

ON BEING OTHERED
John J. Honigmann Describes Steiermark and We Fail to Recognize It

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“To be an object of research
is never pleasing.”

Jacques Maquet

To be able to answer the question “What does the ethnographic gaze see?” one should have actually read an ethnographic representation from the perspective of the one being represented. The best thing would be, of course, to find one’s own region ethnographically described in a work entitled either “The Bavarians” or “The Californians.” One could then compare the portrait sketched by the ethnographer with one’s own self-portrait and thus appreciate the extent to which it actually succeeds in representing the research object “from the native’s point of view.”

Nothing but empty theory, the impatient reader might object here; the Bavarians or Californians have, so far, not been made an object of a serious ethnographic representation. However, in order to avoid having to abandon a discussion of the question raised at the beginning, I will, in the following analysis, substitute a none-too-distant and comparatively well-investigated population: the Obersteirer, or Upper Styrians.¹

The Obersteirer found their ethnographer in John J. Honigmann, who, for his part, is mostly known as an ethnographer of the aboriginal population of Canada. The field research that Honigmann carried out jointly with his wife in the Steiermark region of Austria has actually remained by and large unnoticed. But the essays resulting from this research have, in my opinion, unjustly fallen into oblivion, for they rank with the very few ethnographic works in which a non-European researcher describes in detail cultural phenomena observed in a German-speaking population. As unique ethnographic documents, they present the desired experience, even for the reader unfamiliar with the geography of the Steiermark region: namely, to be able to read ethnography for once from the perspective of being represented.

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1 Even the British social anthropologist Diana Forsythe determined in her synoptic observation of the Federal Republic of Germany, that the most densely populated country in Western Europe “is comparatively unexplored” and consequently appears “proportionally as a white spot on the ethnographic map” (cf. Forsythe 1984: 124, 127). Due to these circumstances, it became necessary to strain the concept of an “ethnography of one’s own kind” a bit further than is perhaps permissible.

Honigmann's Steiermark essays appeared over a period of more than 15 years in various journals and collections. Some of the titles run "*Bauer and Arbeiter*" (1963), "Personality and Socialization" (1964), "Rationality and Fantasy" (1970), "Mixed Contracts" (1976), "Responsibility and Nurturance" (1978). Their synthesis into a great ethnographic work on the Obersteirer was prevented only by the early death of the ethnographer (for a complete bibliography of Honigmann's works, cf. Gulick et al. 1978). Out of the altogether barely ten publications on the Steiermark region, I have selected "Dynamics of Drinking" (1963) for an exemplary reading, since it seems to me that this essay grants us an especially broad ethnographic look at ourselves.²

"Dynamics of Drinking in an Austrian Village" – to give the complete title of the essay – goes back to Honigmann's second research stay in the Obersteirer community of Altirdning. It was first published 1963 in the periodical *Ethnology* and reprinted elsewhere without revision 16 years later (cf. Marshall, ed. 1979: 414–428). Nothing remarkable is to be found in this work in terms of its formal aspects, since it stays within the conventional boundaries of the ethnographic genre. All the same, German-speaking readers immediately detect that this text represents something special: it is not exactly their world which is being described there, but it is nevertheless familiar enough so that they can compare the described world with the one they know from their own observation.³

In anticipation of being able to see this world for once through the eyes of an ethnographer, I began to read "Dynamics of Drinking." The essay starts with a theoretical introduction in which Honigmann emphasizes his connection with the "configurational method" of Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, and sets out the two goals he is pursuing:

... first, to demonstrate how drinking (the apparently simple custom of downing alcoholic beverages) integrates with other parts of a cultural configuration and, second, in doing so to describe drinking in a German-speaking Central European village in Austria (Honigmann 1963: 157).

Without lingering too long over these theoretical constructions, I quickly skimmed the first pages and found at the beginning of the second chapter what actually interests me in Honigmann's ethnographic representation: a description of the Obersteirer Gasthaus, an account of the atmosphere in the taproom, a list of the topics of conversation discussed at the various tables, an analysis of the drinking behavior of the indigenous population etc. The generalizations, that Honigmann undertakes in his

