

PART FOUR

TOOLS FOR INVESTIGATION



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Life History and the Writing of Ethnography: The Case of Morocco*

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In this chapter, I will try to raise some questions about the complexity of collecting life histories and presenting them in ethnographic writing. I will try to show that the way in which life histories are obtained has a great impact upon the way they should be presented. I will formulate my analysis in the light of some Moroccan examples.

The Complexity of the Life History

No anthropologist can deny the complexity of life history. One of the main problems we face while studying this method is that we do not know exactly who the speaker is. Can we say that the narrator is the only true speaker in the life account? And when he says I or me, is he really talking about himself? The difficulties in giving an adequate answer to this question have led some analysts to separate the narrator from his discourse. The life account contains more than one voice and more than one narrator: the life history is thus a result of conflicting and antagonistic levels in the narrator's own mind. In other words, there are many selves in the life account: there is the 'I' character (the narrator as object of his own account), and the 'I' narrator (the narrator as observer of his life), each formulation permitting the narrator to give us an image about himself without necessarily using the pronoun 'I' as judgement or acknowledgement of the opinion of others (Chabrol 1983:81-82).

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The narrator speaks sometimes to himself using 'you', particularly when he evokes some ideal he believes he should fulfil in his life. He sometimes uses 'he' when he wants to reveal the image the group has of him, or 'we' to attest to his integration into the social group. Even though the narrator says 'I', it is probable that he refers only to the image he thinks is adequate to portray him. Because of the selective characteristics of memory, the narrator is not necessarily the most competent one in knowing himself. Moreover, between the image that the group has constituted about him and the true group image about him, we can often find both inaccuracy and opposition (Poirié, Clappier-Valladon, Raybaut 1983:56-57). The life account does not come from a coherent source of discourse, and every attempt to relate it to the same origin cannot be but an illusory practice. If the life history seems in its final version to be an adequate representation of the narrator and his discourse, it is because the researcher, as interlocutor, analyst and interpreter, refers all the voices back to the narrator, thus transforming a true diversity into an illusory unity (Chabrol 1983:82).

Other complexities are connected to the interview situation. It is known that the interviewee may sometimes tell what the researcher would like to hear, and at the same time, might limit the data to what interest the informant has or to what might enhance his image after death. In the life history interview, there is thus a third character who intervenes between the researcher and the narrator: death. Its presence converts the life account into a defence against death and an attempt to keep some kind of existence in the afterlife (Levet-Gautrat 1983:119). In the same way, the life account sometimes gives priority, not to the information needed, but to the task of giving life lessons and experiences presented to the researcher as ideals he should fulfil in his life.

It is also very probable that the interviewee will give a different version of his life if he interacts with different fieldworkers. Much depends on the nature of the interaction between the two personalities. It is possible that he speaks about an ideal personality instead of a real personality, just as he might insert his account into the mould of mass media. Furthermore, we know that human consciousness is not able to be totally aware and perceptive of the present life. Often we understand neither the logic which has an impact upon our present actions, nor the significance of contemporary events. Our consciousness lags behind our actions, and our memory seems unable to catch up with what was well understood at the time it happened (Veyne 1971:229-231).

Linguistic mediation is another obstacle between the narrator and the researcher. The narrator might leave out some personal or family events only because he does not have the proper words to discuss them. Or he might exaggerate these events because of his sophisticated language. In both cases, memory does not have easy access to its object. Moreover, because the significance a narrator gives to events is a result of their interpretation at the time they happened, as well as at

the moment of their memorization, and because this memorization is first of all determined by the present situation of the narrator, the significations expressed by the narrator will necessarily be subjective and susceptible to change (Bertaux-Wiame 1985:50-51).

For example, in the rural area I have studied in North-western Morocco, I have noticed the following obstacles to the life history method.

