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## **THE „AKHENATEN PARADOX“? AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL BURLESQUE<sup>2</sup>**

**Abstract:** This paper discusses the ability to understand what is going on, but to maintain the interpretation of it which is at least – if not dramatically – different than those of the actual participants as cognitive based but culturally driven fact. It is the paradox of human communication: different cultural backgrounds do not prevent us from communication, but what we send and how do we read what we receive out of it could be only but assumed and not literally translated. To make it more elaborate I imagined situations in which the Eighteenth Egyptian Dynasty pharaoh Akhenaten is witnessing the performance of the opera dedicated to his life and deeds, where his positions on it are changing as he is put in the shoes of hypothetical anthropological theorists.

**Key words:** culture, cognition, communication, anthropological theory, Akhenaten, opera, ritual.

What would Akhenaten think if introduced to Phillip Glass's opera bearing his name (although in the form of „Akhnaten“)? Listening to Tamagna singing his Hymn to Aten, will he think perhaps that his religious reforms sustained up to day? We will surely never learn about such things, as we will never be able to know the true nature of Akhenaten's short-lived religious reformation, nor if the verses in Glass's masterpiece are pronounced any close to how they have been sung by the pharaoh's contemporaries. But it does not matter, neither to Glass and all the people admiring his work, nor to the ancient Egyptian ruler, or to anybody else, I suppose. The fact is that we can read about the Akhenaten's life and deeds and discuss them, as we can listen to Glass's opera and discuss it, and that we can

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do both assuming that we understand that. But, do we, or what are means for our understanding of such different enterprises of human mind and spirit? Or better, is there really uniqueness in what we describe as „human mind“ and „human spirit“?

We suppose that there is, or at least we are aware of the dangers stemming out when deploying any other answer, like racism or cultural racism which are first to come to mind. The truth is that whatever „human spirit“ may be, it is not always prone to goodness and exalting, while human mind works in those mysterious ways which the sage credit God usually. One of „those ways“ is a problem of the exact meaning in otherwise mutually intelligible communication. Its basic level is translation from one natural language to another: the translators need to be proficient in both languages in order to maintain the real expression of what is being translated; literal translations could be senseless sometime, and idioms are the best examples: English „apples and oranges“ is „grand mothers and frogs“ in Serbian.

Interpreting non-verbal signs is another level, a little bit more complex than previous one. In human non-verbal communication, for example gestures known as the „emblems“ are said to have their verbal equivalents, but such equivalents could be idioms, as well as single terms: the insulting gestures seldom mean simply „fuck you“ or so, they also express emotions like anger, frustration, despise etc. alongside with their verbal translation. On the other hand, gestures performed while speaking are elusive enough for direct translation, although they are thought of as conveying some conventional meaning too, but the pictorial aspect of their meaning and the fact that they are just the debris of the concepts implied by them make their interpretation always open up to some discussion. It is true that both types of gestures are context-dependant for their meaning (Cf for example Kendon 1998, Sherzer 1991, McNeill 1992, Žikić 2002), but the notion of the „context“ does not say much about the individual understanding of the gestural performance, even among the people who share the same contextual competence and the same movements could mark the different concepts even in the same discourse situations.

Other non-verbal signs, such as visual representations of metaphorical concepts are always subject to interpretation. The ominous sign of swastika, for example, could not be banished from the use in European Union because the Hindu community harshly opposed that suggestion claiming that one of their most sacred symbols, representing the everlasting cycle of life, was abused by the German Nazis (BBC)<sup>3</sup>. Please note that it is not just about the context; the guiding idea of suggestion never to use swastika legally in EU any more was inspired perhaps by the political context of its use by Nazis – a context which is clearly different than the religious context of the Hindu use – but its assumption is, in fact, that today swastika evokes horror, despise and loathing in

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<sup>3</sup> Leach noted that symbols are born of ambiguity because they are always conventional and arbitrary Lič (1983), being cultural artifacts, so there is no such thing as the “universal meaning” of symbols.

every normal human being, representing the death, atrocity, destruction, and the monstrous idea of total annihilation of certain groups of human beings.

