

Fariba in the Shade: A Murmuration

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Abstract

This text wants to provoke some thinking on the interplay between illumination and shadowing. Despite our best intentions, every effort to throw light onto something will create darker shadows and leave things in the shade. I first exemplify this with some cases of my own, and the proposition is then used to reconsider the optimistic enthusiasm with which many of us have embraced the epistemological rupture generated by the decolonial turn in anthropology. While this new paradigm is salutary because it allows for what I call a proper “critique of ethnographic reason”, it is also dangerous in that, unless the critique is rigorously conducted, the academic practice remains unaware of the very shadows it creates. Sadly, my provocation to think our epistemic predicaments leads me to lament the total inability we encounter in cases such as that of our colleague Fariba Adelhah, literally and metaphorically living now in the shade, our shade.



Fariba dans l’ombre : un murmure

Résumé

Ce texte entend susciter une réflexion sur l’interaction entre la mise en lumière et les ombres. Aussi bonnes soient nos intentions, tout effort pour éclairer quelque chose crée des ombres plus sombres et laisse des choses dans l’ombre. Je l’illustre d’abord par quelques exemples personnels tirés de mes recherches, puis j’utilise cette proposition pour reconsidérer l’enthousiasme optimiste avec lequel beaucoup d’entre nous ont embrassé la rupture épistémologique générée par le tournant décolonial en anthropologie. Si ce nouveau paradigme est salutaire parce qu’il permet ce que j’appelle une véritable « critique de la raison ethnographique », il est également dangereux. En effet, sauf lorsque cette critique est rigoureusement menée, la pratique académique reste inconsciente des ombres mêmes qu’elle crée. Malheureusement, ma manière provocatrice de penser nos difficultés épistémiques m’amène à déplorer l’incapacité totale que nous rencontrons dans des cas comme celui de notre collègue Fariba Adelhah, qui vit maintenant littéralement et métaphoriquement dans l’ombre, notre ombre.



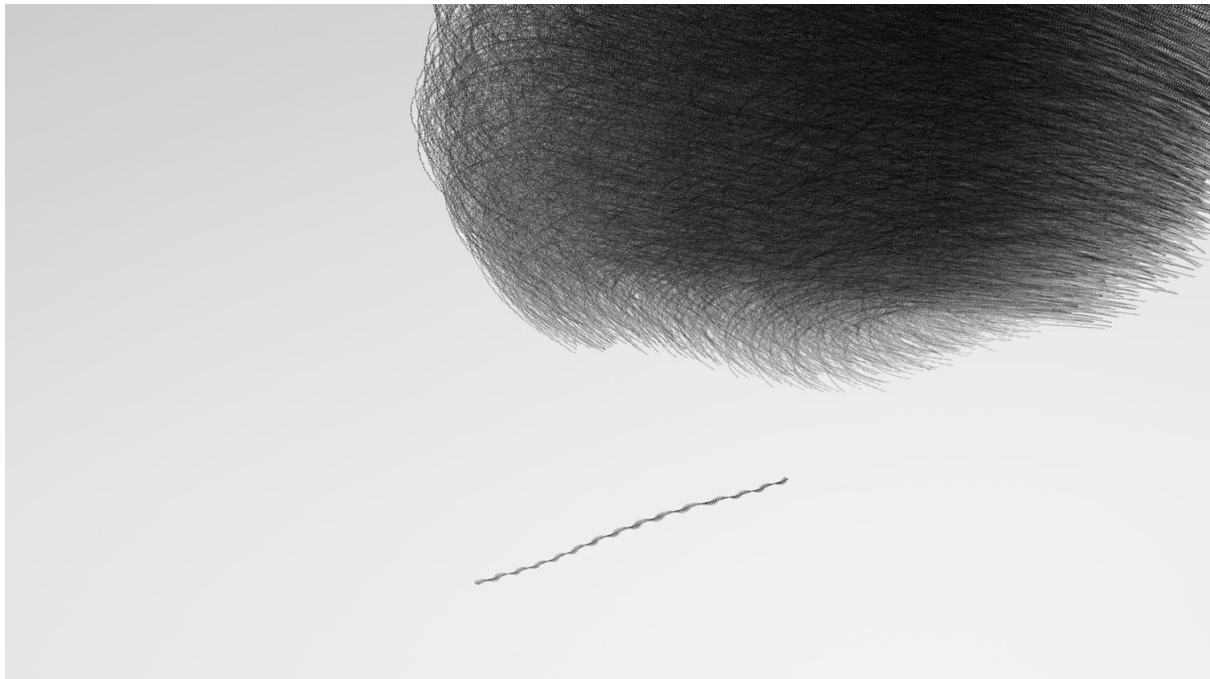
Keywords

Critique of ethnographic reason; decolonial turn; Fariba Adelhah; research freedom; shadow.



