Durham Anthropology Journal
Volume 13(2) ISSN 1742-2930

Download a PDF version of this article

Rhetoric? Culture? Rhetoric Culture! A Report

Michael Carrithers
University of Durham

0.1. Some movements in anthropology seem for a while to pass over Britain on their way from the Continent to the States or vice versa. Two years ago I (myself an economic migrant to Britain) found myself the only representative of the UK at the initial, agenda-setting, meeting of the International Rhetoric Culture Project at Mainz in Germany in February 2002, though both continental Europe and the rest of the Anglophone world were well represented. The second meeting in 2002, devoted to an encounter between anthropologists and linguists, bypassed the British Isles completely. Some Britons--Dick Werbner (a migrant like me), David Zeitlyn, and by virtue of his passport, Michael Herzfeld--appeared at the third conference, on religion and social relations, which took place in February 2005. But only at the fourth conference--on rhetoric culture in economic and political life, set for this coming July 2005--will British anthropologists finally send a substantial contingent.

0.2. This is not the Olympics, of course, but I am concerned that this rich, creative enterprise find a response in the UK as well as the rest of the world. We are all of us now well used to notions of the creation or construction of social forms, and of the elasticity and blending of cultural expression. These ideas have taken us one step beyond ahistorical images of timeless cultures or social structures. From there it is only a short step further to conceiving ourselves as a species of movers and persuaders on the one hand, and of the moved and persuaded on the other...to conceiving ourselves, in short, as rhetorical animals. To put it another way: we are well enough used to the idea that people `do things with words', or at least some things; so why not look more closely into other things people do with words, and with images, and with gestures, movement, and tone, and so with our whole armoury of expression? The notion of performance and performativity have shown their use, but they pale by comparison with the riches offered by our rich heritage of scholarship on rhetoric, which has hardly begun to be used in anthropology.

0.3. On this showing we would look back to a first ancestor, not in Herodotus, and certainly not in Plato, but in the Sophist Isokrates, who said: `because there is born in us the power to persuade each other and to show ourselves whatever we wish,... we have not only escaped from living as brutes, but also coming together have founded cities and set up laws and invented arts, and speech has helped us attain practically all of the things we have devised.' Or, if an entirely contemporary justification for anthropologists' interest in persuasion be sought, look first to the hot loose motions of rhetoric for war gushing out of the White House and No. 10 Downing Street and their effects on the world that anthropologists study... and then consider further that these war makers had to convince themselves before they sought to convince the rest of us. (The Isokrates quotation I take from the excellent and thought-provoking International Rhetoric Project website, *http://www.rhetoric-culture.org/outline.htm* , while the mention of war rhetoric I take from life, and from my forthcoming article in *Current*

Anthropology , 2005.)

0.4. The International Rhetoric Culture Project originated in close cooperation between Ivo Strecker at Mainz and Steven Tyler at Rice in the US, beginning in 1998. This led to two successful applications to the Volkswagen Foundation for a serious of meetings organised by Ivo and his colleagues in the African ethnology at Mainz (I mention especially Christian Meyer, Felix Girke, and Anna-Maria Brandstetter). The papers will be published shortly as a series of five volumes by Berghahn. The Project organisers gathered not only anthropologists, but also rhetoricians and other scholars from around the world, and so faced the challenge of achieving a sense of common enterprise. One way marker laid down for us by Ivo Strecker was the meter-long woko stick, used by the Hamar of Ethiopia.

0.5. The practical use of the stick is to gather with the hooked end the fearsome thorn bush to build a cattle kraal, and to push the thorns into place with the forked end. Hamar use the stick in figurative work as well, in ceremonies of blessing and cursing. The speaker draws good fortune--rain, fertility and increase--toward himself and his fellows with the hooked end, and fends off enemies and bad fortune with the forked end. And so, concluded Strecker, rhetoric finds its way into social life wherever we draw people and effects toward us or push them away. In this and other ways the organisers and participants kept the provoking idea of the conference, that culture is fundamentally rhetorical in character, continually at play.

0.6. One might object, of course, that the *woko* stick, as so used, is not a theory but an image. But I would reply that theories are images, though often much elaborated ones, and are none the worse for it. And in any case the use of theory, at least in an anthropology oriented to fieldwork and to the notion that research finds what is not known, is not to explain discovery but to evoke it. The implied counterpart to the woko stick and culture-as-rhetoric is the turbulent character of social life as viewed at the finest grain, with its sense of agency-and-patiency, i.e. the constant doing to, and being done to.