Top of those levels is that of ideas and ideologies. I do not think it is worth bothering discussing it much: „Christian dogma“, „Communism“ or „liberal economy“, for example, all are the notions which „true meaning“ evades first their most devoted believers, and then perhaps the rest of the world. Science is not abolished from this „intelligible non-understanding“ either: what is the origin of the Universe, was there a „missing link“ hominid, how to explain the difference between the transcendental  $\pi$  and another irrational numbers, those are not just only but few among the numerous provoking yet still irresolvable questions, but also those which obviously are not commonly understood within the contexts of the scientists dealing with them.

And that brings us to somehow similar and apparently maybe the central question of the anthropology itself, could an outsider understand and to what extent a culture which is not just foreign to him/her, but also „strange“, meaning not familiar at all to the anthropologist's experience? I will here neither review nor discuss the opinions about it in anthropology, and will even claim that my position is that it is not so relevant question to the heuristics and epistemology of anthropology as it pretends to be. First, anthropology is matter of interpretation, not of translation; then, „cultures“ are not stable, solid and two-dimensional entities – their members share their basics, but in no matter they share everything what comprises them, not even in how they understand what „culture“ means; finally, it is not necessary to gain the full cultural or contextual competence in order to participate in communication – meaning that you will be able to comprehend what is being communicating and that your contribution to that communication will be comprehended by its other participants.

That is so both when having intra- and inter-cultural communication. In other words, it is the ability to understand what is going on, but to maintain the interpretation of it which is at least – if not dramatically – different than those of the actual participants; to be understood by them appreciating you are not part of the same context they are; and all of that *vice versa* of course. Consider for a moment representations of *Minotauros*. Common cultural experience of the West, Europe, former Soviet world, Latin America, English speaking countries or some Asian countries suggest it is a creature with human body (i.e. the torso and the limbs) and head of the bull. And *representations* is what it is about in anthropology, isn't it? This cultural pattern of the taurocephalus humanoid representing *Minotauros* is part of cultural cognition in many contemporary cultures due to the favourable selection of the classical source telling story of „Asterios, who was called *Minotauros*“.

The Apollodorus's version is obviously selected over the Ovid's, and the probable explanation is that the reason for such selection is more clear image of the creature offered by the former: it is that the creature „had the face of a bull, but

was otherwise human“ versus „half bull, half man“ without specifying on which half it was bull and on which it was man (Cf. Apollodorus, Rusten 1982). Those two versions could be attributed to the two distinct cultures of the classic world, the Greek and the roman, but that is irrelevant. It is important to note that it makes no difference what version of Minotauros corporeality we operate with: the story as a whole is to be understood and its message comprehended no matter how the Minotauros's body is described or how we imagine it. The visual depicting of the story of Minotauros, i.e. the moment of its fatal encounter with Theseus differed already in ancient Greek art. Some depictions feature creature with bull's head and tail and human torso, some other the creature of that description but also with hooves or upper limbs clearly non-human, some more the creature which body is represented although in humanoid form to be larger than human and different in shape, while some depictions feature the humanoid body which is marked visually clearly as non-human by insisting on the different characteristics of its skin. More to that, sometimes the creature's head is clearly that of bull, sometimes of the ox, but there are also the depictions where only knowing the story suggests us that it should be head of the bull what is on picture<sup>4</sup>.

I hope it is in everybody's favour now that the ancient Egyptian pharaoh would be able to get some sense when hearing Glass's opera if somehow transported to our age. The human mind will be able to recognise the human spirit no matter cultural determinants of both the mind and the spirit; how harmonious and anthropological that sounds. But what is the sense of Glass's „Akhenaten“? Is that to be found in the claims of the author, in musings of the performers, or in the interpretation of the anthropologists perhaps? I will pass on that obviously and not just the ending part of the last sentence may sound a bit hilarious. I am convinced that there are no answers to all of the questions, as well I hold it firmly that comprehending of the exogenous is possible without understanding which means the exact matching of the thoughts, words, actions and products of the people of different cultures by the anthropologists.

