



Diffusionism, Appropriation, and Globalization

Some Remarks on Current Debates in Anthropology

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Abstract. – Diffusionism is a long-standing theoretical issue in anthropology. The current research on globalization often shows astonishing similarities between the 19th century understanding of diffusion and the most recent interpretations regarding globally circulating cultural phenomena. These parallels indicate the impact of global influences on local cultures. Instead of adopting a macro perspective that promotes a world map outlook, the author proposes a closer examination of local action in the context of global influences in order to avoid the reemergence of the shortcomings that led to the termination of the 19th century approaches. The focus on the local perspective through study of cultural appropriation appears to be an optimal way to understand the working of globalization on local levels. [*Theory of anthropology, history of anthropology, globalization, methodology*]

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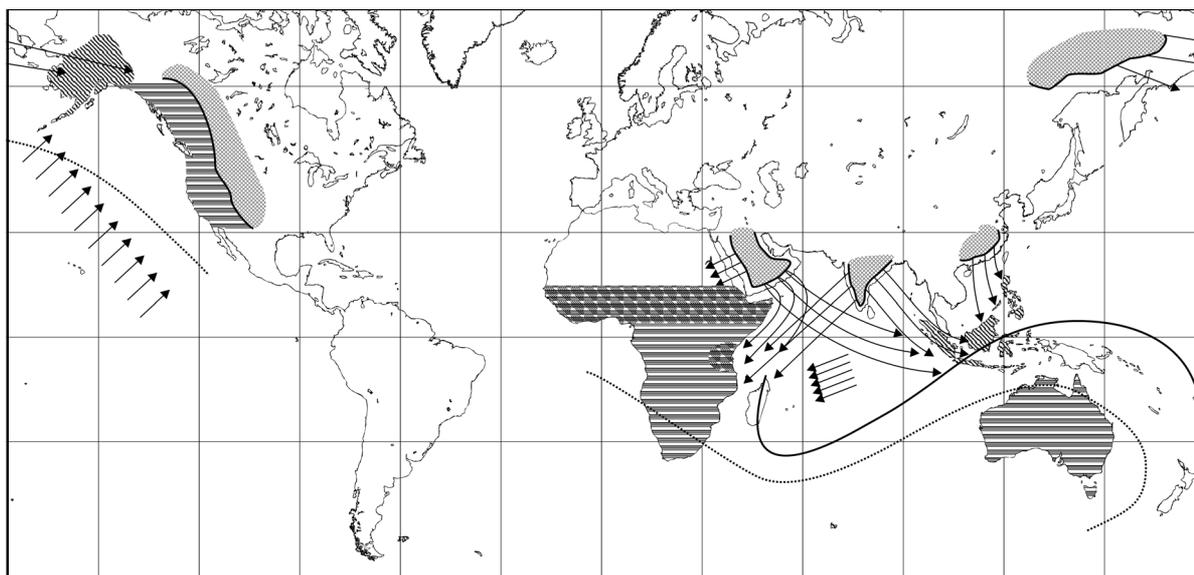
Introduction

At a first glance, a comparison between the world map showing the so-called “malajo-nigrific Kulturkreis” of Leo Frobenius (Map 1) and a recent map representing the worldwide distribution of any given consumer goods (Map 2) discloses a sur-

prising degree of similarity.¹ The obvious resemblances are based on the perception of the globe as being the overarching frame for far-reaching, manifest, and complex relations. Discernible differences mainly concern the topics represented on the maps. Thus the particular attention of anthropologists of culture history in the mid 19th to early 20th centuries was directed towards “cultural complexes,” referring to bundles of specific cultural traits thought to be in cooccurrence on several continents. World maps of globalization, by contrast, show such topics as the flows of consumer goods, the access to information, or the distribution of political systems.

It is fascinating to recognize how Frobenius meticulously drew on his maps the traces of the “cultural complexes,” which had been previously defined by him. The worldwide distribution of the corresponding cultural traits was a core feature of his notion of *Kulturkreise*, and in such distant areas as Oceania and West Africa he observed parallels concerning material culture, indigenous law, and mythology (1897, 1898). He was fully aware of the fact that his “cultural complexes” could only be conceptualized as flexible structures. Therefore,

¹ The map 1 is taken from Frobenius (1898: map 20). Its relevance for my argument is not so very much the specific topic (being related to the origin of the African cultures) but merely the way of combining history and space. The idea that chronology must be discernible in the spatial configuration was a core feature of the new methodology of culture history. It has been adopted by many colleagues at that time.



