

## “Sitting around the fire ashes”. An epistemology of personal acquaintance

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# “Sitting around the fire ashes”. An epistemology of personal acquaintance

Franca Tamisari

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I would like to dedicate this paper to my sister, Rraying who adopted me and was the first to welcome me to sit around the fire ashes of her camp.

Something forever exceeds, escapes from  
Statement, withdraws from definition, must be  
glimpsed & felt, not told.

... there is something in life ...entirely  
unparalleled by anything in verbal thought.

William James 1985:480

- 1 What is a person and what does it mean to know a person? (De Monticelli 1998:28). What is the personal reality of an encounter? What is the nature and possibility of encountering a person in the field and how encounters affect the knowledge we produce? (cf. Tamisari 2006). As other enthusiastic but completely naive and rather arrogant anthropologists at the beginning of their research, I took for granted the face-to-face, direct encounters with people in the field.
- 2 As the English terms *meeting* and *encountering* seem to distinguish, we usually *meet* or deal with lots of people in the field however, we *encounter*, or engage with a few with whom we embark, albeit not always willingly, in a relationship with all its risks, promises and responsibilities. I am interested in exploring those aspects of an encounter with another person that are readily, immediately and often intensively experienced yet escape analysis. These relationships that the ethnographer establishes and deepens in the field are recognised as fundamental in most anthropological projects, however, with some notable past and more recent exceptions in Australia they continue to remain marginal, especially in relation to epistemological questions (see

for instance, Casagrande 1960 entitled "In the Company of Men"; recording and editing of oral histories, i.e. Shaw 1986; Mathews 1988; Beckett 2000, Camfoo et al.2000).

- 3 In his monograph "A Black Civilization", Lloyd Warner (1969:466ff), entitles the volume's last part "Personal History" and dedicates chapter XV to his friend "Mahkarolla" (Makarrwala), with whom he established and "strong and enduring friendship" (ibid.:1969:467).

"Throughout the book I have striven for objective reporting and detached scientific analysis; although Mahkarolla's autobiographical sections in this chapter do conform with these criteria and the evidence was collected accordingly, I hope the last section about him, will express what I felt him to be a splendid human being, as well as **express my love, respect, and admiration** for him. Perhaps in any true account of a lasting friendship this is the ultimate objectivity" (my emphasis).

- 4 By personal reality of encounters I intend considering the singular and unpredictable character, personality, or essential individuality of the Other, as well of the self, that is crucial in knowing another person. Encounters are thus characterised by a process of personal acquaintance that demands to be lived-in through ever deepening layers of affect. It is through "the non conceptual aspects involved in any kind of communication" (Shultz 1951:79) that are experienced, continuously negotiated, and understood before being explained that the anthropologist is invited to enter the sphere of values, practices and concepts that are at the basis of the knowledge we produce in our writings. To use Shultz' expression (Ibid.:79), the personal reality of an encounter can also be called "a mutual tuning-in relationship by which the 'I' and the 'Thou' are experienced by both participants as a 'We' in vivid presence". In other words, I propose a phenomenology of the encounter in order to explore the ways in which personal knowledge interweaves ontological and epistemological questions (De Monticelli 1998:131).
- 5 If, as Fabian argues (1990: 3ff), cultural knowledge is always expressed, mediated, and observed, through action in a performance, and thus the anthropologist's task is not limited to a dialogical approach – information exchanged at the level of communication – I would like to add that ethnographic work goes also beyond embodied practices. No doubt, the embodiment paradigm (Csordas 1990; Comaroff & Comaroff 1992; Jackson 1983; Lock 1993; Schepher-Hughes e Lock 1987; Schepher-Hughes 2000) has certainly been one of the most productive critiques of the politics of representation – for instance in the attempts of not separating objectivity from subjectivity and experience (Jackson 1989, 1995; Herzfeld 1997), cognition from perception (Stoller 1986, Howes 1991) and cultural models from affect (Wikan 1992). However, this approach has, in the main, privileged the body as an interpretative category or analytical model rather than considering it as a part of the person in her totality, the ways in which, for instance, a person gives herself to be known through a process of personal acquaintance that is inevitably grounded in a mutual openness towards the Other. It is a "being alongside with", an "intersubjective mutuality of being" (Stasch 2009:132), an intimacy which strengthens as well as makes one vulnerable (cf. von Sturmer 2001:104; de Monticelli 1998:181-182; Jackson 1998:10)<sup>1</sup>.
- 6 While subjectivity can be considered as the most visible and most obvious aspect of a person, each person is a subject in his or her own individual way. And thus, while one's subjectivity is immediately given, the essential individuality of a person, her unpredictable and unique way of being, acting and becoming, 'announces itself as hidden, secret, "internal", "deep"':

"an individual, a person is not 'all there' wholly and right away virtually 'given'. On the contrary, if I want to make her acquaintance as an *individual* I must engage in a new type of exploration, embarking on an adventure that I might in fact have no desire to undertake... However, it is only by embarking on this adventure of personal *acquaintance* that I will discover what there is to discover about the essential nature of the individual in question, that is her individuality..." (De Monticelli 1998:130, original emphasis).

- 7 As we do not encounter a culture as a system of values and ideas in the field, but persons in their "essential individuality", similarly we neither encounter *any body*, nor do we chance upon a habitus, but we are exposed to the presence, personality and character of an individual: we encounter a "life that is the history of a person, her experiences her training, her choices, her adventures and misadventures" (De Monticelli 1998:121). The anthropologist's body tunes-in through a process of personal acquaintance and its logic of feeling that by means of the body, yet beyond the body, allows her to enter and participate in the Other's value sphere.

