Much of the final session of this year's ASA conference was devoted to the discussion of Edmund Leach's paper on ethnography as fiction. For some of those present, and particularly research students and other younger members of the audience, the most fascinating part of the debate was clearly Leach's interchange with Raymond Firth, now in his mid-eighties and as much the soul of reason as ever. The style of the discussion - Leach short and sharp and Firth patiently searching for loose threads in the argument - was perhaps partly due to temperament, but it also seemed to reflect a long history of argument between two elder statesmen who have long been friends and who were once teacher and pupil. British social anthropology as *gemeinschaft* is clearly still alive and well.

For many at the session, including myself, there was much uncertainty about just what was meant by fiction. There seemed to be some who thought that fact and fiction were related terms, not simply as opposites but with shared etymologies. I do not know if this is true if one goes back beyond Latin, but it certainly is not the case if one does not. Clearly more people are aware of *facere* than *fingere*, but that is a small matter. More central was the issue of a science/art divide. Leach suggested we should criticise ourselves as poor novelists rather than incompetent scientists, and Marilyn Strathern and others talked of the need to recognise the creative use of the imagination in ethnography. Occasionally a view emerged of "science" as a mass of uncreative number-crunching - an astonishing idea in a world of quarks, electrons' shadows and black holes - and certainly we can do without too much of that whatever we might choose to call it. Sometimes too people seemed to be talking past each other and perhaps even past themselves in this search for identity. At any rate, a conference on "History and Ethnicity" seemed a reasonable place for anthropologists to try to find out who and what they are themselves.

In response to a question from myself about canons for judging whether the anthropological brand of "fiction" was good or bad in any particular case, Leach suggested we might look to *War and Peace* and also to Eco's *The Name of the Rose* which I had happened to discuss briefly with him earlier. The citing of the former was intriguing, if only because Meyer Fortes also used to name it as the masterpiece to which the anthropologist should aspire. Fortes used to stress the
way in which the lives of individuals, their intersection with each other, and the larger processes of change in which they were enmeshed were all caught alive and explored in the novel. As to The Name of the Rose, I am happy to confess that it is the most interesting and exciting book I have read for years. It also has a lot to tell us about anthropology. Whether we should be trying to write something like it may, however, be another question.

The book is an extraordinary masterpiece. Through the artifice of a Holmesian detective story (the investigating monk is named William of Baskerville) the culture and structure of a medieval monastery is brought to life and set within the concerns, conflicts and developments of thirteenth and fourteenth century European church and political history. These in turn are situated in the framework of the wider and longer term paradoxes of the relation between christianity and the temporal world, particularly as these were exposed and highlighted in the vision of St. Francis and the development of the Franciscan order with its subsequent division into Spiritual and Conventualist wings. Several themes are of quite fundamental interest to an anthropologist here, and I mention only a few which struck me with particular force. The idea of the abbey as a bounded community which might appear to be readily studiable as a "convenient unit" in Radcliffe-Brown's terms arises only to dissolve before one's eyes. The very names of the monks give the lie to this notion. Benno of Uppsala, Adso of Melk, Rabano of Toledo, and Berengar of Arundel are there with others from all over a Europe yet to be divided into nation states. The abbey is a microcosm of the wider, highly variegated region in which it is set, and the point in time can only be grasped as a point in mainstream European history. The relation between religion and economy and polity is clearly one main issue here, but there are others such as the role of limited literacy and the control of knowledge, and its reproduction which are equally of interest to an anthropologist. The logic and symbolic structure of plant names and other classificatory systems is also fascinatingly explored.

All these are, however, points of detail and there are more general major issues, closer to Leach's primary concern, which the book raises for us. The first is one to which I have already alluded. The text manages in a remarkable way to capture alive another time and place. If this is part of what Leach wants then few of us could disagree with him. I am sure I am not alone in the experience that the act of writing an account of events which are not only theoretically interesting but also full of life and even perhaps tragedy can kill them stone dead. To do justice to their power and vitality is surely a desirable though quite elusive thing. Part of Eco's own characterisation of the magical feat required is in his title, though he
only returns to this at the very end of the book when the narrator quotes a short pair of medieval Latin sentences. "Stat rosa pristina nomine. Nomina nuda tenemus."

