ASA Firth Lecture 2013

Arbitrating collective dreams: anthropology and the new worlding

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Introduction

Ever since his earliest ethnographic research in Tikopia, Raymond Firth was interested in process, that is, in adjustments made within the framework of social structure. One of his major contributions to anthropology, in fact, was to distinguish between social structure and social organization. He observed, for example, that people in Tikopia behaved differently towards collateral and agnatic relatives while using the same kinship term to refer to them. At the London School of Economics and Political Science, where I first met Professor Raymond Firth – although he was no longer lecturing there at the time – I learned that in ethnography the starting point was to identify social structure while trying to re-introduce process through a variety of methods, including situational analysis and Professor Max Gluckman's dictum of "closed systems, open minds".

Several decades later however, in today's runaway world, social structures have rapidly become elusive as global trends chip away at traditional institutions and open paths towards warp-speed transformations. In my own research, I was always running into this difficulty, mainly because I was always dealing with processes: the migration of indigenous peoples, the transformation of women's roles, the social perception of environmental change, the challenges of development and redistribution, the setting up of guidelines for international cultural policy and, in recent years, the reconfiguration of intangible cultural heritage. I remember how surprised I was at finding that very homogenous groups had, in fact, a great diversity of norms, some of them conflictive, and that these could be juggled so as to apply them to diverse settings. Then, as I became what I call a "decision-making participant" in international organizations and agencies, I became fascinated by how the most tumultuous and conflictive debates could suddenly be compressed into precisely worded resolutions and world reports that achieved consensus. Similarly, it is fascinating to see how cultural practitioners of intangible cultural heritage manifestations reconfigure their practices through self-organization (Arizpe 2013).

In this lecture I will refer to the core mechanism of such processes as "social arbitration" and will explore this concept as a tool that could be very useful at present for anthropology. Culture has been called a "site of contestation", and for many years I have been referring to it as a "site of negotiation". Now, in this lecture, I argue that culture is, indeed, a "site of arbitration".

Arbitration is defined in Webster's Online Dictionary as: "The hearing and determination of a cause between parties in controversy, by a person or persons chosen by the parties." Thus, while the terms "exchange", which is central to anthropology, and "negotiation", which is so often used, for example, in policy anthropology, open up potentially endless rounds of discussion, the concept of arbitration leads to the resolution of disputes. And, hopefully, to a way forward.

In this lecture, which I am greatly honoured to be presenting to you here today, I will refer to the contribution that anthropology can make to the new worlding that is occurring in our contemporary times. I use this term "worlding" with reference to post-colonial studies, in which authors such as Gayatri Spivak spoke of the way in which colonialism created a history and an anthropology of the world for the "peoples without history", as Eric Wolf

would have said. "Worlding" can also refer to *mondialisation,* in the sense proposed by Philip Descola, that is, the understanding of the different concepts used in diverse societies to relate human beings to animals, plants and the environment, and the building of a new narrative about the world.

The narrative that anthropology has used to describe the world has been primarily based on the concept of culture. Maurice Bloch, in speaking about the cognitive challenge to anthropology, rightly posits that "the notion of culture as a massive system of classification which forms a grid for cognition" has been challenged for several decades now, and he suggests that the active internal debate and the continuous debate between people engaged in a social exchange of inferences are the most interesting aspects of cultural processes for anthropology (Bloch 2012: 165).

I agree with Professor Bloch, who, in fact, was one of the best teachers I ever had, that the internal debate in individuals and the debate between people should be the focus of anthropological research. Having said that, I would add that neither "exchange" nor "debate" are precise enough analytical terms to understand how cultural practitioners actually move to new arenas in their thoughts and actions. In my own experience, which has been one of "decision-making participation" after I became a member of the United Nations World Commission on Culture and Development and then Assistant Director-General for Culture at UNESCO, something else is going on which anthropology should take up.

In referring to Raymond Firth's work, I would first like to mention his participation in the Humanist Manifesto II, published in 1973, and briefly relate it to my own work with the United Nations World Commission on Culture and Development, which resulted in the report "Our Creative Diversity". Secondly, I will present ethnographic data delivered by the cultural practitioners of the Aztec dance of central Mexico, to show how the "captains" of the dance take decisions for their group as they go along, in the context of rapidly changing social and political conditions in the regions in which they perform their ritual dance. In both instances, it seems to me that leaders and participants have been "arbitrating" collective dreams. They do so as they go along, in trying to give social meaning and social organization to runaway processes. In both experiences – the international and the local – there is a search for synchronization in the way in which the actions and performance fit into the global worlding.

The Humanist Manifesto II

Raymond Firth was one of the original signatories to the Humanist Manifesto II, which was published in 1973. At that time, I was a student at LSE and, having attended some of Professor Firth's informal talks, I signed the manifesto myself, together with many of my classmates.

Reading the Humanist Manifesto II today gives us very interesting anthropological insights into how and why the initiatives it contains have been achieved – such as the creation of international courts to adjudicate disputes – or changed course.

