



The anthropology of storytelling and the storytelling of anthropology

Rodolfo Maggio¹

Abstract

These research notes concern what anthropologists currently do, and can do, with stories. Although pleas for narrative have become increasingly widespread in contemporary anthropology, an anthropologist of storytelling cannot but recognise that all anthropological production is to a certain extent a story. A question ensues: what kind of story is an ethnography? These research notes propose an answer by providing, first, a working definition of story tailored to this specific purpose. Secondly, they propound a brief illustration of the three main thematic interests of the anthropology of storytelling: the relational dynamics between the people involved in the storytelling situation; the content of the story, and the storytelling techniques. Thirdly, these aspects are examined in order to claim that an anthropology of storytelling among contemporary anthropologists is a necessary condition to respond concretely to the above-mentioned plea for narrative.

Keywords

Anthropology, storytelling, anthropology of storytelling

Introduction

“In contemporary anthropology, pleas for narrative have almost become a cliché.² Our journals regularly bring theoretical discussions about the centrality of narrative,³ about narrative as a key to understanding life,⁴ about the ways in which the great narratives of

¹ Social Anthropology, School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester, United Kingdom, rodolfo.maggio@gmail.com

² See, e.g., Narayan, 2007; Tedlock, 1979, 1987, 1991; Webster, 1983; Ellis, 2004.

³ See, e.g., Atkinson, 1992; Geertz, 1988; Marcus & Cushman. 1982; Van Maanen 1988.

⁴ See, e.g., Andrews M. et al., 2008; Danto, 1985; Miller et al., 1990.

history mirror the small narratives of personal lives,⁵ and so on; but we rarely get on with actually telling stories. Maybe this is general professional affliction” (Eriksen, 2006: 36). Although I agree with what Thomas Hylland Eriksen meant, I only partially agree with what he wrote. Anthropologists do not tell stories *rarely*, they tell them all the time. But their stories are seldom recognised as such, for they are stories of a particular kind.

Eriksen was trying to explain why anthropology has recently been so irrelevant in the public debate. After listing a number of “partial explanations [...] of the failure of anthropology to communicate in the public sphere” he concluded that the most important reason is that “anthropological writing [...] tends to be chiefly analytical” (Eriksen, 2006: 35), as opposed to narrative. Stories, however, are not necessarily written, nor the benefits of a good narrative structure would be felt only outside academia. Stories can be told orally, as it regularly happens in conferences, workshops, seminars and other professional contexts, although they are seldom acknowledged as such in professional context. Recognising the story-like nature of anthropological outputs would draw attention on what kind of narrative structure they have. That, in turn, might illuminate how they are experienced by their audiences.

These are all aspects that fall under the range of interest of the anthropology of storytelling. Indeed, the anthropology of storytelling should be first and foremost a critical reflection on the storytelling character of anthropology itself. These research notes are intended to serve as a space to think about such character. To begin with, thus, a working definition of story is in order.

However, it is far from easy to define a story. Is it, like Aristotle put it, a ‘whole’ (*holos*) action, with beginning, middle, and end linked throughout by necessary or probable sequence? Not necessarily. Aristotle himself noted that, counter-intuitively somehow, neither the beginning nor the end of the Iliad is about the Trojan War. Does that make a bad story of it? If that was the case, it would have not been written down and passed on to hundreds of generations.

Is a story the product of an author? Not necessarily. Although there is no universal consensus on the Homeric question, it is conventionally accepted that the blind poet of Chios is but the personification of a multiplicity of bards.

It might be said that a story must to be listened to exist, as much as an experience acquires meaning through narration (Jackson, 2002: 18 Tyler, 1986: 138). But that would make a very ephemeral object of it. For a story changes when it is told (Arendt, 1958: 50), listeners do what they want with it (Boyd, 2009), if only for a few, yet determining particulars. In turn, it could very well be argued that a story is the author of people, because we are changed by the stories we tell as much as those we listen to (Frank, 1997).

A story can be many things, if not all things: account, achievement, adventure, alibi, allegory, anthropology and all words ending with -logy, anecdote, apology, ballad, belief, bet, byword, case study, catharsis, challenge, chat, chronicle, confession, contrivance, correspondence, creation, crisis, defamation, disagreement, discourse,

⁵ See, e.g., Crapanzano, 1980; 'Elota & Keesing, 1983; Kwa'ioloa & Burt, 1997; Morris, 1998; Shostak, 1990.

discovery, discursive formation, dream, epic, episode, etymology, event, excuse, experience, fable, faction, failure, fantasy, fiction, finding, folly, function, future, glossolalia, gossip, happening, hearsay, heresy, hesitation, historiography and all words with -graphy, information, interpretation, invention, issue, joke, journey, justification, legend, lesson, lie, matter, metamorphosis, metaphor, model, myth, narrative, news, nightmare, novel, ontogeny, phylogeny, and other words ending with -geny, past, perspective, plot, poem, poesis, praise, prayer, prejudice, pretense, pretext, problem, project, promise, prophecy, protest, question, reason, recital, recommendation, religion, report, research, reverie, ritual, rumour, scene, science, slander, statement, subject, tale, testimony, translation, travel, truth, vicissitude, yarn, Zeitgeist. Everything can be a story, if only because everything is the outcome of a process; although not everything is 'sayable' (Jackson, 2002: 21).