0.7. So the notion of culture-as-rhetoric invites us to look intently into the give and take of otherwise unremarked interactions of daily life. The ethnographic papers at this February conference accepted the challenge and were uniformly clear and intensely focused on the character of everyday sociality. Jean Lydall showed us how one part of what we call kinship is created by sensual intimacy and care, say between mother and child, but that much of the rest is created through persuasive effect. Such rhetoric she illustrated with a film clip of a Hamar mother singing sweetly and skilfully to her baby while working. The song, not only heard by the baby but also overheard by intended others within earshot, told the child of the care and concern it would meet from this person or that. Similar points were made by David Zeitlyn from everyday talk, while Anke Reichenbach demonstrated the fine silken elegance of demonstrated esteem and compliment--and sometimes barely hidden insult--in neighbourly manners in Damascus. Nurit Bird-David used her case of Nayaka gatherer-hunters in India to turn such fine observation back on anthropologists as well, inviting us to consider how our frequently used English term `relationship' tends to concentrate our minds on twosomes, rather than on the immersion in a wider field of mutual awareness, of `being-together', which is common in what she called `intimate' cultures.

0.8. Bird-David was also clear, as were those giving papers on what we call `religion', that the give and take, persuasion and dissuasion, of social life also includes the dead or the Unseen. Bo Sax, Christian Meyer, Ulrich Demmer, Rupert Stasch, and Dick Werbner between them treated us to a comprehensive display of arguments, entreaties, consultations, benedictions and curses winging back and forth between parties, some visible and some not quite so visible. These papers, along with those on kinship, showed what the notion of rhetoric, combined with increased resolution of the details of interaction, might achieve for anthropology. (Others cultivated comparative ethnography: Stephan Feuchtwang found, by

looking across the range of Chinese ritual, how `excessive communication'--a bit too much rhetoric, so to speak--achieved a sense of divine presence in god ritual. Chris Gregory found what might be called exuberant rhetoric: in looking across various renditions of the goddess Lakshmi in India he found a ritual tradition in the east which, combined with a rich oral epic, dramatises and recounts a soap opera life of the fertility goddess while simultaneously enacting the processes of rice cultivation.)

0.9. If these ethnographic papers showed how a higher resolution image of social life might be gained, Michael Herzfeld's paper, which began the conference, showed how that resolution might be purchased at a price. He began from an observation of Peter Loizos', that one could never be sure if apparently sincerely expressed opinions are actually true to someone's inner state, and went on to discuss conviction, deception, and the simulation of conviction in the cut and thrust of political life. This set off a note of useful doubt which echoed from time to time in discussion. We might, for example, question whether we, or others, do in fact understand unambiguously the sources, and the effects, of persuasion and dissuasion. We might look to that other side of rhetoric, so stressed by Plato and still so alive in the English usage of the word, as a tool of deceit rather than truth, or as expressing a social requirement rather than thoroughgoing sincerity. Just these dimensions of rhetoric appeared in Anke Reichenbach's paper, as in Matthew Tomlinson's paper on Christianity in Fiji. It is as if the focus on rhetoric brought crisper resolution to our picture of social life, but also revealed shadows; these shadows may, like the shadows of good technical photography, enhance the clarity of the whole and point up the three-dimensionality of the matter, but they may also hide detail we would dearly love to see.

0.10. Because I am writing here to anthropologists I have left the rhetoricians' contributions to the end, for which I must apologise. Their contributions led to some of the most dramatic, and dramatically fruitful, tensions of the February conference.

0.11. I took instruction from Bob Hariman and Philippe Salazar at the conference and afterwards, and they conveyed to me some of the present character of rhetorical studies. I think the minimum that we need to know is this: in both France and the USA, though in very different styles and settings, rhetorical studies (often housed within `communications studies' in the US) have been concerned not only with the understanding and analysis of public expression in speech and writing, but also with their place in the body politic. The rhetorician, as Salazar pointed out to me, should gaze dispassionately upon the rhetorical transactions of society, but may also take an active role, especially in a republic, where rhetoric in the best sense is necessary to effective deliberation. Stephen D. O'Leary's paper on cults and the rhetoric of `cults' gave some sense of this dispassionate engagement. He showed clearly, and with some anger, how the describing of a religious movement as a `cult' can lead to marginalisation and disenfranchisement of their members, and even to their slaughter, as suffered by the Branch Davidians at Waco. Essential to this understanding are, on one hand, an analysis of the language used to describe and justify actions, but on the other reference to the political system, and political ideals, within which the rhetoric is applied. So rhetorical study is, or at least can be, at once analytical and actively critical.

