

Anthropology's Ancestors: A review essay on a new Berghahn collection

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Abstract

Anthropological history is today a growth area. This essay reviews the new collection *Anthropology's Ancestors* that Aleksandar Boskovic is editing at Berghahn. The three short books he has published so far are very engaging intellectual histories of three anthropologists of the past who have recently received increased critical attention and whose legacy certainly deserves it: Robertson Smith, Margaret Mead and Françoise Héritier.

Keywords: Sacrifice; gender; blood; embodiment; Margaret Mead; Robertson Smith; Françoise Héritier.

Antepassados da Antropologia: Uma revisão da nova coleção da Berghahn

Resumo

A história da antropologia é uma área em crescimento rápido. Este artigo discute a coleção *Anthropology's Ancestors* que Aleksandar Boskovic tem vindo a dirigir na editora Berghahn. Os três curtos livros que saíram até hoje são histórias intelectuais de três dos antropólogos do passado cujo legado tem vindo recentemente a receber merecida atenção crítica: Robertson Smith, Margaret Mead e Françoise Héritier.

Palavras-Chave: Sacrifício; género; sangue; embodiment; Margaret Mead; Robertson Smith; Françoise Héritier.

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A busy history

The history of anthropology has never been as busy as over the past few years. The writing and researching of it seems to be undergoing a moment of effervescence right across the globe. Just as anthropology distances itself theoretically from the major interpretive frameworks that constituted the undisputed background assumptions for a century, it seems that anthropologists are called to re-read in a new light the discipline's past insights. As it happens, some of the more persistent misinterpretations of our recent past are calling loudly to be re-examined (e.g. on participant observation, see Pina-Cabral 2023). The thing is: our ancestors remain with us in new ways, just as we distance ourselves from them.

Everyday another interesting exploration comes out in one of our disciplinary journals (some, such as *History & Anthropology*, *Anthropological Theory*, or *HAU*, to cite only three, have published consistently innovative contributions in this line). At the same time, some of the recent re-presentations of classical works will undoubtedly stay in the coming future as commonly acknowledged references. I have in mind works like Dorothy Zinn's translation of Ernesto de Martino's *Magic: A Theory from the South* (2015), Jane Guyer's re-translation of Mauss' essay on the gift (2016), or Shryack and Da Col's omnibus of Pitt-Rivers's essays (2017).

As it happens, Brazilian anthropology is no stranger to disciplinary history—in fact, it was decidedly a forerunner of the genre. Márcio Goldman's book on Lévy-Bruhl (2019 [1994]), Lygia Sigaud's essays on Leach and Mauss (1996, 1999, 2007), Eunice Durham's essay on Malinowski (in 2004), Mariza Peirano's *Uma Antropologia no Plural* (1992), and of course the monograph on the school of Nina Rodrigues by Mariza Corrêa (2013 [1998])—these are surely among some of the more masterful examples anywhere. Some of you, I am sure, will consider that I am being unfair in having left so many other perfectly good examples out of my list of preferences. I apologize in advance for that; only that these were the ones that marked more strongly my passage through Brazil and the way it changed my view of anthropology.

A particularly interesting feature of recent publications on the history of anthropology has been the emergence of a new style of short book that combines the biographical essay with a theoretical re-assessment of the chosen author's contribution. These constitute great aids to teaching and thinking. I am reminded of essays such as Sally Cole's biography of Ruth Landes (2003), Virginia Kern's essay on Julian Steward (2010), Séan Morrow's life of Monica Wilson (2016) and the collection of essays the Bank brothers dedicated to her (2013), Julia Blackburn's fascinating essay on Daisy Bates in the Australian desert (1994), or Robert Gordon's brilliant setting in historical context of Gluckman's life and ideas (2018). Again, many more might have been named, but as far as I am concerned all of these have helped me significantly in teaching ethnographic theory over the past decade.