Is the processual form the only common feature among all the above-listed possibilities? To answer this question would be necessary to distil the fundamental story-like element within each and everyone of them. That would perhaps generate the definition of story. But thinking of a definition as definitive (as the etymology itself suggests) can only be detrimental to the speculative process, which is the kind of activity these research notes are intended to represent. Plus, a definition of story from an anthropological perspective must remain open and flexible enough to accommodate all which humans consider to be a story. Such intellectual choice is intended to avoid finding oneself affirming something akin to what the eminent critic Georg Lukács wrote about the Homeric poems: "The way Homer's epics begin in the middle and do not finish at the end is a reflexion of the truly epic mentality's total indifference to any form of architectural construction." (Boyd, 2009: 237) Lukács' judgement is perhaps astonishing from the point of view of a literary critic, but it is almost scandalous from the point of view of an anthropologist, especially for its universalising tone. That is why an anthropologist of storytelling must refrain from defining a story before its making.

Considering everything to have the potential to be a story does not imply considering everything as tellable, nor that no fundamental differences can be identified between a thing and its story. The fact that behind everything there is a story that can be told means, in a sense, that everything is to a certain extent the story of itself. However, the anthropology of storytelling does not take such isomorphic perspective to its extreme consequences. Indeed, the process of storytelling is contextual, and so should be the study of stories being told. The view that does not consider the difference between a story and the life it is based upon, or between a story and its teller, is blinded to the processual and contextual dynamics of storytelling, and considers the fixed and self-contained nature of the concept of story as apt analogue of the practice of storytelling.

Storytelling is the act of telling a story, and the anthropology of storytelling should consider it as such and look at everything that happens around it. In the same way as looking at an individual human life as separated from the context of its own development would not produce an anthropological understanding of that particular life (Eriksen, 2004), looking at a story as the creation of a particular individual rather than the

intersubjective creation of experience would deprive the study of its anthropological value.

1. Anthropology and storytelling

Anthropology and storytelling have multiple affinities: they can both be about virtually everything, be found virtually everywhere and at any time, and virtually everybody on Earth engages in both at varying degrees of professionalism. Since anthropology is itself a form of storytelling, it is not possible to draw a clear-cut distinction between anthropology as storytelling and anthropology of storytelling. Blurring the differences between these formulations of the same fundamental storytelling activity is coherent with a definition of anthropology that does not objectify its focus of interest but rather conceives of itself as embedded not just in the process of knowledge production, but also in the process of creation of what it is to be known (Jackson, 2002: 292).

The anthropologist of storytelling is first interested in the relational dynamics between the people involved in the storytelling situation: the storyteller(s), the listener(s), but also the entities who take the role of characters in the story, who might be real persons (such as members of the storyteller or listener's social network) or representations of real persons (such as fictional versions or caricatures); other storytellers who have a particular relationship with the story being told, as well as other listeners who have heard the same story, or a different version, and so on and so forth. An example of such relational dynamics is that of professional storytellers among the Kachin of Burma, who adjust their stories to suit the audience who hires them (Leach 1954: 266.). To take another example, Arthur Frank (1997) illustrated how ill people who tell the story of their disease refuse the role of victim, regain agentivity, and make their suffering intelligible to other people who consequently become conscious of their own vulnerability.

In accord with this view, existentialist anthropologist Michael Jackson argued that storytelling is a "vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances. To reconstitute events in a story is no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one's own imagination" (Jackson, 2002: 15). Here Jackson refers particularly to the stories of refugees who experienced a loss of sense of recognition, belonging, agency, and purpose. However, he recognises that there is nothing innovative in attributing to stories the capacity to bestow order and coherence on events (see, for example, Ochs and Capps, 2001, Kermode, 1967:127). Thus, he proposes to look into the ways in which "reconstructions of reality are tied to existential imperatives, such as our need to be more than bit players in the stories of our own lives". That means that, although conveying traumatic experiences in the socialised narrative of a story heals the soul in a way that compulsive solitary retelling does not, the cause of the change is not necessarily the intellectual attribution of a new meaning. In other words, telling and listening to stories does not necessarily provide a different cognitive understanding of the world. Rather, because every experience is first and foremost a story, telling a story is an

experience, an experience that restructures past events in the same way as the experience of recovering from an illness changes the experience of falling and being ill. In summary, Jackson has his own definition of the function of storytelling: “Storytelling is a coping strategy that involves making words stand for the world, and then, by manipulating them, changing one’s experience of the world” (Jackson, 2002: 18).

The content of the story is another element that anthropologists of storytelling look at. Rather than on the story itself, however, an anthropological approach to storytelling focuses on the action of telling and listening to stories (verbs, rather than nouns). The reasons why a story is particularly appealing for a particular audience might be found in people’s reactions to the cultural relevance of characters, plot, and/or theme of the story. For example, Georges Tin (2012) argued that differences between subsequent versions of *Tristan and Iseult* constitute the literary counterpart of coeval tensions between the courtly ideal of homosociality, (particularly avuncular relations) and the raising emphasis on chivalric heterosexual love. To take another example, Bruno Bettelheim (1978) argued that children elaborate and cope with the psychological challenges of growing up largely thanks to an unconscious appropriation of stories from the public domain.