The Humanist Manifesto II appeared in *The Humanist* September/October, 1973, and the text is still available online from the website of the American Humanist Association.[1] It was signed by scientists and writers such as Francis Crick, H.J. Eysenck, Julian Huxley and Margaret Knight from the UK, and Isaac Asimov, Betty Friedan, Irving Horowitz, B.F. Skinner, Andrei Sakharov and Jean-Francois Revel. Although its authors conceded that the original Humanist Manifesto of 1933 now seemed "far too optimistic", the new document insisted on the need for "an affirmative and hopeful vision", embodied in a seventeen-point statement that was much longer and more elaborate than that of the previous version. It was a statement "reaching for vision in a time that needs direction". Importantly for us anthropologists, the manifesto was a "social analysis in an effort at consensus". Similarly to the report of the World Commission on Culture and Development,[2] the "positive principles" of the Humanist Manifesto II sought to offer "a design for a secular society on a planetary scale".

Many of the proposals in the document, such as opposition to racism and weapons of mass destruction and support for full implementation of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are now part of the international policy discourse, and its prescriptions that divorce and birth control become legal have become a reality in a majority of countries. In addition to a rejection of religion, various controversial stances were also strongly supported in the document, notably the right to abortion. One of the oft-quoted lines of this manifesto is: "No deity will save us; we must save ourselves." This surely applies today to the urgency of achieving sustainability.

Interestingly, the manifesto in its twelfth point looked towards "the development of a system of world law and a world order based upon transnational federal government. This would appreciate cultural pluralism and diversity. It would not exclude pride in national origins and accomplishments nor the handling of regional problems on a regional basis. Human progress, however, can no longer be achieved by focusing on one section of the world, Western or Eastern, developed or underdeveloped. For the first time in human history, no part of humankind can be isolated from any other. Each person's future is in some way linked to all. We thus reaffirm a commitment to the building of world community, at the same time recognizing that this commits us to some hard choices".

With great foresight, the manifesto emphasized that the "planet earth must be considered a single ecosystem. Ecological damage, resource depletion, and excessive population growth must be checked by international concord." In its fifteenth clause it stated: "World poverty must cease. Hence extreme disproportions in wealth, income, and economic growth should be reduced on a worldwide basis." It considered technology a vital key to human progress and development, yet cautioned: "We would resist any moves to censor basic scientific research on moral, political, or social grounds. Technology must, however, be carefully judged by the consequences of its use; harmful and destructive changes should be avoided. We are particularly disturbed when technology and bureaucracy control, manipulate, or modify human beings without their consent." This was written in 1973.

In closing, the signatories to the manifesto stated: **"**We urge that parochial loyalties and inflexible moral and religious ideologies be transcended...We, the undersigned, while not necessarily endorsing every detail of the

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[1] http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_II, accessed 15 July 2013.
[2] UN World Commission on Culture and Development (1995) *Our Creative Diversity,* Paris: UNESCO. Available online at http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001016/101651e.pdf, accessed 15 July 2013.

above, pledge our general support to Humanist Manifesto II for the future of humankind. These affirmations are not a final credo or dogma but an expression of a living and growing faith."

This is, indeed, a very worthwhile vision, strongly influenced by an anthropological perspective for which Raymond Firth was responsible, possibly among others. It shows how important it is that anthropologists participate in discussions about the design of international arrangements, even if we do not always get what we would like. Importantly for the topic of this lecture, the signatories indicated that not all of them endorsed every detail of the Humanist Manifesto II; they were arbitrating between competing ideologies and goals, not to create a new final credo or dogma but to engage in a living and evolving process. Such a process, in my view, has more to do with arbitration, that is, with deciding which ideas and goals are kept, which are left in the margins and which are eventually discarded, than simply with exchange and debate.

It is worth mentioning, very briefly, how this blueprint for the world contrasts with the Millennium Development Goals, which are currently being hotly but subtly debated at the United Nations.[3] In assessing the previous Millennium Development Goals, on the Committee for Development Policy of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, we argued that their very practical focus had left out vital broader goals[4]. In summary, the goals refer to fostering inclusive growth, promoting sustainable patterns of production and consumption, developing open and accountable institutions and forging global partnerships. In this international arena, arbitration is based on geopolitical considerations and countless rounds of negotiation are gone through until a consensus is arrived at. What is interesting is that such negotiations, from an anthropological perspective, consist of "reading the minds" of diplomats and politicians, as they waver in their decisions according to the continuous resetting of divisions and alliances. They are constantly rereading words, pronouncements and intentions in the flow of arbitrating resolutions and policy actions.

The World Commission on Culture and Development

First, I will give a very brief and schematic description of the way in which the term "culture" has been used in international debates on development. The concept of culture was first taken up in the discourse on economic development in United Nations documents in the early 1950s, as a factor to be taken into account in applying development policies in Third World countries. Oscar Lewis, in his study of rural migrants in Mexico City, proposed the term "the subculture of poverty" to refer to a new phenomenon which he associated with the growth of the informal sector in urban development (Arizpe 2004). In the sixties, other authors, among them Charles Valentine, redefined this concept as the "culture of poverty", and considered it a major obstacle to development.

