To what extent can anthropology be seen as the study of indigenous classifications?

To think about ourselves and the world that surrounds us is a complex activity that can also be thought about. This sentence in itself demonstrates that it would be impossible to do this, to think, if we were not capable of designating all things, concepts, relations and objects to specific categories, and so classifying all that we experience and perceive into a coherent system of organization. Are our representations, our classifications a product of cognitive processes or rather, those of culture, or both? Classifications have always been the focus of anthropological research because they are in the root of both what anthropologists do when they conduct analysis and in the heart of what they are analyzing. However, it is considered that Durkheim's and Mauss's work '*Primitive Classifications'* opened the field for the effective and focused study of this topic. In order to determine whether anthropology is the study of indigenous classifications, and what this means and encompasses, this paper will cover a number of classic studies of indigenous classifications along with the mentioned work of Durkheim and Mauss.

Social organization and social relations are that which create a model on which primitive classifications are based and according to which they take their shape, argue Durkheim and Mauss. Thus, in each society the way of classifying things and sorting out phenomena is a manifestation of the collective consciousness. In order to investigate this process, the anthropologist must study the 'most rudimentary classifications made by mankind, in order to see with what elements they have been constructed' (Durkheim, Mauss: 1963: 9). The simplest systems of classification for Durkheim and Mauss are found among the tribes of Australia, and there, the classification of things is a reproduction of the classification of people – all objects in nature are classified according to the division of tribes into moieties and moieties into clans, and all of these into marriage classes. The constraint of the logical order so created and it's principles on the minds of these peoples is so strong that it determines their whole way of life. Because people of the same clan feel closer to each other than to people of different clans of the same moiety, Durkheim and Mauss believe that the classification system is such that the individual sees all things as arranged into a number of concentric circles which surround him, of which the most distant are those related to the 'widest genera' and which he perceives to be the least part of him. On the other hand, the individual feels the closest to his essence, the thing that is the centre of all these circles – his totem.

The principle of division of the Zuni Indians is somewhat different. Classification is determined by the Zuni spatial arrangements and the seven regions that the Zuni believe space can be broken into – north, south, west, east, zenith, nadir and the centre. All things in the universe, social roles and functions, colors and the clans of the pueblo - all are assigned to these seven regions. However, Durkheim and Mauss find a similarity between the classification system of the Australians and the Zuni – both have a social organization into clans (the Zuni into 'oriented clans'), and both are totemic, only the Zuni system is a more complex variant of the Australian one. Although Durkheim and Mauss do not believe that a certain way of classifying is an essential consequence of totemism or the division of things by regions, they do believe the two

are closely related, that is, that there exists a 'close link between the social system and the logical system' (Durkheim, Mauss, 1963: 41).

After Durkheim and Mauss, a great number of anthropologists continued with the study of indigenous classificatory systems. One group of studies placed a focus on what can be called symbolic classifications – like in the case of Mauss and Durkheim, where, as we have shown, it is maintained that classificatory systems are a cosmological expression reproducing the social and moral order by the means of categories – norms - that regulate social life. Additionally, within the study of symbolic classification fall anthropological works that are based on the idea of binary oppositions as underlying social thought, such as that of Mary Douglas. She conducted an analysis of the Leviticus and biblical rituals by placing a focus on all that is abnormal so as to shed light on the relation of religious and cosmological categories and concepts to the structure of the social order. Of course, the interest of Mary Douglas in the Leviticus was very much motivated by her desire to put forward a paradigm of holism – thus, the set of symbols expressed, for example, through food taboos, are linked together within a broad symbolic system, and all the ideas that they express are comprehensible only in relation to a 'total structure of thought'. For Douglas, the only interpretation of the Leviticus that was 'comprehensive' and so applicable to every aspect of it's symbolic system is the concept of holiness, and together with it, the concepts of the clean and unclean – 'to be holy is to be whole' (Douglas, 1996: 55) – and food taboos developed over time as a metaphor of holiness, they are unclean things that are not whole because they do not conform to the natural order, their rightful class.