- 2 Few ethnographic works deal with Germany or Austria and an astonishing amount of those deal with the consumption of alcohol, especially beer, schnapps and sparkling wine. Works worth reading are those by Hage (1972) and Thornton (1987). – This essay deals, at least implicitly, with the question of how far this noticeable concentration on the complex of alcohol and drinking habits refers to a culturally specific "obsessive character trait" (Kohl 1987: 3) which North American cultural anthropology applies when dealing with Central European traditions and says perhaps more about the Puritanism in the United States than about the drinking habit of the described people.
- 3 Reading an ethnographic portrayal from the perspective of the people portrayed does not aim at judging the objective content of the depicted matter in the sense of a comparison between translation and original text. Rather, it aims solely at finding out to what extent the self-conception of the ethnographicized agrees with the understanding of the ethnographer. In other words, the question is when does the observation of the anthropologist correspond with the self-perception of the natives and with regards to which subjects differences in standpoints arise.

description of this microcosmos, are derived from his research in two village inns and from unsystematic observations in their proximate surroundings. Against the background of his own Puritan-stamped culture he was struck by the relatively easy access to alcohol and its widespread consumption, which he was also able to observe at christenings, weddings, and funerals. Honigmann summarizes his perceptions in reference to the significance of alcoholic beverages at these events as follows: "The annual round and ceremonial points in the individual life cycle call for drinking as war calls for weapons. Alcohol is an intimate part of a configuration" (Honigmann 1963: 164).

I had secretly expected some such result after reading the theoretical introduction, but not such a martial comparison; it seems entirely unsuitable for expressing the very casualness and relative carelessness associated with alcohol which Honigmann would like to indicate. This failure to convey through language what was observed is not, however, an isolated slip, which one might safely let pass. Instead, this failure surprisingly moves through the entire ethnographic report like a red thread. The description too often exhausts itself in a superficiality which tends to distort the observed events by stereotypically reducing complex social interactions to a certain predetermined conduct:

Procession Days, notably Corpus Christi, understandably generate exceptional thirst; so after the march the men drop in at a Gasthaus before going home to dinner. The Markt band, to which several inhabitants of Altirdning belong, always plays in processions and then continues in formation to a favorite tavern where its members can refresh themselves (Honigmann 1963: 163).

Even common clichés about Alpine pleasures are put to work, for instance, when it comes to characterizing the course of village festivals: "Young men do much of the drinking. They not only grow increasingly gay as the afternoon or evening wears on, but they also grow bolder and sometimes become involved in fights" (Honigmann 1963: 161-162).

It is especially remarkable how, in the framework of these clichés, social mechanisms are claimed which recall Pavlovian reflexes and whose dubious character is revealed in the attempt at a purely linguistic rendering into German: "If drinking continues long enough, group singing breaks out ..." (Honigmann 1963: 160).

Side by side with the description of concrete observations, one repeatedly finds generalizing statements that are reinforced in their grotesqueness by Honigmann's use of indigenous terms: "An evening filled with wit and laughter is *lustig*, gay. *Lustigkeit* or gaiety is what people want from a *Gasthaus* and from alcohol" (Honigmann 1963: 160).

Finally, the ethnographer attempts a conclusion which should contain a highly condensed scientific assertion, and which sooner calls to mind a piece of doggerel worthy of the poet Christian Morgenstern: "Better said, the dynamics of drinking resides in the total web of drinking itself" (Honigmann 1963: 169).

Thus endeth the essay by Honigmann, which leaves the reader with the anxiety-ridden question of whether the Trobrianders or Nuer experience the same alienation in reading their monograph that German-speaking readers may feel in reading "Dynamics of Drinking." What has happened here? Are these distortions, which cause

the represented population to appear as a caricature of themselves, a structural feature of every ethnographic work, or did a field researcher plainly bungle the job here? Was John Honigmann actually in Altirdning, and what did he do there? Did he at least sit together with the Steirer in the pub – or did he just loiter in the farthest corner of the taproom, silently sipping his colas and fruit sodas, of which the ethnographer felt obliged to report that they were at least as expensive in Altirdning as beer and wine? What sort of field research could have led to such results?

Driven by these questions, the author of these lines set out one day to solve the riddle at the scene. Not that he would have undertaken the long trip to the beautiful Enns Valley especially for this purpose. He simply happened to be in the vicinity of Altirdning, but – as it must be stressed – instead of tracking down Honigmann on this mild late summer's day he could also have done a little mountain climbing and perhaps might have found his *Gipfelglück* on the peak of Hochgolling or Gamskarspitze. But he denied himself this pleasure and instead made his way on a Monday afternoon to drink with the Obersteirer in Honigmann's regular haunt and, almost incidentally, to inquire about their ethnographer.⁴

Now, every child knows that public houses stay closed on Monday afternoon, but, as it sometimes happens, every ethnographic investigation involves a bit of luck. The researcher and his female assistant found the Gasthaus door unlocked and were steered by a woman from the completely deserted taproom directly into the kitchen.