Map 1: Sketch of the world map adapted from Leo Frobenius (1898: map 20). This simplified sketch is shown here in order to visualize the methodology of culture history.

he compared cultures with organisms, which have the capacity to adapt to different environments by changing their *Gestalt*.² These details of the theoretical framework of culture history are of some importance, because they reveal some significant congruencies between the idea of “culture history” and the concept of “ethnoscapes” coined by Arjun Appadurai (1990). The latter used this term in order to underline the complex interactions of ethnic groups, religions, and technologies all over the globe. The result of these interactions is a patchwork, or “cultural landscape.” Still following the thoughts of Appadurai, cultural phenomena in the context of globalization may be perceived as circulating around the globe and being modified in different areas, without losing their specific characteristics (which may be addressed as their *Gestalt*).

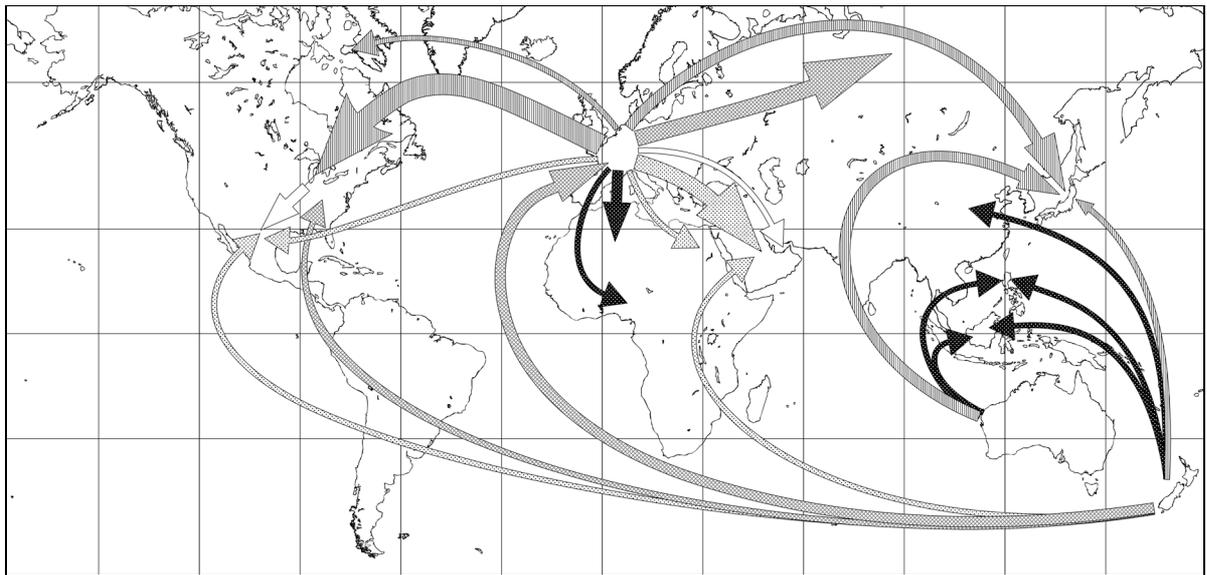
These remarks make clear that the parallels reach far beyond their aforementioned visual qualities. They transcend the level of similar metaphors of cultures as organisms or landscapes by linking the most remote parts of the world into a larger framework of exchange and mobility. The common perspective implies furthermore the idea of the effortless transportation from any place in the world to any other place. This becomes clearer

by the following example of a research proposal, made by Christoph Brumann (1998), who discussed the possible research priorities for a “second phase of globalization.” In this context he proposed a more empirically oriented application of the term “ethnoscapes.” Following Brumann, an example for doing this would be a worldwide mapping of festivities and rituals related to Christmas. As he proposes, researchers should collect as much information as possible on local Christmas traditions, and, in a second step, draw a map of this complex and globally distributed ritual. This research proposal might be regarded as some kind of “missing link” between the perspectives of culture history and globalization. This idea about future research makes even clearer the far-reaching parallels between the two approaches.

Bernhard Streck (2001), one of the first anthropologists to discuss these parallels between the culture-historical method and the perception of globalization, labels these trends in globalization discourse as “neo-diffusionism.”³ He recognizes in the current debate about globally circulating phenomena the chance to overcome the fallacies of the older diffusionism and, thereby, of the cultural-

2 The similarities between the psychoanalytical concept of *Gestalt* and the idea of cultures, both of them being defined through specific configurations, has been underexplored so far. However, Weakland (1951) mentions that these two concepts can be related to each other.