Many of these books will, I am sure, remain with us in the long run, as they not only bring to light a particular author whose fame might otherwise have waned among contemporary practitioners, but they provide important analytical continuities at a time when we are experiencing major shifts in analytical trends. This brings to light a curious aspect of these first two decades of our new century: we seem to have moved from rejection to reformulation; from a *post-something* moment to a *neo-something* moment. As an example, see the fascinating neo-structuralist trends that are emerging out of the inspiration of quantum mechanics (e.g. Barad 2007) or complexity theory (e.g. Dalton 2021).

A passing canon

A scientific discipline is a space of collective encounter—a multistranded, never unified, always-conflictual agora. In that sense, there are no new disciplines but only new disciplinary developments; we all sit on the shoulders of those who preceded us. Thus, no one who comes anew to a field of scientific enquiry can escape having to deal with a canon—that is, a set of accepted references by relation to which they frame their questions. Yet, there are no eternal canons—all canons are *passing canons*, in the sense that Donald Davidson had in mind when he said that all prior theories are passing theories (2005 [1986]: 86-109).

One of the more insidious forms of ethnocentrism is *chronocentrism*: the naïve belief that our present wisdom has superseded the wisdom of those whose lives unfolded in times before one's own. Any well-heeled practitioner of any scientific discipline will confirm that the challenges that we face today are not all that distant from those faced by our colleagues in the past. Our canon, therefore, should always be open both to the future—in the sense of being concerned with what our contemporaries are proposing all around us—as well as to the past—in the sense of including the *savants* of bygone ages. This means that, much as we inevitably dialogue with the canon of the teachers who inspired us, each one of us is ultimately responsible for the choice of their own canon.

In the case of ethnographic researchers, our very fieldwork explorations yield profound changes in our analytical canon—as was the case with my fieldworks in Macau first and then in Bahia. Whether we are Serbian, Portuguese, Russian or Brazilian; male, female or other; rightwing, leftwing or other; white, black or other ... whatever we are, when we choose those who inspire our writing as anthropologists it is our responsibility to be inspired by the 'best': those whom we judge to be the more trustworthy, the more creative, the more insightful thinkers. Science—and anthropology even more—is a universalist enterprise; one from which no one who can enter the debate can be excluded. I say this whilst knowing fully well that we do not only choose our ancestors because of the analytical and empirical perspicacity of their work, but also because the perspectives they developed echo with our own interests. Furthermore, where we are and what is happening around us matters for how we choose to approach the human condition broadly conceived—different local traditions necessarily yielding different canons. Yet, beyond that, no anthropologist can afford to bypass the more creative work of any other anthropologist, wherever that was produced. This is why the history of anthropology is such a central concern of anthropology—the times in which we could falsely pretend that 'anthropology is a young discipline' are long over. None of us has the right or can afford the luxury of forgetting our canon, even as it passes on, and we successively redraw it. That is the beauty of the best work on the history of anthropology that is being done today.

In what follows, I will refer in particular to three little books—each one of them a long essay focusing on an anthropologist of the past whose work amply deserves our consideration today. They are part of a new collection called *Anthropology's Ancestors* that Aleksandar Bosković is editing for Berghahn. Even as it is starting, the collection already promises to be an inspiration for young people who, newly coming to anthropology, want to know what the discipline is all about. As a door of entry into anthropology, these personalized essays, where an author's life and work are developed succinctly but with sufficient breath to make them justice, are far better and much more inspiring than yet another boring (and soon to reveal itself out of date) "Introduction to Anthropology" or another compendious "History of Anthropology" (or worse still, of the anthropology-of-this-or-that). The worse thing one can do to a young beginner is to make them read one of those simplified and more often than not biased overviews of the discipline, of which there are so many. Experience shows that it is far better for students to become well acquainted with one or two of the past luminaries of our discipline, whilst trusting that a better grasp of the discipline's broader history will come in time.