- 1) Spatial and social mobility in this region influences greatly the effort of memorization (Amphoux, Ducret 1985:198). It is well known that there is an intense emigration from the countryside to the cities, as well as change of social status from low to high, and vice versa. To ask a townsman to recall the half of his life that he spent in the countryside often seems to be a difficult task, for his memory has lost its spatial reference mark. In the same way, to ask a rich or well-off peasant to recall a part of his life when he was a sharecropper does not seem easy, because here too the memory has lost its social reference point.
- 2) The informant only narrates the facts that were considered relevant from his point of view. He is selective in his life account. A peasant may speak particularly about his work 'life'; a former *caïd* may speak particularly about his political and administrative life; while a *sherif* (The Prophet's descendant) may show above all his propensity to reveal his family genealogy. The memory eliminated – consciously or unconsciously – all that seems to the narrator contradictory to the image he may want to present of himself.

While women work hard in this society – going to the market almost every week and carrying heavy burdens for long distances – the discourse of male narrators usually neglected these facts and showed women's roles only in social exchange and reproduction.

Moreover, while a woman participates actively in decision making, the discourse of the male marginalized not only her participation in family matters, but also her presence as a person. In the same way, when we asked men to give us their family genealogies we noticed that their memory became weaker as they began to talk about women, but stronger with regard to males, particularly when the narrator had many sons. This selection comes perhaps from the reluctance of this population to talk about their wives with an outsider, or maybe from their fear of losing their maleness and virility in face of the researcher. It could also be a result of a vengeance operated by a discourse against the real and the empirical. What is certain, however, is that this selective discourse is somehow a result of what might be called 'structural oblivion'. It means that the male, because of his dominant social position, is unable to give the female all the importance her real presence deserves. He forgets women not because he is a male, but because of his dominant social and economic position. Furthermore, it means that the image the

narrator seeks to present of himself is determined not only by what is being remembered, but also by what is being forgotten. Maybe oblivion is more important in this matter than memory (Mauve 1985:26).

I also noticed that a life history sometimes becomes a kind of peasant defence toward a researcher as a townsman. The peasant seeks in this manner to modify the image that townsman have constituted about rural dwellers. It is known that family education in traditional cities has for a long time tended to depreciate the image of the people of the countryside. Before the colonization of Morocco, tribesmen were able to defend themselves by attacking the cities. This is no longer possible. Therefore, the only weapon that remains in their hands is to modify their image in the townsmen's mind. Some sentences that were collected are very significant in this regard: 'Don't think that the people of the mountains are silly or ignorant or that because they don't live in the cities, they don't know what happens in the country'.

Sometimes, the peasant borrows ideas and conceptions from the cities to show you that there is no difference between the researcher and him, between the city and the countryside. Consequently, the researcher finds in the narrator's discourse nothing more than his own image as a townsman.

The narrator might sometimes avoid talking about his participation in political institutions that have since been condemned (e.g. participation in colonialist administration). On the other hand, it is often true that narrators try to seduce the ethnographer by talking in detail about their participation in the resistance against the colonial system.

Concerning the present, the majority of the interviewees make a conscious calculation of what can be said and what cannot be said. As a result of these restrictions the interviewees seek sometimes to be understood without striving to speak clearly, or without continuing their narrative to the end.

With respect to the form of the oral life account, we can notice that, with some interlocutors, it takes the form of written biographies about well-known religious figures (Von Grunebaum 1962:291-306). This is particularly true about local men of learning who have passed through different stages of traditional education. Because they have read many Islamic biographies, they tend, when asked to give an oral account of their lives, to keep the same written form, to the extent that their life history reveals the repetitive and the universal more than the individual and the specific.