3 In his history of anthropology, Marvin Harris (1968: 379, 382 ff.) already classified the culture-historical approach as part of the diffusionist perspectives in anthropology. At that time, German anthropologists vividly refused the lumping together of the different culture-historical theories (Raum 1973). See for the relevance of diffusionism in German anthropology also Lowie (1937) and Welz (2001).



Map 2: World map showing “Global Flows of Dairy Products,” adapted from <<http://www.farmedaniamal.net/faw/faw5-42.htm>> (01.08.2007). In the framework of Appadurai this is an example of his “landscapes” with particular nodes and barriers.

historical methods of Frobenius and others. Although culture history had a high sensitivity for cultural connections covering large spatial areas, one of its shortcomings was the neglect of more recent diffusions of cultural traits. In particular, current phenomena of the second part of the 19th century, such as the diffusion of the bicycle, the steam engine, and complex social institutions of modern administration, might have been fruitful fields of research. As a consequence of the evasion from the modern world, and of the retreat towards older and distant phenomena, the potentials of the method of culture history received little attention among anthropologists later on. The atomistic perspectives dominating social anthropology have not been able even to approach the topic of global connections anyhow.⁴

Seemingly, Leo Frobenius and the concept of culture history had not been so totally wrong, might be the conclusion in the light of the parallels with recent globalization perspectives. This line of thought is worth further discussion and also contributes to replying to some criticism against current trends in anthropology, as represented by Anna L. Tsing (2000), among others.⁵ Tsing blames

the anthropologists for having picked up globalization as a saving straw in a highly critical situation in the 1980s, when many scholars in the Humanities thought the subject of anthropology would fade away with the disappearing of indigenous peoples and the emerging debate about the inequalities of representations. Her criticism is particularly directed at the carelessness of switching away from the discipline’s self-reflection, which had taken a certain momentum at that time in the context of the debate following the publication of “Writing Culture” by James Clifford and George Marcus (1986). Instead of thoroughly discussing the critical position towards anthropological methods and the history of the discipline, anthropologists preferred to turn to the new phenomena of globalization.

As a matter of fact the anthropological turn toward the study of globalization was somehow unconnected to previous issues and fields of research.⁶ Thus, within the limited scope of the history of anthropology in the years preceding the turn toward globalization, Tsing’s criticism is justified. However, looking at the earlier history of anthropology, as I did at the beginning of this

⁴ Even in the realm of the atomistic paradigm, diffusion continued to be a topic of anthropology, albeit on a much smaller scale. Thus, Igor Kopytoff explored the diffusion of cultures and societies in Africa on a regional cultural level (1987: 34).

⁵ See also Burawoy (2000), who also has a critical perspective on the sudden emergence of the new topic of globalization. In contrast to the optimistic position of Gupta

and Ferguson (1997a, 1997b), Burawoy depicts the deficits of any globalization approach which does not focus on the local.

⁶ In anthropological literature is still a discernible gap between the booming topic of globalization research and the reflection about the discipline’s history, as blamed by Godelier (2000) and others.

article, shows that anthropologists had been interested in global connections and interactions as early as almost a century before the rise of the term “globalization.”

Despite these enticing lines of thought I will not deepen the reflection about the long run of the discipline’s history and, instead, exploit the outlined parallels for a critical examination of some current methodological issues in anthropology and discuss some conceptual problems in its current dealings with globalization. I will then explain in some detail the relevance of the term “cultural appropriation” for a better understanding of globalization. My hypothesis is that appropriation should be adopted as a theoretical framework in anthropological globalization research in order to overcome some of the current methodological shortcomings and to reorient research to a more thorough study of local societies. This claim is based on the argument that cultural appropriation is not only a functional tool explaining the link between the worldwide distribution of cultural traits and its adoption or rejection. Reaching far beyond this level of understanding, appropriation may also open new horizons of innovation and resistance. The aim of this contribution is, therefore, twofold: first, I will theorize the term “appropriation” in order to show its theoretical potential; second, I will show the efficiency of the term when it is used for explaining phenomena of globalization in the context of some examples.

Deficits of Current Debates on Globalization

As my introductory remarks have shown, the use of culture history as method and the current ideas about globalization may be lumped together in the framework of diffusionist theories. Today, as in the 19th century, contact between societies and cultures and the diffusions of cultural traits are given a higher priority than cultural change. The moving of cultures seems to be dominant, independently of the question whether this is to be explained by stimulus diffusion or by the mobility of people.⁷ But, before proceeding to a detailed critique of this overemphasis upon the mobility of people and cultural traits, it might be useful to present some critical perspectives on the globalization debate.