Aleksander Boskovič is a Serbian (Scottish-trained) anthropologist who has worked and carried out research in South Africa and Brazil, having been inspired, among others, by Mariza Peirano's pioneering work on the history of anthropology (see his edited volume *Other People's Anthropology*, 2008). The three volumes that have come to light so far cover three distinct periods of the discipline: William Robertson Smith was an all rounded scholar of the Belle Époque who worked on ritual and religion; Margaret Mead was perhaps the most media-savvy anthropologist ever, who worked at mid-twentieth century; and Françoise Héritier was the principal successor to Lévi-Strauss in Paris, and an anthropologist whose breath of research and brilliant analytical skills have not yet been fully appreciated. Boskovič starts his collection with a choice of some of the very best, and the essays are written by authors who studied them profoundly and deeply respect their legacy. Furthermore, to start off with, Boskovič had the wisdom of avoiding the more consensual cases, which means that there is novelty in what we are being offered.

Margaret Mead

The book on Mead is written by Paul Shankman, a respected American specialist on Pacific Island cultures. The book is an overview of her and her work from early on in the 1920s, when she studied with Ruth Benedict and Franz Boas in New York, to her final days as a media figure in the late 1970s. The story that Shankman recounts is truly fascinating: Mead was one of those people whose personal life was quite as exciting, and at times even more, than her written work. In fact, recently this has been highlighted by Lily King's novel—*Euphoria* 2015—where the author recreates the troubled period during fieldwork in Papua New Guinea when Mead broke with Leo Fortune to start a relationship with Gregory Bateson that marked the history of anthropology. From the late 1920s, when our colleagues were enthusiastically responding to the Malinowskian reforms, to the early 1960s, Mead was always in the forefront of developments, always producing creative, voluminous, and engaged research. In fact, her exploratory war-time work 'at a distance' has acquired increased methodological relevance today, during these our Covid-haunted days.

But Shankman does not finish there. Soon after her death, Mead's legacy found itself involved in a quite spurious attack moved by an Australian colleague, who managed to tap onto the sort of prejudiced slander that the mass media and our less scrupulous colleagues enjoy. In a short, but decisive final chapter, Shankman lays the matter to rest: the critiques were mostly unfounded and, overall, based on a dishonest manipulation of sources.

Despite some obvious weaknesses, Mead's work continues to be inspirational today. Shankman reminds us that she was indeed prone to romanticise her descriptions, and that she was not always as analytically rigorous as she might have been. In particular, in the 1970s, during the last decade of her very long and active life, the discipline was undergoing major changes not unlike today; the consensus of the post-War period suddenly vanished in face of the problems brought to the discipline by a new generation. By then, Mead no longer seemed able to respond creatively to the new challenges posed by the generation of people (such as Marshal Sahlins) who came out of the student uprisings.

Personally, I met her in 1976, in a situation that I did not enjoy. I was a graduate student in Johannesburg, South Africa. At the time, the ANC, which was the main organization fighting apartheid, had declared an academic boycott of South Africa. Retrospectively, I must admit that this boycott was probably one of their least fortunate policy decisions. Its future implications, in terms of the destruction of the previously lively academic life of the country, are still being felt today. Yet, for us that heard Mead speak then in Johannesburg, leaning on her prophet's forked staff, her disregard of the boycott and, worse still, her arrogant posture as someone who claimed to have a solution for what surely was one of the more complex political challenges of contemporary history, left us decidedly underwhelmed.

The reader may ask, therefore, why should we today choose to include Mead in our canon. Shankman's critical but respectful overview of her career leaves no doubts about that: she was certainly one of the more creative and prolific thinkers at mid-century, and even although she was not a declared feminist and she did not yet use the distinction between sex and gender, she was certainly a figure about whom anyone studying gender and personhood today is inevitably drawn. Moreover, in the late 1930s, during her years of collaboration with Gregory Bateson, she became a pioneer in what are today major fields of anthropological research, using audio-visual material to explore embodiment, gender, and sensory relations in a truly pioneering fashion.

A theologian's anthropological legacy

Boskovič himself authors the second book in the collection. It is a study of William Robertson Smith (1846-1894), one of the principal British scholars at the end of the nineteenth century—truly, an intellectual giant. He was not properly speaking an anthropologist, since this was a period that preceded the modernist definition of sociocultural anthropology as a discipline that we take for granted today. Robertson Smith started his professional life as a pastor in the Free Church of Scotland. Later, he became one of the greatest specialists that ever existed on the Old Testament and, more broadly, its relations with Semitic societies.