The third aspect that the anthropologist of storytelling is interested in investigating is that of storytelling techniques: how storytellers use verbal and nonverbal behaviour to obtain particular effects (such as involvement, detachment, surprise, tension, thrill, expectation, sympathy, scandal, etc.); how they negotiate shared knowledge with their audience and formulate their stories accordingly (tone, register, vocabulary, etc.), and to what extent they show their personal selves as opposed to making themselves mere medium for the telling of the story. For example, Mariko Karatsu (2010) demonstrated how two uses of the Japanese distal demonstrative *a-* (that) might converge in storytelling to transform individual experiences into shared knowledge. The first use is commonly applied to indicate something that is only in the speaker’s mind; the second refers to an entity that the speaker and hearer have co-experienced. Karatsu observed three Japanese women in Tokyo who told of their personal discovery and assessment of a new taste (*kakuni*). Their conversational storytelling created a context in which the participants shared their knowledge about *kakuni* thanks to the mutual recognition of the two different uses of the distal demonstrative *a-*. To take another example, Stuart McLean explored the “affinity between processes of material creation and the fashioning of humanly intelligible narratives” (McLean, 2009: 223) among anthropologists and asked: “If, for the people depicted in anthropological accounts, the contemporary retelling of myths pertaining to the time of creation appears to serve to reactivate ancestral powers of creativity and transformation, could it be said that such powers persist, albeit in altered and perhaps attenuated form, in the self-consciously second-order accounts of such retellings produced by anthropologists?” (McLean, 2009: 222)

This brings us to the theme of the next section, namely, what do anthropologists do when they tell their stories?

2. Telling

A. Personal Vs. Professional Communication

There is a fascinating and puzzling phenomenon in anthropology seminars, workshops, and conferences, both inside and outside academia. Although the topics are usually exciting, interesting, and mind-opening, the faces of non-specialists are, more often than not, baffled with an air of perplexity (cf. Ghodsee, 2013; Lett, 1997). It seems as if they are struggling to follow the speaker, to be carried by his or her narrative, to be engaged. It is as if they could not find or understand the story.

Contrast this image with another one, which is captured slightly later. During the break, the paper giver meets one of the non-specialist attendants and the two begin to chat over a cup of coffee. Before they finish blowing on the hot surface, someone who did not make it at the seminar comes and asks about the content of the paper. That is when the storytelling begins.

Both listeners are captured by the words of the speaker. They do not look puzzled, indifferent, or bored. Their eyes are fixed on hers, their heads move in synchrony. They are paying attention. Which is surprising, for, contrarily to the silent seminarian context, there are many sources of distractions around them. Other attendants pass by, some attempt to intercept their gaze, and some join the conversation after perceiving that something interesting is going on. The number of interested faces increases.

Everybody seems locked in the storytelling. The audience listens and empathises with the main character of the story, the ethnographer, with whom they identify; they care about the argument, which is a particular research problem for which they are becoming increasingly concerned; and they feel as if they cannot go back in the room until they are told how that problem was solved (cf. Loewenstein, 2005).

The storyteller keeps eye contact and knows that her audience is with her. The listeners react to her rhetoric: they freeze and open their ears when the story reaches a conflict, they go with the flow when she interweaves multiple narrative strings, they frown when she knots them all up, they are surprised when something unexpected happens, and nod when she reaches her conclusion.

Why all this did not happen during the presentation? The argument was the same, as was the speaker, and also the audience, apart from one latecomer. It could not be just because of caffeine! There is something about telling the story in an informal context that makes the story more readily graspable by the audience. What is that? There are many hypothesis that could be examined. The one that I would like to explore is that the reason behind such a high degree of absorption is that the author and the audience were sharing the experience of the “living immediacy” (Benjamin, 2006[1936]: 362).

Human beings are storytellers. Countless authors think so (Gottschall, 2012). One of them is Uri Hasson who, at the time of the experiments quoted below, was assistant professor of psychology at Princeton Neuroscience Institute. He and his colleagues observed that when personal stories are told the brains of both storyteller and listener

synchronise. “Brain-to-brain coupling” is the term that the research team chose to describe such a phenomenon (Hasson, 2003). The brain waves of the subjects had been connected to fMRI machines and monitored during storytelling sessions. It was of particular importance that the stories told were unrehearsed. During the storytelling, the same brain areas of the speaker and dozens of listeners were found activated in response to the same elements elicited in the story. Such a paired activity meant that there was a deep connection between teller and listeners. The results indeed “exhibited joint, temporally coupled, response patterns.” Hasson concluded that storytelling had the power to synchronise brains.

That is probably what happened during the coffee break conversation. As long as the speaker formulated an image in her brain that set the story into motion, and transformed it into her incipit, something similar happened in the brain of the listeners. She then told of when she found something interesting in her fieldwork, and the listeners wanted to know what that was. Then, she began to interact intellectually with some authors of relevance, and all of a sudden her data began to matter at a different level. That was when more people approached. Her analysis was perhaps more tentative and less precise than it was in the seminar room (for it is a coffee-break conversation, anyway). But still, everybody cared for the process and the results of her informal analysis, apparently much more than during the professional context that was designed and organised precisely for that intellectual activity. How could such a high degree of interest be attained during a seminar?

“We are all natural storytellers, but somehow we lose this part of ourselves when we enter the corporate world. It’s especially true when we give PowerPoint presentations. We fall into presentation mode and forget that the most effective way of delivering information is through the emotional connection of story” (Gallo, 2012). Most academics cannot speak in formal settings with the same spontaneity they show during informal conversations. It is believed that, in order to give a ‘good’ presentation, one has to prepare, organise his own material, read a lot, synthesise, connect, learn by heart, rehearse, and a whole range of other preparatory routines. And yet, such a hard work won’t necessarily result in getting as much attention as one would get during an informal conversation. Why?

B. The character of a good story

“Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly”, lamented Walter Benjamin as early as 1936. “More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences” (Benjamin, 2006[1936]: 362). Such embarrassment should be the special concern of anthropologists, for, as Benjamin himself reminds us “‘When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about’ goes the German saying, and people imagine the storyteller as someone who has come from afar” (Benjamin, 2006[1936]: 363). That ‘afar’ could be both the distant, exotic,

unfamiliar other, as much as the ordinary life of our neighbourhood that the anthropologist is called to skilfully de-familiarise (e.g. Lindon, 1937; Miner, 1956, Miller, 1998, 2001; see also Marcus & Fisher, 1986).