0.12. The tension arose with Philippe-Joseph Salazar's admirable and deeply thoughtful paper, `The Trope of Pontifex', devoted to the interpretation of Bishop Desmond Tutu's guiding ideas in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, and especially in the final Report of the Commission. It is important to point out now--though this was not known, I believe, to most anthropologists at the conference--that Salazar has lived in South Africa for many years, that he has published extensively on Tutu and on African rhetorical concepts as well as European ones, and that he had just finished a bilingual edition of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report, French and English, with critical commentary. Moreover the Report was meant to have some of the canonical and constitutional import that, say, the Federalist Papers have in the USA: not the Constitution itself, but an auxiliary guide to its understanding and interpretation.

0.13. Salazar's key point was this: the Report was not written as evidential history in the sense of legal procedures or scholarship, but rather in the sense of a series of preparatory topics, including for example

the internment of the Boers in concentration camps during the Boer War. This was preparation for reconciliation, which can only be understood as standing in the truth, `truth' here being *aletheia* , what is revealed, and in particular, what was revealed by the parties, in their grief and guilt, to each other. The purpose of the truth, thus understood, was the achievement of mutual recognition and hence a coming together, a community, and indeed a republic. The Report was therefore a sacerdotal history, in Tutu's understanding, just as the narratives of perpetrators and victims were sacerdotal in character, preparation for spiritual reconciliation and not a matter of law or legality. (Though it is worth noting that Richard Wilson's ethnography of the process argues that the legalistic dimension came to dominate, at least in the eyes of many South Africans.) Salazar supported his analysis by the use of Latin and Greek Christian materials, materials which Tutu himself had access to and sometimes explicitly used. Moreover, in an introductory section Salazar showed some of that same passion for criticism in rhetorical study by explicitly contrasting Tutu's contribution to public deliberation, and the notion of a deliberative republic approached by spiritual means, with the political business as usual of the present South African government.

0.14. Your reporter found this deeply intriguing and thought provoking, not least because of his own preoccupation with Germans' notions and practices of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* , `overcoming the [analogously catastrophic] past'. But some anthropologist colleagues, speaking as Africanists, did not. They were immediately *outraged* . These were alien concepts, imported by Salazar, they said. This analysis was totally irrelevant, Eurocentric, ethnocentric. This had nothing to do with Africans' concepts, Africans' ideas of justice, Africans' ideas of reconciliation. Nor did the subsequent comments, namely that Tutu was deeply learned in Christian thought, that Christianity was an African religion, or that South Africa was a thoroughly cosmopolitan setting, pacify them. A line had been crossed, or at least a line had to be drawn. Anthropologists had to speak for Africans.

0.15. Things did settle down, though it took some time. The incident left behind some questions, though, that are not easily answered. There is the question of how, for what purposes, and for whom, we are to classify someone as African, or European, or Christian, or for that matter as Muslim or terrorist. This is a rhetorical matter, but also a moral one, and the two are intimately bound together. There is also the question of the extent to which anthropologists, or for that matter rhetoricians, speak for people in some settings, rather than about them in a scholarly way, and of their right to do so. And there is this: can texts, written or performed through some other medium, help reveal the nature of social life? For rhetoricians they can: constitutions, speeches, and broadcasts of all kinds reveal social life directly, or at least they do if properly interpreted. But what of anthropologists? Does our scope reach into the mediated world of texts--print, radio, television, electronic media, Constitutions and Reports--or does it stop with the face-to-face, the word of mouth, the authenticity in the village or on the street? Does not the art and expense lavished upon the act of publication--or the expense given sometimes to preventing publication--suggest that these, too, are worthy our attention? Some rhetoricians claim the right to act critically within a body politic by virtue of their learning and analytical insight into textual performance. May anthropologists not claim an analogous right?