Do anthropologists have the right to speak for their informants? Is this a form of exploitation? Discuss with reference to at least two ethnographic examples.

Since its roots in colonialist academia, anthropology has come a long way in its thoughts and behaviour towards its informants. In this essay, I will use the work of Asad, Clifford, Said and Abu-Lughod in discussing, theoretically, the question of authority in ethnography, looking at the traditions of anthropology and the methodology of ethnographic work. I will use Abu-Lughod's ethnography to show how these theories can work in practice, contrasting it with Marjorie Shostak's work on a !Kung woman which, although it 'lets her informant speak', still maintains some of the potentially exploitative traditions of anthropology.

Relations of power between anthropologist and informant must be discussed in respect to this question. As Asad notes in the introduction to the collection of essays he compiled connecting anthropology and colonialism, the very existence of the discipline is due to the imbalance of power that existed (and still exists?) between the West and the non-West during colonialism (Asad 1973). This political and economic dominance enabled Western anthropologists to go and live with non-Western communities with the security of their position as somehow superior. Asad argues that not enough is made in anthropology of its colonial roots, a beginning that ultimately sustains a notion of cultural hierarchy even to this day. As Clifford adds in his work on 'Writing Culture', anthropology seems to have claimed a "monophonic authority" (Clifford 1986: 15) over its informants because of imperialist influence. Edward Said, in his seminal work 'Orientalism', calls for an analysis of authority (Said 1995), a call that is being heard in contemporary anthropology and which in this essay I hope to explore. There exists a

tension in the very notion of ethnography, of bringing other cultures to Western attention, in that the culture is observed, analysed, and discussed in Western terms. Anthropologists control the form (if not the content too), and are supported by their dominance in economic, social and political life. Said notes that to "study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a nonrepresseive and nonmanipulative, perspective…one would have to rethink the whole complex problem of knowledge and power." (Said 1995: 24).

With a background such as this, how can anthropology begin to distance itself from imperialism and Western cultural superiority? One way, Lila Abu-Lughod suggests, is to close the constructed gap between self and other (Abu-Lughod 1991). Anthropology, in its beginnings, was able to call itself "the study of primitive cultures" (Asad 1973: 11), a description that no longer sits comfortably within the discipline. The construction of ultimate difference between the known self and the unknown other is under extreme attack. Abu-Lughod argues that as we build a notion of self in opposition to other, we inherently create a hierarchy of power. (In this way, anthropology has been said to have contributed, if unconsciously or unintentionally, to the sustenance of imperialist ideology (Asad 1973).) The term 'culture' suggests homogenous, coherent, and timeless entities that exist in opposition to one another (Abu-Lughod 1991), while the 'lived' world is nothing like this. It seems that while distinct notions of 'culture', 'self' and 'other' continue to pervade ethnographical thinking and writing, anthropology will remain true to its colonial, imperialist roots.

While attempting to do away with ideas of self and other, a recognition of the ethnographer's position in the community he or she studies must be present in the

ethnography for situating the information they impart. The circumstances that have passed to allow such a contact between ethnographer and informant must be acknowledged. The history of colonialism and its relationship to anthropology, and its heritage inherent in the minds of all (including Western anthropologists), undeniably marks the ethnographer's work, for example, "it must…be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of *his* actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second." (Said 1995: 11). Thus the ethnographer must make his or her position clear.

I have discussed, if very briefly, some arguments regarding the questionable authority of anthropologists in studying others, but what also must be addressed is whether, even given the right to make their ethnography, anthropologists are able to present a 'true' depiction of the world of their informants.

One problem of presenting information is whether it is too general or too specific. Said tells us, "my two fears are distortion and inaccuracy, or rather the kind of inaccuracy produced by too dogmatic a generality and too positivistic a localized focus" (Said 1995: 8). If there is no cultural whole, as discussed earlier, presenting too general a picture creates the kind of homogeneity and completeness that leads to abstractions and reifications of reality. Abu-Lughod calls for 'ethnographies of the particular', where the contradictions that exist in every person can be shown against the coherence of generalisations: "the particulars suggest that others live as we perceive ourselves living, not as robots programmed with 'cultural' rules, but as people going through life." (Abu-Lughod 1991: 158).

The method of presenting information gathered that is so instrumental in the transference of meaning is discussing at length by James Clifford in 'Writing Culture', and its importance within the discipline is being recognised more and more. The writing of culture can not be viewed as transparent; with writing, conscious and unconscious exclusions are made, and meanings altered. As Clifford says, "literary processes – metaphor, figuration, narrative – affect the ways cultural phenomena are registered" (Clifford 1986: 4), and meanings may be added or taken away by the reader that were not intended by the informant or the ethnographer. The ethnographer's understanding of his informants (even though this is still representation, not truth) ultimately changes in the medium through which he or she expresses it. This is not something that anthropology can fight to change, the understanding and misunderstanding of intended meaning is a fact of life. However, it is thought by some, including Abu-Lughod, that by including more recorded speech and less academic jargon (that further separates ethnography from reality) a version closer to the 'truth' of the community will appear. Ethnographies, as Clifford says, are 'fictions', and "ethnographic truths…inherently partial – committed and incomplete" (Clifford 1986: 7), but anthropologists must embrace this fact, not claim to be giving ultimate truth, and make as clear as possible the position of their ethnography in mediating between one group of people and another.

