Discourse, communities and institutions

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The title of this presentsation, 'discourse, communities and institutions', is not meant to indicate an approach which discusses three seperate conceptual entities. The area which I want to talk about is rather a set of social and cultural **processes** in their interrelatedness and open-endedness.

From the title again one may suspect that I wish to suggest a linear movement from one to the other to the third, but my point is not that in empirical reality there is such a development. I don't wish to imply that discourse or language 'comes first', and has to be studied as an entry point if one wishes to understand institutions.

What I wish to discuss is the **expression and articulation** of an area of social practice, situated at a middle level, and particularly how the researcher get access to such an area. As you can see from the article which has been handed out (Frederiksen 1990), I tentatively within this area identify 'communities of interpretation and communication' as an object of study. Now, such a community is certainly informed and held together by discourses and may generate or be generated by institutions.

The approach which I advocate to such an area of study is one which seeks to find discourses or discursive practices in institutions, and traces of institutional forms and social practices in discourses. In the introduction to *Social Anthropology and the Politics of Language*, which is on the reading list, there are two broad definitions of **discourse**, which are close to the sense in which I use the term: A first step in the definition is to say that discourse "encompasses all aspects of linguistic organisation at or above the phrase level" , the next and decisive step is to say that discourse is a "constantly emerging and emergent interface between language and culture", or a "nexus, the actual and concrete experience of the language-culture-society relationship" (Grillo 1989, p.18).

In order to understand this relationsship, not as structure or system, but as **process** I need the mediating notion of 'community' which is meant to direct attention to **the people** - individuals and groupings - who talk, write, perform and act in certain ways. Looking at social and cultural practice as a process, as performance of social dramas is an approach which is characteristic of the anthropologist Victor Turner, for instance in *At the Edge of the Bush*. The ways people act and perform, express themselves,
can hopefully be characterized by making use of information from the area between institutions and discourse in which they are situated. In the article which I referred to, you can see my further reflections on the character of the

communities and on the reasons why, according to me, the study of such communities and other social practices at a middle level is becoming popular now.

In the brief outline of today's session, which you can find in the Seminar Programme, we write that "discourses from popular culture, institutions and communication within groups are available as texts for analysis". The **nature of these texts**, emerging from the communities, their status as social data is what I wish to adress myself to now.

And the question which I seek to answer is, how does one, the researcher, gain insight into the **meaning** of political and cultural institutions. Whether these texts, public or semi-public articulations as they are, provide suitable material for understanding the meaning and value which people in a society attach to communities and institutions.

I should like here to refer to Victor Turner's definition of meaning: 'The only category which enables us to conceive an intrinsic affinity between successive events in life" (Turner 1985, p. 203). And I should like to link this way of conceptualising 'meaning' with the notion of **interpretative strategies**, associated with the deconstructive mode in literary criticism, particularly with Stanley Fish. According to Fish there is not such a thing as a wrong interpretation of a text. There are only strategies of interpretation which are *as yet* incomplete and therefore unacceptable to the 'interpretative community'. So what members of an interpretative community do when they wish to make sense of social situations, procedures or documents, is to seek for elements to fill out the gaps of non-sense, which prevent the recognition of affinities in life or in texts.

Perhaps I should say that the institutions which I imply in what follows are not closed, formal institutions such as the World Bank or a para-statal. They are modest-scale, open, and informal institutions, swimming in the sea of a community, such as a mosque or a church, situated in and interacting with a particular locality.

What I am after is an understanding of institutions from the 'inside', but not primarily as 'institutional' or 'organisational culture', a system of meaning, but rather as a cultural an social **resource** which people can use and to which they can meaningfully attach themselves. As a resource which is valuable, because belonging to it is part of an ongoing dialogue or negotiation which individuals and groupings conduct with society at large. Attaching oneself to such an institution, using its vocabulary and and influencing it with one's own is a form of social practice.

To illustrate what I have in mind I shall quote to you from Christine Obbo *African Women, Their Struggle for Economic Independence,* a Ugandan woman's description of joining a Nubi Muslim community in Kampala. The community was permeated with Muslim institutions, such as the *purdah*. Part of this woman's work was being a prostitute, and she felt herself very exposed:

"I did not want people to think me that sort of woman. I started attending some of the local (protestant) churches. In some of them the prayers were conducted in Luo and I could not follow. In others I could understand the services conducted in Luganda but the preachers were always condemning thugs and loose women. I felt that I had been damned for life and that there was no hope for me. At the time I was contemplating moving to another neighbourhood, I became friends with an elderly Nubi woman who used to gently tell men that women ultimately are responsible for their morality and no man can actually control them if they should wish to misbehave. Through a lengthy process I became a Nubi. I changed my name from Faith to Fatuma. The rest was easy. The Nubi woman became my 'mother' and instructed me in Nubi ways and I became converted. Although my jobs have not changed, I am a much respected woman. We all need respect, don't we?" (Obbo 1980, p.109).

The identification with the Nubi community was attractive, according to Obbo, because, in practical terms the woman would be protected by Nubi men, if she had problems, and at the same time she could carry on her work. If she was in *purdah* , her respectibility would not be seriously questioned. So practical Islam in Kampala was a **culturally coded discourse,** which in its interplay between general doctrine and socially dependent practical interpretations was full and flexible enough to contain a woman's ambiguous position as a prostitute and yet respectable. But joining the community and making use of its institutions was a lengthy process, as the woman herself says. And it was a deliberate choice, made after an examination of the other readily available option for religious identification, the Christian church.

