

## EDITOR'S NOTE

This issue of the *Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* features two important articles addressing a recurring anthropological conundrum: the problem of moral relativism. In a world presently facing crises of ever increasing magnitude (from rapid inflation in food prices to on-going execution of abusive sovereign power to global warming), multicultural quandaries like cultural relativism might seem to be a low priority. Yet, if these planetary problems are to be tackled, we (i.e., *everyone on the planet*) will have to do so together—*across* boundaries of state, culture or civilization; *across* boundaries of town and country; *across* traditions both new and old. In today's speeded up world of global interconnection, questions of cross-cultural communication and disagreement frame all political debate, whether explicitly or implicitly. Anthropologists are providing fresh thinking on how to overcome the impasses that sometimes paralyze political and moral disagreements that are grounded in a sense of 'ecultural' difference.

Our first article is Webb Keane's 2007 Edward Westermarck Lecture, portions of which will also appear in the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, whose permission to reproduce them here is gratefully acknowledged. Keane's recent work has focused on what he calls 'esemiotic ideologies', reflexive beliefs people share about language, arts, or any meaning-making process or practice. Drawing a contrast between ideologies that seek to purify meaning of its necessarily material—artifactual or perceivable—manifestations (for example, Calvinist theology or the virtualism of certain strands of structural linguistics), and those ideologies that locate meaning in the very materiality of its signs (such as many forms of ancestor worship and their so-called 'fetishes'), Keane recommends attending to the ways in which all traditions reflexively problematize practices of signification. Though Keane's essay, drawing on his extraordinarily complex recent book *Christian Moderns* (University of California Press, 2007), is principally about religion and definitions thereof, Keane intimates that contests over social scientific definitions of religion typify features of the contest of cultural (or moral) interpretations more broadly. Debates about moral relativism often occur at a level of ethical abstraction—they frequently seek to 'epurify' debate about any particular moral quandary, including quandaries concerning disparate sociocultural traditions, of everything that makes them contextual, specific, historical, local or particular. Moralities, like religions, will have to assume a material form if they are to be discussed, of course, and such discussion is itself evidence of the materiality of moral discourse. Keane intimates that moral debates would do well to refrain from abstraction or purification and rather attend to the actual contexts in which they occur. Janice Boddy provides a case study, in a sense, for considering this way of thinking. She examines efforts by the British to reform or eliminate forms of female circumcision (the terminology concerning the practice is highly contested) in the Sudan. Her article concludes that efforts based in 'absolute' moral convictions, that is, efforts that do not relativise their own presuppositions, are bound to *fail* at attaining their goals. Such presuppositions include the very idea of what a human body is. Reflexive ideologies of embodiment in her article



can be productively compared to reflexive ideologies of meaning and materiality in the essay by Keane.

Neither article argues for a naive moral relativism. Instead, both suggest that only by considering the complexity of the circumstances surrounding cross-cultural disagreements can either side in a dispute hope to make itself *heard* in ways that are *efficacious*. Neither anthropologist suggests that social scientists must unburden themselves of moral conviction. Rather, each offers a perspective on how anyone with conviction might hope to persuade others that they are right.

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