In his later "Reflections upon the Name of the Rose", Eco comments that he was somewhat surprised by the number of reviewers who assumed the title of the book harked back to Romeo and Juliet. For as I became aware when struggling to translate the text in question, the idea in it is quite opposite to Shakespeare's. "A rose by any other name..." stresses the intrinsic nature of the living flower as independent of its name. But Eco's text takes quite another line. It translates, as I understand it, as "The rose remains as it first was in its name. We keep hold of naked ("empty" might be a better word) names". For the quotation, the real rose is ephemeral and dies, but it somehow lives on in the name which we attach to it. The name in this sense is not unlike the kula valuables which embody within themselves the histories, ambitions, and adventures of those who have possessed them and exchanged them. Ultimately, like Ozymandias's ruined statue "Nothing beside remains".

The lines come, as I have said, at the very end of the book, but perhaps more importantly they come at the end of a sort of postscript to the main narrative. At the time in which the story is set, the narrator was a young novice and participant observer in its events. But at the time it is written, he is old and the abbey has long since fallen into sodden ruins after a fire which destroys it in the climax to the story. He has revisited it and discovered only charred fragments of the once great library. And he muses over the question of how much he has created and constructed in recalling and recounting things. The narrative is then the empty names which we hold instead of once real but now dead lives and happenings, and the relation between the two is quite problematic. Nor is a long passage of time strictly necessary. In the narrative he meets and sleeps with a young village girl whom he finds one night as she is making an illicit visit to the abbey. Already by the next day, the reality of that one night is presented in the narrative (albeit many years later by a monk created later still by Eco) as confusing and uncertain, and one senses that the vision of it shifts and gels in different forms over a lifetime. If I read Leach aright, this is one basic puzzle for the anthropologist. To keep life and experience alive while recognising the increasing distance between them and our attempts to recreate their essential features on the written page.

The theme of fiction is, of course, not new to Leach's work. In "Highland Burma" he criticises Fortes and Evans-Pritchard for their assumptions about stable equilibria, and he stresses the "as-if" nature of all models. At the same time
he accepts that model-building is quite fundamental to the anthropological task,  
and he offers a partial solution to the problem in terms of the nearer  
approximation of his models to the reality of history seen more or less as "just  
one damn thing after another". Crucial in this case is of course his use of  
oscillatory models to build time and change into the picture. My own picture of  
his views around that time is also influenced by comments which he made about  
bits of my own work. As an undergraduate I wrote an essay on the Highland  
Burma book which he was kind enough to read. In it I suggested that one could  
look at a social system over time in four ways. In the first it just continued, and in  
the second it reproduced itself in a sort of amoebic fission. In the third it changed  
repetitively as from Gumsa to Gumlao to Gumsa etc. In the fourth it changed  
lineally from form A to B to C and so on. Gently ignoring the naivety of this  
formulation, Leach's comment on it was that the fourth, linear picture was quite  
different from the others. It was history, not anthropology, and it lacked general  
sense. Similarly, at a seminar in which, shortly after my first fieldwork, I  
presented an account of a Nyamwezi riot, he made the comment that, as it stood,  
this was history (though quite good history) and that I needed to draw out its  
general structural implications.  

In his new paper Leach partly pursues similar themes. He still castigates his  
colleagues for their early tendencies to try to abstract a "traditional system from  
the welter of phenomena they encountered in the field. He also criticises their  
failure to recognise the importance of their own role and that of other visitors in  
the interactive creation of what they saw and heard and in the formation rather  
than simple documentation of this. We are, I may add, not all equally guilty of  
this, though perhaps not always for the right reasons. I admit that I have not  
myself loomed large, at least explicitly, in my attempts at Nyamwezi and other  
ethnography, but history and outside intervention and interaction certainly have. I  
suppose that initially I was simply empirically naive rather than epistemologically  
sophisticated on this issue. I went to the field and found Europeans, Arabs and  
Indians as well as lots of Africans, and I automatically assumed that I should  
document what they were, and had been, up to. And I found myself writing that if  
there was a Nyamwezi political system, it was full of inconsistencies and had  
been on the receiving end of so much influence from outside and from sectional  
interests within that it had never had a chance to be anything else.  

