

Book Reviews

Social and Cultural Anthropology. The Key Concepts

By Nigel Rapport and Joanna Overing,
London, New York: Routledge (Key
Guides), 2007, ISBN-10: 0415181569,
ISBN-13: 978-0415181563.

Reviewed by Andreea Lazea

This book, first published in 2000 and recently revised and updated, represents an original attempt to offer 'a concise repository of explanatory statements covering a number of the major concepts which professional anthropologists might use' (vi). It consists of 58 essays, some of them discussing inevitable concepts as 'Culture', 'Individualism', 'Kinship' or 'Society', others drawing on notions less traditional for the discipline of anthropology such as 'Cybernetics', 'Hybridity', 'Irony' or 'Moments of being'.

The entries do not, and are not intended to, exhaust the area of significant anthropological concepts. They correspond to a subjective selection, representative for a certain way of conceiving anthropology, verging on postmodernism. The major challenge of anthropology, as the authors stress in the preface, is bringing together 'particularity' and 'generality', 'individuality' and 'humanity'. One response to this difficult task that seems to guide this book is complementing a healthy relativism (as opposed to essentialism) with a generous humanism. This intellectual and moral position is convergent with the implicated attitude and the pregnant sound of the authors' voices, revealed all over the book. In this spirit, Rapport and Overing on occasion enrich the essays with their own field experiences and research findings.

The treatment of the concepts is personal and academic at the same time. Without being rigid or stereotypical, each essay tries to follow the inner logic of the concept and to trace its theoretical origins and implications and some neighbouring valuable ideas. Thus, one can find the history of the founding of the discipline in the chapter 'Alterity' or can read about terms and concepts that were not among the 58 ones, as, for example, 'structuralism'.

The great benefit and the originality of the book is the attempt to trace nodes of significance, and in the process to shed further insight in understanding anthropology. The frequent appeal to philosophical and sociological references, which illuminate the interdisciplinary connections created on the ground of similar currents of thoughts and inquiries that nourished these disciplines, contributes greatly to these ends. This permanent dialogue between anthropology and other disciplines is stimulating and fertile at once, though it can be problematic for those who are not familiar with philosophy.

From the point of view of the organization, the volume encloses a significant index and useful cross-references. The rich bibliography at the end of the work allows the reader to supplement his/her sources significantly.

The book can be extremely valuable to those students and researchers in anthropology who are at ease with the fundamentals of the discipline and are looking for a keen approach to the anthropological statements.

Andreea Lazea is a PhD candidate in anthropology at the University Bordeaux 2, France, and the National School for Political and Administrative Studies, Bucharest, Romania, with a thesis on

the patrimonial politics in Romania after 1989. She graduated in the Faculty of Philosophy with a Masters in Anthropology, and has participated in several conferences focused on themes such as 'regional identity' and 'urban public space'. Her article 'Les monuments post-communistes de Bucarest entre "espace public" et "espace social"' was published in Sociétés. Revue des Sciences humaines et sociales, L'expérience métropolitaine, no. 97, 2007/3 and she is a member of the International Association for Southeast Anthropology (InASEA).

Creativity and Cultural Improvisation

By Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold (eds.).
Oxford, New York: Berg (ASA Monographs 44), 2007, ISBN 978-184520-527-0.

Reviewed by Felix Girke

This collection of contributions to the eponymous 2005 ASA conference, held at Aberdeen, seeks to bring home creativity from its place apart within the realm of culture: neither should creativity be sought only in sites of artistic display, nor is it merely a talent of gifted individuals. It can be found everywhere, being 'intrinsic to the very processes of social and cultural life' (19)!