That is why I am going to try to imagine what in the world could Akhenaten get from the Glass's opera devoted to him. I suppose there are numerous ways to do so, but being the anthropologist and not the Atlantis hunter or „Ancient Aliens“ believer (nor even a fan), my try will be in the form of some paradigms of anthropological theoretical thought. The premise is that the opera performance could be experienced as some kind of ritual<sup>5</sup>; and here I mean the sole performance, not for example preparing to go to opera by dressing some fine gown or so. The opera has its narrative structure which is not just the storytelling one; it also conveys the message and demands certain knowledge

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<sup>4</sup> All of those could be observed at Theoi.

<sup>5</sup> I was inspired by Kotnik's interpretation (Kotnik 2009), although not applying it here; for more detailed information on anthropological interest in opera, see Kotnik 2008.

from its audience which enables the audience to participate the unfolding of the performance to its very climax. At some point, it could be described as the dramatisation of the text too, i.e. the musical and theatrical performance are organised around the libretto. The text is not mythical of course but no matter that, the artists, the author and the audience are convinced that the essential quality of the art – and opera is one of its princesses I dare to say – is in its ability to transmit the intellectual and emotional communication which transcends particular social and cultural contexts and which is considered as universal.

The worshipers in rituals think alike about the purpose and meaning of their rituals being universal. More specific, the ancient Egyptian rituals are thought of nowadays as being the dramatic representations of the scriptures where performance is perceived as contributing to the functioning of ritual as well as the meaning of the text (Eyre 2002). All of that makes me think that basics for hypothetical Akhenaten's perception and experience of Glass's opera is in that which could be easily postulated as somehow homologue structures of ritual and opera, and therefore, while familiar to the structure of the dramatised text in religious rituals of his time, Akhenaten could interpret opera in that key if not in any other else.

So, Akhenaten first should share a humanist view on the mankind with the philosophers of the Enlightenment. That means he must be able to think of himself as of another human being; well, maybe not as of *just* another human being, but certainly he must give up the notion of himself as of a son of God. This is where anthropologists' favourite concept comes early to interfere with anthropologists' favourite idea: it is not unreasonable to imagine that kind of cultural pre-determination of the Egyptian pharaoh's thought which provides him (or in some seldom circumstances: her) with the cognitive model of the world – if not the Universe – in which he occupies the very central position, crucial for the sole existence of that world. That model probably differed from the similar model of his subjects in that that although both models are expected to display convictions of how human beings occupying the different social positions are *essentially* different one from another, only pharaoh's model probably claimed that the *essence* of such essential diversity is in his bearer and with him.

This is obviously contraindicated with the core of the gloss of the humanities, and makes this exercise senseless (if it's not so already ☺) for Akhenaten the Pharaoh will then see only normal that people bow and prey to him. Ironically, Akhenaten the Anthropologist should see things not very different from that in order to make sense of them. It is only that he has to throw away the notion of his divinity, but to hold it as the possible manner in which other people could see him perhaps. So, beside the strange music, what else he could observe? The opera of his name is a poetical chronology of his life: from the last days of the reign of his father, to the ruins of Akhetaten – accounts of his deeds and the aftermath. Not very far from the usual ritual way of presenting the life and deeds of the heroes, saints or divinities. That is, I expect him to perceive it as a

celebration of his historical figure and – just for the sake of this exercise – not to pay attention to Leslie White's discussion.