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[3] The Millennium Development Goals Report 2013, available online at http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/report-2013/mdg-report-2013-english.pdf, accessed July 14, 2013.
[4] United Nations Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, *A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies Through Sustainable Development*, available online at http://www.un.org/sg/management/pdf/HLP_P2015_Report.pdf, accessed July 15, 2013.

In the seventies, national liberation movements in Latin America and Africa took up culture as a political concept in demanding that traditional ways of life be the foundation for "endogenous development". Culture was seen as a liberating force against colonialism and imperialism. In 1982, at the Mondiacult conference held in Mexico City, a broader, anthropological definition of culture was incorporated into international policy discourse, which led to cultural policies being established in many countries of the world.

In 1987, the Group of 77, a coalition of developing countries, was successful in having the United Nations set up a "Decade on Culture and Development" with UNESCO as the lead agency. This programme fell into my hands when I arrived in UNESCO in 1994 as Assistant Director-General for Culture. The general public opinion about this decade was that it had dissipated itself into hundreds of events, covering folklore, art, festivities and music festivals, but had not generated guidelines for international policies linking culture and development. To fill this gap, the World Commission on Culture and Development (WCCD) was established.

Harvesting culture around the world

In 1991, the General Conference of UNESCO requested that the Director-General, in co-operation with the Secretary-General of the United Nations, "establish an independent World Commission on Culture and Development comprising women and men drawn from all regions and eminent in diverse disciplines, to prepare a World Report on Culture and Development and proposals for both urgent and long-term action to meet cultural needs in the context of development"[5]. This independent commission was chaired by former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, and included four Nobel laureates, among them Claude Lévi-Strauss, and fifteen further members, among them two anthropologists, Tchie Nakane and myself. In November 1995 the commission presented the report to which I referred earlier, "Our Creative Diversity". I shall now briefly run through the commission's perspective.

The first key message is that development embraces not only access to goods and services but also the opportunity to choose a full, satisfying, valuable and valued way of living together in society. Culture, for its part, cannot be reduced – as is generally the case – to a subsidiary position as a mere promoter of economic growth. Its role is not to be the servant of material ends but the social basis of those ends. In other words, culture is both a means to material progress, and also the end of development, when "development" is seen as the flourishing of human existence in all its forms and as a whole.

The second key idea is that issues of development cannot be divorced from questions of ethics. Views about employment, social policy, the distribution of income and wealth, people's participation, gender inequalities, the environment and much else are inevitably based on ethical values. None of the important questions concerning

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[5] UN World Commission on Culture and Development (1995) *Our Creative Diversity*. Paris: UNESCO: 9. Available online at http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001016/101651e.pdf, accessed July 15, 2013.

culture and development could be addressed in an ethical vacuum. Values are always present, either implicitly or explicitly.

The commission also saw that the intense cultural interaction caused by globalization can be a source of conflict, just as it simultaneously opens new spaces for cultural exchange, borrowing and lending. People position themselves in these spaces by turning to the most immediate, familiar, collectively shared instrument they have at hand to mobilize: *inherited culture*. In many lands there has been a convulsive ingathering, a return to past traditions and a resurgent assertion of peoples and their leaders.

The question we were trying to answer was whether culture could bridge the gap between local identity, ethnic/religious affiliation, national citizenship and regional bloc allegiance. Conflicts at each of these levels all over the world were already giving the impression that we were facing a chaotic scramble for identity. Indeed, the pressures straining the social and political fabric of nation-states throughout the world have already become one of the major new challenges to the United Nations concept itself.

Within the commission, there was, of course, dissension. If culture is a site of contestation, I would say that a world commission is the site of a great battle. Some members of the World Commission on Culture and Development wanted the report to focus primarily on a commitment to cultural pluralism, but many of us opposed this view and insisted that the broader commonalities among peoples should be addressed. It was just at that time that Professor Samuel Huntington was publishing his book entitled "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order" (Huntington 1996). As a result of our deliberations in the commission, it was decided that the first chapter of our report should focus on these commonalities.

At the head of its concerns, then, the commission placed the notion of a *global ethics* that needed to emerge from a worldwide quest for shared values that could bring people and cultures together rather than drive them apart. It then explored the challenges of *cultural pluralism*, reaffirming a commitment to fostering coexistence in diversity, both nationally and internationally. But we added a caveat: only cultures that have values of respect for other cultures should be respected. In other words, intolerance and cultural domination could not be respected under the guise of respecting cultural pluralism.

In the following chapters, the report took up the challenge of stimulating human *creativity*, in order to inspire as well as empower people, in the arts, the field of science and technology and the practice of governance. It explored the cultural implications of the world *media* scene, focusing on whether the principles of diversity, competition, standards of decency and the balance between equity and efficiency, which are often applied nationally, can be applied internationally. The commission also addressed the cultural paradoxes of *gender*, as development transforms the relationships between men and women and globalization impacts both positively and negatively on women's rights. It was deeply concerned about the potential needs of *children and young people*, and sought ways to bolster their aspiration to a world more attuned to multicultural values and intercultural communication. It cast a fresh eye on the growing importance of *cultural heritage* as a social and economic resource, and built on the

groundwork carried out by the Brundtland Commission to explore the complex relationship between cultural diversity and bio-diversity, between cultural values and environmental sustainability. Finally, it set out a research agenda for interdisciplinary analysis of the key intersections between various aspects of culture and development issues.