Thus, even if anthropologists seem to be in a favourable position to tell engaging stories, their capacity to do so decreases as they shift from personal to professional modes of communication. The dilemma seems to oppose the living immediacy of experience with the intellectual and practical preparation that is believed to be necessary to present material that is inevitably dense and complex as much as the research is accurate. Relying on a paper and reading it is part of the problem, for that provides an alternative support to the intersubjective connection, and thus dilutes the intensity with which speaker and listener are cognitively connected. As Albert Mehrabian observed, if people attempt to communicate with a tone and body language that is not congruent with the message, the transfer of the information does not take place effectively (Mehrabian, 2004). If the reader's voice is not matched with her inner state, that severs the emotional connection that appears to play a major part in the brain-to-brain coupling. She might be mind-wondering as she reads, and think: "are they listening? Am I being boring? I should have edited down this whole bit...", and other random thoughts unrelated to the paper. Ultimately, it is that kind of distraction that is being communicated. It follows that the audience will be involuntarily encouraged to mind-wonder as well.

However, the problem is not reading in itself, for the same kind of distraction would result from reciting. I learnt that at my own expenses. Last year, as part of my ongoing activity as organiser of anthropology-as-storytelling outreach events, I was in a high-school where I was presenting to an audience of 13 to 16 years old. At the end of the presentation, I asked the pupils to give me feedback on my performance. A couple of them noted "Sometimes he sounded as if he had learned everything by heart." That was definitely not intended to praise my effort. They were absolutely right: I had learnt my essay by heart, and that aspect stuck in their mind more than the story I was trying to tell. What they visualised was not my adventure among the Kwara'ae of Solomon Islands and my struggle to make sense of a puzzling ritual, but rather my fear of forgetting, and of failing to sound authentic.

On that occasion, my talk was based on an essay that I had structured as a story and which had been awarded the 2013 Maurice Hocart Essay prize by the Royal Anthropological Institute. The award made me confident that the anthropological content and narrative form of the essay were effectively blended. And yet, that was not sufficient. Although a well-structured story does help the audience to follow, in order to get the sense of connection that Hasson called "brain-to-brain coupling", the talk has to raise and burn in the "living immediacy".

This reinforces Eriksen's argument that anthropology would benefit by privileging a style of communication that uses more narrative than analysis (Eriksen, 2006:35). As he argues, storytelling can do more than to increase the engagement of academics attending anthropology workshops, seminars, and conferences. It can make it relevant also for a much wider public. For the most part, anthropology continues to be less visible

in the public sphere than other related disciplines, such as history or sociology. Although anthropologists venture into enterprises intended to reach a wider public (such as The Centre for Public Anthropology and the blog *Savage Minds*), these hardly “attract anyone but other anthropologists” (Eriksen, 2006: 32). The reason cannot be imputed to the subject itself, because human culture is of utmost importance to public debates concerning, for instance, the increasing multiculturalism, the resurgence of nationalism, autonomism, and the so-called ‘clash of civilisation’. “Even a cursory glance around the world today evidences the shocking truth that our own age might very well be known as the Age of Culture Clashing” (Silverman, 2014). It follows that, rather than the subject itself, the scarcity of anthropological contributions to the public debate is arguably due to the inability/reluctance of anthropologists to get the message across.

Nevertheless, anthropologists of the past intervened in the public debates of their time quite regularly. They did so, for example, in support of anti-racism and cultural relativism (Borofsky, 2011) as it was the case of the works of Franz Boas, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead. Though often controversial, they used anthropology to promote cultural awareness, diversity, and auto-critique.

Nowadays, apart from a few cases, “whenever anthropologists endeavour to write in a popular vein, they tend to surround themselves with an air of coyness and self-mockery” (Eriksen, 2006: 1), or receive the harsh criticism of purists (di Leonardo, 1998), which might partly explain why anthropologists who write fiction tend to use (hide behind?) pseudonyms (Buelow, 1973). Thus, personal and professional relationships between specialists might partly explain why so many contemporary anthropologists seem so reluctant to intervene in the public realm, although there have been notable exceptions (see, e.g., Besteman and Gusterson 2005; Checker 2009; Graeber, 2014).

It has been hypothesised that a reluctance amongst anthropologists to communicate their insights and knowledge in the public realm might be due to the fear of stating the obvious, the anxiety that the outside world might discover anthropology’s scientific fragility (Descola, 1996), or the incompatibility between the complexity of anthropology and the rapidity and oversimplification inherent in contemporary public media.

Geertz suggested that it is not a matter of complexity and/or unmanageable quantity of data (1988: 3). “The ability of anthropologists to get us to take what they say seriously has less to do with either a factual look or an air of conceptual elegance than it has with their capacity to convince us that what they say is a result of their having actually penetrated (or, if you prefer, been penetrated by) another form of life, of having, one way or another, truly “been there.” According to the works quoted above, such conviction only comes through the emotional connection that is responsible of “brain-to-brain coupling”. Without the sharing of emotions, communication of research result sounds void, if not unconvincing or, worse, uninteresting. Emotions come from personal experience. That is why Geertz’s intuition might reach much further than it was, presumably, intended to do. He wrote that “the authorial uneasiness” that produces unconvincing ethnographies “arises from having to produce scientific texts from biographical experiences” (Geertz, 1988:14). Indeed, it is precisely a personal story that

grabs the attention “in nearly every communications format” (Gallo, 2013). It follows that such uneasiness might be exactly what makes the shift from personal to professional communication also a shift from interest to indifference.