Mots-clés

Critique de la raison ethnographique ; Fariba Adelhah ; liberté de la recherche ; ombre ; tournant décolonial.



Murmuration of starlings and peregrine falcon (Image : @Xavi Bou)

In 1969 the Catalan philosopher Eugenio Trias, working under the fresh shade of a young Michel Foucault, published his book *La filosofía y su sombra* (Philosophy and its shadows) with a follow-up a few years later entitled *Filosofía y carnaval* (Philosophy and carnival, 1973). In them, Trias argued that any light that we try to throw onto something will create shadows and will leave many things in the shade. Paraphrasing the anthropologist Julio Caro Baroja, who in 1961 authored *Las brujas y su mundo* (Witches and their world), an insightful study on witchcraft beliefs in medieval and early modern Europe, Trias claimed that European witchcraft was the shadow created by the propagation of the light of the gospel. Likewise, Goethe may have gasped “Light, more light!” on his deathbed, but this demand for enlightenment was matched by the shadows so deeply loved by the thinkers and artists of Romanticism.

Perhaps because I have been conducting research on a religious movement called “shadows” (*Kyangyang*) in Guinea-Bissau, I have become extremely interested in the play between light and shade. Very often an incredible amount of light is thrown on some specific object without the person doing the illuminating realizing that they are creating a darker shadow behind the object and leaving others in the shade too.

There is little we can do about it, but just being aware of it would be quite an epistemological and ethical achievement. Some examples come to mind. In June 2011, I was invited to attend a major conference in Kinshasa on Simon Kimbangu, the famous anti-colonial Kongo prophet (1887–1951). It was an intensive one-week meeting during which almost a hundred papers threw light on this single historical character. There was so much light, and from so many angles, that someone might think there was little possibility of even the tiniest shadow being generated behind Kimbangu.

The conference opened on a Sunday with a Kimbanguist religious meeting and ended the following weekend with a visit to the Holy City of N’Kamba-Nouvelle Jerusalem, to which delegates were to be driven by bus. However, I and my friend Wabeladio Payi, the inventor of the prophetic alphabet known as *mandombe*, decided to take a different route. We took a public transport to the city of Mbanza-Ngungu (half-way between Kinshasa and N’Kamba) and from there walked to N’Kamba. It was the same route, albeit in reverse, Simon Kimbangu had been forced to take when he was arrested by colonial authorities in N’Kamba in September

1921. It is an impressive uphill walk of around 55 kilometres, and Wabeladio and I were to undertake it twice, as I describe in my recent book on Wabeladio and his alphabet. A few hours after we left Mbanza-Ngungu, we were stopped by some farmers, men and women, in a tiny hamlet. Wabeladio explained who we were. “Oh, you were at that conference about Tata Simon?” asked one of them. “Yes”, Wabeladio replied. “We heard about it in the radio. You were talking for a week about Simon Kimbangu in Kinshasa. Simon Kimbangu’s struggle was for people like us, Bakongo from this region. He walked this way from N’kamba to Mbanza-Ngungu when he was made a prisoner by the Belgians. He died for us, but nothing has changed since his days. We are still suffering in the villages. No light, no running water, no tarred roads, no medical services, no schools.”

The man did not say anything about the cost of the conference, but I guessed he was also annoyed that Kabila’s government, together with the wealthy Church of Simon Kimbangu (one of the three biggest churches in the Democratic Republic of Congo), had spent a fortune (in transport, hotels, and infrastructure) to make the conference happen, to throw all that light on a crucial actor in Congolese colonial and anti-colonial history. Apart from Wabeladio and me, walking as we were along the Kongo hills, probably not many (if any) delegates in the conference realized that the brighter the light we wanted to produce, the darker the shadow we were projecting onto these poor and angry farmers and their marginalized lives. Marginalized, at that very moment, by people like us with our very good scholarly intentions.

The idea that there is no light without its shadow is a powerful one. It has often haunted me in relation to something I have been following with more or less personal involvement for the last four years: the epistemological rupture that we have been experiencing in social (and not only social) sciences and in popular culture in many parts of the world around what we now agree to call “the decolonial turn”. In anthropology, this is just one more turn among the many we have experienced before: the “Marxist turn” of the 1970s; the “writing culture turn” aka the “postmodern turn” of the 1980s; the “postcolonial turn” of the early 1990s; the “material culture turn” in the mid 1990s; the “ontology turn” of the early 2000s; the “ethical turn” of the mid 2010s, among many others. More than any other scientists, anthropologists seem to be particularly adept at reinventing the wheel. And a good wheel it is, as it does not cease of turning. But in the decolonial turn the concept of “turn” is perhaps more adequate than in any previous turning avatar, because it is not just a 45° or a 90° deviation, but a 180° U-turn. It is a turn that consists of putting anthropology on its head, much as Marx did with Hegel or Durkheim with Kant. It is not a rebellion, but a fully-fledged revolution.