Writing Life Histories

For a long time writing has been reduced to method: keeping good field notes, making accurate maps, presenting statistics, and writing up results. The fact that this process has not until recently been challenged reflects the fact that many researchers still believe in the possibility of having immediate contact with experience, the direct perception of an underlying reality. This ideology seems,

however, to blind the anthropologist to the fact that the 'translation' of indigenous culture, wherever it happens, 'takes place within relations of weak' and 'strong languages that govern the international flow of knowledge' (Clifford 1986:22), and at the same time, implies a shift from non-literate and non-academic culture to written and academic language, with the implicit claim to superiority of the anthropologist who presents himself as an outsider who knows the inside life of the population he studies, and gives to it, through a text, the possibility of persistence (Asad quoted by Scholte 1987:42).

Many life histories are written on the basis of a salvage allegory, of saving in the text what remains of vanishing traditional society and culture. It is in this way that ethnography legitimises its writing practice as inscription of a culture rather than transcription, as representation rather than evocation. And behind this salvaging and redemptive action, there is the idea of the other society as being weak, and thus in need of being represented by an outsider. There is also the idea of the ethnographer as a custodian of an essence, the privileged witness to an authenticity that cannot be easily refuted (Clifford 1986:112-113). Because the culture he studies may vanish, and because the ethnographer tries to convince us of the truth of what he says by presenting factual observations in a theoretical context, we are inclined to believe him simply because he has 'been there'. He does this in such a way that every one else who would decide to return to the fieldwork in order to check the seriousness of the ethnographer's statements, even if they find different facts and use different models, would not be able to conclude anything more than that things have evolved and changed from their previous state (Geertz 1988:4-6).

Such representations of anthropological knowledge have now begun to change. Anthropology, which was born in colonial conditions, is beginning to readapt itself to new processes of decolonization. The widespread use of the media and the role of tourism now deprive anthropology of such assumptions as the separability of the subjects of study and the audience. The people who ethnographers study are no longer colonial subjects, nor mere objects. Their increasing capability to have their own view about their culture is now making the anthropological encounter one of dialectical interaction (Geertz 1988:131-135).

It is not surprising then to find that, in many cases, the life account combines oral expression with the reading of personal and familial texts. I have had the experience of narrators who interrupt the interview to bring me written documents concerning matters such as marriage, property ownership, inheritance and legal cases. The ethnographic work is no longer a mere written record of an oral account. As noted by James Clifford, data move from text to text, and both informant and anthropologist are readers and re-writers of the life history (Clifford 1986:116). The researcher is no longer the primary bringer of the culture into writing.

Furthermore, what a narrator communicates to the researcher is not only an oral account but is also an oral text. What distinguishes the life history method is that objectivation exists not only between the researcher and his subject matter, but also between the narrator and his life. The narrator has a kind of theoretical relation with his life. Instead of just reproducing it, he submits it to selection, reorganization and reinterpretation. The oral life account is thus itself a writing (Kishani 1985:71-72).

If we then observe the passage from 'real' life to the oral text, and finally to the written text, we can imagine how the loss is important (Zonabend 1985:36). That is why J.J. Rousseau privileged the direct observation of the world and viewed the book as contrary to truth and science. That was also the reason that incited Jacques Derrida to conceive writing as violence perpetrated against oral accounts, and also oblivion (because all is written, the memory is no longer needed). In the same way, Claude Lévi-Strauss viewed writing as a means by which human societies lose the immediacy, the face-to-face communication and the intimacy of speech (Derrida 1967:55, 198).

The life history cannot be obtained without cooperation between the researcher and the narrator; the relationship between them cannot be viewed in accordance with the observer-observed dichotomy. For, instead of being just an observer or object of observation, both cooperate dialogically to produce a discourse (Tyler 1986:126). The life history method deprives the researcher of the epistemological privilege that has been given to him by the structuralist tradition. Consequently, if the narrator's life is neither an object nor a series of facts, we cannot deal with it simply by procedures such as 'descriptions, inductions, generalizations, verification, experiment, truth'; the mode of ethnographic writing must be evocation rather than representation, a version of the life history rather than the true life history (Tyler 1986:130).

