



Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Ethnocentrism: Reflections on Medical Anthropology* by Sjaak Van Der Geest and Ria Reis

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Source: *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Jun., 2006), pp. 481-482

Published by: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3804281>

Accessed: 07-06-2017 15:51 UTC

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VAN DER GEEST, SJAAK & RIA REIS (eds). *Ethnocentrism: reflections on medical anthropology*. vi, 152 pp., bibliogr. Amsterdam: Aksant, 2002. €13.00

This intriguing little volume was produced by the Medical Anthropology Unit at the University of Amsterdam to mark, according to the preface, a quarter-century since its founding in 1977. This origin explains the slight disconnection between the purported theme of the volume and some contributions, all by staff and former students of the Unit. While all the chapters address the topic of ethnocentrism in some fashion, occasionally there is a sense that a decent piece of medical anthropological research has been contorted somewhat to accomplish this.

Sjaak van der Geest's introductory chapter provides some illuminating background on the nature of ethnocentrism, pointing to the modern mis-rendering of anthropologist W.J. McGee's original meaning when first used in 1900. He intended the term to characterize an early stage in the evolution of human thinking, within a schema associating expanding awareness of the scale of the physical universe with cultural development (thus in 'primitive' culture 'egocentric and ethnocentric views' dominate, whereas in 'higher' cultures humans have become progressively aware of the relative insignificance of humanity – let alone particular groups of humans – in the cosmos). This original and thought-provoking, characterization of ethnocentrism was rapidly replaced by Sumner's (1907) definition, whose usage continues to be generally accepted.

Van der Geest moves on to claim that anthropologists consider ethnocentrism indispensable to culture, while seeking to contest it through a culturally relativist approach. Turning to the link with medical anthropology, he argues that the assumed superiority of one system (e.g. biomedicine) over another (e.g. an indigenous tradition), of one group of professionals (doctors) over another (anthropologists), and of a particular interpretative schema over another (professionals over lay persons, or 'other' cultures over one's own), all constitute varieties of ethnocentrism. While these moves are logically defensible and hold analytic promise for a revitalized comprehension of, for example, doctor-patient relations cross-culturally, as they are worked through in the subsequent chapters the limitations of such a totalizing approach become increasingly clear.

'Ethnocentrism' is popularly assumed to involve some element of prejudice. The second chapter, by Chris de Beet, on racist Eurocentrism in turn of the twenty-first century Sierra Leone, is therefore highly pertinent, although the ethnic policies described are not the same as 'ethnocentrism' in its commonly understood sense of being an unthinking, even unconscious, orientation. As de Beet suggests, the operation and effects of such policies as ethnic segregation on grounds of disease risk to Europeans from the indigenous population and the exclusion of black doctors from the medical association constitute a 'special kind of ethnocentrism that related to colonial or neo-colonial domination' (p. 32). Kodjo Senah's chapter discusses 'doctor-talk' and 'patient-talk' in Ghana, usefully observing that ethnocentrism entails an element of embedded hostility. Senah argues that Ghanaian doctors' jargon-laden and overbearing communicative styles indicate 'physician ethnocentrism' in a context where medical authority is so reified as to be unchallengeable.

Similarly, Annette Drews argues in her chapter on birthing in Zambia that the coercive imposition of biomedical obstetric procedures on labouring women (such as lying down during contractions) constitutes 'ethnocentrism' (*sic*) on the part of the medical staff. Els van Dongen concludes her chapter on a Dutch psychiatric hospital by arguing that staff exercise a more subtle but still pervasive form of ethnocentrism when interacting with patients by implicitly treating their own constructs as superior. Although individually interesting, in these three chapters the progressive stretching of the concept of 'ethnocentrism' reaches a point where it ceases to have much leverage. It is questionable whether it is analytically sensible to subsume entirely the effects of social hierarchy, including the variable and particular contributions of (for example) class, gender, and professional authority, under the rubric of 'ethnocentrism', thereby forgoing attention to the operation of power in these different encounters.