The path forward, then, as proposed by the commission, was to create new systems of cultural allegiances in the setting of civic communities. The commission viewed culture as the foundational spring of remembrance and identity, as the major source of energy for creating new senses of belonging as well as new ways of living together.

At this point, allow me to digress, so that to an audience of anthropologists I can say that although in this report, and in subsequent activities at UNESCO, those of us participating in these process who were anthropologists insisted that culture should be understood as embedded in contexts of civic communities and citizenship in a framework of global ethics, in the more schematic political discourses of government delegations and applied development projects, culture continued to be reified. As an anthropologist, I was caught between the sceptical use of culture in anthropology, which I had experienced in my own research, and the need to established at least some safeguards to help autochthonous and local peoples to hold on to their own cultures, and this meant moulding a discourse on culture that governments, NGOs and foundations could find useful when implementing policies and projects.

An example will enable you to understand the trade-offs an anthropologist has to make when functioning as a "decision-making participant". Every time the UNESCO staff – among whom, at that time, there were some world-class scientists and intellectuals – wrote a speech for me that specified that there were 6,000 languages in the world, I crossed this out and inserted a more open-ended statement about there being "thousands of languages and variants, and the distinction between them blah-blah-blah". Such open-endedness was totally useless in trying to get government delegates to support a good project to safeguard local peoples' languages. And when I dared to say, at a UNESCO intergovernmental conference in Zimbabwe on language policy, that linguistic policies should support trilingualism – a vernacular, a national language and an international language – I was practically buried under the avalanche of criticism: from vernacularists who followed Julius Nyerere's policies emphasizing local languages, which created communication problems in Tanzania at both national and regional level; from nationalists who advocated nation-building by excluding local languages, usually imposing only one as a national language; and by internationalists who wanted a lingua franca, or to keep cultural windows open with ex-colonial metropolitan countries, or to hegemonize international communications.

I will not tell you about all the diplomatic incidents I provoked at UNESCO, such as the time I, as a scientist, decided to use "the voice of reason" to oppose what I perceived as "the voice of power" of a Latin American ambassador – a male – when I naively rejected a political initiative that was badly formulated conceptually. Which brings me to the need to highlight Max Weber's very relevant distinction between the basic motivation of scientists in seeking truth and politicians' responsibility in achieving consensus among people to carry

out a legitimized course of action. As one ambassador friend asked me flatly one day: "Lourdes, do you want to get that program approved or do you want to spend months debating its conceptual qualities so it can be debated at the next General Conference in two years?"

Returning to my narrative on the report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, we found, in the mid-nineties, that its emphasis on global ethics and human rights was being countered by the strong thrust to make multiculturalism – following Samuel Huntington's and Will Kymlicka's schemes – the predominant cultural policy. To counter this trend, in the World Culture Report *Cultural Diversity, Conflict and Pluralism*,[6] which, after many battles I had been successful in having UNESCO publish in 2000, we strongly argued against the metaphor of a world made up of "a mosaic of cultures", of hard, unmoveable, unalterable pieces placed on a flat world (Arizpe, Jelin, Rao and Streeten 2000). We borrowed Nelson Mandela's metaphor of a "rainbow nation" to give a different perspective: a "rainbow river" in which cultures were in constant flux, changing, exchanging and adapting to its course (Arizpe 2013: 25).

Today we would say that cultures are co-evolving in the course of this river. And this is precisely the point I want to take up in analyzing contemporary cultural change.

The unwilling anthropologists

"The path towards seeing the ethnographic as the product of active psychological beings" is a subtitle in one of the chapters of Maurice Bloch's book "Anthropology and the Cognitive Challenge" (Bloch 2012: 146). Professor Bloch cites Edmund Leach – who was a student of Raymond Firth – with reference to the dangers of anthropologists considering explicit states as the foundation of cognition. The example he gives is that Australian aborigines could have interpreted the dogma of the virgin birth as evidence that Europeans did not think that a masculine contribution was necessary for a woman to fall pregnant (Bloch, op.cit.: 145). What we observe from the outside, he goes on to say, "…is merely the outward superficial manifestation of the complex activity of the bodies and minds of naturally existing human beings." (ibid).

Relating this point back to my argument in this lecture, such complexity becomes even more intricate in the case of geopolitical debates. What if these manifestations are political resolutions carefully sculpted so that consensus among a great diversity of political actors may be achieved and concerted political action made possible? This is what I have tried to make evident in my brief description of a few of the intellectual battles we had in the World Commission on Culture and Development. To use a wild metaphor, I was explaining the inner workings of the mind of the commission since I was part of its brain, together with more than 200 agents, all with differing powers of influence over the report of the commission.

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[6] *World Culture Report 2000*: *Cultural Diversity, Conflict and Pluralism*. Paris: UNESCO. Available online at http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001210/121058e.pdf, accessed 15 July 2013.

