

BOOK REVIEW SERIES

Cosmology or Chaosophy?

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Allen Abramson and Martin Holbraad (eds.).
2014. *Framing Cosmologies: The
Anthropology of Worlds*. Manchester:
Manchester University Press.

This book is based on the activities of UCL's Cosmology Group. When this group first started to meet in 2007, Mary Douglas found it surprising. "Cosmology is the kind of thing the Lele had" when she conducted fieldwork in the 1950. "Primitive societies" were thought as natural wholes and ordered totalities, while Western scholars explicitly used epistemic hierarchies, which tended to exoticise indigenous cosmologies. As Allen Abramson and Martin Holbraad explain in their Introduction to the volume, "anthropology was itself an exercise in cosmology through and through, projecting images of human being concentrically outwards and spatio-temporally along a social and cultural gradient, stretching outwards from a series of civilised centres". When paradigms began to shift, the topic of cosmology lost its appeal for most anthropologists.

Now, members of the UCL Cosmology Group not only ask if the "anthropology of worlds" might still (or again) be a relevant topic. They also want to know if studies of cosmologies are viable without relying on the cosmological framework formerly offered by Western naturalist ontology and colonialist worldviews. The main reason why anthropologists rediscover cosmology is contemporary Western society itself. Our cosmology is a complicated matter that deserves more attention. Knowledge produced by NASA, CERN, and university departments has become truly esoteric. "From the theory of relativity to

black holes, from quantum theory to Schrödinger's Cat, from electrons to the 'God particle' [...] crucial propositions of the nature of being have attracted fascination in, more or less, inverse proportion to their comprehension. In effect, their understanding has mainly transposed into a 'general knowledge' of heroic names and momentous events, achieving supremacy at the level of science, iconic celebrity at the level of popular culture, and yet minimal penetration at the level of grassroots cosmology." Contrastingly, New Agers (but not only they) believe in "sick buildings", "tumour-inducing phones", and "illnesses that concentrate waves, particles and rays". Such notions show there is a new orientation towards the cosmos. People want to open up to "energies of earth, sky, sea and mountain". In this new conjuncture, anthropology has a lot of catching up to do in matching popular interest and deepening comparisons with the cosmological compulsions of others.

The first chapter, by Michael W. Scott, is not an argument in favour of a new wave of cosmology studies, rather it pleads for a revaluation of Socratic wonder as the beginning of any philosophy or anthropology. The chapter starts with a review of anti-Cartesian, nondualist trends in contemporary theory, focussing on authors belonging to the current trend known as anthropology of ontologies. Most of those authors criticise metaphysical dualism as the intellectual basis of many problems of modernity; sometimes they demand the right of ontological self-determination; and often they suggest that the nondualist orientation of their ethnographic consultants constitutes a fuller apprehension of the true flow and ambiguity of being and becoming. Is this just a new type of sentimental pseudo-immanentism? Rather, it is an opening up to wonder. Nondualist anthropologists describe nondualists "as people who make themselves permeable, who accept the impact of others, hold their own being in abeyance in order to let others flourish and flow into them, they approach others in humility, awe, and reverence". In contrast Cartesian dualists are said to be both closed to wonder, and to close down wonder. However, Michael Scott argues against relying too much on this simple dichotomy. Rather, he proposes to start with wonder. A true "anthropology of wonder" could multiply the ways in which anthropologists wonder about wonder. In this sense, ontological and cosmological questions should be considered

secondary.

Knut Ríó's and Annelin Eriksen's chapter on the teachings of a political and religious leader of Ambrym, Vanuatu, seeks to reframe cosmology in a context where the world is not held as a totality, but is understood rather as a distributed plurality. The chapter offers plenty of information of what conventionally goes as cosmology or myths of origin. But "world-making" is more important than producing totalising depictions of cosmic and social wholes. Neither Christianity, nor development and not even nation-building are perceived as antagonizing traditional customs. Rather, they are all part of an on-going effort to produce life and growth that is always manifold. Amid a context of accelerated change, people of Ambrym do not see any necessity to abandon their pluralist cosmology. In this sense, a process of ontological Westernization won't happen in the immediate future.

The three chapters on India and China are closer to conventional studies of cosmology. Soumhya Venkatesan's chapter on Tamil religion asserts in deemphasizing "life-world" as something unconsciously shared or taken-for-granted by all members of a given society. Devotees of the Hindu deity Siva have actively pursued the study of cosmology, in order to be able to live by it. It is more a practice of educating the self, than a theory about the world. The question remains if with this subtlety the author goes beyond the scope of old-school cosmology studies or not.