It is pleasing that this methodological shift is not argued by the usual means of demolishing any ancestors. Laying the groundwork for the entire volume, the editors instead engage with the vocabulary we have been using all along, and reassemble familiar terms to make their point. As they suggest, 'creativity' need not be opposed to 'convention' as has been traditional modernist wisdom. The editors advocate attention to 'improvisation', the sometimes quite ephemeral creativity in the context of only seemingly readymade culture, favouring it over the similar notion 'innovation', which is often used merely as a retrospective verdict on

the more enduring manifestations of implemented imagination. Improvisation, instead, acknowledges our fundamental thrownness into the 'crescent' (3) or even 'concurrent' world (52). We all are constantly 'generatively', 'relationally' and 'temporally' creative. Accordingly, while not listed in the index, the theme of 'emergence' runs throughout the collection, with references to the constant state of becoming permeating the introduction and several of the chapters. Furthermore, we are encouraged to look for social change, as Karin Barber explains, in 'how people go about solidifying the flux of social life' (26). Since this stance is by and large maintained throughout, the volume demonstrates how to avoid easy closures, such as reifications of 'innovation', or uncritical celebrations of 'appropriation'.

Beyond the introduction proper and Barber's opening piece, the contributions are arranged in four sections of three chapters, each preceded by a topical introduction. By comparison, the concluding essay by Clara Mafra, in which different voices debate a gentle practice of ethnography, seems little integrated with the other contributions. Most chapters, though, illustrate the difficulties in dealing with 'creativity' in stimulating ways. James Leach gives an overview of the history of 'possessive individualism' in Western thinking: today, tensions between common and individual interests are seen as an inevitable, even natural aspect of social life. The celebration of the individual 'creative entrepreneur', however, is a cultural imagination that is bound to have distorting effects when transported elsewhere. This is echoed in Judith Scheele's short but persuasive text on 'revolution as convention' in Kabylia. Her study shows that while we have long known that 'tradition' is not only an object of analysis but also a 'locally manipulated category' (162), it seems that we still have difficulty seeing the terms 'change' and 'agency' or 'creativity' in the same way, deeming them both more positive and more accurate. That we look for creativity in the wrong places is

the punch line of Amar S. Mall's contribution. Indian *kōlam*, complex patterns drawn in rice flour to ward off evil spirits, are in fact works of improvisational mastery. This is only revealed by observing the process of drawing, but irretrievably obscured by contemplation of the finished form.

This dilemma is inadvertently mirrored by the front cover, which sports an uncannily clever one-line drawing by Tim Ingold himself. One uninterrupted line twists and criss-crosses across the page, conjuring up a grandiose bird, some tawny owls, a bashful deer, a coniferous tree, the sun and an unidentifiable mammal. But this is too elaborate to illustrate 'improvisation' plausibly, and so this finished form obscures its genesis just as much as the *kōlam*. While I immediately had to try my hand at retracing the shape with a pencil myself, one wonders what the editors intended to evoke by using this intriguing picture, which is apocryphal only at first sight.

As a more substantive criticism, I found that the relationality of improvisation and creativity which is initially invoked remained largely restricted to vague 'fields of relationships' (8) throughout the book. Some additional reflection on improvisation and creativity in situated interaction would have been appropriate. I expected to find this in Hastrup's essay on

'agency, anticipation, and creativity', but she foregoes the middle ground of interaction by focusing on 'personhood' and 'agency' at the micro-level and 'the social' and 'history' at the macro-level.

Some potential buyers might be put off by the narrow description found on the back cover. There, references to the 'graphic and performing arts' and 'intellectual property law' act as eye-catchers. This does a disservice to the book as it does not play to the cogency of the advocated methodological stance, which for non-specialist readers will be the most compelling feature of the book.

*Felix Girke has an MA in social anthropology from the University of Mainz. At the moment, he is writing his PhD thesis on rhetoric and social relations in Kara, Southern Ethiopia, at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle/Saale. He has spent about 18 months on cumulative research in Kara, and also works out of the South Omo Museum and Research Center (SORC) in Jinka, Ethiopia (see <http://www.southethiopiaresearch.org>). His film *Morokapel's Feast* (2007 with Steffen Köhn) has been screened at a dozen film festivals and won the first prize in the Amateur's Competition at the XVI Festival of Ethnological Film in Belgrade, Serbia.*