The problem with policy anthropology, then, is that the bulk of its ethnographic data necessarily comes from the final adopted texts of resolutions and declarations, and, at best, the interpretations of the few diplomats and politicians willing to make public statements about their countries' positions. Even inner-core decision-making participants, as in my case, do not have full knowledge of the motivations and incentives that are played out in even the most minimal arbitration of decisions. The tacit knowledge needed is difficult to access and, most of the time, can be understood only through inferences, that is, one formulates a hypothesis about why a government, or an individual delegate argues and votes the way they do, but the only way to confirm this hypothesis is by observing their subsequent decisions in the light of this hypothesis itself.

To use another wild metaphor, diplomats and politicians are "unwilling anthropologists" who spend their lives reading governments' and peoples' minds in order to achieve concerted actions – or, of course, their own personal gains. Understood in this way, I would suggest that anthropology shed the mantle of the "purity" of its methodological procedures vis-à-vis those of diplomats and politicians. Of course, it may be argued that anthropologists have the purported motivation of producing scientific knowledge of the highest order. And, here again, we run into the dilemma of working to find "truth" or working towards the "responsibility" of influencing human affairs. But the point I want to make is that the methods of learning, classifying, interpreting and deciding have similarities in all arenas of human knowledge and action.

A difference which does separate the social sciences and political agency is that the former are able to be self-critical about their methods. This is precisely the terrain in which I believe anthropology could be very innovative in the years to come. To put it succinctly, I think that we now have the tools to overcome this false realism, as Maurice Bloch calls it, of studying "culture" as an independent self-contained phenomenon, derived from the harmful nature/culture dichotomy. Indeed, in the ethnographies we wrote, we carefully sliced off the environmental, the gender, the political and the climatological backgrounds that would have given them a very different final interpretation.

For the purposes of my argument in this lecture, it is worth noting briefly why it is different from the models set up in the broad debates on cultural hybridity. As Pnina Werbner has pointed out, the "current fascination with cultural hybridity masks an elusive paradox" (Werbner 1997: 1). This is not the place to discuss the countless terms that have been used in this debate, including hybridity – Vasconcelos (1929), Garcia Canclini (1992), Hall (1991), Gilroy (1993) – hyphenated beings – Spivak (1987), Bhabha (1994) – global mélange – Nederveen Pieterse (2004), Gruzinski (1999) – the ethics of identity – Appiah (2010) and many others – and "reflexive global heterophilia" – Hutnyk (1997). Peter Burke summarizes the theoretical debate and gives a very useful conclusion. He agrees that we are now witnessing the emergence of a new form of cultural order, but one in which the diversification adapted to different local environments will not necessarily lead towards a homogenous global culture (Burke 2009: 115).

My critique of all these models focuses on their basic reproduction of the assumption that some form of bounded cultures exists and that, although while mixing they become hybrid or hyphenated, they are nonetheless

caught in webs leading to global homogenization or heterogenization. Such terms seem so vague that they are no longer useful in thinking about current contemporary global cultural phenomena. I agree with Pnina Werbner that what is needed is "a processual theory of hybridity, one that goes beyond the recognition that monological discourses are in permanent tension with a 'sea of heteroglossia'" (Werbner 1997: 21). Such a theory has been very elusive during the past two decades, and I believe this is due to the assumption that traits, or, if you like, memes, are the star evidence, the indicators that mixing or hyphenating is occurring. Already, the shift from traits or memes to performance and practice is introducing the factor of time into analyzing this process. We had already made this shift explicit when working on the conceptualization for the 2003 Convention for the Protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. We began by defining the subjects of the convention as "practitioners" and "culture holders", but in subsequent meetings of member states the concept was further specified as "culture bearers", to give greater agency.

Drawing the map of how cultural boundaries and cultural exchanges go to and fro between so-called "cultures" gives us little insight into why, when and how such exchanges are occurring. I posit that the concept of "synchronicity" opens up the possibility of a more precise understanding of this agency. In fact, agency then becomes the core mechanism to be observed, analyzed and interpreted in a moving time frame.

In a sense, a cultural practice becomes a "moment in time" or, to paraphrase Virginia Woolf, a "moment of cultural being". Viewed through this theoretical lens, the aspects of a cultural practice that it is most important to analyze are the decisions taken by actors, in a given time frame, that have reconfigured that practice in its present form, that is, decisions that take on the form of arbitration since they open or close possibilities of action.

Explaining such decisions, as an anthropological task, is very complicated. The individual himself, as has been frequently remarked, may not have a conscious view of her decision. We must then, as Maurice Bloch argues, "read peoples' minds". This is audacious. But we must try, since it might open up new paths towards explaining outcomes, such as the report of the World Commission on Culture and Development and the present form of the Aztec dance, as described in the following pages.