Having carried out actual field research in the Middle East, Robertson Smith finished his days as a Professor in Cambridge, where he became world famous for his work as editor of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, a job for which a tremendous amount of scholarly accomplishment was required. Here we have an 'ancestor' who did not conceive of himself primarily as an anthropologist and whose work moves way beyond our discipline in terms of its relevance, but who is nevertheless a central component of the canon of most professional anthropologists today.

He was fired from his first post in the Free Church Seminary at Aberdeen after lengthy judicial proceedings during which his rationalist and critical approach to the Bible's history was judged to be deleterious to the faith of his students. Eventually, as a Professor in Cambridge, his importance became generally consensual. Half a century after his early death, however, at a time when anthropology was moved by more relativist and synchronicist approaches, his rationalist exegesis of Biblical texts came to be queried by some of anthropology's principal thinkers. Evans-Pritchard, in particular, in his 1959 Aquinas Lecture, explicitly criticizes the influence that Biblical criticism had on the founding of modern anthropology (accusing Robertson Smith of being moved by 'positivism' and 'agnosticism', which he pointedly lumps together—Evans-Pritchard 1963). In his lectures on the history of anthropology, he further criticizes Robertson Smith's theories (1981). As a descent theorist, Evans-Pritchard saw the clan, organized according to a strict structure of patrilineal segmentation, as the founding element of Semitic societies. For him, the earlier scholar's emphasis on blood sharing and on matrilineal relations seemed illogical. For us, today, however, such Durkheimian certainties no longer seem to carry quite as much conviction as they did in Evans-Pritchard's days and we are prone to sympathize with Robertson Smith's insights.

Whilst Boskovič dedicates the central chapters of his book to a history of anthropological approaches to myth, this is probably not the area where most of us today are bound to find inspiration in Robertson Smith's work. His contribution to the study of ritual and, in particular, his profoundly insightful approach to sacrifice as communion, is the area that any contemporary ethnographer working on religion would be advised to revisit. His work on sacrifice was the backdrop for Mauss and Hubert's classical exploration of the theme (1981 [1964]) and, subsequently, for all the work carried out on the topic at mid-century (see Bourdillon and Fortes 1980), including some now classic works, such as Luc de Heusch's book on sacrifice in Africa (1986) or Girard's book (1972) on sacredness and violence, which so marked Freudian debates, and, finally, of course Maurice Bloch's time-setting *From Blessing to Violence* (1986).

Even though, today, we are prone to discard the primitivist analytical framework that Robertson Smith took for granted, his emphasis on communion (the sharing of a common substance) no longer seems to us as unreasonable and contrary to logic as it seemed to Evans-Pritchard at mid-twentieth century. Is he not lurking in the shadows, we ask ourselves, when we read McKim Marriott's revolutionary essay on substance-codes (1976)? In fact, in this regard, Françoise Héritier's late work on kinship and body substances opens vistas that justify plainly our revisitation of Robertson Smith's early exegesis of Semitic ritual history.

The great successor

Gérald Gaillard is responsible for the third book—a life history of Françoise Héritier (1933-2017). As was inevitable—both because she is our near contemporary and because of the specific characteristics of French intellectual life—the book has a very distinct feel from the other two. As it happens, for those who do not read French, it will probably turn out to be a helpful entry into the more recent history of our discipline in that country. Gaillard places Héritier's work and career squarely within the institutional framework where it developed and by reference to a French kind of intellectual stardom that is very distinct from the type of accolade that characterizes success in Anglo-American contexts.