So, Akhenaten the Evolutionist<sup>6</sup> (in Frazer's, not Darwin's fashion) will probably seek for the liaisons between the performance and his historical life. He will notice some discrepancies of course but if not sulky he will take those as deviations necessary for dramatic expression. He – as other Akhenatons in this text – will focus on the religious reform and will probably rook it as a good sign that his worshiping of Aten is central to the attention of the nowadays audience, drawing the conclusion that no matter his attempt to reformulate the religion of his state, but also the cosmogony stemming out from the religion and consequently the world view of his contemporaries, was not long-lasting at a time, it proves itself as the highest religious form far in the future, thus providing future society with the most advanced approach to the questions related to life on earth, but also by establishing the unique link between the life-force of the Universe (Aten, or Sun), its earthly agency (Akhenaten, or the ruler), and the living creatures of the world (mostly connoting his subjects, but not excluding any other living organism).

If he wants to be cautious enough, he could admit that his attempt was kind of the final stage in the evolution of religious beliefs. The praise in the opera will suggest him that the final outcome of his reform results in worshiping the one and only, true God, so Akhenaten the Evolutionist could be firmly convinced that he discovered the „missing link“ of the evolution of religion: from scattered, unsystematic beliefs in various supernatural entities, worshiping the nature or ancestors, to sacred texts of the organised religion, from animism and polytheism to monotheism, his henotheist situation stands as the watershed leading to true source of all the knowledge, as he would observe it all eventually.

Akhenaten the Diffusionist<sup>7</sup> will be glad to announce how he found the confirmation that ancient Egypt *is* the place where civilisation originated. He will observe entirely different social and cultural setting than the one familiar to him from ancient Egypt when attending the opera performance; he will encounter people in strange gowns, sophisticated and technically equipped beyond his reason and looking powerful enough to pay attention to nothing else but their own affairs; yet those people invented the „ceremony“ of opera and gathered together to praise him and his religious reform. He will be convinced that reason for that „celebration“ by the opera ritual is in the genuineness and the strength of the truth long ago found in the one and only God, source and the energy of all life, and that no matter if some particular historical circumstances were not in favour for that kind of revelation, its spirit being the spirit of truth was and is able to survive those and to radiate into the future across the land and through the corridors of time.

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<sup>6</sup> I will not refer to an specific bibliographical item when presenting some particular paradigm of anthropological theory; instead I will refer to the author(s) presenting it.

<sup>7</sup> Rivers before Elliot Smith, but not excluding the latter entirely.

He would not be able to make any other connections between what he remembers from the society he lived in and the surrounding responsible for the opera performance. Nevertheless he will insist that the powerful and comfortable for living society he is introduced to logical inheritor of the ancient Egypt. He will learn of the idea of agency and trace it back to the times when he thought of himself as of agency: human position, ability and the possibility to cope with the social (but also with the natural and why not, with the spiritual) world is something which he could conveniently ascribe to his positioning as the conduit between the source of life and the life on Earth. Now, when he learnt he is only a human, and that he was it always, he would love the idea that he is credited in the history of this social world (and by a historian) as being the „first individual“ in the history of the mankind. There Akhenaten the Diffusionist will find for sure that celebrating him and his idea(l) is celebrating human agency and its divine source.

Akhenaten the Functionalist<sup>8</sup> would be focused on the purpose of the musical play, equalling it with the sense of the performance: he would probably see the very act of performing the opera as a mean of how his achievements are demonstrated within a community. His thoughts of the deeds presented by the opera will go after having purpose nowadays of strengthening the inner sense of cohesion within the community, no matter if those are considered as deeds of man or deeds of god. He will not bother himself with discussing the religious elements or the political historical events depicted in opera. The vary fact of people gathering to pay respect to what he has done once by performing some kind of ritual – or maybe what he has conceived once by challenging the form and structure of religious, social, and political life, mores and beliefs in the Egypt of his time – will be comprehended by him as realising the function of some high priority to that group of people.