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Reading the mind of an Aztec dancer

The ethnographic example I will use to illustrate the above-mentioned proposition is the recently reconstructed "Aztec dance", in villages of the state of Morelos in Mexico.[7] This intangible cultural heritage has continuously evolved since the 1950s, in synchronicity with the livelihoods and ways of life of its dancers, most of whom emigrated from their villages to large cities where they met with other indigenous and non-indigenous

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[7] The original lecture concluded with a video made by members of Professor Arizpe's research team, led by Cristina Amescua, which includes some of the statements by conchero dancers that are analyzed in this text. The video is included in the webcast version of the lecture, which can be viewed at http://youtu.be/C3k9fpIHdhI.

peoples and began to develop a new kind of dance. It was originally called the dance of the "Concheros", with most groups living in Mexico City, but as social and political settings diversified, so did the motivations, costumes, choreographies and music verbal discourse of such groups, to such an extent that there are now groups that separately identify themselves as "Concheros de Tradición" – Traditional Concheros – Concheros de Conquista – Concheros of Conquest – and "Aztecas" – Aztecs – all over central Mexico.

In the words of Martha Oliveros, Captain General of the Aztec dance in the state of Morelos, "there was first the time of 'Concherismo' (the Conchero dance) but very closely related to the Catholic question; then came the 'Aztequization' (the Aztec dance) with the rebel chiefs of the dance...but far from settling on whether you are Conchero and I am Aztec, it has to be understood as a historical-cultural process that we have been taking in, precisely to take into our own hands all the knowledge and greatness of our culture"[8].

The co-evolution of such groups can be analyzed in terms of a constant synchronisation of intention and meaning in response to contemporary social and political events. Martha explains this further: "So we are at the Aztequization of the fifties to 1992, more or less, a new process begins for those of us in the dance, and this is 'nativization'. It is a planetary movement, it is no longer from Mexican to Conchero, to Nahuaca (follower of the Nahua-Aztec tradition) to 'Aztequita'[9]. This goes beyond this…on the 13th of March the Mexica (Aztec) year began, but nothing ended and nothing is going to end. We simply have to renovate and what's it about now? About unconditional love, unconditional solidarity, respect for our earth, the air, for all that is our culture and feeling proud"[10]. It is also important to note that one of the most significant changes since the nineties has been the establishing of groups of Aztec dancers in the United States. Like other such extensions of Mexican intangible heritage groups, for example the Mariachis and the Jaraneros, Aztec dance groups have been set up by migrants from villages where such dances are performed. Most of them also attract American-born descendants of Mexican and Latino migrants, as well as other Americans. For example, every year a group from San Francisco comes to the May 15 festival at Chalma, a sanctuary which existed before the arrival of the Europeans.

The social structure of the Mexica dance

The internal structure follows a strict hierarchical order, which has many similarities with that of ancient indigenous Mesoamericans. Herminio Martínez explains: "In the (Conchero) dance, everything is set by levels.

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[8] "Vino una etapa del Concherismo pero apegada muy a la cuestión católica; luego vino la Aztequización con los jefes rebeldes de la danza…, pero lejos de quedarnos en que si tu eres Conchero y yo soy Azteca, hay que entenderlo como ese proceso cultural histórico que hemos tenido que ir tomando todos, precisamente para retomar en nuestras manos todo el conocimiento y grandeza de nuestra cultura".

[9] Reverential term for Aztec

[10] "Quedamos en la Aztequización de los años 50 a 1992, más o menos, y empieza un proceso nuevo para las gentes que estamos en la danza: la Nativización. Es un movimiento planetario, ya no es de mexicano a conchero a nahuaca, aztequita, eso va más allá…hoy estamos, el 13 de marzo empezó el año nuevo méxica, pero no se acabó nada, ni se va a acabar. Simplemente nos tenemos que renovar, y ¿de qué se trata ahora? Del amor incondicional, de la solidaridad incondicional, del respeto a nuestra tierra, al aire, a todo lo que es nuestra cultura y sentirnos orgullosos".

There is a chief, there is a command, there is a hierarchical organization…as to the ritual, that's it, the Concheros in the ceremony, all we do is for God, the 'Giver of life'[11], the one, as many chiefs say, who is father and mother at the same time, God, firstly, or whatever he be called. Then, the honouring is for different images, as in our case for the Señor de Sacromonte, we do the feast, the ceremony, the sacrifice, this is in second place. Then for the 'ánimas' (spirits of the dead), for all the chiefs who died before us and through the years and centuries have left us this tradition"[12].

The terms used for the hierarchical organization vary from group to group, but the name of the officials all come from military orders: the "soldiers" are allowed to play a musical instrument and to dance and obey instructions; "sergeants of 'mesas' (groups)" organize the followers according to the captain's orders; "field sergeants" are entrusted with carrying the music instruments, flower insignias and other artifacts when the group marches out to dance in other venues; the "alférez" – an old colonial term which translates as second lieutenant – carry the standard-insignias of the "mesas"; and "colonels" take on decision-making responsibilities when the "captain" is not present. Women are the "sahumadoras"; they perform the function of "opening up the four cardinal points" and cleansing both the path they are taking and all the artifacts with smoke. For this they use a "copal" burner, which burns an aromatic tree resin; they are led by the "Reina Malinche", the Malinche Queen.