Even if, as Nash and Wintrob acutely observed as early as 1972, the degree of attention paid to anthropologists to themselves in their field roles, i.e as ethnographers, has increased, such a change did not result in a turn toward a biographic style of communication. The consequence is that emotions are still kept outside of the seminar room. When anthropologists leave the coffee machine and enter that room again, they are ‘emotionally barehanded’; they are perceived as if they have nothing to share, exactly as Benjamin wrote: “as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.”

However, emotions are not necessarily elicited with personal stories, but also with stories of other people (Gallo, 2013). For example, Lila Abu Lughod (2007), in her ethnography of the Awlad 'Ali Bedouins of Egypt, uses stories to make the reader empathise with the characters. Such a strategy engages the reader with that material through an emotional connection that mirrors the “brain-to-brain coupling” mentioned above. Be it a personal story or a story of other people, it is always possible to establish a connection. The question then is, how?

All in all, conducting participant observation among anthropologists reveals not only that anthropology is a form of storytelling, but also that recognising the storytelling character of anthropology might draw attention to the sense of sharing that many feel is lacking in professional contexts. However, that perception is not just a matter of immediacy and emotions. A story does not sync brains just because it is told ‘from the heart’. In the next section I attempt to discuss another aspect of the relationship between anthropology and storytelling, namely that of the narrative structure of post-modern ethnography.

3. Story

A. The type of plot of post-modern ethnography

The textual strategies of the post-modern anthropological tradition adopted a disjunction between language and world that caused a feeling of uneasiness among anthropologists who found language epistemologically inadequate for representation (cf. Geertz, 1988). Their communicational and representational potential became inversely proportional. “Every move to enhance representation threatened communication and every agreement in communication was the sign of a new failure in representation.” (Tyler, 1986: 123; see also Rosenau, 1992)

At the crux of this disjunction are several elements that operate jointly in distancing communication and representation. One among many is the paralysing perception of each and every linguistic sign as representationally inadequate as a consequence of the infinite possible associations between conventional *signifié* and perpetually self-differentiating *signifiant* (de Saussure, 1983). The absence of such

linguistic adherence in the professional mode of communication hinders the representation of what is tellable in personal storytelling, where a conventional linguistic association is established as aesthetic totalisation in the story.

However, such an aesthetic totalisation is not necessarily an incompatible alternative to post-modern ethnography. If, as Tyler argues, “[p]ost-modern ethnography [...] does not move toward abstraction, away from life, but back to experience” (Tyler, 1986: 135), and if, following Hannah Arendt, individual experience is given public meaning through the intersubjective relation created by the storytelling situation (Arendt, 1958), then there must be a storytelling character in post-modern ethnography too. The question then is what this might be. One way to conduct such an exploration would be to examine to what extent post-modern textual strategies are underpinned by a particular type or types of plot. In order to do so, a comparison can be attempted between a few postmodern textual strategies as identified by Stephen Tyler (1986) and the narrative elements of non-classical plots as categorised by Robert McKee (1997).

According to McKee, there are three kinds of non-classical plots: antiplot, miniplot, and nonplot. The main features of the antiplot are: nonlinear time, inconsistent realities, and coincidence or lack of causality. Nonlinear time is also the time of the postmodern world, which “is in a sense timeless; past, present, and future co-exist in all discourse”; and, as we know, “post-modern ethnography privileges discourse” (Tyler 1986: 129). In such a coexistence of synchronic and diachronic discourses, multiple inconsistent realities intertwine, for “post-modern ethnography is an occult document; it is an enigmatic, paradoxical, and esoteric conjunction of reality and fantasy” (134). As much as causality, the narrative equivalent of syllogistic reasoning, is replaced by coincidence in the antiplot, “post-modern ethnography does not move toward abstraction”, it “is fragmentary because it cannot be otherwise” (131, see also Schwandt, 2007: 263).

Does this make the post-modern ethnography an antiplot? Not necessarily, for post-modern ethnography shares some features of the miniplot too, according to the categorisation operated by McKee: open ending, internal conflict, multiple and/or passive protagonists. Open ending is a leading feature of post-modern ethnography, which “retains a separate sense within the discourse without being subordinated to a grand evolutionary myth of ultimate perfectibility. Each text is akin to a Leibnizian monad, perfect in its imperfectibility.” (Tyler, 1986: 138) Also, internal conflict permeates the “hesitant, stuttering quality” of post-modern discourse, as effectively expressed by Thomas Eriksen: “what can I say? how can I say it? with what right do I do so?” (Eriksen, 2006: 26). Indeed, the author is constantly engaged in the negotiation of a difficult position between his individualised authorship and the attempt to “evoke by means of a participatory text in which no one has the exclusive right of synoptic transcendence.” (129) Thus, since the multiplicity of perspectives and voices is eventually reduced to the text of a single ethnographer, that is yet another expression of synoptic transcendence, with the added complication of aphasia (Foucault 2002 [1966]). That is where the multiple and the passive protagonist of the mini plot coexist in post-modern

ethnography. Indeed, as Tyler put it the author is possessed by “a paralysis of choice brought on by our knowledge of the in- exhaustible supply of such allegories that makes us refuse the moment of aesthetic totalization, the story of stories.”