Notwithstanding, Héritier's life trajectory mirrors significantly that of Margaret Mead: she starts with an important investment in intensive fieldwork (in her case among the Samo of Burkina Fasso/Upper Volta), then she produces an important theoretical and comparative contribution as a researcher and teacher (at the CNRS and then the EHESS), and finally dedicates the end of her life to a deeply engaged type of public anthropology, largely associated to the center-left spectrum and feminist causes. Whilst being a woman in a man's world—the picture in the book's cover shows her alone in the middle of around thirty of her male colleagues at the prestigious Collège de France—she was by no means the first woman to mark centrally French anthropology. In fact, in the beginning of her academic life, she was inspired by one of Mauss' most distinguished students, Germaine Dieterlen, also an Africanist. And again, much like Mead, her married history is very much part of her career. Her two husbands (Michel Izard and Marc Augé—whose family names she added to her own in her publications during the periods when she was married to them) were an intrinsic part of her intellectual and institutional projects. However, and much as he might have had other plans concerning his succession (Gaillard 2022: 68-70), it is Claude Lévi-Strauss that sets the intellectual launchpad upon which she was going to work during the principal period of her professional life, both before and after she succeeded to his principal postings in the Parisian Olympus in 1980.

Like her mentor, she aimed to be part of a line in the structuralist study of kinship that, having emerged from the work of Durkheim, was renewed in the 1930s by Radcliff-Brown and then, at mid-century, by Lévi-Strauss. This is very much how she told her intellectual story, whenever she attempted an overview. *L'exercice de la parenté* (1981), where she starts from a strictly orthodox structuralist exploration of kinship terminologies, and then moves to a discussion of alliance and incest prohibitions, is probably the work that marks the high point of her intellectual fame.

From the mid-1980s onwards, largely moved by the emergence of the AIDS pandemic and the way in which the disease was transmitted through the sharing of bodily substances, her work starts moving in a distinctly different direction. This new dialogue with human biotechnology was also moved by her active participation in the discussions concerning assisted reproduction and its legal implications. As her engagement in public-political committees and the media increased, the emphasis in her work moved from a preoccupation with alliance to a concern with the sharing of substances in the constitution of human persons (1989 ([1986]) and how this affected gender relations, namely in terms of power.

How this latter work connects with her earlier work, and particularly with her claims to be an orthodox follower of Lévi-Strauss' early structuralism, was never too clear and remained uncertain to the end, in spite of her repeated efforts at bridging the gap. Having been privileged to attend a small course of four lectures that she gave at the Casa Velazquez in Madrid in 1989, I was at the time puzzled by the way she managed to avoid the glaring epistemological disjunction between her earlier structuralist exercises and her later, far more culturalist approach to the role of bodily fluids in human sociality.

The final decades of her life were marred by a severe health condition that ultimately left her seriously handicapped. This in no way distracted her from her increasingly intensive engagement as a public intellectual. She played an important role during the final days of the Socialist Party's hegemony over French politics. Although she kept away from organized feminist activism, Héritier defended her own universalist conception of the right to difference in very vocal and creative terms, enthusiastically applying her theoretical insights on alliance and the role of bodily substances to the public debates that so marked the early 2000s. As it happens, the close attention given in the two closing chapters of Gaillard's book to Héritier's activities as a public intellectual in Paris, will probably turn out to be more interesting to a French readership than elsewhere.

Héritier claims that, when she left her office at the Collège de France upon retirement, she found an unfinished manuscript at the bottom of a drawer that she no longer remembered. This, she claims, she had abandoned shortly before setting off to write *L'exercice de la parenté* under Lévi-Strauss's inspiration. The resulting book, which she finally published three decades later, *Le retour aux sources* (2010), turns out to be the ethnographic monograph of the Samo of Upper Volta that she had never finished. It is not a book about 'kinship' but a book about a house-based African society and the way in which its institutions (namely concerning marriage and descent) are echoed in the worldview that its members share. From a focus on rules and systems, here we move to a focus on persons, houses, participation, and values that responds very much to our more contemporary theoretical concerns. This is, to my mind, her best and most mature contribution to a discipline that she so wholeheartedly defended. I recommend it to the readers. Sadly, however, Héritier's very fame as a public intellectual probably explains why this brilliant (earlier but last) book passed largely unnoticed.

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