But although cooperation fails in many cases, we find that only a few writings about Moroccan society show in some detail the difficulties the anthropologist encounters while doing his fieldwork. What we notice instead is the image of a researcher in good terms with the people whom he has been studying. Is this the reality? I think that both inside and outside researchers encounter features that might encourage them to continue their work, as well as what might discourage them from continuing to do so. We do not find in the text the strained and unstable relationships that might sometimes emerge between the researcher and some of the individuals he studies. This means that agreement and mutual sympathy do not always proceed from the fieldwork experience, notwithstanding the image some anthropologists like to project of a researcher who dominates either the techniques he employs, or the ability to get on well with the people he is studying (Clifford 1985:61).

Moreover, in spite of the curiosity aroused by the presence of the author in the field, where he usually becomes a focus of attention within the community, and where he finds himself, if not giving up some views over his own life, at least questioning some of its aspects under the influence of his narrator's life; in spite of the fact that his fieldwork results are largely determined by the way he interacts with the other and intervenes in his subject's lives, we do not notice the presence of the author in the text, not as a writer, but as a fieldwork researcher. The fear of colouring objective facts by his subjective views often leads him to suppress his presence in the text, or at least to limit it to preface and notes (Jarion 1974:626). He acts as if there were a contradiction between objectivity and manifesting explicitly his presence in the text. He writes a text which should be, in his view, related not to an author, but to specific facts or events. And the more facts and events he presents, the more he thinks of his writing as being objective. By acting in this manner, he becomes like the historian who thinks that the credibility of his work depends, above all, on how many documents he can include in his text, on the extent to which his text can become equivalent to actual events, and his presence as author limited to its minimum expression.

We notice also that the life accounts, when collected, become in the anthropologist's laboratory an object of division and disintegration. I mean that the presentation of the life account is repeatedly interrupted by the author who intervenes through it to clarify, to explain or to make some comments. In any case, what is usually meant by scientific work is seen as being the opposite of the novel where such processes as identification, pity and admiration are possible. Have we, however, deontologically speaking, the right to divide a man's life, a man who trusted us and gave to us his life account? Are we here not facing a double game by the anthropologist? Is not the anthropologist's attitude here ambiguous? In the beginning he listens to the life account and records it without any comment. But, then, when he returns to his office, he begins, on the basis of his personal conceptions and values, to disintegrate the narrator's discourse, without giving to the informant the possibility of expressing, if necessary, his disagreement with the author's interpretation. Therefore, the writing might be conceived of, at this level, as a disruptive violence and authoritarian practice quite different from the previous sympathetic listening (Lejeune 1985:81).

This authoritative attitude also appears at the moment of publication. We know that anthropologists sometimes publish accounts of informants' lives that would greatly displease the informants themselves. Anthropologists seldom consult informants about what should be published and what should not.

To limit the authority of ethnographic writing, anthropologists are increasingly adopting dialogic texts in which a plurality of voices replaces the monology of a single author. This only displaces ethnographic authority, because it is still the

author who does the orchestration of all the discourses in the text. The author might modify the narrative order, or suppress some of its parts. The author of a polyphonic text does not suppress his authority, but only modifies its basis. Consequently, to overcome the authorial authority one needs to treat collaborators not only as informants or enunciators, but also as writers (Clifford 1988:43, 44, 51). This evolution is still in process. It needs to rely not on a conventional notion of a shared cultural system, but on a notion of a culture viewed as an outcome of negotiations between subjects through acts of communication, and as incarnating partial truths of each subject's points of view. The anthropologist, instead of trying to impose, in the name of 'being there', one true interpretation of history, must 'encourage readings from diverse perspectives'. And as long as it is the reader, much more than the author, who gives to the ethnographic text its meaning and coherence, the adoption of a dialogic form would not mean a loss of the text unity (Clifford 1988:52-53).

The Case of the Moroccan Society

It is certainly pertinent to give consistency to what has been presented above, to refer to some anthropological studies whose authors have presented their fieldwork in Morocco by using the life history method.