It follows that the textual strategies of post-modern ethnography display similarities with both antiplot and miniplot, for how McKee has categorised them. However, there are also some similarities between post-modern ethnography to what McKee has called “nonplot”. In particular, McKee sees nonplot as the story characterised by stasis, the absence of change (McKee, 1997: 233-251), which sounds similar to Tyler’s claim that “ethnography is no account of a rationalized movement from percept to concept. It begins and ends in concepts. (Tyler, 1986: 137)”

In summary, in the light of this preliminary comparison, several textual strategies of post-modern ethnography (as identified by Tyler) seem to present all the features of non-classic plots (as categorised by McKee). There is one last element that seems to draw the two sets of categories closer, which is the reaction of the public: attendants to anthropological workshop on the one hand, cinema spectators on the other. Indifference and boredom follow both the epistemological, representation and communicative paralysis of post-modern ethnography as much as the ingenuous pessimism of non-classical plots, which insist on the negative and static nature of the human condition (McKee: 62-63).

It is not that storytelling is removed as a consequence of the shift from personal to professional communication of research findings. Rather, as the shift takes place, it is the kind of story that changes. Indeed, professional communicative styles in anthropology are influenced by the post-modern tradition in a way that ascribes the kind of story that such communication underpins to the category of non-classical plot. Thomas Eriksen had already foregrounded such a point when he wrote: “It seems that the much discussed crisis of representation is really neither more nor less than a crisis of communication” (Eriksen, 2006: 25). It follows that anthropologists who are unhappy with the shift from personal to professional communication might consider the exploration of the storytelling element of both interactive contexts.

B. Classical plot ethnography?

I began to think about the relationship between anthropology and storytelling when I was in Solomon Islands. There, I learnt that among the Kwara’ae, a Melanesian people from the island of Malaita, a child is taught about how to be human with night-time storytelling. I kept thinking about that shared lived experience and the vicarious experiencing that storytelling provides, but it was not until I was confronted with the writing up of my thesis that I seriously engaged with these aspects.

Benjamin Burt, who conducted research with the Kwara’ae for more than thirty years, admitted that most if not all of them would not have the necessary education to read his PhD thesis with ease (Burt, 1994). In contrast, I think that ethnographies should be written in a way that is accessible to most of the people who provided the original information. Burt himself maintained: “many anthropologists recognise a responsibility

to do something in return for the privilege of researching someone else's culture. From the other side of the relationship, this is likely to be seen more as an obligation to give something in exchange, at least under the cultural morality of the peoples of Malaita" (1994: 180). I wanted to follow this principle in my writing style. In return for the opportunity to learn about the culture of the Kwara'ae people, I wanted to write my ethnography in a way that mirrored the Kwara'ae process of teaching (*fa'amanata'anga*).

This was obviously impossible, especially given the requirements of a British PhD program. Thus, I had to look for a viable compromise between the language and reasoning expected from a doctoral thesis in Social Anthropology and the teachings of a Kwara'ae *gwaung'i*, a highly ranked person with the reputation of having a deep knowledge of key cultural values.

Kwara'ae people juxtapose their notion of *fa'amanata'anga*, seen as informal and based on direct experience, to what they see as the Western formal education. One notable aspect that justifies such opposition in their view is the alleged absence of direct experience in the teaching of the *arai'kwao* (Whiteman). "The Whiteman learns in schools, we learn from real life, and from our fathers and mothers", they say. Thus, one of the most difficult aspects of finding a compromise consisted of the apparent incompatibility between formalized and informal release of information. Such incompatibility resonates not only with the above mentioned difference between personal and professional context, but also with the unbridgeable difference between the idiographic details of direct experience and the nomothetic aspirations of some deeply theoretical debates in the discipline.

My personal attempt to overcome these incompatibilities was to write in a way as to reproduce my own experience of learning about the culture of the Kwara'ae people, and trace the progress of my reasoning towards abstract ideas about a few themes, which is more or less what happened as I progressed towards the completion of my PhD program. Therefore, in the central chapters of my thesis, I begin with fragments of my own field diary, trying to set my position within the narration. Then, I report numerous "cases" in order to anchor the subsequent discussion to concrete events and real characters. Finally, I try to proceed inductively towards the abstraction of ideas and see if these can coherently interact with the relevant literature.

Presenting the material in a way that is analogous to learning about a culture in the field has been termed the "Inductive Case Study Approach" (Spindler and Spindler, 1990). The process of abstraction begins as soon as the description of the case ends, and proceeds slowly towards more definite and precise conceptualizations of the experience. But the process is never completed, which is a common feature between my own way of learning about the Kwara'ae culture, as well as their own concept of *fa'amanata'anga*.

The impossibility of achieving completely accurate cultural knowledge inheres the use itself of the case studies as heuristic device. Case studies, indeed, are generally seen as poor basis for generalization (Mitchell, 2006). Thereby, there is an inherent risk of assuming a case to be representative of a general socio-cultural process, when it might not. That is why it is necessary to compare the outcomes of the analysis of case studies with a set of key theoretical propositions.

However, that is not necessary for each and every case. Indeed, not all cases are necessarily meant to be relevant for theoretical discussion. Some are purely configurative and idiographic, according to the classification developed by Eckstein (1975), i.e. they only provide a mere concatenation of relevant circumstances and shall not be considered parts and parcel of a nomothetic reasoning. Others are “Disciplined Case Studies”, in that they serve as particular illustrations of well-known cultural processes. Others are “Heuristic Case Studies”, because they support the development of a particular theory, without providing the main pillars to sustain it. Finally, the “Crucial Case” epitomizes the point that a particular analysis and theory are intended to sustain, while at the same time providing room for interpretation and comparison with other similar cases.