"Yes, what do you need," asked a second lady bluntly.

"Two beers, please," we replied, whereupon two *Schladminger Märzen* were wordlessly held out to us, and the scarcely initiated dialogue immediately died down.

Paying no further heed to our presence, both ladies resumed their household chores. While the older one embroidered an Alpine motif onto a framed piece of cloth, the younger one was obviously busy enriching the *Gasthaus* menu with some culinary delicacies. An immense chunk of meat was being sauteed with quartered onions on the range, and hand molded dumplings were set aside on a tray: venison with bread dumplings – so it flashed through the mind of the research team seated on the corner bench. Maybe we should come back again in the evening, when the taproom would be open.

We were lost in thought and waited for an opportunity to begin our research. When, after a quarter hour, the stony silence became too oppressive, we called through the cloud of grilling fumes to the woman standing at the stove:

"Can you two ladies perhaps remember an American ethnologist who was here in 1960 and 1962 and ...?" – "John!" the two blurted out as if from one mouth. And how they knew him! John Honigmann had come to Altirdning with his wife Irma five times in the summer and once in the winter for several weeks at a time. A colleague from the nearby county seat had a vacation home here, and they had always stayed with him. – Whether they had known Honigmann well, we wanted to know from the two ladies first. – But of course, they gushed. He had always sat next door in the taproom. – Was

4 The ironic undertone of this paragraph emerges from the not to be denied fact that what is described here has little to do with what actually happened. Nevertheless, that what Vincent Crapanzano termed "Hermes' Dilemma" applies here too: "... Hermes promised to tell no lies but did not promise to tell the whole truth" (Crapanzano 1986: 76).

Honigmann able to speak German at all, or did he have to use an interpreter, was our next question. After all, we knew well the value of language knowledge for doing a solid job of ethnography. – He spoke German fluently, was the answer. As the child of German parents, he had grown up virtually bilingual. In the final years, he was even good at understanding the Steiermark dialect – no easy task, as we frankly had to admit. – But he had certainly asked strange questions, was our next bid. – “John? Never!” He had really been quite sensible. After all, he had also worked as a professor at a renowned American university. – But Honigmann with his worthy wife must have had a lazy time here in the mountains – maybe we were being just a little too stubborn in our pursuit. – Not at all! He had participated in everything: haying, driving the cattle down from the *Alm* ... Yes, as for the *Alm* agriculture, he had always been interested in that, and in everything that was connected with it in former times ... He was constantly going up to the Moersbach-Alm to assist up there and to have everything explained to him by the *Sennerin*. – Next, we wanted to know whether he had also had contact with the people here in the taproom. – But of course; he had always sat at a table with the locals, just like someone from around here. – After we had listened, incredulous, to all this, we still wanted to know whether they were at all acquainted with the articles that Honigmann had written about Altirdning. – No, indeed not. But John had presented them with a village chronicle, which was lovely with its many photos of the *Alm* and of the village festival. Should they fetch them ...?⁵

When, after one and a half hours, we said goodbye and left Altirdning behind, doubt was no longer possible: Honigmann was in Altirdning and did conduct a field investigation according to all the rules. And not only that: the women we interviewed were not only sincerely taken with their ethnographer, they were downright enthusiastic about him. However, this knowledge was of little help to us. Since we could not attribute our irritations with “Dynamics of Drinking” to technical errors on the part of Honigmann and thereby reduce them to an individual ethnographer’s problem, the question raised at the beginning stood out only more menacingly: what does the ethnographic gaze see?

We had initially taken up Honigmann’s Steiermark essays to examine through the eyes of an ethnographer for once a world otherwise known to us. We wanted to ascertain how successful the researcher was in assuming the position of the locals and in describing their world as they themselves see it. And we had finally hoped to be able to deduce the productive dimension of the ethnographic gaze from the expected difference between the natives’ self-understanding and the ethnographer’s ability to understand them. We were, to be sure, everywhere struck by a difference between his perception and ours, but we could not gain a surplus of insight from this difference in the culture being represented. Instead, we saw ourselves confronted with superficialities and distortions that turned the described lifeworld into an imaginary stage production. But how had it been possible to arrive at such a distorted representation when, after all, it was settled beyond doubt that Honigmann had not only done his work properly, but, on the basis of his knowledge of the indigenous idiom, had

5 Unfortunately, the village chronicle could not be found and neither a second visit to Altirdning nor an exchange of letters with Dr. Jontes in Leoben (a friend of the Honigmann family) gave any information about what happened to it.

presumably started off under ideal conditions? If we had to exclude methodological mistakes in the performance of his investigation, how was it that his description of a world that we knew seemed so alien to us?

