

Comments on Inaga and Kurimoto* Papers For Crossing Cultural Borders

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*Editor's note: We regret that Professor KURIMOTO Eisei's paper, under discussion here, cannot be included among the Proceedings of the conference. Please see (Wendy James, Donald Donham, Eisei Kurimoto and Alessandro Triulzi eds. *Remapping Ethiopia*, Oxford: James Currey (forthcoming in 2001).

I

In 1972, with reverberations from the student movement still audible, Rodney Needham concluded his book on the nature of anthropological understanding *Belief, Language and Experience* (1972) with a quote from Einstein. It is worth quoting here: "The one eternally incomprehensible fact about the universe is that it is comprehensible. The solitary comprehensible fact about human experience is that it is incomprehensible." This is a very pessimistic remark, indeed. Einstein's words have made me realize that anthropology might be an impossible attempt to cross cultural borders.

But these days it is not the epistemological impossibility, something that Needham has articulated, that does not allow anthropologists to sleep well at night, but an impossibility of another sort. If I am not mistaken, it is concerned with the "ethics of intercultural communication" to which Professor Inaga has called our attention. We are being forced, in his analysis, to become aware of the "violence in border crossing," or, more specifically, to the **violence** in cross-cultural representation maintained during times of the uneven distribution of power as Gayatri Spivak (1988) has pointed out in "Can the Subaltern Speak." *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Spivak criticizes the imperialism of power with which "First World Intellectuals" create subaltern subjects, particularly when these "voiceless" subalterns (oppression has produced a class of voiceless people) are made to speak for themselves. After her critique of the cavalier manner in which Deleuze and Foucault have enthusiastically endorsed the project of allowing prisoners to speak for themselves (see the chapter "Intellectuals and Power" in *Language, Counter Memory, Practice*, 1977[1972]), crossing cultural borders seems to become even more difficult, because there is always a Professor Inaga

reminding one of "the deceptiveness [*sic*] of the act of our representing voiceless others." The sixties are making a comeback, it seems to me, with a vengeance, and what is worse, I am now held accountable.

II

Keeping in mind that this sort of critique contributes to my sleepless nights, I would like to direct a question to Professor Kurimoto who has stated that his duty as a scholar is "to give voice to those unheard ones, and to present them in a way intelligible and meaningful to those who are not familiar with the local contexts." What would he say in response to the comment made by the anthropologist Stephen A. Tyler in his chapter "Post-Modern Ethnography," in *Writing Culture*, ed. J. Clifford and G. Marcus (1986)? Let me quote from Tyler, even if it is a little bit long: "some ethnographers have tamed the savage, not with the pen, but with the tape recorder, reducing him to a "straight man," as in the script of some obscure comic routine, for even as they think to have returned to "oral performance" or "dialogue," in order that the native have a place in the text, they exercise total control over her discourse and steal the only things she has left--her voice." Prof. Kurimoto's response might help me sleep a little better.

Yes, indeed, I, as an anthropologist, would like to sleep a little better. Even if I do believe in, at least, the correctness of a part of --not all of--Spivak's and Tyler's critiques, my sympathy still lies with Professor Kurimoto's position. I think, however, that he cannot ignore Professor Inaga's prudent nudging.

As far as Professor Inaga goes, I cannot feel too enthusiastic, for the same reason that I did not feel empowered after reading Rodney Needham's book, when I listen to a series of his anecdotes, full of "aporias" in cross-cultural understandings. I would like to ask Professor Inaga what sort of future of cross-cultural understanding he could imagine, given all the aporias he has enumerated? Should we stop our efforts in cross-cultural understanding since our current "ethics" are inadequately equipped to deal with difficult inter-cultural situations?

Nevertheless, my intention is not to devalue Professor Inaga's statements. It is quite the contrary. In other words, it is incumbent upon us, as anthropologists, to respond to the Spivakian and Tylerian critiques of the sort that Professor Inaga has presented. Thus, I want to hear how Professor Kurimoto might engage Professor Inaga's incisive critique against anthropology's so-called *raison d'être* of "giving voice to the voiceless." (As a footnote, "giving voice to the voiceless" is, I add, problematic in looking back at the history of anthropology itself.) These days, anthropologists should not, at least, attend a sophisticated "theoretical party" without the proper attire.

III

I think it might be useful at this point to ask to what extent, in what sort of context, can Spivakian and Tylerian critique, which Professor Inaga has so approvingly cited, be meaningful not only to anthropologists but also, for lack of a better term, to the "local" people, since such a critique points to the site of articulation of the subject of subjected subalterns? To put the problem more concretely, I think it might be useful to make a close check at such a site of articulation: Who is giving a voice to whom? Under what circumstances? Who controls the conditions of subjugation? Perhaps the word "control" is not very suitable in describing a site of negotiation.

The anthropological stance of "giving-voice-to-the-voiceless" and the philosophical equivalent of "allowing the voiceless to speak for themselves" are both highly problematic because both positions do not attend to the operation of power that constitutes the dyadic relationship between the anthropologist and the "natives." Such positions function as though they are complementary categories constituted by power and, thus, they hide their own genesis.

Too broad and generalizing a stroke of argument might make us overlook the possibilities for re-articulation in the politics of representation, because the positions mentioned above present an impasse: for example, I have pointed out elsewhere that what is lacking in these two positions is a way of envisioning a complete speech act in which speaking must "gain a hearing," as bell hooks in *Yearning* (1990) has so astutely insisted. Such possibility for completing a speech act emerges from practical acts of historically situated negotiation, not out of theoretical elaboration and refinement, however sophisticated they might appear.

What I have in mind is, for example, a famous Latin American *testimonio* such as *I, Rigoberta Menchu* (1984); did Elizabeth Burgos, a Venezuelan anthropologist and a left-wing solidarity worker in Paris, totally control the text since Burgos edited it? Did Burgos imperialistically construct a subaltern subject as she recorded and edited Menchu's recollections, even if Menchu's stance depended on her being able to represent her people, that is, the *Ki'chee'* of Guatemala. Did Burgos use the *testimonio* as a vehicle to extract identification in support of her cause from her potential readers?

The site at which the subaltern subject actually emerges is more complicated than the Spivakian and Tylerian critiques have us believe. To allow more sensitivity to the complicated process of negotiation, I think we need to remain precisely where such a process takes place, that is, metaphorically speaking, on the cultural borders where a "crossing" takes place, although such borders are rife with contradictions. But, I do not

think, even for a moment, that to come to a conclusion about the contradictory nature of border crossing would make me sleep any better than before. Or could it be that insomnia is the price contemporary anthropological consciousness must pay?