The leader of the group is a captain, who directs all the group's activities and is responsible for collecting the funds to feed all of the dancers, and for travel and food along the way. "Generals" have several groups under their charge but when they lose their groups, meaning that people no longer want to dance under their leadership, they become a "caudillo real"– royal "caudillo", an old Spanish colonial name for a military or political leader – or a "cacique general" – general "cacique", again, an old name for an indigenous noble under colonial Spanish law. Significantly, as Ernesto Solares said, "you never lose your rank, you may lose your people but they continue to recognize you. You may lose your people if you are a drunkard, a womanizer, a thief, or if you are irresponsible, whatever you like or command, but everyone knows he was a general." This position, then, is structural, even if the individual transgresses the responsibilities that go with it. Again, we find that social organization adapts to specific behaviours but leaves the core structure intact.

The programmatic structure of the all-encompassing Conchero dance is described as "Union, Conformity and Conquest", a phrase that is written on almost all standard-insignias. However, Ernesto cautioned that "sometimes this phrase is as false as they come"[13] and he went on: "Yes, we are united because at the end (of all

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[11] A literal translation of the concept of God in the ancient Mesoamerican Nahuatl language

[12] "La danza tiene, todo está por niveles. Hay una cabeza, hay un mando, hay una organización jerárquica…en cuanto al culto, así es, los danzantes Concheros, en la ceremonia, todo lo que hacemos es para Dios, para el "Dador de la vida", como dicen muchos jefes, él que es padre y madre a la vez, Dios, primeramente o como se le llame. Después, la honra es a las diferentes imágenes, como en nuestro caso, al Señor Sacromonte, es para él la festividad, la ceremonia, el sacrificio, eso en segundo lugar. Luego, en tercer lugar, para las ánimas, las de los jefes que murieron antes que nosotros, que, a lo largo de los años y los siglos, fueron dejando esta tradición".

[13] "…Unión, Conformidad y Conquista es una frase que traen la mayoría de los estandartes, que a veces es de lo más falso que hay".

accounts/stories[14]) we are here", and he pointed to the ground. "Conformity is because we are supposed to be in agreement with everything we do, yet we are incapable of saying when we do not agree". Finally, he added, "conquest refers to the conquest of ourselves as a people, as human beings. The first conquest is in your body, because you may be tired, during the night-long vigils you want to go to bed, so you are told, no, you came here to dance, not to drink, you came to the dance because you put yourself up to it ('te pusiste a disposición'). The moment you put yourself up to it, you are stuck because you have to assent to whatever the chiefs tell you to do".

Constructing the self

Taking up the cognitive challenge that Maurice Bloch speaks about, how the Aztec dancers express their intentionality and feelings in dancing opens up a different dimension. Few dancers are able to put such feelings into words, but when I asked Mariana Xoxotla, a dancer of the Concheros de Conquista dance what the dance was about, she said: "In itself it is a war of conquest…first you conquer yourself, your strength, your fatigue, the heat, you go along conquering yourself. Then you conquer another, you say to her/him, here we are. Even if we are 'mesticitos' (an endearing term for 'mestizo', a culturally mixed person) and even if we wear jeans every day, and even if we have cell phones, and all that, we're still Mexicans and we are (sic) still that indigenous part that gives us sustenance. In many places it is still like that, people don't realise but in their heart, in their inner self, they are still maintaining this (indigenous) part. What is happening is that the world is very overwhelming, the world today. For them, the more you 'disidentify' yourself, the better, right? So then, it is a war of conquest, you have to conquer yourself, you have to conquer the hearts and minds of those who see you and of yourself"[15].

In her discourse, two phases are clearly marked. The first refers to how you construct your inner self, by "conquering" your own impulses in response to sustained effort, prolonged physical discomfort and constantly looking after others. Then, once you have constructed yourself, you are able to "conquer" others, to win over their hearts and minds. Importantly, there is a third phase that she also tries to put into words:

"In the end, for me, I feel connected to something beyond my own self."

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[14] "A final de cuentas" is a familiar expression in Spanish meaning, literally, "at the end of the accounts", equivalent to the English expression "when all's said and done". I highlight it because of the importance of the word "cuentas", which may be translated into English as "counts" as in counting peanuts, or "accounts" as in giving an explanation or an interpretation of an event, but is also close to the masculine word "cuentos" – cuentas is a feminine word – which means "stories".

[15] "En sí es una guerra de conquista…primero te conquistas a ti mismo, tu fuerza, tu cansancio, el calor. Te vas conquistando, luego conquistas a otro, le dices, aquí estamos. Aunque seamos mesticitos y aunque vistamos de mezclilla todos los días y aunque tengamos celulares y todo, seguimos siendo mexicanos y seguimos siendo esa parte indígena que nos da sustento. En muchos lugares así es, la gente no se da cuenta pero en el corazón, y en el interior, sigue manteniendo esa parte. Lo que pasa es que el mundo es muy avasallador, el mundo actual. Entre mas te 'desidentifiques' para ellos es mejor, no? Entonces, pues es una guerra de conquista, te tienes que conquistar los corazones, tienes que conquistar la mente de los que te ven y de ti mismo".