Classifying case studies according to Eckstein’s classification emphasises what they are used for. However, they can also be classified according to Gluckman’s definitions, i.e. in terms of their heuristic complexity rather than methodological purpose (Gluckman, 1940). For Gluckman, a case is an “apt illustration” when it illustrates a relatively simple happening, limited in time and space. A “social situation” is a more complex set of interconnected events through which it is possible to explain some general principles. Finally, the “extended case study” is an even more complex set of interconnected events over a long time span, in which social relationships are rearranged.

However, the problem with drawing on case studies to ground inductive anthropological reasoning is still that of the relationship between subject and object, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, self and other (Tedlock, 1991:83). One possible way to move beyond the dilemma between objectivism and subjectivism is to follow Michael Jackson’s dialectical solution, as I have suggested in a recent article. “The existential solution to the methodological impossibility of ethnographic representation consists of being aware of the inter-subjective dimension of knowledge production. In other words, ethnography should be an autobiography about the other, the confession of a representation, the story written by an ‘auther’, i.e. the story of a relationship” (Maggio, 2014: 41).

There are several ways in which this kind of story can be written. The textual strategies mentioned above, namely fragments of field diary, concrete events, real characters, hindsight reproduction of intellectual journeys between an interesting, perhaps surprising finding and a final solution (Gay y Blasco and Wardle), all belong to the classical plot as categorised by McKee. To these, others can be added.

For example, several intellectual climaxes corresponding to more and more daring and meaningful interpretations can mark the analytical pathway leading to the formulation of the argument, as in the classical design of a plot marked by causality rather than coincidence. Each climax can be induced by an external conflict between the ethnographer and other incompatible interpretations, or data, rather than an internal conflict within the author and his own epistemological/political/racial demons. The argument can be presented as the final destination of that sequence of confrontations, although openness to alternative or complementary interpretations should always be welcomed. It follows that the narrative will be that of a single, active, protagonist

moving from fieldwork, to the library, to publication, rather than multiple protagonists crossing each others in nonlinear time, not to speak of a passive antihero. Furthermore, anthropologists should include biographical details because the choice of their topic, field site, and methodology, is inextricably linked with their biography. (Nash and Wintrob, 1972)

The impression of consistent and self-contained systematic reality that such an ethnography would give will certainly call for the accusation of naive realism, for its seemingly monologic (Atkinson 1992: 40) and univocal tone will remind of classical critiques against 'modernist' traditions of scholarship (cf. Tedlock 1979, 1987; Tyler 1987; Crapanzano 1990). However, it is as much likely that it will be welcomed with serious consideration and pertinent commentaries. First, because the voice of the privileged narrator does not deny difference; it is, in fact, its *conditio sine qua non*. This has been quite well represented in the reflexive examinations of the self-consciousness of the ethnographer (Ellis 2004; Nash & Wintrob, 1972, Reed-Danahay 1997). Secondly, people crave more and more classical-plot stories as their 'intellectual immune system' becomes increasingly unsusceptible to "epistemological hypochondria" (Geertz 1988: 71), positivist scare, and anti-racist hallucinations. Although there have been substantial benefits in purging the modernist faith of its theoretical pretentiousness for the past few decades, replicating the same kind of pattern in contemporary ethnography is perhaps no longer necessary.

On the other hand, it is a hypothesis to be tested, and yet a very plausible one that classical-plot anthropological storytelling makes case studies, analyses, and arguments more appealing and accessible to both academics and non-academics. It is to be seen whether it provides audience with both the basis for argumentation and a very engaging experience. Though the storytelling method has been used in the anthropology of the past (e.g. Gardner, 1997), anthropologists still do not make much use of it. That might be the reason why, as I have suggested in this research notes, so many anthropologists find personal conversations more understandable and engaging than professional presentations, although the content of what is told seems to be the same.

The question remains open, along with many others that these research notes only hinted at. What are the socio-cultural premises of people's preference for non-classical plot in contemporary ethnography? How to reconcile anthropology and storytelling as a form of communication in professional contexts? What do the narrative structure of storytelling mean to people who are interested in knowing about different cultures? How can anthropologists use storytelling as a new way of engaging wider audiences? These and other research questions will hopefully attract the comments and critiques of others who are interested in what anthropologists do, and can do, with stories.

REFERENCES

- Abu-Lughod, L. (1986) *Veiled sentiments: Honour and poetry in a Bedouin society*. Berkeley & London, University of California Press.
- Andrews M. et al, (2008). *Doing Narrative Research*. London: Sage.
- Arendt, H. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Atkinson, P. (1992) *Understanding ethnographic texts*. London: Sage.
- Bettelheim, B. (1978) *The Uses of Enchantment*. City: Publisher.
- Boyd, B. (2009) *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction*. Harvard University Press.
- Burt, B. (1994). "Cultural Development and Anthropology in Kwara'ae." In *Culture, Kastom, Tradition: Developing Cultural Policy in Melanesia*, edited by Lamont Carl Lindstrom and Geoffrey Miles White, 173–86. Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of South Pacific.
- Crapanzano, V. (1990) "On dialogue." In *The Interpretation of Dialogue*. edited by Maranhão, P. Chicago, University of Chicago Press ,pp. 269-91.
- Crapanzano, V. (1980). *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Danto A. (1985). *Narration and Knowledge*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- de Saussure, F. (1983) *Course in General Linguistics*. Chicago, IL: Open Court Publishing.
- Eckstein, H. (1975). "Case Study and Theory in Political Science." In *Handbook of Political Science*, edited by Fred Greenstein and Nelson Polsby. Reading Mass.: Addison-Wesley.
- Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA, Rowman Altamira.
- 'Elota & Keesing, R.M. (1983) *'Elota's Story: The Life and Times of a Solomon Islands Big Man*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Eriksen, T.H. (2004) *What Is Anthropology?* London, UK; New York, NY: Pluto Press.
- Eriksen, T.H. (2006) *Engaging Anthropology the Case for a Public Presence*. Oxford, UK; New York, NY: Berg.
- Foucault, M. (2002) *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. London: Routledge.
- Frank, Arthur W. (1997) *The wounded storyteller: body, illness, and ethics*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Gay y Blasco, P. & Wardle, H. (2007) *How to read ethnography*. London & New York, Routledge.
- Ghodsee, K. (2013) 'Writing Ethnographies That Ordinary People Can Read.' *Anthropology News*. [online] Available at <http://www.anthropology-news.org/index.php/2013/05/24/writing-ethnographies-that-ordinary-people-can-read/> [Accessed 13 August 2014].
- Gluckman, M. (1940) "Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand." *Bantu Studies* 14 (1): 1–30.