Since the nature of his reform was religious, but it affected the society and its institutions also so the latter was changed to adopt the form implied by that reform, his educated guess will be that the praise or maybe even worship of his enterprise which is taking place right before him is to be understood as the demonstration of moral strength and cohesion of the community. The bond between religion and society always produces rules of behaviour for it is a marriage of two systematic, categorical, and consequently rule-making thoughts. Those rules are moral rules, he will muse, and being so they must be prescriptive. The point of the opera ritual he will find then in satisfying the need of the society for moral guidance. Its function will lay in providing the moral cohesion of the community by perpetuating the mythical form of the story of the efforts and effects of changing the society from some anachronistic form based on moral heterarchy and therefore confusion and maybe anarchy to more solid form of clear moral hierarchy, as implied by the notions of one supreme god and the ruler as his only earthly agent.

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<sup>8</sup> Like Malinowski was.

Akhenaten the Structuralist<sup>9</sup> will take into deep consideration the ideas of Akhenaten the Functionalist and elaborate them further in a manner that the ancestral wisdom is communicated by the opera ritual. He will agree about how moral rules are in the core of that transmission and that they are meant to be prescriptive to act upon those who receive the message. He will decide it after observing that the focal point of the opera ritual is a belief that religious and in turn social reforms of Akhenaten the Pharaoh affected society to eventually embrace the conviction of a unique life-giving force being the immaterial resource behind the visible and material world. The belief itself would not be discussed by Akhenaten the Structuralist neither in terms of its relation to the overall ideology of the society, nor in terms if people actually hold it true. He will be concerned with the moral of the „story“, or the „myth“, how he will attribute it.

He will probably deploy the complex set of antinomies or oppositions to learn about that moral, make paradigmatic categories of them and try to find the conclusion. So he will turn himself to the narrative aspect of the opera ritual, i.e. to the verbal descriptions of what is happening. Some of the obvious candidates for elements to form the oppositions first and then to be classified in groups according to their presumed meaning could be many gods/one god, diverging from the faith of fathers/ being the father of a new faith, hetarchy in the institution of agency of religious experience/ hierarchy in the institution of agency of religious experience, ruler as child or favourite of the divinities/ ruler as kind of the divinity himself etc, probably resulting in paradigms like the old vs. the new and controlled or helpless individual/individual who controls or is in power. He will thus acknowledge the development in society which was brought by Akhenaten the Pharaoh, opting that the message of inter-generational communication is in stressing, repeating and conveying the values stemming out from the change from the individual who is object to the world to the one who is its subject, and who can consequently master it, which is demonstrated by restructuring world of gods according to the new structure of human world.

Akhenaten the Symbolist<sup>10</sup> would have no principle objections to the thoughts of Akhenaten the Structuralist, but would also be concerned with the attempt to pose structuralist explanation as general as possible, timeless and spaceless. He would rather consider a context – social or cultural one – of the opera ritual interpretation. Could he be puzzled then where to look after such context, in the opera performance itself, in the cultural aspect of the „story“ or the „myth“ narrated by it, in society in general? Will he be confused then to discover if opera is ritual which is feature of the culture of nowadays society, the narrative could has meaning in that society which is probably different form meaning in the culture of ancient Egypt, so which of those societies should he consider as a frame providing the tools for his interpretation?

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<sup>9</sup> Of Levi-Strauss's fashion.

<sup>10</sup> I have Geertz on mind here.

History will help him no matter the claims that diachronic perspective is of little help for that kind of anthropological analysis: his story may be the one of ancient Egypt, but its relevance lies with the culture which tells it – consequently which embedded some meaning within it – and not with the culture which is it nominally about. Akhenaten the Symbolist will have to admit then that there is certain transcendence in ritual or mythic communication he observes, as Akhenaten the Structuralist suggested, but will focus nevertheless on particular symbols and their meaning in nowadays society. Will he see then the notion of one god as symbol of unique origin and the essential sameness of all the life on Earth or as of an individuality freed from the tyranny of the multitude of supernatural demanders disconnected from the everyday lives of human beings, it will depend on whether he decides if the most important feature of the observed society and its culture lies in the realm of religious or spiritual or moral concepts, or in the domain of the material life, i.e. which notion is valued above all and executed more frequently in real life, that of moral behaviour based on appreciating the common good, or that of pursuing individual needs based on appreciating particular interests. So, what do you think, what would be his guess?