We now began to suspect that we, as readers of Honigmann's ethnographic representation, had been led by our idiosyncracies and only on that account had considered his remarks about "fights," "gaiety," and "group singing" to be so mistaken. Therefore, we began to look around for somebody who could confirm our negative attitude – and the two ladies in Altirdning came immediately to mind. Should we confront them with the texts of their ethnographer and ask for an opinion?

In our mind's eye, we saw ourselves sitting again on the kitchen bench in the Gasthaus in Altirdning, reciting a rendition of "Dynamics of Drinking" through the cloud of grilling fumes. But what would we have proved, if it were now possible for us to quote the two women as critics of Honigmann's ethnographic representation? And most of all, how would we react to their critique, if for whatever reasons it turned out to be positive, that is, if the ones being represented approved of Honigmann's representation?

After we had seen a world known to us through the eyes of the ethnographer and not recognized it, we did not want to disregard our own opinion offhand and subject ourselves to the judgement of the ones being represented. Besides, relinquishing the decision about the adequacy of the representation of them would have meant ascribing a greater value to the self-interpretation of the ones being represented than to the interpretations that Honigmann as author or we as readers had to offer. Similarly, every other decision in favor of any one of the three divergent interpretations would have required a detailed explanation of the reason behind it, insofar as a reason for such a decision could be given at all. Since the adequacy of Honigmann's representation could not be denied offhand, other questions moved automatically into the foreground: why Honigmann had thus described the Obersteirer, how he had described them, and what he wanted to share with his readers when he composed his text about them.

As addressees of his essays on the Steiermark region, Honigmann had undoubtedly had neither his native subjects nor his German-speaking readers in mind, but rather members of the Anglo-American scientific community. To these, the author of "Dynamics of Drinking" was known not only as a professor of anthropology at the University of North Carolina but also as a skilled practitioner of his discipline and specialist in alcohol studies. Honigmann, who died in 1977, had not only conducted numerous research projects, particularly in Arctic and Subarctic Canada, he had also at the same time repeatedly explored the significance of alcohol in different cultural contexts. In one of his last works, which appeared posthumously in 1980, Honigmann once again picks up this theme in order to define retrospectively his scientific contribution to this field by looking back on his approximately 30 years of research. Since Honigmann subjects himself to this task in a remarkably critical fashion, he himself lays the track upon which one should, in the following, attempt to develop another reading of "Dynamics of Drinking."

In 1945, 1965, and 1970, Honigmann had conducted research projects in three different Canadian provinces and, at the same time, had also examined the outlook of

the resident population (Euro-Canadians, Indians, Inuit) toward alcoholic beverages. While, in the first social study, he still deals with this theme from a consistently culture-relative position, in the second study, Honigmann takes into consideration categories of culture and personality research. Finally, in the third study, he investigates the same question with a more symbolically oriented approach. This change in the underlying approach produces differing perspectives, from which the same phenomenon, which Honigmann calls "alcohol behavior," is described on the basis of indigenous concepts, characterized as deviant conduct or interpreted as an expression of cultural denial.

Honigmann does not reconstruct these changes in his theoretical alignment as a linear development that has led to a continual improvement of the methods and insights. Instead, he tries to prove that each investigation could have been conducted with equal justice by drawing upon each of the other approaches. As Honigmann admits, he has, in the course of his many years of research activity, utilized the same ethnographic data with different approaches and has therefore arrived at quite different results, without being able to decide for or against any one of these interpretations on the basis of his current viewpoint. Honigmann stresses that, instead, each of the approaches he employed can be plausibly explained and merely stresses other aspects of the same phenomenon. He then draws the following conclusion:

But clearly, when the behavior of one community can be described from different perspectives and none of these is false in the sense of being contradicted by another, more is involved in ethnography than just reporting existing phenomena (Honigmann 1980: 280).