This, however, brings us back to questions which are still a puzzle. Fortes  
(re)creates a traditional Tallensi system. At times too, for instance in his paper on  
culture change as a dynamic process, he is clearly aware that he is leaving large  
chunks of his field material artificially aside. At the same time he has described
himself, albeit in a context of good humoured argument, as "an unreconstructed positivist empiricist". But what if anything was he doing wrong? Was he doing the wrong thing in writing "fictional" accounts of Tallensi society, or was he doing the right thing and simply using the wrong label? Or was he writing the wrong sort of fiction, in which case what should he and others have been doing? Should he, for instance, have figured more largely in his own texts, or should he have pursued artistry perhaps at the expense of accuracy? Is accuracy itself no longer meaningful?

At this point a "gut-level" reaction sets in, at least for me. I am quite convinced that the main task for the anthropologist as ethnographer is to be as true as possible to the people he/she studies. I know that as this stands it is too simple. The boundaries which mark off such "people" are artificial and debatable, and there are internal significant divisions based on age, sex, and possibly class as well as more local criteria among them. Custom may be described by them as traditional, but we know it to be capable of rapid change and that the question of who it belongs to is more important than how old it is. But, when all is said and done, the task remains to give as true a picture as we can of what we see and hear and learn. If it would be better style, more stirring, or more satisfying aesthetically or intellectually to tell it in some other way, that in the last resort must be less crucial than telling it as we at least think it was. Of course, if we are providing an ethnography of our own society with its members as main audience, we can assume that much of what is idiosyncratic and "fictional" in our account will be quickly picked up and noted. Indeed it is for this reason that I am less worried about my own intrusion, selectivity, and partiality in "ethnographic" sections of this paper than I would be if I was writing about a Nyamwezi debate. Or again, if we read Eco's novel, we can go back to more straightforward historical accounts of the Franciscan order and the inquisition. We can then trace, or at least ponder relatively informedly, who and what was real in the book. Michael of Cesena, Ubertino, and Bernardo Gui were real people engaged in real Debates and struggles about which much, though of course by no means everything is known. The Fra Dolcino movement too was real. In other words, an interested reader can have the best of both worlds. He/she can enjoy Eco's novel with all its evocations and explorations, and at the same time it is possible to let that interact with a reasonable facsimile of history. The different texts can both enrich and qualify each other.

Perhaps that would be the best solution in an ideal world. We would attempt to provide "documentary" ethnographies in which we took on board explicitly as much as we could about subjectivity and selectivity, and in which our own and
other "external" influences were sensitively recognised. At the same time, if only we have the skills, we might also try to breathe life in a more self-conscious and creative way into the dead pages of our note books. I have once tried, unsuccessfully, to do this vicariously. In 1971 I published a paper on a particular set of bridewealth negotiations in northern Uganda. The paper described and analysed the offers and demands, and the process by which an agreement was reached, but it paid relatively little attention to the fate of the bride. The success of the negotiations took her, for good structural as well as personal reasons, into an unhappy marriage which ended with her death apparently through suicide. Wole Soyinka was in Cambridge at the time, and I tried but failed to interest him in the story which I did not fell I could do proper justice to myself. But I willingly acknowledge that I felt the need then, as I do now, for such justice.

It is a daunting task, and I suspect all too few of us are capable of it. But it is important too that we realise that it is by no means our only one. Much of the world which we study is a world of others who differ from us in their cultures and their social forms, and also in their poverty and in their inability to make themselves heard. We typically make our own livings out of their co-operation with us. One way in which we can hope to repay this is through the honest and reliable, and in some non-trivial degree authoritative, documentation and analysis of their world. It is, possible, as I have said, that self-conscious anthropological fiction may help in this task, but I am not convinced that we have yet done all we usefully and sensibly can to understand the structure and the functioning (I choose these old fashioned words quite deliberately) of other societies. Nor should we abrogate our genuine expertise in that field. The mindless number-crunching mentioned earlier is not the only dangerous alternative at hand. Another is that by defining ourselves as writers of our own brand of creative fiction, we may also write ourselves out of an involvement in the real world with potentially damaging results not only for ourselves but also, more importantly, for those we study. There are already enough politicians, economists, civil engineers and agricultural experts who are prepared to think that they know all that matters about these people; and self-styled "fiction", however we define it, may not be the best way to persuade them they are wrong.

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