Akhenaten the Postmodernist<sup>11</sup> will look after the hierarchy, agency and performativity in the opera ritual. His remark of hierarchy could be that it was crucial in the development of society to establish the clear and causal link between the agents in both worlds, the natural and supernatural, in order to move accent on responsibility and activity from the collective proprietors to single being, and thus to enable agents to produce agency, meaning that the middleman class of supernatural entities became obsolete in the process of relating to world and into it, so they are replaced in social life by the singular potential, capacity and ability of each of its members in negotiating, creating and re-creating social ties, bounds, institutions, meanings, ideas and so on. There he will observe consequently how the need for the shift in power and control emerged and is further elaborated and performed through the body representation of Akhenaten the Pharaoh, a representation unique both in the cultural norms of depicting human and ruler's/ruling body in ancient Egypt, and in the mainstream social practice of a nowadays society.

A bit feminine features of the body of the fathering figure would suggest, according to Akhenaten the Postmodernist the uncertainty of an individual identity. This uncertainty comes from the unstable character of social and personal relations in contemporary society, but also from the social empowerment as the central feature of an individual who is free now to design his-her own social world, and is not obliged to comply with pre-designed and pre-given norms and forms of identity. The individual express him-herself through the chosen act of performance, picked out for any particular situation in social life. Occurrences like those suggest some new heterarchy is emerging in human world, replacing both the ancient heterarchy

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<sup>11</sup> Followers of Bourdeiu, Foucault, Butler and so on.

of the supernatural beings in the divine world, as well the hierarchy of norms-over-identities in this, social world humans live in. What is celebrating by the opera ritual, Akhenaten the Postmodernist will claim, is the first open performative act of an individual rejecting the hierarchical world of the supernatural norm imposers and abjecting it, an act which enables negotiating the identity, deposing the rules which suggest the body is fixed, and establishing human-to-human and human-to-society relations based on the human agency as the driving force, the force which stands now for the former life-giving force of the supernatural origin and the life-guiding/determining/controlling force of the society.

Although all Akhenatens the Anthropologists probably would be able to understand the core point of the Glass's opera, their perspectives on it will differ one from another depending what school of thought and method of explanation influenced them mostly. That is because it will be the case with the real anthropologists also and that brings me again to what I call the Akhenaten Paradox, which stands for our, human ability to understand what is happening in a given social occurrence which is part of the social context different than the one of ours, but to interpret it according to the cultural modes of thought we are accustomed to, which is obviously different than how its actual actors would see it, even when we are aware that there should be some „original“ contextual explanation, and/or when we possess certain degree of the cultural competence inherent to the original social context.

It is usual anthropological consideration, or maybe a curse ☺ but I see it as universal human condition: we are limited in gaining extra-cultural competence, never able to grasp it in its whole literally, we are able to understand whatever observance or description of any human condition or experience, being it material or immaterial. The fact is that we understand, or that we try to understand – both about different cultures as anthropologists, but about conditions and experiences of other people as human being – by the attempts to make patterns which make sense for us, i.e. which are intelligible according to our experience, out of the material we learn from the others and to put those patterns together in some meaningful general frame.

What we are doing, we are trying to translate in fact the experience of other people, which of course is originally strange to us, to make comprehensible by our means and standards something which is so by standards and means of other people. There are limits in the extent to which we can translate something, being it a word or the concept of some culture, for exact matches of the notions, ideas and concepts are found seldom in different language contexts but no matter to that limits in our ability to translate – which is the basic tool of how we exercise the cognitive capacity for learning, by visually or verbally fitting the descriptions or forms of what we do not know to those which are clear parts of our experience – we are capable of understanding other peoples ideas, stories, myths, narratives, customs, relations etc, we are capable of comprehending their condition and experience.