Anthropological interest in globalization began in the 1980s as a debate driven by an increasing awareness for new economic and cultural phenomena. Although newspapers reported on the actions of global players and the global entanglements of economies and societies, social anthropologists did not yet have a proper disciplinary approach to these phenomena. At that time, the relation between anthropologists and the public perception of globalization was comparable to the story of the rabbit and the hedgehog. When anthropologists like Arjun Appadurai, Mike Featherstone, Ulf Hannerz, and others introduced one after the other their new theories, the public was able to learn about the even newer phenomena and even more astonishing worldwide links. Obviously, globalization phenomena emerged much faster than the corresponding new interpretations from anthropology.

Identifying anthropological approaches to globalization is furthermore complicated by the fact that there is a dominant understanding of globalization as an economic or political term. Often it remains unclear to what extent it also describes social and cultural changes. Focussing globalization on economies would result in a limited relevance of anthropological issues. Then, cultural phenomena might be classified as “collateral effects” of globalization. Nevertheless, this perspective is misleading and globalization has to be regarded as having an impact of equal importance on economic, social, and cultural aspects. It is the first task of anthropologists engaging in the public debates to make this point as clear as possible: Cultures and societies are as much concerned with globalization as it is the case for economies. Perhaps, globalization has escaped a convincing theoretical framework from sociology and anthropology until now, just in cause of the extremely great diversity of significant observations related to it.

A good indicator for the incomplete or at least inconsistent theoretical explanation of globalization is revealed by the fact that some important anthropologists, like Jonathan Friedman, take a highly critical attitude in the globalization debate and refuse to appreciate globalization as something new, or as being of any relevance beyond Wallerstein’s world-system theory.⁸ Following Friedman

⁷ The increasing mobility as a shared topic of 19th-century anthropology and in the domain of globalization is also to be seen as part of a new experience of the anthropologists themselves (Probst 2005).

⁸ Some historians and anthropologists distinguish between the long and the short concept of globalization. Whereas the short concept sets the starting of globalization in the 1980s, the longer perspective sees a phase of globalization *avant la lettre*, dealing with globalization phenomena in the 19th

(2005), there is no reason to explain the current phenomena of globalization other than as a period of declining hegemonies. The opening of the political power blocks after 1989, the increase in world trade and the intensification of the circulation of goods may be subsumed as an outcome of the increasing disorientation. Following Friedman, globalization is nothing new. Thus, he compares the current phenomena of globalization with the period of decline of the Roman Empire (2004). With this statement, Friedman is – without making it explicit or giving any references – astonishingly close to late representatives of culture history like Oswald Spengler (1919–22) or Arnold Toynbee (1962).⁹

It is not possible to discuss here whether Friedman's position is justified or not, but I will use his critical view of the current globalization debate and refer to one of his arguments, because it is pertinent for a better understanding of anthropology's specific problems with the increasing circulation of goods and ideas. His argument starts with a description of the Kwakiutl, an Indian tribe on the northwestern coast of America, famous for their potlatch ritual. One day, the Kwakiutl began to use sewing machines for this ritual and to destroy them instead of the formerly used copper plates. Friedman's argument regarding this innovation is that local traditions will not change automatically just because of the arrival and the subsequent integration of global goods in a ritual, as it is the case with the potlatch.

What we learn from this argument is that the description of the circulation of goods around the globe and their diffusion even to the groups which anthropologists understand as "their own domain" are not a reason yet to posit any essential change of those societies as such. As Friedman argues, the recent usage of the sewing machine among the Kwakiutl may be described as a phenomenon of globalization.¹⁰ But to understand the consequences of this, we have to ask more exactly whether the society changes as such, and if so, to

what degree. Dominant arguments of the current globalization debate are based on mobility, and they are fixed by the fascination of the metaphors of currents and flows. Decisive questions, for whose treatment anthropologists would consider themselves as being experts, however, remain open. These questions concern the agency at the level of local societies as well as the cultural change in those societies.

The Role of Appropriation for Understanding Global Influences on Local Societies

In this dilemma, it might be advisable to leave for a moment the path of the nervous debates describing bewildering globalization and diffusion phenomena. Instead of freezing our perspective in the admiration of the novelties and the unexpected, it seems to be more appropriate to switch to the level of a more conceptual perspective. I will do this in reflecting about the relevance of appropriation in the context of the new diffusionist paradigm and beyond. If the particular anthropological specificity of focussing on the actors and their view onto cultures shall be maintained, then globalization should be linked to the concept of cultural appropriation, describing local perceptions of new cultural phenomena.¹¹ The circulation of objects and things as such is of lesser importance, regarding the question of how to understand culturally meaningful actions in the context of global influences. A closer look at appropriation will serve in the following as a reorientation away from the dominance of the pure description of phenomena of circulation (sewing machines among the Kwakiutl) and toward a deeper understanding of meaningful local action in the context of globalization.