Why do they dance?

When asked why they do the Mexica dance, Ernesto answers: "At times because the people asked you to do it, and now it is your conscience that asks it of you. We are here because of something, in the first place because we like it, even though you spend a lot of money. In the second place because we want, sometimes without too much success, to at least to conserve the tradition. We know it is not like it was before but we try to do it. Another issue is to make it known, because otherwise, what a laugh, I die and I take all the knowledge with me and that's it. So, no, one has to evolve and teach the others and now with electronic media, with Facebook and YouTube, now you open sites and you are going to find millions of opinions, all diverging, and what I say is…let's create many points of encounter, I think this is best".

One can interpret this to mean that the more human beings open up spaces of communication the more differing opinions will fly in the high winds. The more such opinions are aired, the longer tolerance and negotiation have to go on, but, in the end – "a final de cuentas" – decisions have to be taken, and arbitration becomes inevitable. This, I believe, is what the captains of the contemporary Mexica dance have explained in this case study.

The dynamics of social arbitration

This lecture has dealt with the dynamics of arbitration by cultural practitioners in the historical continuum of ritual practices. Such arbitration is necessary, as groups evolve within a society and social and political conditions change. Culture has been defined as a "site for contestation", but in some of my work in the nineties I argued that it would be best to term it a "site of negotiation".

Nowadays, extrapolating from my own experience of decision-making in internationally implemented cultural programmes, I would say that a distinction must be made between negotiation and arbitration. Negotiation is identified with synonyms such as discussion, consultation, deliberation, mediation, bargaining and dealing. Arbitration is associated with synonyms such as adjudication, mediation, conciliation, intervention and judgement. Adjudication, in turn, has as synonyms decision, judgement, ruling, verdict, settlement and sentence. In international affairs, negotiation is the first level of action, and it might go on for months or years, but there comes a moment when a decision has to be made, in order to advance to another level. Without such a decision, negotiations would go round and round forever, as so often happens in political affairs. As anthropologists, we also have to negotiate in our own minds differing accounts of social events, when writing ethnography, yet we cannot commit words to paper unless we have decided to highlight one or several accounts and to explain others in reaction to these (rewrite). In other words, when we have negotiated ethnographic versions, we have to take decisions, that is, we have to arbitrate, mainly between the structural, institutionalized and legitimized ethnographic utterances we are given and the actual social meaning and actions of the people we are observing.

This is a process that we can get at only with great difficulty, for reading people's minds is always rather messy. The example I have used, the narrative that Martha Oliveros, the Captain General of the Aztec dance, has given, allows us to reconstruct the actions and reactions, the fission and fusion, and the frictions and fractions that, through arbitration, have maintained the social meaning and cohesion of the Aztec dancers amidst changing conditions. The cohesion of this particular group of Aztec dancers has been established within the wider framework of the more general Conchero dance tradition, which in itself has also gone through a process of arbitration. It is this wider framework that places each Aztec dance group in a multiscalar context of thresholds of ascription to the tradition. Each individual is free to cross these thresholds and arbitrate her or his own self-ascription as a singular identity, i.e. I am a dancer in Martha's group belonging to the Aztec dance, which is a variant of the Conchero dance, which shares a broader, historical and ethnographic metonymy with other Mesoamerican indigenous rituals in Mexico.

Just as practitioners of ritual dances, as in this example, create decision-making structures that allow ritual leaders to arbitrate in the continuous exchanges, contestations, frictions and fractions between members and groups of the Aztec dance tradition, it seems that, in a sense, we undertake a similar endeavour as anthropologists. Although it could be argued that among anthropological practitioners an informal decision-making structure is also generated through quality, seniority, institutional affiliation and influence, I am more interested in how the anthropological tradition creates intellectual and scientific codes and metonymies that allow us, first, to recognize the diversity of practitioners' versions of their own social practices and, then, to arbitrate between them as we construct the best possible narrative of such practices. Tracing the construction of such practices through one informant's interpretation over time gives us the possibility of accessing the continuous cognitive perceptions and arbitration in such processes, but we need to develop much finer tools with which to do so.

Before ending, I would like to say that this lecture has been a celebration of anthropology and its analytic power, and a tribute to teachers such as Raymond Firth, who give it meaning, continuity and purpose.

I will end with Martha Oliveros, who summarizes the intentionality of all the arbitration in cultural processes. She asks, in carefully worded sentences, "Who, then, will write history? What are we going to write in this history? What are we going to write that is worthwhile, that may give guidance to future generations, what? I, myself, was educated by my grandparents and they left me many things to teach. Here is the knowledge. A people who don't know where they came from, cannot recognize where they are going. It is this simple"[16].

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[16] "¿A quién le toca escribir la historia? ¿Qué vamos a escribir en esa historia? ¿Qué vamos a poner que valga la pena y que sirva de guía a las futuras generaciones, qué? A mí me prepararon mis abuelos y me dejaron muchas cosas para enseñar. Aquí está este conocimiento. Un pueblo que no sabe de donde viene, no puede reconocer hacia donde va, simple".

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