The final chapter is perhaps the most illuminating case study in the volume, due to its courageous (if naïve) reflexivity in providing an account of fieldwork marred by anthropological ethnocentrism – or arrogance – of a kind that should be all too familiar to most medical anthropological researchers. Arguing again that the notion of ethnocentrism can be applied to professions

and disciplines, Sonja Zweegers reports on the trials of doing field research using a medically qualified 'interpreter'. She attempts to disentangle her own 'anthropological ethnocentrism' (an assumption of disciplinary superiority, reciprocal to that of biomedicine) from the quotidian (cultural) form and from individual personality attributes. Her analysis is again limited by a lack of attention to social structural influences of critical importance to her interactions – here, gender and possibly age, as well as ethnicity (the Vietnamese doctor being male and the Dutch anthropology student female). None the less it is unusual to read so frank an account of a fairly common phenomenon in multidisciplinary research across medicine and anthropology. Anthropologists who work with others in the health professions in particular will find some illuminating insights in this book.

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WHITEHEAD, NEIL L. (ed.). *Violence*. ix, 306 pp., illus., bibliogr. Oxford, Santa Fe: James Currey Publishers/Sch. American Research, 2005. £45.00 (cloth), £16.95 (paper)

This volume, dedicated to the memory of Begona Aretxaga, enriches anthropological approaches to culture and conflict. It confronts the complexities in theorizing the relationship between violence and cultural practices. It has been derived from the School of American Research Advanced Seminar on 'The Poetics of Violent Practice' and questions the role of anthropology in relegating violence to the margins of culture.

The results of the seminar are summarized in an important introduction by the editor and give emphasis to an 'anthropology of experience' over an 'anthropology of identity'. While the former focuses on political, social, and economic transformation, the latter is more concerned with meanings, emotions, and bodily practices which can lead to a better knowledge of violence and its sources in various communities.

In the opening essay, George compares social observations in a letter from an Indonesian painter with Geertz's essay on the Balinese cockfight. Following it reflectively with examples of his own ethnographic research in Indonesia, he draws out commentaries on the place of terror and bloodshed in local cultures.

Whitehead's essay uncovers the conceptual problems faced by anthropology in studying the centrality of violence in culture. He argues that an understanding of the poetics of violence offers more credible representations of others *and* us, which would enable the West to contest notions of 'mindless' terrorism. The essays share a concern over neo-colonialism and how it determines the nature of indigenous killings.

Hinton and Taylor examine the relationship between local expressions of genocidal behaviour and the state. Hinton focuses on the radio broadcast of a Khmer Rouge speech and the narrative of a Cambodian woman who witnessed a brutal political slaying in a Buddhist temple. Through this juxtaposition, the author critically examines the local 'vernacular' through which acts of violence are culturally patterned, legitimized, and enforced. Taylor's remarkable essay explores the symbolic aspects of illustrations in pre-genocidal popular literature in Rwanda. The iconography provides marvellous insights into the radicalization of Hutu ethno-nationalism. Taylor's own presence in his writing, through his experiences of evacuation, cross-fires, and the killing of his Tutsi parents-in-law, highlights the emotional costs of writing on violence.

'An extraordinarily risky undertaking': that is how Jeganathan describes his own essay. He muses over Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's ghost*, Lionel Wendt's photography, and Thamothampillai Shanaathanan's political art, and attempts, often poignantly, to develop a picture of death and destruction in conflict-ridden Sri Lanka. Seltzer focuses on 'the wound culture' of reality television and describes brilliantly the ethnology of principles, pity, and publicness that emerge from 'true crime' shows. He demonstrates how collective viewing of the spectacle of crime, investigation, and self-styled support groups leads to public exasperation, belief, and feelings of shared victimhood amongst North Americans. Both scholars remain concerned about the normalization of the 'grotesque' (Jeganathan) or the 'abnormally normal' (Seltzer), in everyday life.

Ellis contests an understanding of the war in Liberia as habitual 'tribal' violence. He advocates an analysis of violence as a social and historical phenomenon, where its extreme manifestations also exist in 'normal' conditions. Nordstrom is convincing in her analysis of war trauma in Mozambique, and argues that