Two ethnographies that claim to let their informants speak are Abu-Lughod's 'Writing Women's Worlds' and 'Nisa: the life and words of a !Kung woman' by Marjorie Shostak. I will look at these two ethnographies in detail and contrast their two methodologies in relation to each other and the arguments that I have discussed.

The problem of presenting non-Western ethnographic material in Western terms is something that both authors had to work with. Abu-Lughod, on introducing her work, says, "the unusual form of this ethnography owes much to the remarkable women in the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin community with whom I lived" (Abu-Lughod 1993: 1). This is a progressive step for ethnography, to fit the form of one's work to the content, inspired by the informants. Conversely, Marjorie Shostak describes the problems she encountered when trying to fit the lives of the !Kung into the categories she had prescribed. Having "mentioned some of the topics I hoped to cover…"(Shostak 1982: 21), she found the informants difficult and unreliable. Shostak's material was gathered mainly through formal interviews (often with informants receiving payment), in contrast to Abu-Lughod who had built up a rapport with her informants and used mostly informal personal and group conversations, which led her eventually to the conclusion that "perhaps my wealth, status and foreignness kept the women from trusting me" (ibid.: 33).

Shostak seems not to recognise the divide she creates and maintains between herself and her informants in her thoughts and actions, while Abu-Lughod is very self-conscious and self-aware.

For all her determination to create an ethnography that does not perpetuate a cultural hierarchy, Abu-Lughod can not escape the fact that she remains in ultimate control of her material, and so potentially a superior and authoritative voice. However, she seems conscious of this fact, and is explicit in her methodology, leaving in the questions asked and not pretending conversations did not take place because of her presence. The final chapter centred around Kamla is an example of Abu-Lughod's editorial work being governed by the material she is gathering is shown. The content of the chapter is

determined according to the information that Kamla included in her essay, Abu-Lughod merely adds relevant points to each section.

Shostak, however, is not so open to suggestions as she has set out with a very clear picture of what she wishes to achieve through her ethnography. She says that she explained to her informants, "that I wanted to learn what it meant to be a woman in their culture so I could better understand what it meant in my own" (Shostak 1982: 21), which is the kind of construction of self through opposition to others that I described earlier in the essay as contributing to the notion of self and other that perpetrates notions of cultural superiority. As shown at one point when she is "reminded … of the cultural gulf between Nisa and me" (ibid.:350), Shostak seems unwilling to attempt to understand her informants on their own terms and not in contrast to herself.

Despite describing the !Kung in the introduction using many generalisations, the fact remains that Shostak has written, as Abu-Lughod would call it, an ethnography of the particular; she has allowed the voice of one woman to be heard. However, it seems that Shostak's intention was not to allow us to see the intricacies of one person's life so that we may see the boundlessness of 'cultures' or the similarity of living life all over the world, but rather that we may get a general picture of the '!Kung culture' through one person. In the epilogue, Shostak writes, "perhaps [Nisa's] story was too idiosyncratic an interpretation of !Kung life; perhaps it didn't generalise to other women" (Shostak 1982: 350), which shows a certain unawareness of the potential of letting informants speak for themselves, and a simple wish to personify culture.

Abu-Lughod, on the other hand, uses the opportunity of describing individual lives to great effect. Her wish, she says, was that each chapter might 'unravel' its title, each one

being a conventional Western analytical category, to show the boundlessness of life. She is able to show the tensions and contradictions that exist within the community, even within the individual, which would have been 'flattened out' (Abu-Lughod 1993: 221) in generalisations. For example, Kamla describes the importance of traditional values, but "… if she were to think about how the extensive bonds between kin are to be maintained, she would have to admit the virtues of marriage to paternal cousins, the kind of marriage she wanted desperately to avoid." (ibid.: 234). This internal conflict between tradition and progress is shown in the contradictions of one girl.

The question of exploitation in transferring the information gathered to the public is something both authors address. Abu-Lughod's intention with this ethnography is clear, but she is uncertain of her authority in executing it: "Do the ends of undermining anthropological generalisations, questioning feminist interpretations, and shaking up assumptions about the Middle East justify the means?" (ibid.:38) Abu-Lughod was worried that she was exposing things about her informants that were personal and worried that it may be seen that she was using them for her own purpose.

Shostak is not so sensitive to the consequences of her work being published. In debating asking Nisa for her permission, she says, "it was *my* work, certainly…but it was *her* story" (Shostak 1982: 350). The notion of self and other in her book is shown again. In this case, the issue of exploitation seems more apparent than in Abu-Lughod's book because she has constructed an image of herself in contrast to Nisa, and of Nisa's world in contrast to her own, which she was using for her own ends in understanding 'what it was to be a woman'.

In this essay I have shown some of the main arguments from Said, Asad, Clifford and Abu-Lughod concerning the authority of anthropologists in speaking for their informants. I have shown, using two ethnographies, the potential for success and failure in letting the informants speak. I realise that I was very critical of Shostak's work in comparison to that of Abu-Lughod, and that this followed theoretical suggestions from, amongst others, Abu-Lughod, which may seem biased. However, the arguments put forward by Abu-Lughod for better and more representative ethnography were theoretically supported by other anthropologists and seemed to me to be sensible and appropriate for this discussion. In conclusion, if approached and executed in the right manner, I believe the work anthropologists do in making known the lives of others is not exploitative, but informative and useful.

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