Among these biographical works, we can distinguish between two kinds of writing: the one that uses biography in order to study Moroccan society and history; and the other which resorts to biography as a pretext to evaluate the status of anthropology as well as relationships with foreign cultures.

If the authors, in whose writings the social dimensions of biography were more salient, are admittedly, at the level of their methodological approach, close to each other, they are however interested in different issues raised by their field research. While John Waterbury was essentially attracted by the study of economic behaviour, and Henry Munson by the study of social and cultural change, Dale Eickelman seemed more interested in knowing the nature of Islamic learning¹. Let us see separately how each one of these writings dealt with biography.

In Waterbury's book (Waterbury 1972), we notice that the author gave more attention to what was general in the life of Haj Brahim as a Soussi merchant than to what was unique and intimate in his personality. He aimed, through his biography, to find out the extent to which the norms of thinking and behaviour have changed in Moroccan society. So, instead of letting Haj Brahim speak for himself, he intervened constantly to give a larger sense to his remarks and situate them in the framework of his personal interpretations of Moroccan society and history. He used a great deal of the fieldwork data he collected to inform his treatment of Haj Brahim's biography. Moreover, he approached it in the light of Max Weber's theory about the impact of Protestantism upon economic success, and also from

the standpoint of the hypothesis developed by David Maclelland concerning the cultural and psychological motivations which lag behind economic development. In the same way, Waterbury tried to verify, on the basis of the basis of his informant's life, the extent to which the famous Khaldounian statement about the Maghrebian merchants need for the protection of rulers is still valid (Waterbury 1972: 89-115). And although the author permitted Haj Brahim at times to express directly his opinions and attitudes about Islam, commercial, political and social life, he did not go so far as to give up the role of supplying both continuity and transcendent meaning to such striking events as the sale of poisonous cooking oil in 1959, or to comparable patterns reported in other studies of Islamic and non-Islamic societies.

With the exception of the subject studied and the form of biographical writing, Henri Munson takes a similar approach to social transformations through individual realities. He tries to understand how the status of women, peasants and migrants in the Djeballan highlands of North-western Morocco have been transformed under the impact of diverse factors of change. He also seeks to grasp the cultural basis on which the interviewees built their conception of colonialism, nationalism, dependence and modernization (Munson 1984:3-4). It is within this scope that the author decided to interview forty members of the Si Abdallah family.

His account is not, however, limited just to a number of biographies, but extends to the act and context of narration, and the techniques employed to register it. It is revealed that Fatima Zohra, the author's wife and her uncle, Al-Haj Mohamed, are the source of all the biographies presented in the book. Sometimes, he distributes the narration between them, but in most cases he makes them speak about the same persons and events. The comparison between the two points of view was intended to show him how the narration of Fatima Zohra and Al-Haj Mohamed were, respectively, influenced by western thought and Islamic fundamentalism. While Al-Haj Mohamed's narrations were tape-recorded in Morocco, most of Fatima Zohra's were undertaken in the United States. If the context of biographical narration influences its nature, the same thing might be said about the way used to record it. So, while the author used a tape-recorder in his encounters with Al-Haj Mohamed, he confined himself to the direct inscription of his wife's biographical accounts; while both were permitted to narrate their own lives, the other members of the family were not allowed the same privilege.

If we add to all this the fact that the author included in the narratives data he had heard indirectly from them in the context of collective Moroccan discussions (Munson 1984), we will then be able to understand the extent of the writer's intervention in reconstructing his subject. It thus appears that the author's comparative approach was dictated more by the ideological background of the narra-

tive discourse than by its inevitable relationship with the context and techniques of its production.