"Making something to become one's own" describes – following Wilhelm Dilthey (1910) – the fundamental idea of being confronted with the "other." To enlarge one's own horizon and to appropriate the formerly strange is one of the central figures in the thinking of the 19th century, in particular of hermeneutics as a methodology of understanding. More than a half-century later, Paul Ricoeur was one of the first philosophers to

century and even earlier (Robertson 2001; Osterhammel und Petersson 2003; Wimmer 2003). The precursor of these approaches is Immanuel Wallerstein and his concept about "The Modern World-System" (1974).

9 Thus, Friedman implicitly confirms the parallels drawn in the introductory section of this article.

10 The Indians engaged in potlatch were systematically interested in Western consumer goods, which they acquired through the fur trade reaching its peak through the 19th century (Masco 1995: 51). Thus, the integration into the colonial world-system propelled the potlatch not only on the level of the goods involved, but also in the social structure of competition through conspicuous gift-giving.

11 An early usage of appropriation in social sciences can be found in the texts of de Certeau (1984). De Certeau sees the relevance of this term in the defeat of the power of large-scale structures. He uses the idea of "appropriation" with the intention to readjust the scientific perspective towards local action. For a further reflection about de Certeau's notion of "everyday life," see Highmore (2000).

problematize and to expand the concept of appropriation, which had been so familiar and prominent in the 19th century.¹² Ricoeur (1981) points to the hermeneutical basis of cultural appropriation and, thereby, proves the necessity to think about the specific meanings of this concept.¹³ Ricoeur (1981: 178) attaches great importance to the fact that, in contrast to the older philosophers, the hermeneutical perspective of appropriation has changed its meaning by the thoughts of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960). Gadamer's concept about the "fusion of horizons" means that it is not adequate to include foreign things, institutions, or ideas into one's own horizon. Instead of this, a correct understanding of appropriation implies the focus on the "momentum of understanding" as an open process, which inevitably leads to a changing of an actor's identity.¹⁴ The process entangles the person who is appropriating an object or an institution to the extent that he or she does not have a complete control over its outcome.

This longstanding tradition in the Humanities of theorizing "appropriation" as described so far is useful for the distinction between everyday and scientific understandings of this concept. The more limited everyday usage of this term, which sometimes also can be observed in anthropological literature, can be misleading in the context of globalization theory.

This particular tradition of the term "appropriation" also makes obvious the shared roots of two approaches, which today seem to be totally separated. The first of the two debates is situated in the context of a critical perspective towards Western thought and agency. In this context anthropologists are particularly exposed to sharp criticism of the illegitimate intention to appropriate other cultures by writing, drawing, or photographing. This debate has received growing attention from the 1970s onwards, when indigenous rights became a topic of discussion. An outstanding book summarizing this debate is the edited volume by Bruce Ziff, entitled: "Borrowed Power" (1997). The title reflects some

of the most biting criticism concerning the "stealing" of indigenous art and the commercializing of non-Western crafts as part of an exoticizing practice in consumer societies (Grewe 2006). This debate is about the illegitimate behavior of the powerful to make use of other people's traditions, of their knowledge and aesthetics, as authors of artistic or scientific work. They do so without asking the "true owners" of these cultural phenomena, and benefit from the windfall profits from doing so.¹⁵ Such appropriations are a major issue, lamented by advocates of indigenous peoples. A good deal of such conflicts end up with very precise arrangements about which cultural forms of expression are subject to an ethnic copyright and, therefore, fall under the "appropriation ban" (Rowlands 2002).

In contrast to this, the understanding of appropriation in the context of the globalization debate is oriented toward the indigenous peoples, not as victims but as actors. In this perspective appropriation is no longer regarded as the behavior of the powerful but merely as a particular strategy of the powerless. According to Michel de Certeau (1984) the powerless may use appropriation to undermine the power of the ruling people. Among others, Jean and John Comaroff (1991, 1996) have elaborated this point by explaining the modifications of Western clothing by natives in South Africa. In this discourse, appropriation is much praised because it describes spaces of agency which do counter hegemones. Here, appropriation is understood also as an act of self-assertion and of resistance of local identity against the colonial powers or postcolonial elites.