With the aid of his own works, which he cites as examples, Honigmann does away with the idea that ethnography has something to do with a true-to-life picture of foreign cultures and that every conscientious ethnographer has to attain comparable results when he analyses the facts. On the contrary, he underscores that the perception of a foreign culture is dependent upon methodological and theoretical presuppositions which influence the execution of the research, the interpretation of the ethnographic data, and the form of the textual representation. These presuppositions can be read as messages that refer back to the person, time, and culture of the ethnographer:

These decisions, in turn, reflect factors like the state of anthropology at a given time or the state of the ethnographer's society that lead him to select certain concepts for conceptualizations of data rather than others (Honigmann 1980: 281).

Honigmann concludes his self-reflective remarks with the following summary:

The freedom I described in ethnographic conceptualization signifies that the culture patterns presented in an ethnographic report are not reflections of reality but to a great extent represent constructs dependent on factors inherent in the ethnographer ... (Honigmann 1980: 282).

If one now relates these views of the late Honigmann to the early one of "Dynamics of Drinking," that is to say, if one asks to what extent the patterns of the *Gasthaus* and alcohol consumption in Altirdning that he described represent ethnographic constructs in which conditions in his own society are mirrored, what kind of alternative reading of his ethnography of the Obersteirer is possible?

In "Dynamics of Drinking" there is a passage in which Honigmann explicitly compares the circumstances in his country with those he was able to observe in Altirdning. At the beginning of the chapter entitled "Availability and Consumption of Alcohol" he writes:

To a visitor from the United States, where alcohol is treated with nearly the same caution as guns, drugs, and germs, western Europeans are amazingly casual about drinking. The American realizes by comparison how his land is unable to accept drinking easily but instead surrounds it with restrictions, curtails it by difficulties, and conceals it from public view (Honigmann 1980: 158).

Honigmann here alludes to the ordinances, familiar to American readers, which regulate the production, distribution, and consumption of alcoholic beverages in the USA. Thus, for example, in a state like Texas, alcoholic beverages could not be retailed until the end of the sixties; and even today there remains a group of "dry counties" which continue Prohibition on the basis of the "local drinking laws" and prohibit the sale of alcohol in general. Honigmann, who has also done ethnographic work in the Canadian Frobisher Bay, describes the restrictions on the purchase of alcoholic beverages for the local people in the mid-sixties in the following manner:

They can go to the counter of the Territorial Liquor Store on any of several afternoons and evenings weekly, show their permit, and order wine, rum, whiskey, gin or beer (including ale) for delivery three weeks later, paying with their order (Honigmann and Honigmann 1965: 197).

Restrictions of this or of a comparable sort, which completely prohibit the purchase of alcohol or make it dependent on rationing permits as well as a three-week delivery interval etc. form the more or less obvious background against which Honigmann began his ethnographic work in Altirdning. Apparently under the impression that none of the familiar regulations applies, he describes the access to alcoholic beverages there as follows:

A person living in the Enns valley community of Altirdning, Steiermark, needs no official permit to buy domestic and French brandies, rum, or schnapps. He can obtain them in the general stores located in the community and in the market town two miles distant. In the Markt he can select a bottle from the open shelves of the self-service stores. These establishments also sell liter bottles of beer and wine (Honigmann 1963: 158).

Which Western European researcher would consider it worth conveying that one requires no official permit to buy a bottle of schnapps? And who would bother to observe that one can take one's bottle of beer or wine from the shelf of the supermarket by oneself? What is perceived and described here derives from differing circumstances "overseas," that is, in the USA and Canada. The representation therefore exhibits a focus on the culture of the ethnographer which must appear persistently strange to the readers who are familiar with the circumstances from their own observations.

Even the very selection of the topic is influenced by decisions which are made on the basis of a perception of what would constitute a problem in the society of the ethnographer and of the values that prevail there. Honigmann speaks in the aforementioned Frobisher Bay study of "the North American's traumatized, puritanical attitudes toward alcohol, attitudes that picture drinking as noteworthy or special

behavior, not so much because of its capacity to dissolve inhibitions and promote gaiety but because it is fraught with menace and connotes depravity" (Honigmann and Honigmann 1965: 201). To the North American reader who shares these puritannical values Honigmann's description of Altirdning reveals an exotic world in which a completely different outlook prevails: "To drink intoxicants is relished for the release and the *Lustigkeit* it brings" (Honigmann 1963: 162).

