the ontological turn in anthropology depends on a notion of separate or different ontologies. One often gets the impression that the turn relies on research materials from Amazonia or Papua New Guinea and societies that are really irreducible to general anthropological concepts. My argument will be that for ontology to be a valid category it has to be equally applicable to all human societies. And, further, that the issue of what is called ‘globalization’ also becomes a major question. Is it possible, and is it useful, to identify a globalizing ontology or a world-system ontology?

Olaf H. Smedal, University of Bergen

What do the rocks say?

In the frequently occurring rituals enacted by the Ngadha of Flores, Eastern Indonesia, various entities are mobilised: first of all people (by drawing on networks of kinship, friendship, rank, and alliance). Moreover, rituals involve the display or actual use of specific objects – often classified as heirlooms (e.g., weapons, jewellery, human remains) understood to be inalienable wealth. Third, other substances (mainly vegetal and animal) employed must be procured (fetched from the forest or an animal enclosure; borrowed from friends and relatives, bought at regular markets). Fourth, animals featuring in ritual are consecrated and sacrificed and whenever a sacrifice is conducted ancestors are understood to be present as participants – both by consuming sacrificial matter in their own manner and by responding to queries by way of manipulating biological matter. Each Ngadha ritual is thus an event where economic activity (planned or frantic, minor or major) precedes the event itself and where humans interact with each other and in various ways with non-humans (e.g., solid objects, animals, ancestral spirits). While the paper touches on these attributes it concentrates on a rare ritual occasion featuring a foundational heirloom – a pair of rocks – of mythic provenance and uncertain properties.

Christian Sørhaug, Telemark Research Institute

Holding house in Crazy Waters: Reassembling sociality in Amazonia

The aim of this paper is to explore the possibility of reinvigorating anthropological theories of household studies through the ontological turn. Pivotal in this theoretical approach is decentralizing the analysis, investigating human and nonhumans symmetrically, thereby opting for a more inclusive and holistic study of householding. The suggestion is to analyze households as heterogenic assemblages of human and nonhumans. Studying householding as an emerging event, instead of as static units for distribution, production and consumption, affords a novel view of peoples realities. Reassembling sociality in the Amazon symmetrically is a method to grasp the everyday householding practices that people engage. The Warao Indians of the Venezuelan Orinoco River Delta live on stilted houses on the river's edge in the tidal zone of the Atlantic. The houses are literally held by poles in the

waters, connected with footbridges between the houses. The tidal waters crisscrossing the myriads of rivers and channels daily flood thousands of islands. Canoes do all movement in this landscape, where the waterways function as paths. In this environment fishing, gardening, hunting and gathering makes out the most important part of the procurement tasks. However, the Warao economy entangles with postcolonial institutions, national and transnational; welfare funds, cash crop, suitcase art, travels to urban centers trading and gathering at a garbage heap. These practices are involved in householding and become part of enacting sociality for the Warao of the 21st Century.

Kari Telle, Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI)

‘False prophets ’: Blasphemy and ontological contests in Indonesian courts

Since 1998, when Indonesians embarked on a process of democratization after three decades of authoritarian rule, there has been a sharp rise in accusations of ‘insults to Islam’ and ensuing court cases. This paper provides an analysis of a blasphemy trial in which a 70-year old Sasak Muslim man, who claimed to have received revelations from the Angel Gabriel and to have ascended to ‘heaven’ (*surga*) on several occasions, was charged under Indonesia’s criminal code with the offence of ‘insulting a religion’ (*penodaan agama*). Probing the ontological and semiotic divides that were exposed during this case, I reflect on the trial as a ‘religion-making’ technology, one that renders certain forms of religiosity abject. This analysis will engage critically with certain claims for a post-humanist radical alterity.

Martin Thomassen, Department of social anthropology, NTNU Trondheim

Reflections on grounded methodology: The ontological turn meets art-talk between 1989-2015

I would like to explore why *radical ontology* talk in the social sciences is in vogue at this particular point in time: Why now? And what kind of politics does it have?