Certain anthropological studies have also shown that there exist not only binary classification systems dividing everything into twos, but also those which separate all things into odd numbers, such as the case of the very much talked about trio of white, red and black. Victor Turner's research on the Ndembu rituals among other things problmatized color classification within it – the tripartite classification of the above named colors, the only three for which there exist primary terms in the Ndembu language. Although it may seem that it is only the colors white and red that are opposed in rituals, they also often represent the same thing and so 'participate in one another's meaning' (Turner, 1967: 61), indicating that there is another, third factor, involved – the color black. While these colors have a wide array of meaning, Turner believes that nevertheless, they are explicitly related to physiological products of the human body, intense bodily experiences that are then associated with the powerful emotional states that follow, thus connecting culture and nature. Furthermore, Turner speaks of the relation of color classifications and rites of passage in terms of transition, which is significant perhaps because symbolic classifications demonstrate and support the principle of transition in society through categories which are marked as anomalous and irregular, border-line and dangerous. Because most physical experiences are the result of social relations, by relating colors to bodily experiences they also offer a classification of the world and reality Therefore, contrary to Durkheim, for Turner it is 'the human organism and it's crucial experiences (that) are the *fons et origo* of all classifications' (Turner, 1967: 90).

Some anthropologists can be said to have focused on the area of semantics and the importance of characteristics of things in the process of their categorization. The classificatory system of color attracted quite a lot of attention – Harold Conklin's study of Hanunoo color categories was perhaps paradigmatic in this sense, and subsequent works of Brenda Beck, Brent Berlin, and

others. The principle questions of interest were related to the evolution of classificatory schemes and the determination of their underlying foundations. For example, Harold Conklin tried to determine the relation of lexical sets and perceptual categorization through study of Hanunoo color categories. Although color discrimination can be considered more or less the same for all people, what it interesting for Conklin is the way that millions of existing colors are classified in different languages. Thus in the Hanunoo language, there exists a primary, basic four-way classification system of colors of which all other colors are derivative - black, white, red, green – and this division, states Conklin, is correlated to a number of oppositions foreign to 'chromatic differentiation' and linked with 'non-linguistic phenomena' (Conklin, 1955: 342). These are the oppositions between light and dark, as well as dryness and wetness – part of the natural world and especially significant for the flora, and finally, the third opposition cutting across the first two, between 'deep, unfading, inedible and more desired material as against pale, weak, faded' (*ibid.),* separating red and black from white and green. Once occasion calls for more specific color terms the 'level II' terminology is employed with other specific words such as gray or yellow, as well as constructs such as 'very red' or 'weak yellow', with special attention to texture and light reflection of the surface. What Conklin states is that anthropologists must differentiate between categorization and sensory reception in order not to infer that people speaking languages consisting of different color lexicons to their own are 'color confused'.

It must also be noted that much research has been done on zoological and botanical classification, with the goal of uncovering whether certain groups of categories that these classifications consist of have a 'logical primacy' – where one category at a certain level of classification can be said to be more basic (*salient*) then others. A good illustration of this is Stanley Witkowski's work on 'Lexical Universals' (1978), inquiring whether there are some universal characteristics of language that correspond to universal and innate human abilities to use this language, or if the 'human language faculty' depends on 'information processing devices'. Based on cross-cultural studies, Witkowski analyses those word-names that are likely to be 'lexical universals' because they relate to nature such as sequences of folk botanical and zoological life-forms and basic color categories. By explaining how the process of naming things occurs on the basis of four principles – conjunctivity (binary opposition), criteria clustering, marking and dimension salience (Witkowski, 1978: 433), Witkowski goes on to show that these are related to human cognitive facilities for information processing, but also rely on our innate neural circuit.

Although one can with much confidence show that classifications are a reflection of the social, it would be extreme to advocate the view that all classification is embedded in social institutions. Rather, it is significant to consider that there may exist some universal, innate cognitive mechanisms and abilities which are in the basis of classificatory systems. At the same time, culture, together with language, aids us in the organization of reality and all of our perceptions. Because classifications are a result of complex cognitive processes and shared social experience, they are in the midst of all that anthropology studies. Examples of research that have been given show that although the motives, interests, subject areas and perspectives differed in many ways, the question of indigenous classification is common to all of them and unavoidable. In the words of Durkheim and Mauss: 'Far from being able to say that men classify quite naturally, by a sort of necessity of their individual understandings, we must on the contrary ask what could have led

them to arrange their ideas in this way, and where they could have found the plan of this remarkable disposition.' (1963: 9).

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