Another interesting biography is Dale Eickelman's *Knowledge and Power in Morocco*. Its author aimed particularly to write a 'social biography' (Eickelman1985:14-15), revealing the general context into which religious learning in Morocco had evolved during the twentieth century. Along the way, he decided to study the personal and scholarly stages of the life of a rural judge living in Bzu, in the High Atlas mountains (Eickelman1985:16). Although the author occasionally permits Haj Abderrahman Mansuri to speak in his own words, Eickelman remains the principal speaker and interpreter. He intervenes constantly to incorporate social, economic, political and climatic events of the Protectorate and Independence periods, as well as to compare some aspects of Islamic learning in Morocco with those in other societies (Eickelman1985:58-59).

To write this biography, Eickelman had recourse to interview many of Haj Abderrahman's friends and relatives, as well as those he encountered while studying in Islamic educational institutions. But, at the same time, Eickelman did not rest only upon oral accounts. He also drew on personal and familial written documents that his informant had carefully conserved, and above all, relied on the Haj's personal diary (Eickelman1985:17, 26-30). He even consulted the newspaper Saada for supplementary information about Haj Abderrahman's marriage (Eickelman1985:128-129).

The author's main efforts were still directed to interviews with Haj Abderrahman, whose biographical conceptions were deeply impregnated by the Tarjama model (Eickelman1985:41-42). From the standpoint of what Eickelman considered to be essential knowledge, he led his informant to overcome what the 'tarjama' means as a formal presentation of self. For example, such accounts exclude women from the narration, and remain silent about the economic and political transactions that were undertaken by many men of learning, in such a way that the data Haj Abderrahman gave to the anthropologist were more abundant than those he had given to his own sons (Eickelman1985:34-38).

Nevertheless, by the questions he asked as well as by the later reconstruction in the text, the ethnographer's voice remains dominant. The social context of Islamic learning in Morocco is more the result of the ethnographer's interpretation and writing than a mere emanation of the informant. This does not mean, however, that the author has assimilated all the preconceptions he had learnt about the Middle East: 'In this study, I use a social biographical approach to break accepted stereotypes held by westerners and by many Middle Easterners themselves of Islamic learning and its carriers' (Eickelman1985:15).

The second trend, which emphasizes above all the fieldwork encounter, the status of self and other, and the adoption of a new ethnographic writing experience, is represented by two American studies.

The first one is Kevin Dwyer's book, *Moroccan Dialogues*. What is relevant in this work from the standpoint of modern ethnographic writing is, first, the revealing of the extent to which dialogue is essential for ethnographic knowledge. The entire book is constructed as dialogues on specific events that the Moroccan interlocutor has to face (divorce, loss of a child, unhappy marriage of a daughter, circumcision, wedding, dealing with the police about a theft, etc). It provides, from the author's point of view, the occasion either to analyze the interaction with the Other, or to evaluate anthropological practices that have been taken for granted. It reveals, in addition, that the active role of the anthropologist appears more clearly in the interaction with the informant, than between the writer and his text. Only this dialectical encounter permits the production of the ethnographic text (Dwyer 1982:278-279).

Secondly, contrary to the epistemology which allows the anthropologist to reconstruct, partially or totally, the fieldwork experience, and to give primacy to the moment of interpretation hence keeping the reader distant from either the fieldwork experience or the ethnographic text, Kevin Dwyer attempts 'to bring the reader as close as possible to the experience' (Dwyer 1982:278-279) and presents to him the raw material of his dialogues, challenging him in this manner to participate in giving them the meaning he considers the most appropriate. And if he keeps his presence as interlocutor in the text, it is because he considers that objectivity is attained neither by hiding himself behind his informant nor by using the artefact of 'multiple biographies', but through the recognition of the researcher's subjectivity (Dwyer 1982:277). He recognizes, however, that the experience is inevitably transformed in making it into a text:

Events certainly lose their immediacy and are reworked in the mind of the writer as he writes them down much is lost in transcribing conversations into written dialogues: gestures do not appear, tone of voice is muted and mood is hidden, and Moroccan Arabic disappears as it is translated into English (Dwyer 1982).