Basing my ethnography on the art-world vocabulary between 1989-2015, I suggest that radical ontology talk belongs firmly to a global, contemporary, post-colonial and decentered (art) world, i.e. it is this world that brings this talk to life. But also this; radical alterity is not

the only talk in town, in the social sciences, nor in the art-world. Radical alterity is in both places contested by the talk of *radical relationality*, which is yet another true born child of today's (art) world, a world devoid of any one center, where everyone is contemporary and where denying coevalness on the part of the "other" simply will no longer stand. This talk is about relationality, suggesting not radical difference between many "worlds" but hybridity within one and the same "world".

Both claims are highly politically charged; they have what we may call a politics. As for radical ontology, it's a politics of autonomy (cultural identity). As for radical relationality, it's a politics of affinities (global kinship). Both politics are practiced and called for. So why should there be only one politics in social science method?

Hege Toje, UiB

"Capturing Sochi. The 2014 Russian Winter Olympic Games as an arena for contestations over past, present and future in the Caucasus".

In February 2014 Russia hosted the Winter Olympics in Sochi, a city situated on the Russian shores of the Black Sea Coast. As the Olympics in Sochi were approaching, tensions were arising on multiple levels. The preparations for the Olympics had been hampered by delays in building processes produced partly by poor planning and challenging material conditions for the Olympic construction, and partly by corruption and mismanagement. The event was coinciding with the 150 year anniversary of the exodus of the Circassian people in 1864 from the port of Sochi to the Ottoman Empire, at end of the Great Caucasian War.

Circassian activists seized the occasion to raise political issues of historical grievances prior to the Olympics, and specifically to lobby for the facilitation of the repatriation of Circassian diaspora to their historical homelands in the northwestern Caucasus. A third source of unrest surrounding the Olympics was radical Islamic groups. The Emir of the self-proclaimed Caucasus emirate, Doku Umarov, lifted in June 2013 the moratorium on attacks within the Russian territory and has called for a "use of maximum force" to ensure that the Games were disrupted. The rationale for the Olympics as target for violent attacks is that it is to be held on the bones of their ancestors and fellow Muslims.

This paper will explore these tensions by looking at different forms of territorial capture in the shape of contested spatial histories, maps, and the forging of territorial connections and

solidarities across the Caucasus and beyond. It will be argued that these claims can be seen as a struggle over territory and homelands where political imaginaries of past, present and future compete. Circassian and Islamist claims hinged on a different and largely silenced history, and by so doing, de-naturalized Russian territorial and historical claims to the Caucasus casting critical light over sovereign practices of symbolically inscribing the territory by naming, erecting statues and memorials, and of rule. The aim here is not to give a full account of the Olympic Games as political and cultural spectacle, but rather, to explore how the Olympic Games opened up for a set of competing spatial histories that all claimed their own set of “truth”.

Cecilie Ødegaard, UiB

Blood, fat and predation in the Andes

This paper takes as its point of departure the well-documented figure of the *kharisiri* in the Andes, who steals the blood and fat of un-suspecting humans and sells it to priests or doctors, the devil or mountain spirits. Such loss of fat or blood has generally been interpreted as metaphor for power abuse in the region, as symbolic of social inequalities and exploitation since colonial times (Bastien 1978), as a personification of violence in the relationship between highland and the capital (Ansion and Sifuentes 1989), or as involving an epistemology of race (Weismantel 2001, Canessa 2000). In this paper, I would like to discuss how a focus on alterity, as suggested by various contributors to the so-called ‘ontological turn’, might contribute to our understanding of the *kharisiri* attacks. Rather than seeing these attacks as a matter of ‘representation’, I will analyse the *kharisiris* as events characterized by an emergence of *different* and *multiple* forces and entities. The intention with the paper is not to argue that *kharisiri* attacks do not entail a deep-seated sense of loss, but to explore the *kharisiris* in light of Andean notions of personhood that encompass both the human and non-human. In so doing, I draw upon notions of predation based on ethnographies from Amazonia (Viveiros de Castro 1992, 1998, Descola 2013).