- Gottschall, J. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.
- Jackson, M. (2002) *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression, and Intersubjectivity*. Copenhagen, Denmark: Museum Tusulanum Press.
- Karatsu, M. (2010). Sharing a personal discovery of a taste: Using distal demonstratives in a storytelling about *kakuni* 'stewed pork belly'. In *Storytelling across Japanese conversational genre*. Edited by Sztatowski, Polly E. John Benjamins Publishing Co. Amsterdam. The Netherlands.
- Kermode, F. (1967). *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kwa'ioloa, M. & Burt, B. (1997) *Living Tradition: A Changing Life in Solomon Islands*. London, UK: Published for the Trustees of the British Museum by British Museum Press.
- Leach, E. R. (1954). *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Lett, J.W. (1997) *Science, Reason, and Anthropology: The Principles of Rational Inquiry*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Tin. L.-G. (2012) *The Invention of Heterosexual Culture*. MIT Press.
- Maggio, R. (2014) "I was at Home!" The Dream of Representation in the Representation of a Dream. *The Unfamiliar* 4 (1).
- Marcus, G.E., and D. Cushman. 1982. Ethnographies as Texts. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 11:25-69.
- McKee, R. 1997. *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*. New York: Harper-Collins Publishers.
- McLean, S. 2009. *Stories and Cosmogonies: Imagining Creativity Beyond "Nature" and "Culture"*. *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 24, Issue 2, pp . 213–245.
- Miller , P. J., and Randolph Potts, Heidi Fung, Lisa Hoogstra and Judy Mintz. *Narrative Practices and the Social Construction of Self in Childhood*. *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (May, 1990), pp. 292-311
- Mitchell, Clyde. 2006. "Case and Situation Analysis." In *The Manchester School: Practice and Ethnographic Praxis in Anthropology*. Edited by Terry Evens and Don Handelmann. Berghahn Books.
- Morris, C. 1998. Two Worlds: Narratives Of Colonialism In Life Histories. *The Journal of the Polynesian Society*. Vol. 107, No. 4. pp. 405-413.
- Narayan, K. (2007). Tools to Shape Texts: What Creative Nonfiction Can Offer Ethnography. *Anthropology and Humanism*, Vol. 32, Issue 2, pp 130–144,
- Nash and R. Wintrob (1972) The Emergence of Self-consciousness in Ethnography. *Current Anthropology* 13(1972)pp.527-542.
- Ochs, Elinor, and Capps, Lisa. (2001). *Living Narrative: Creating Lives in Everyday Storytelling*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Reed-Danahay, D. (ed.) (1997) *Auto/ethnography*. Oxford & New York, Berg.
- Rosenau, P. (1992) *Post-modernism and the Social Sciences*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Schwandt, T. A. (2007) *The SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Shostak, M. (1990) *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman*. London: Earthscan Publications.
- Spindler, George, and Louise Spindler. 1990. "The Inductive Case Study Approach to Teaching Anthropology." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*. 21 (2): 106–12.
- Tedlock, D. (1979) The analogical tradition and the emergence of a dialogical anthropology. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 35(4), 387-400.
- Tedlock, D. (1987). Questions concerning dialogical anthropology. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 43(4), 325-337.
- Tedlock, D. (1991) From Participant Observation to the Observation of Participation: The Emergence of Narrative Ethnography. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Spring, 1991), pp. 69-94.
- Tyler, S. (1986) Postmodern ethnography: from the document of the occult to occult document. In: Clifford, J., & Marcus, G. E. (eds.) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley, University of California Press, pp. 122-140.
- Tyler, S. (1987). On "Writing-up/off" as "Speaking-for". *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 43(4), 338-342.
- Van Maanen J. 1988. *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Webster, Steven. (1983) Ethnography As Storytelling. *Dialectical Anthropology*, 8(3), 185-205.

Rodolfo Maggio holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from the University of Manchester, UK. His research interests span from storytelling, to Pentecostal Christianity, to the domestic moral economy of the Kwara'ae people of Solomon Islands. He uses stories in many different ways, both inside and outside the academic context. His PhD dissertation presents case studies, analysis, and theoretical reasoning with a narrative approach; his oral presentations draw on the structures, rhetorics and techniques of storytelling; with Jessica Symons, he has recently co-edited a volume on the relationship between storytelling and anthropology. Deeply persuaded by the power of stories to change people's lives, Rodolfo Maggio currently continues to work at the intersection between ethnography, anthropology as storytelling, and the anthropology of storytelling.