## The „Akhenaten Paradox“? An Anthropological Burlesque

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Anthropology is not about translation, as I put it earlier, it is about interpretation, or: about giving meaning to facts and phenomena which do not seem intelligible out of their original context of occurrence. People doing something or telling particular stories give some meaning to those deeds and stories, or gain the meaning out of them. They are mostly eager to share that meaning with anthropologists, but anthropologists sometimes (or maybe: usually) disagree with the meaning given by their informants (that's what we call the „ethno-explication“), or find themselves preposterous enough to think that they are the only people out of the given local context who are capable of understanding the meaning in local terms so have to translate it to the outer world in order to interpret it for that world. But for whom anthropologists' interpretations are intended in fact?

I would not dare to tackle that question for real and will just note that supposing that the most frequent readers of the anthropology production worldwide are the anthropologists, the Akhenaten Paradox could include not just understanding over translation as the fact which enables practicing anthropology at all, but that intelligibility within different traditions and schools within a discipline is based on the same principle. Consider for a moment all Akhenaten the Anthropologists: they are examples of the thoughts irreducible one to another, although produced within the same general, contextual, meaning-giving frame of one social science discipline, and although some of them logically precedes each other. It is true that these thoughts, mocked in this text earlier, display certain theoretical and methodological development of the discipline and within it, but no matter theoretical peaks and hypes in some time span, none of them cease to exist entirely, yet it is hard to imagine not just how Akhenaten the Postmodernist would receive interpretations of Akhenaten the Diffusionist and vice versa, but the result of conversation of any of Akhenaten the Anthropologists on what exactly is going on in that opera ritual.

In other words, each of Akhenaten the Anthropologists would be able to understand the opera, but neither of them could claim that his interpretation is the only true and exact one. Well, probably each of them would just do so, but unless we are believers (those who fall into category of „informants“) and not the anthropologists (those who fall into category of „researches“) we would not take any of those claims for granted. That is the difference between the interpretation and translation. The latter pretend to be „true“, while the former is good enough when it is heuristic. This coincides with the fact that uncertainty and instability are among the major features of social life, or of the human existence if I may say so. It is not just the description of the faith of „great ideas“, as probably was Akhenaten's in his time, but of institutions, social relations and cultural norms in any given society. Anthropological theories are obvious example too 😊

That is why I find irrelevant concerns with anthropologists' interpretations of foreign cultures in terms of his/her own. I am suspicious if there is some other

way, for if I am trying hard for example to explain how general population would benefit from prevention strategies in social epidemiology of blood-borne diseases by interpreting the world of injecting drug users or street sex workers who live in the same society with the people who are positive that AIDS is disease of „junkies, fagots and whores“, what are chances for some international organisation officer from the West to understand the social and cultural significance of twins in the native Nilotic peoples without an anthropologist's interpretation shaped in a manner intelligible to social surrounding from which the anthropologist come from?

Posing a question out of a cabinet if the anthropologist have made slightly different picture then that of his/her informants on the matter he/she is interpreting is not encouraging then for further anthropological investigations worldwide. Of course the anthropologist could not share cognitive pattern developed in some particular culture without the attempts either to adjust the similar pattern of his/her culture to that of the culture where he/she researches, or to adjust the native cognitive cultural pattern to the one of his/her culture. The right question could be whether anthropologist's research techniques are suitable and to which extent for comprehending subtle nuances in observations and accounts of occurrences, circumstances, discourses etc. communicated to him by the people whose social life he/she is interested in and among whom he/she lives for some period of time.