There is little consensus on what decolonizing may mean theoretically and practically, but one thing is clear: it expresses the need to a) rethink the history of science and be critically aware of the power inequalities embedded in the past hegemonic production of knowledge; and b) be aware that the current practices of today (fieldwork, archival research, writing, collaboration, museum exhibitions, etc) may still reproduce, even if unwillingly, the attitudes and worldviews of a colonizing, predatory and extractive *regard*. All this is very salutary, even if it may lead to an excess of epistemological vigilance. It may also lead, I am afraid, to a lack of theoretical imagination, making scholars feel anxious if they abandon the comfort zone of the now normalized decolonial episteme. The lack of imagination is obvious when we look at the overall academic landscape. Over the last three years, the number of conferences and workshops (not to mention publications) with the title “decolonizing X or Z” has been so enormous that I wonder whether adding “decolonizing” to a title is not just a question of marketing, of securing a public and a fair amount of “likes” (or to avoid a fair number of “dislikes” if you do not abide by the rules of the Wittgensteinian language game). I am sure that for many an author, the concept has become a totemic marker that shows that they swear belonging to the clan of the righteous ones. They think that if they write, say, about mangroves in West Africa, their work will sound much more correct if they *decolonize* the mangroves than if they simply *study* their deterioration or resilience, or how people, plants, and animals coexist in that changing, endangered ecosystem. Many, I fear, may also think that by adding the d-word to their title, they will also look like a rebellious and creative thinker, while in fact they are doing something very similar to what

starlings do when large numbers of them take to the air and form the amazingly beautiful and hypnotizing shapes of a murmuration: one starling monitors how a limited number of birds close-by are flying so that it can imitate their behaviour and orchestrate its individual flight to theirs, and the result is the perception that all the birds are flying *together*. Predators like the peregrine falcon, a natural enemy of starlings, find it more difficult to attack them. There is safety in numbers. Just observing how a few colleagues are writing and adding the right word here and there does a similar trick among us scholars. We are very good at creating the illusion that we are all thinking *together*.

I have no doubt that we are throwing light on historical processes. We probably know more today about how brutally unfair the making of museums in the West has been than ever before, and we are much more symmetrical than earlier anthropologists in our ethnographic collaborations with partners from the places we base ourselves in our research. Likewise, we are much more demanding in our ethical standards and in establishing imperative boundaries between freedom and research (“what am I entitled to ask?” seems to be an inescapable question any researcher must ask themselves and their research collaborators before even starting). As far as I can make out, the decolonial turn has been very good in one crucial sense. In *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx wrote that humans make history without being aware of the conditions under which such making takes place, reproducing blindly, through their habits of thought and action, the very conditions of their oppression. Before him, Kant had said that humans think, and even embark on such complicated modes of thinking as metaphysics, without being aware of the conditions of possibility of thinking, which he attempted to make explicit in his critique of pure reason. One could say that the same applies as far as history of anthropology goes. We have done anthropology for a long time without questioning how this production of knowledge has taken place. The decolonial turn has introduced a kind of Kantian “critique of ethnographic reason”, making us aware of the very conditions of possibility that made, in the past, the production of ethnographic knowledge attainable. In the past and, I hasten to add, in the present.¹

All this illumination is, I insist, salutary, but it would be too naïve to believe that it arrives without its concomitant production of shadow. It would be impossible to throw light on a historical process without leaving others in the shade. Thus, in a recent photographic exhibition I saw in Lisbon about the role of the image in the decolonization of Lusophone Africa, I was surprised to see that all the images in the show related to the practices of the Partido africano da independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC), the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO), and the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA), the political parties that were involved in the anticolonial struggle and have been in power for most of the postcolonial period since 1974 in Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and Angola respectively. These political parties, which today keep their legitimacy by conjuring up their role in the making of the nation, were memorized and magnified through the lenses of this exhibition, while other actors, equally important in the anti-colonial struggles, were silenced and left in the shade. Seen under that particular light, the process from anti-colonialism in the 1950s to today’s nation-states proceeds in a straight line of political success. Some of the images used in the exhibition, showing guerrilla soldiers teaching peasants in the improvised schools in the bush in the 1960s, were very similar to the images adorning the walls of the consulates of these countries in Lisbon. Decolonization is a double-edged sword. It can be liberating, and it can become part and parcel of a legitimating political apparatus. In the case of Angola, the situation is almost comical. While young activists in Luanda, born more than 25 years after the country became independent, actively question the claims to legitimacy that the MPLA is still tapping out of their involvement in the making of the nation in the 1960s (the generational gap was particularly evident in the last election in August 2022), scholars in