Thirdly, the text is not presented either as definitive or as a model to be followed. Dwyer stresses rather the vulnerability of all participants in the ethnographic project: anthropologist, informant, and reader (Marcus, Fisher 1986:70).

The second book is Vincent Crapanzano's *Tubami: Portrait of a Moroccan*, in which life history is presented as a puzzle, and with which the author consequently asks for the reader's help in interpretation (Marcus, Fisher 1986:72-75).

Tuhami refers in his narrative to the ordinary events of his life, as well as to fantastic metaphors (djnun [demons], magic shrines, angels, the legendary character of Atcha Kandis', etc). Such diverse matters as the fragility of childhood, the arbitrariness of desires, the manipulation of the woman, love, death, security, honour, shame, and dreams are expressed in different registers: the historical, the demonic, the magical and the folkloristic. The ethnographer aims through his encounter with Tuhami not only to have a general knowledge of colonial and post-independence period or to understand the characteristics of a cultural tradition, but also to determine attitudes vis-à-vis fundamental matters such as time, nature, the supernatural, the person and social relationships. Psychic processes and linguistic metaphors are dealt with by the author as valid means of communicating experiences. From his work with Tuhami, the author learned to distinguish between the personal history which equates narration with individual acts, and the truth of autobiography which exists only in the text. As anthropologist, he was convinced of the impossibility of having direct access to the mind of his interlocutor, and had therefore to seek it through the text mediation (Crapanzano-Tuhami 1980:5). He broke the traditional frame of history which was, in his opinion, largely influenced by novelists such as Balzac, Flaubert and Zola, to be rather closer to the form of the modern novel (Crapanzano-Tuhami 1980:10-11).

Tuhami's life history is not only informative but also evocative (Crapanzano-Tuhami 1980:14). That is why the author expresses his fear that interpretation may become over interpretation, and hence, invites the reader to be engaged in the process. But although he defines the life history as a process by which the subject presents himself from his own perspective, he recognizes, at the same time, the undeniable impact of the writing:

His text ... /Tuhami's text however accurately I can present it, is in a sense my text. I have assumed it and afforded myself as narrator, a privilege he has not been granted. I have had the privilege of (re) encounter. I hope, however, that through my assumption the reader will discover Tuhami and recognize in him something of himself (Crapanzano-Tuhami 1980:23).

Conclusion

The life account may serve as a vehicle for fictions, self invention and individual strategies. It is not synonymous with the truth about one's life. Even though the anthropologist can make fruitful uses of the illusions and lies it contains, the oral life account remains, in many of its aspects, confusing and ambiguous. Consequently, only new forms of ethnographic writing can lead to a better reading and understanding of life histories. Because the life account is so complex and peculiar, no single mode of writing can present an adequate transcription of it. What the anthropologist presents in his text is not the life

history, but only one version among other possible versions. While writing his text, he adds his own fictions to the narrator's fiction. What should be expected is an imperfect and vulnerable text whose meaning depends on all the participants in the ethnographic project: The anthropologist, the narrator and reader. None of them can claim for himself an exclusive privilege in producing the meaning of the ethnographic text.

On the other hand, because the narrator participates actively in interpreting his own life, and constructs it in a reiterative and progressive manner such, characteristics as process, reflexivity and understanding should be acknowledged not only in the social reality of the ethnographer, but also for individuals in the culture he studies. The split between ethnographer (as subject) and native (as object) should be overcome not only by the use of humanistic qualities such as 'sensitivity' and 'understanding', but also by the experimentation with new techniques for research and presentation of findings.

Note

1. The way John Waterbury and Dale Eickelman write biography seems very close to Lévi-Strauss' view, which consists of conceiving the life account not as a mere expression of an individual self, but as a sort of partial and weak history which cannot have any pertinent meaning outside a stronger and larger processes of history (Lévi-Strauss 1961:346-347).

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