The contradictions between the two debates have become obvious. Although each of the two perspectives is legitimate and well founded in its particular historical and empirical domains, the approaches to the term are quite different. In the first debate appropriation is a matter of interpretation. This is linked to the hermeneutical understanding where anthropologists make something become their own; they are the authors, and, correspondingly, they claim a particular authority. In the second debate, acting and the prevailing power relations are in the focus of the observation. The question in this debate is not about the individual author but merely about the spaces of agency in

12 Obviously, I have left out here some important 19th-century thinkers who contributed eminently to the emergence of the concept of "cultural appropriation." In particular this is the case for Karl Marx and his notion of appropriation as a precondition of man's existence in the world. Even today Marx's argument is of relevance for applications of the term "appropriation" (cf. Haug 1994; Cheah 2006).

13 Cf. Schneider (2003, 2006) for a closer discussion of Ricoeur and hermeneutics in anthropology.

14 This context is one of the reasons for the career of the term "identity" in social sciences and in anthropology (cf. Jenkins 1996; Emcke 2000).

15 Beyond the usual claims about illegal usage of traditional forms and techniques (Pannell 1994; Todd 1992), also the dissemination of rituals and religious practices has been criticized as "illegitimate appropriation" (Lösch 2003; Fisher 2004; Irvin 2005).

everyday life. Appropriation on the side of indigenous people is something pragmatic, something unpredictable. The only possible conclusion from looking at both debates is to enlarge the understanding of appropriation so that it contains both meanings. Properly understood, appropriation can sensitize the observer for the necessity to combine hermeneutic approaches with a perspective on pragmatic actions.

Readjusting the Globalization Debate through the Appropriation Approach

In the light of this broader understanding of appropriation, the role of this term in the globalization discourse becomes somehow clearer. As already mentioned, this term is a tool applied to the particular anthropological methodology of focussing on the local. Thus, the concept represents an alternative to the dominance of the flow metaphors, criticized at the beginning of this article. At the same time it explicates the resistance and self-assertion of the local in spite of the increasing global influences (Probst and Spittler 2004).

Appropriation is neither the first nor the only tentative of establishing alternatives to the dominant flow metaphors. The terms of hybridization and creolization, which currently receive a considerable popularity in the Humanities, also claim to offer alternatives to flow metaphors and the dystopia of cultural homogenization (Hahn 2004c). Both had been introduced a decade ago and represent a particular position in the globalization debate, which underlines the vitality of local cultures.¹⁶ Following the core arguments of these terms, the phenomenon of cultural homogenization induced by the diffusion of global norms, ideas, and technologies is inevitably complemented by the emergence of new cultural mixtures. In short, hybridization and creolization manage to explain the present-day cultural diversity without denying the reality of globalization. In particular, in anthropological essays they are often used because they seem to direct the focus of observation toward the creativity of local societies.

16 Each of the terms has been discussed largely in social sciences in the last years. Out of the huge corpus of books and published articles it is worth to name at least those who introduced the term in the current debate. It was Ulf Hannerz (1987) who introduced creolization, and Homi Bhabha (1994) who is most influential when people discuss the term "hybridization." For this term see also Jan Pieterse Nederveen (1995).

This specific capacity is an important achievement, but I think, it also contains a problematic aspect. Stemming from biology and linguistics and being imported into anthropology as guiding metaphors, hybridization and creolization imply a merely mechanical picture of local creativity by taking for granted the readiness of local people to discuss and to integrate new cultural phenomena.¹⁷ This mechanical picture obfuscates some important questions: Is it really so that people voluntarily agree to integrate the new? Under which conditions global influences are adopted, transformed, or rejected?

Within the limited framework of hybridization and creolization, the acceptance of new things by local societies becomes a kind of "normality." The possibility of rejection, which was so important in anthropology some decades ago, is no longer considered (Spittler 2002). Neither the refusal nor the question as to why such transformations occur and whose interests are linked to these processes are part of these concepts. My critical perspective is akin to the position of Marshall Sahlins (1988), who also criticizes the assumption of an automatic adoption or transformation of Western or global cultural phenomena. Following Sahlins, the idea that no society can escape global influences should be regarded as an illegitimate form of universalizing specifically Western thought. In contrast to this approach, anthropology should face the task of answering questions about continuity and change without prefabricated models.¹⁸

The concept of appropriation is particularly apt to deal with such questions without any pre-assumptions. Appropriation orients the look at local contexts and protagonists, who decide whether a certain cultural element is picked up, transformed, and will become a feature of the local society – or not. The concept of appropriation constitutes a way of understanding cultural processes, which stress durability and the locality of meaning. It offers an attempt to explain equally well processes which are as different as adoption, modification, and rejection. Appropriation man-

17 According to Charles Stewart (1999: 41; 2007) it is the "porosity" of cultures which constitutes the highly problematic bias of these terms. This applies to creolization and hybridization as well as to syncretization.