Akhenaten the Functionalist and Akhenaten the Evolutionist would certainly not deploy the same investigative approach, nor would their objectives overlap. I suppose that talking to performers or even to the audience would shed different light on what is going on than focusing on the happening as the peak point of some presumed earlier developments. Similarly, taking the opera as a text and interpreting its libretto (its text) will produce different interpretations; maybe not as different as in a previous case, but different enough so their conclusions will stand as asymptotes one to another. Obviously, or: as we know it already, the aim of our research and the means of our analysis orient our perspective on what we are researching. That means, in turn, that the facts we are interpreting is what could be assumed as „true“ in terms of natural sciences perhaps, but it does not mean that our interpretations are less „true“, although they can not be „true“ in the same way as are the facts.

Each Akhenaten the Anthropologist's interpretation is „true enough“, which obviously is not the same as when I say „the facts are true“. They are true, for they are heuristic, or in terms that they are sufficient not just for solving the research problem posed before the researcher, but also probably the best considering the analytical tools on his/her disposal. I am aware how this could be abhorred by philosophical methodologists perhaps, but unlike the other social science disciplines, anthropology rarely pretend to give interpretations which „explain everything“. Akhenaten the Structuralist or some of the other Akhenaten the Anthropologists would disagree maybe, but our discipline is more prone to give explanations which are context-worth. And it is not just because the interpretations are context-dependent.

Human condition means also that there are no such laws as are laws of physics in social life (Cf. Žikić 2012). There are maybe statistically observable regularities in behaviours, but our discipline is not about the behaviour itself, it is about the meaning people relate to the behaviour, if not about the human meanings at all. Such meanings are not stable as natural phenomenon are and when we catch them, we do so in particular conditions of social life which we describe usually as social context. Contexts are not stable as natural phenomena are either and consequently the interpretation of some occurrence in the particular context could be different from the interpretation of seemingly same occurrence in seemingly same context some time after. That is probably why general explanation starting with „all human beings are/ tend to/ do etc.“ are scarce in anthropology.

All human beings live in special and particular conditions usually different than those from their fellows, looking upon it intra– or inter-culturally. Anthropology does not neglect such fact as sometimes seem to me that other social science disciplines do when calming the ability to explain for example the institutions of family or money, so anthropologists do their best to understand those conditions in order to give specific interpretations for explanations considering social and cultural features of specific groups of human beings. The anthropologists would not be able to do so if there is no such thing as I call here the Akhenaten Paradox (without pretending neither that I gave the best possible example for what it stands for, nor that have explained it the best way): capacity to understand without literal translation and matching to the original meaning. That is maybe the reason for anthropology being rather obscured in public: it does not comply to the way of thinking which suggest that everything could be subject of generalisation and additionally contest the notion that translations are exact meanings transmitted from one language or culture to another. It is also why it would be really interesting if there would appear some Akhenaten the Anthropologist to interpret *that* way of cultural thinking 😊

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## Bojan Žikić

### „PARADOKS EHNATON“? ANTROPOLOŠKA BURLESKA

U radu se raspravlja o sposobnosti razumevanja onoga što se dešava, ali i pridržavanja interpretacije toga koja je u najmanju ruku – ako ne i dramatično – različita od one koju ulesnici događanja imaju kao kognitivno zasnovane ali kulturno usmerene činjenice. To je paradoks ljudske komunikacije: različita kulturna zaleđa nas ne sprečavaju da komuniciramo, ali ono što šaljemo i ono kako čitamo ono što dobijamo mogu samo biti pretpostavke a nikada bukvalni prevodi. Kako bih ovo razmatranje razradio zamislio sam situacije u kojima faraon osamnaeste egipatske dinastije Ehnaton prisustvuje izvedbi opere koja je posvećena njegovom životu i delima, dočim se njegova stanovišta o njoj menjaju kako biva postavljan na pozicije različitih hipotetičkih antropoloških teoretičara.

**Ključne reči:** kultura, kognicija, komunikacija, antropološka teorija, Ehnaton, opera, ritual