Honigmann now attempts to demonstrate that such a naive outlook on alcohol need not automatically open the door to greater social problems. Since the consumption of alcoholic beverages in the society described by him ties in with manifold traditions and is, along with them, subject to definite rules which can from time to time even compulsorily prescribe the consumption of beer or schnapps ("as war calls for weapons"), it is also in a way controlled and thus renders a stronger exercise of influence on the part of the state superfluous. Even "group singing" and "fights" as consequences of excessive public enjoyment of alcohol do not provide a reason for requiring more comprehensive state restrictions on the sale of alcohol. However, even while Honigmann thus describes the culture he is investigating, he is simultaneously telling his readers yet another story. It is the story of political liberalism. Accordingly, socially acknowledged norms evolve and guarantee the liberty of the individual if the state reduces its infringements on the community to a minimum. This story of a free and self-accountable association with alcohol ultimately succumbs to the whole ethnographic report as allegory.

The concept of allegory, which was initially the domain of literary theory, was taken up by James Clifford and applied to the interpretation of ethnographic representations (cf. Clifford 1986).⁶ In a series of prominent textual examples, Clifford was able to demonstrate how the question about the allegorical content of a representation changed the approach to ethnographic texts:

Allegory draws special attention to the narrative character of cultural representations, to the stories built into the representational process itself (Clifford 1986: 100).

According to Clifford, ethnographic texts do not coincide with what they ostensibly represent, but instead simultaneously tell other "stories." These stories are conveyed by the way ethnographers systematize their observations and experiences and prepare them as literature. Even by detaching certain parts from the totality of the knowable world and selecting a particular form for their treatment, they begin to construct this story. What is finally presented as the result of these efforts are, according to Clifford, complex rhetorical achievements which consist of descriptions of real events and of "additional moral, idealogical, and even cosmological statements" (Clifford 1986: 98).

6 In his inspirational work "On Ethnographic Allegory" (1986), James Clifford pushes a definition of this concept forward which is taken from Webster's "New Twentieth Century Dictionary." Therein, "allegory" is defined as follows: "1. A story in which people, things, and happenings have another meaning, as in a fable or parable: allegories are used for teaching or explaining. 2. The presentation of ideas by means of such stories ..." (Clifford 1986: 98). The other meaning which a text can have along with the foreground story, and which the concept of allegory refers to is built up in ethnographic depictions, because the debate with the foreign is usually connected with a type of self ascertainment. In a certain way, one can say: "Ethnographers talk to themselves even when they are talking about others." Fritz Kramer (1977) in particular pointed out the connection between perception of foreign and self-ascertainment.

These "statements" are directed towards the ethnographer's society; they refer to its themes and problems and help the text gain its actual meaning. But they give no second meaning to the ethnographic report, so that it is impossible to differentiate between an explicit and a figurative level. Rather, both levels are not only inextricably connected with one another as the factual and the allegorical aspects of an ethnographic text, but they are also "conditions of its meaningfulness" (Clifford 1986: 99).

According to Clifford, the possibility of getting access to its allegories is one of the conditions for being able to read an ethnographic text as meaningful. In our example of "Dynamics of Drinking," we attempted such an allegorical reading and interpreted the text as a "story" about political liberalism. However, such a reading became possible after we had understood the cultural comparison which is implicit in every ethnographic representation. For the readers of an ethnographic text who belong to the culture of the ethnographer, such an approach presents no basic difficulties: against the background of a given sameness (consumption of alcohol), they see a difference (varying rules associated with alcohol) ethnographically described. By connecting what is being represented (here, that which is alien) with their own kind, they gain access to the allegories. However, such an approach to ethnographic representations is not possible for the ones being represented, who, after all, belong to another culture than the ethnographer. If they connect what is being represented (here, their own kind) to their own kind, only the factual aspects of the ethnographic text become accessible to them. The text here becomes a paraphrase of their own world, a paraphrase which expresses the familiar in a complicated manner and is described from a perspective that distorts and alienates the ones being represented. The representation of their own world must then appear trivial and superficial to those who are represented if no other allegorical references can be set up, as is the case in such a thin description like the one discussed at the beginning.

The readings of other cultures that ethnographers develop are allegorical. As allegories, their representations exhibit a clear relationship to the themes and problems which their own society is confronted with. These allegories in ethnographic representations are not as accessible to the ones being represented as to the readers who share the culture and language of the ethnographer. If the ones being represented can establish no other allegorical connections to the texts, their readings remain limited to the factual, that is, they are not able to read the texts as meaningful. From the fact that the allegories of the ethnographer are not necessarily comprehensible to the ones being represented emerges a tendency for ethnographic representations to have no significance for the members of the described culture.

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