18 Anthropology should not limit its scientific interest to the statement that globalization has an impact on cultures. According to Strathern (1995: 165) every local culture tends to have a globalizing self-understanding. Anthropologists should, therefore, be particularly sensitive for the persistence of local specificities, which often exist without being noticed.

ages this task by looking at the aspect of local agency and the strength of local societies. Therefore, tradition and the emergence of new traditions must be regarded as results of appropriation, too.

Furthermore, how is it possible to regard tradition as part or even result of the process of cultural appropriation? This question is related to the experience of interpreting empirical research on global influences in Africa.¹⁹ A closer look at the integration of global goods reveals several fields of agency linked to this process. Without constituting subsequent stages, these fields or aspects of appropriation are helpful to structure the empiric findings. Although no appropriation process covers all aspects, the initial phase (acquisition) and the result (tradition) are necessary elements.

Thus, the initial phase of cultural appropriation can be contact, acquisition, or adoption. Further modes are begging, lending, or even stealing, as described drastically in the literature (Nelson 2003). At this stage, actively controlling the process is a prerequisite. The next stage constitutes what is meant by the term “appropriation” properly, and it describes the different fields of agency which may, but do not need to be present in their totality. The intention of these acts is the transformation or redefinition of the appropriated cultural element. The transformation does require some preconditions and has particular consequences. One of the conditions is what I call the “obstinacy” or “autonomy of rules and properties.” This applies to material objects, which depend on particular technologies, as well as social institutions and religions, which require well-defined normative or ethical positions. This transformation includes redesigning, renaming, and recontextualization as well as bodily adaptation. Furthermore, the transformation leads to the creation of local traditions enclosing particular forms and specific ways of dealing with the appropriated element. Kurt Beck (2001) has shown this with the example of the diesel engine in the Sudan, and I have described the appropriation of the bicycle in West Africa in the context of the mentioned research programme (Hahn 2004a).

¹⁹ In the framework of the above mentioned programme, investigations into household possessions and documentations of objects’ life histories were carried out. One of the astonishing outcomes is the fact that “global goods” are hardly ever perceived as something contradicting or questioning locally produced things or local traditions. In the context of the research project we understand this as result of the process of traditionalization which is part of appropriation (Hahn 2004c; Verne 2007).

Appropriation and Innovation as Processes of Interpretation and Improvisation

As both case studies show, improvisation is of great relevance during the process of appropriation. As a matter of fact, improvisation describes an area neglected by anthropology so far. Improvisation stipulates the fact that people act without controlling entirely the outcome of their action, and that the result of the acting may be only of limited or temporary value. Typically, improvisation has to do with actions which have a clear intention, but do not have a very well-defined result. Improvisation – as appropriation, too – can be understood as a hermeneutical process, insofar as the actor is searching for the right mode of acting or dealing with an object, until he will be able to master the new thing. This is the key to relate both terms to each other: a more thorough understanding of appropriation combines the acting (improvisation) with the reinterpretation and reinvention. In this way it becomes possible to combine the two discursive traditions of the term “appropriation” mentioned above.

Thus, tradition, which has been placed at the end of appropriation, does not contradict innovation. On the contrary, contextualization frequently consists in redefining a worldwide distributed cultural element as something new and in stressing the difference compared with the very same element in other societies. A good example for this comes from my already mentioned research on bicycles in West Africa, which focused on the acting of bicycle users, on their creativity and their capacity for improvisation. In the light of a larger theoretical framework, these actions constitute only a partial appropriation of global goods. Of equal importance is the interpretative dimension of the appropriation of bicycles, which has been documented by Jean-Pierre Jacob (1979). He reports on a quite specific legend of origin of bicycles for a neighboring region. Among the Winyé in Burkina Faso, there is a story about the invention by one of their ancestors of all means of transport, which do not work without the use of air, as bicycles, cars, and aeroplanes. Thus, the Winyé declare themselves as experts for using and manipulating the air, and they assign to the Europeans the capacity to deal with water transport. When Europeans brought the first bicycles to this area, they just remitted to the Winyé what already belonged to them and what had been kept safe by the White people for some time.