In the case of Don Handelman, who also studies Southern India, I have more doubts. He starts his chapter with a reflection on the twilight of cosmology, caused by the rise of monotheism in the Axial Age. In the worlds derived from this new radical type of religion, "most living beings who were other-than-human were either killed off, reduced to their communicative capacities with humans, or, treated as inert, no longer were perceived as living." This section is interesting, though not really original. It seems to match pretty well with Michael Scott's texts on nondualism but, at least implicitly, it is refuted by several other of the authors in this volume, who argue that cosmology actually thrives in the modern world.

According to Handelman monotheism simplifies, and imposes rigid categorizations, while

polytheistic religions embrace the manifold (and wonder). Consequently, his study of Hinduism as practiced in a small town in Andhra Pradesh seeks to emphasize complexity, paradox, and the difficulty to conceptualize the cosmos. "This cosmos is not a closed system as it is unbounded, yet neither is it open since it includes everything there is." The goddess Paitidalli is an extremely fluid being. Rituals enable the goddess to take a series of forms, like mud, pot, and tree, and to possess or to absorb a priest. All that is really fascinating stuff, but somehow misses analytic clarity. As with Venkatesan, plenty of theology is offered, but somehow we lack detailed information on liturgy. Enthusiasm for myth, mystery and cosmologic speculation often obfuscates the study of religion. In order to avoid that, focussing on ritual action is normally useful. To a certain degree this can be appreciated in Stephan Feuchtwang's chapter, oriented towards the study of traditional Chinese medical practice. Here I am inclined to criticise an excess of binarist structuralism, but this may be the fault of the Chinese.

Leaving the realm of ancient civilizations, the book gets exiting again. Marshall Sahlin's text is an extract from his forthcoming treatise of the "stranger king", a concept that is already famous in anthropology, offering an interesting dialogue with Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's theory about the constituent power of alterity. In this text (which actually doesn't deal much with cosmology) old ideas about socio-cosmic holism are confronted more consequently. Three chapters by specialists on Central Asia (Morten Axel Pedersen, Rebecca Empson and Caroline Humphrey) continue along the same line. These authors have realized that societies have never been pre-modern. In other words, the world has always been "out of joint". Complex relations to all kind of "others", chaotic imbrications with enemies, etc., are not necessarily postcolonial "problems", but are rather aspects of the human condition. Such situations are, of course, a challenge for conventional approaches to cosmology. In post-soviet Central Asia, "gods" of traditional religions coexist quite naturally with planets, electrons, black holes and cosmic forces like the ones in *Star Wars*. Sociocultural revolutions, traumatic economic "transitions", and financial crises may offer suitable environments for presumably traditional practices like shamanism. As proposed in a recent article by Henrik Hvenegaard Mikkelsen, published

by Hau 6 (1), “chaosmology” is probably a more appropriate term. The anthropologist has to learn that “anything from fieldwork may turn out to serve as ethnographic data”.

Another corollary is that political economy and cosmology should never be treated as separate areas of study. This is particularly clear in Bjørn Enge Bertelsen’s chapter on corn-mills in Mozambique. It might be surprising, but for some reason the authors of this volume do not use the term “cosmopolitics”, as it is fashionable among Americanists and in STS. Anyway, their approaches often point in a very similar direction.

Toward its end, the volume gets into cultural studies, cinema and the Internet. Daniel Miller speculates about social networks like Facebook as a chance for modern individuals to recover a worldview that perceives people as part of relational webs, like ones described by anthropologists working in small-scale societies. It also allows a new relation to a godlike instance. Facebook is a “meta-friend” that takes the function of the generic “other”, or cosmic judge, as known from religion. The return of religion, as extra-human agencies ruling the cosmos, is also an important topic in Gregory Schrempf’s short and Bruce Kapferer’s rather lengthy reflections on science-fiction movies. A synthesis of both arguments seems to be viable. In Kubrick’s *2001: Space Odyssey*, advanced technology from outer space is a powerful cosmological myth that makes scientific, geocentric theories of human origins seem insufficient. Sci-fi assumes that our civilization came from outer space. Not unlike Sahlins’ anthropology, power derives from “others”. In Kubrick, its status is ambivalent, because the acquisition of fire and weapons, or spaceships and computers, inevitably causes the destruction of human life. Or is it human technology that produces mythology and makes belief in extra-human agencies necessary?

In any case, the dawn of the Space Age is not the twilight of cosmology, even as the kosmos is traditionally defined as the outer boundary of humanised or humanisable order. The move of humanity beyond Earth, or beyond kosmos, is a turning point, only equivalent to the acquisition of tools in the Stone Age, but it is not the epitome of scientific progress. Rather it is a coming back. Space travellers become infants once more, and

they have to struggle to regain control over technology, including the human body. After a long Odyssey, the astronaut is not a Nietzschean Übermensch, but a dernier homme, maybe a post-human, transforming into a foetal Star Child. He finds his way back home to the late 18th Century, to Barry Lyndon’s Earth, eventually to be reborn in a new Age of Enlightenment.

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