An institution does not have to be fully fledged, but may be a **institutionalising process** which highlights and structures certain features within a community, because a structuring or organising of the particular features corresponds to momentary social needs. As far as I can see the basis and material for organisation have to be **the experienced and/or wished for identities** of individuals or groupings within a community.

Organisation around a common denominator feeds on **identities** or identifications, projected at a particular social juncture: The identity chosen may be linked to kin, to generation, to ethnicity, to gender, to class, to nation, to religion, to race, etc. The process which I talk about presumes not only **highly differentiated societies**, but also **highly differentiated individuals**. I take for granted that that's what we are dealing wth in Third World societies. The understanding of the process presupposes an **alertness** on the part of the observer to the multiple identities lodged in individuals and groups, not always easily observable. I don't think one can always take that alertness for granted.

In the discussions we have had here on concepts of "culture", at least those where I have been able to be present, the voices of those who are embodiments of a certain culture or social practice seem to me to have been fairly absent, or at least muted. The voices of those who invent and conceptualise 'the others', have on the other hand been fairly loud and insistent.

To me it is of absolutely central importance that the researcher tries to devise ways of entering into and understanding discourses of the community, the group, the institution she wants to study, and does not limit herself to meaning which make sense in her own cultural discourse.

To illustrate what I am on about: In *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa* Terence Ranger describes dance societies, cultural organization and performance which was wide spread in the urban centres on the Coast of East Africa. Their origins were precolonial, and they proliferated around the First World War. People would make processions through the streets of the towns, including dancing groups, headed by bands. *Beni*, they were called. Two of the well known ones in Mombasa were*Scotchi* and *Kingi* originating from different areas of the town. They used kilts, bagpipes, uniforms, badges of rank, and adressed each other 'General', 'Lieutenant', 'Colonel' and 'Private'.

According to Ranger this was not because they loved the military or the Scotsmen who were among the first British on the Coast, but because they used the signs of modernity and of hirarchy, expressed in uniforms and titles to compete **internally**, and express the aspirations of the different communities. They used them in "the interests of communal prestige and of the festive life" (Ranger p. 21).

They mimicked the colonizers, but it is wrong to say that they formed themselves in their image: They took elements of the discourse from "the others", and incorporated them to make sense in their **own** cultural discourse, which was not traditional, but certainly local. "The Beni mode represented rather a display of self-respect than a submission to absolute power", in Terence Ranger's words (Ranger p. 50).

So the question for me is how does the researcher get access to popular knowledge and meanings which are central at a certain juncture in a community?

Sociological analyses are capable of providing data on both objective and subjective processes in a social situation. Sociological examinations of the subjective dimension, the creation of meaning, like those of anthropology, base themselves on qualitative, open ended interviews and participant observation. Anthopology is furthermore equipped to interpret symbolic systems and articulations.

But in the final analysis an outsider, sociologist or anthropologist, structures or perhaops constructs the reality which is being examined. She makes the priorities based on her notions of importance and relevance, and the data used for generalisations are coloured by this selection process.

Fictional literature written by persons closely involved in the process of social change constitutes a different kind of data, dealing with the subjective dimension of social situations. This type of text is of course also the product of priori-

ties and selection, based on values held by the author, presumably reflecting or at least discussing those of the community he or she writes about (though that is open to discussion). Analysis and interpretation of this type of text may enter into dialogue with and perhaps supplement insights obtained from sociological and ethnographical material.

I wish briefly to postulate some traits of fictional literature which are of interest to the kind of use which I suggest may be made of literary texts: Works of literature are symbolic structures, ordered according to the prorities of the author, distilling out of wide areas of concern focal points which are being defined, redefined and argued about by shifting 'voices' in the text. Outside the text, these voices can be identified as belonging to various social and subcultural groupings, available for anthropological and sociological approaches if they wish to be so.

Literary texts are ambiguous - but so are ethnographic texts. Both modes call for interpretation. The whole institution of literary criticism points to the centrality of the role of **the interpreter** within the field of literary studies, and throws the occasional lack of concern over the interpretation of sociological and ethnographic texts into relief.

It may seem contradictory that I at the same time stress the processual character of institutions, and seem to believe that one can get access the the value and meaning of these institutions by looking at material which is the opposite of processual: For instance printed texts which are static and unchangable.

But the argument for that hinges on the presence in literary and popular culture texts of **many voices**, entering into dialogue. And these voices are themselves, as I see it, expressions of 'communities of interpretation and communication'. A popular magazine, which came out in Nairobi in the 1970s, and which I have studied, may be an even better example of the richness present in a written text in terms of not only voices, but also genres.

In *Joe Magazine*, as it was called, we find a motley of genres and formats: As regards written material there are editorials, feature articles, pastiches, spoofs, reviews, competitions, short stories, advertisements, jokes, genuine and faked letters from readers. The graphic work also appears in many sub-genres: The full page political, satirical drawing, cartoons, traditional comic strip with talk bubbles, illustrated narratives, illustrated jokes with one punch line, and once again advertisements. And there are photos. The ensemble represents a variety in form which throws a multi-facetted light on the fairly limited number of issues., shared concerns of modernity, particularly as it unfolds in urban settings.

The different voices and genres are not only present side by side. They comment on each other, make fun and turn things upside down. A satirical drawing of 1970s dressing style, flares, platform shoes and enormous cap, illustrates a short story about *Ben*, as most of the male protagonists seem to be called, making his way through the rain-wet streets, stumbling into bars and trouble. And

those two genres will again be offsett by a straightforward photo in an advertisement for a private educational institution, featuring someone like Ben, now in all seriousness.

But other forms of artistic articulation, music, theatre, painting should provide a similar data base, essentially not in the first instance tampered with by the external observer.

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