Appropriation is the basis for innovation not only in the sense of inventing new contexts and

establishing new traditions. It goes well beyond these aspects when improvisation is considered. In particular, when dealing with material culture and technical objects like the diesel pump or the bicycle it is difficult to draw a line between technical improvements (innovation), customization, or a pure recontextualization.²⁰ As far as innovation results from improvisation, it is the result of an individual effort and puts the role of the protagonist into the center. Only if it leads to a new practice recognized as such in the local society, it is considered as an innovation. Innovation is thus a question of the author. As I have shown, appropriation is a question of the author, too. Just as the legend of the means of transport, which are connected to air, transforms those objects in a manner that they are perceived as local inventions, it is one of the constitutive aspects of the appropriation to relativize the diffusion and to stress the fact of the local reinvention. Thus, innovation refers to people as innovators, that means actors, who have intensively dealt with an object, who have become expert for the object's properties, and who define new qualities.

According to this understanding, cultural appropriation describes "acting with the aim of changing the environment" and also the act of "interpreting with the intention to make other things to become one's own." Therefore, it requires time and it also has to be perceived as work. James Carrier (1995) farsightedly has used the expression "work of appropriation." He understands both aspects with this: the practical, physical work of redesigning and the social work of interpretation and redefinition. The aim of the social work is to create a new consensus about the assessment of the object or the institution in question. This way the cultural element becomes a local tradition. I will conclude from a hermeneutical perspective: part of the cultural work is also the readiness to change oneself in the context of the process of reinterpretation.

Conclusion

This article has proposed an understanding of cultural appropriation that is central to anthropological reflection. If we compare the focus of cultural appropriation with the perspective of the maps of the worldwide diffusion of cultural traits (as discussed in the first section of the article), it becomes clear, just how much of the path has been made

away from the metaphors of global flows and in the direction of more depth in the analysis of local changes.

Although I did not want to agree entirely to the criticism concerning the dominant metaphors in the current globalization debate, the critical position was helpful in order to identify the shortcomings of the ongoing debate, and to show a way to compensate for these deficits. I am convinced that anthropology will be able to gain a better understanding of globalization only by readjusting its focus on the local level. This priority of the local might cure the fallacies of the cultural-historical approach as well, which is the particular impact of the concept of appropriation. In directing the perspective on local actors, we may build up a device to overcome the shortfalls of diffusionist approaches. One hundred years ago, diffusionist anthropologists neglected local horizons of meaning and action. If the globalization debate today once again dismisses the perspective on the local, it will fail to describe adequately the ongoing processes of cultural change.

An anthropological theory of culture in the context of globalization is only possible if we leave the bird's-eye view of the maps of the world and put the level of the local protagonists in the center. The concept of appropriation contributes to such a theory of culture, because it is focussed on the different aspects of acting on the local level. So, appropriation is an instrument which helps us to examine questions of rejection, takeover, adoption, or reinvention without simplifying pre-assumptions. The concept opens new horizons which explain the change of local societies. Instead of limiting the perspective to culture contact (or cultural mixing) by using appropriation, cultural change becomes a central focus for anthropology. Appropriation, as a mode of cultural change, is nothing that happens automatically, but it deals with local action and the creation of local meaning.

Before discussing the relevance of this new approach to globalization, I have shown the long tradition of this term in the Humanities and I have stressed the fact that appropriation means hermeneutical interpretation and pragmatic action (improvisation). Whenever appropriation is reduced to only one of the two levels, its heuristic potential is abandoned. The current usage of appropriation in anthropological texts on globalization will benefit from combining the two meanings of appropriation. Interpretation and action are no contradictions in this context, but they are preconditions of each other.

20 For a more detailed description of the empirical fields of appropriation-oriented research cf. Hahn (2004b).

Appropriations are not just a matter of “acting” of indigenous people, and appropriations are not exclusively an illegitimate “attitude of arrogance” of Western ethnographers. Both contexts are examples of appropriation, which are not fully explored when they are looked at separately. I prefer to use the metaphor of *regards croisés* because appropriation is always linked to several perspectives that cross each other. In all these cases, using appropriation as a conceptual framework leads to a closer look at the actors. Appropriation is always an action which has its sense on the level of the actors’ intentions. This is the reason why appropriation may contribute to the assertion of the identity of one’s own and to the permanence of local societies. Appropriation is, therefore, critically valuable for a better understanding of cultures in the context of globalization.

The article emerges from the ongoing research on “Local Action in Africa in the Context of Global Influences” (SFB/FK 560) at Bayreuth University. It has been presented at Frankfurt University in May 2006 and it has been repeatedly discussed with my colleagues. I wish to express my gratitude to Gerd Spittler and Markus Verne, the collaborators in the research project, for allowing me to present some of the research results in this article.

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