¹ I am being unfair here to an entire “lost” generation of decolonial *avant la lettre* anthropologists who were doing precisely this in the 1970s. The British journal *Critique of Anthropology*, created in the 1970s by a group of radical left-wing young anthropologists based largely at UCL in London, was born to both *criticize* the way anthropology had been conducted previously (i.e., in the then still recent colonial times) *and* to establish a *critique* (in the Kantian sense) of production of knowledge. Most of the anthropologists who belonged to that group were engaged (politically speaking) with processes of political decolonization in the then so-called Third World and also in the decolonization of knowledge as we understand it today.

Europe keep on glorifying the party and its struggles in seminars and exhibitions. To borrow the anti-colonial rallying cry, *a luta continua* (“the struggle goes on”). Its shadows, too.

To sum up, I would like anthropologists to engage more in a Kantian-like critique of ethnographic reason. By that I mean a study of the conditions of possibility of the production of anthropological knowledge. A critique that could unveil why and how Malinowski got his data and why and how we are doing research today. A study that would make anthropologists aware of how we are speaking, with whom, and for whom. A study that would, at least, make us aware of the very shadows we are projecting.

The Kantian critique of ethnographic reason I defend here takes me to the painful situation we are experiencing with Fariba Adelkhah. Over the last 3 years, I have struggled to understand why we in anthropology worldwide are putting so much effort into un-learning imperialism, colonialism, anthropology, or ecology and yet seem to be unable to learn how to throw light into the shadows of the world we live in today, many of which we have created. Whenever I tried to call the attention of colleagues in different settings to the brutal imprisonment of our colleague Fariba in Iran, the response was always tepid. Neither they nor, admittedly, I knew quite *what* to do or *how* to do it. Most of the time, I was advised not to make too much noise (if any), as this could backfire on Fariba or in any case be interpreted as one more sign of “us” telling “them” how to conduct their business. This did not annoy me. I understand the awkwardness and would never wish to do anything that might put colleagues in peril. However, what did annoy me, and made me suddenly aware of our predicament, was, in contrast, how much fuss we were making, at exactly the same time, about the decolonial urge in academia and beyond. Obviously, I thought, here we are in our “comfort zone”. Here there is no danger that our talk can backfire. It does not take a hero to show that the conditions of possibility of Evans Pritchard’s ethnography were colonial or that a lot of the money supporting bourgeois and aristocratic life in Europe, including high education, was extracted by inhumane means in the global south for centuries. Our engagement in this kind of decolonizing research is our way of showing each other that we are collectively learning to fly, like a starling in a murmuration of thousands. The peregrine falcon will attack the bird that does not know how to stay in the group. In short, anybody willing to criticize anthropology for being colonial is free and safe to do so. However, nobody seems to notice the contradiction in stating the colonial overtones of anthropology while not doing anything whatsoever about a colleague in prison. (Let me make this clear: she is certainly not there because she is colonial). She is an anthropologist and was doing what anthropologists are supposed to be good at doing: research, seminars, and writing. What she said and wrote surely annoyed someone. This often happens when one writes. But what did she write? people ask me, hoping that this will give us “the” clue to the mystery. It is a difficult question to answer. Fariba’s curiosity is enormous. She has written about pilgrimages to saints’ tombs, she has written about perceptions of being Muslim and being modern, she has written about popular music, she has written about diasporas, she has written about gender and freedom, about individual and collective suffering, about the game of identities in Afghanistan and Iran (and many more topics, too). She has always maintained a very constructive dialogue with the most cutting-edge theoreticians of anthropology and has made us rethink classic topics such as Afghan “ethnicities”, notions of self, or the proteic nature of “the gift” in Muslim economies. In her free time (if I may use this concept without sounding cynical) she was also a translator of French medieval poetry. If you think that perhaps the clue to her surreal imprisonment lies in the imperative question mentioned above – what am I entitled to ask? – I can tell you it does not. No one has accused Fariba of having trespassed any legal or ethical boundary, of which she was well-aware. She was, however, a difficult starling – perhaps because, like many of us, she belonged to more than one murmuration. Obviously, some peregrine falcon hovering over those murmurations realized she was not willing to learn how to be part of one specific group. Her flight was too free, too outside the box, and that made her an easy target. What we need to learn from that, however, is not that staying in the murmuration will protect us, but rather that flying outside the murmuration, at least for a period of time, is necessary if one wants to effect some change of direction. Fariba had the courage to fly outside the murmuration, and so should many of us. That would be a lesson we could learn from the very shadows we are producing.

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