## Sitting and standing around the fire ashes

- 8 During my first fieldwork period in Milingimbi in 1990, in Northeast Arnhem Land, I encountered several people with whom I maintain a relationship despite my distance from the community and my move to Italy almost seven years ago. These relationships have not only been fashioned through my participation in ceremonial dancing, gambling, and travelling together, but also deepened by sitting around my adoptive relatives' hearth, or rather "fire ashes" and "charcoal embers" (*ganu' or lirrwi*) as Yolngu people refer to the campfire<sup>2</sup>. Located in the immediate vicinity of most houses in the community, the campfire is the fulcrum around which a residential group's everyday life revolves. It is near the hearth that the camp members sit every day for most of the day talking or being silent, arguing, resting, playing or sulking. This is the place where daily events are discussed, food is cooked and eaten, announcements are made, family meetings are held, and visitors are received. Mortuary ritual and circumcisions are also held near the campfire. It was around my adoptive family's campfire that I was adopted and around this and other relatives' campfires that, over time, I was invited to commence a long mutual process of personal acquaintance. It is around the campfire that the personal reality of encounters "incarnates itself in the lived actualisation of its feeling and in the decisions and actions that follow" (De Monticelli 2003:168).
- 9 Before understanding the significance of being invited to sit around the "fire ashes" I felt ill at ease and embarrassed. Although I was always welcome there, the effort my presence demanded for entertaining me and my awkwardness in trying to understand what was happening around me was palpable. Often I would wonder what I was doing there apart from intruding and imposing myself into the lives of my hosts. Soon, however, I was also impatient and rather irritated, because, at the time I felt I was "wasting my time" just "sitting around", "doing nothing", rather than collecting data, mapping the town, learning the language, and participating in rituals as I was trained to do. Time went by very slowly sitting down next to my adoptive sister, Rrayin, drinking tea, listening, trying to communicate, playing with the children and re-orienting myself in the new play of affects made up of small gestures ranging from expressions of love and acceptance to plain indifference and overt hostility. The

symbolic significance of the hearth, however, is not limited to the sharing of everyday experience through co-residence, cooperation and commensality, but extends to incorporate the deceased members of the residential group. Given that the hearth is not usually moved over time, and the members of an extended family have occupied the same camp over several generations, the hearth is also considered as connecting the present and the past, the dead and the living. When, in more or less formal speeches, one affirms that "one stands in" or "sits around the fire ashes" (respectively *dhaara* or *nhinnanganu'gnur*), the speaker wants to stress the strength of her relationships with all members of a residential group that have been established by the intimate and gradual process of personal acquaintance. The fire ashes stand for shared mundane time, the time necessary to become a relative who is the same as but different from any other, or as Yolngu people say: someone who is "together but alone" (*rrambangi ga ga:na*), or "close but far away" (*galki ga barrkuwatj*). The fire ashes represent all the occasions in which one announces oneself and is accepted for what one becomes with and for others.

- 10 As I was told, Yolngu Law must be felt in order to be respected and acted out correctly. One must "hold the Law" (*rom ngayatham*), that can be glossed as to touch, to have, to reach, and to endure the correct way of behaving. However, as the Italian and the French verbs underline, "*tenere*" and "*tenir*", the Yolngu verb *ngayatham* must also be understood in terms of "having close to one's heart" (the Yolngu would say close to one's stomach, *ngayangur*), to worry about, to participate, to be close to others through a logic of feelings (*maarr*) founded on the singularity and depth of each encounter (cf Tamisari 2000). A Yolngu person is socialised through a gradual acquisition of her patrilineal essence expressed in terms of sweat and bones. At birth an individual is automatically placed in the kinship network, but remains a stranger (*mulkur*) until the patrilineal essence shared with one's "bone country" or country of origin (*ngarraka*, lit. bones) and patrilineal relatives is absorbed by one's body in daily life and transformed by and with others relatives<sup>3</sup>. With a very moving gesture, I once witnessed a maternal grandmother put her sweat onto the coffin of her deceased newborn grandson thus assuring that he could be recognised by his 'bone country' (*ngaraka*, lit. bones) he was returning to after his death. Socialisation, then, is not only a matter of group membership or genealogical links but is accomplished through a process of personal acquaintance in which one's everyday experiences, choices and actions involve a life-long affective engagement with kin and country.
- 11 I can now better understand what my son Lapulung once told me by saying: "you have become a real relative by sitting around the fire ashes for a long time" (*nhe yuwalk gurrutumirr dhuwal, bili dhe wiyiin ganu'ngur nhinan*, lit. you are really having kinship/relatedness as you spent a long time near the fire ashes). Everything I know and keep on learning about Yolngu Law, comes from the relationships I deepened sitting around this and other campfires every time I am in Milingimbi. Affect as a modality of knowing others, human and non-human beings, is also central in the consubstantial connection between person and place, and in the urges that motivate ancestral cosmogonic actions as they are re-actualised in paintings, songs and dances. Songs cycles, for instance, do not simply connect places and people by retracing ancestral journeys, but describe beings who know and interact in their world through a wide range of sense perceptions, moral qualities and feelings such as homesickness, compassion, aggression, care, physical exhaustion or strength, love, avidity, happiness, the malice of

seduction, generosity, determination, resourcefulness, deceit, the lust of sexual desire and many others.

SLIDE: summary of song transcription

- 12 As I illustrate in relation to a song transcription discussed in a recent paper (Tamisari submitted 2012):
- 13 In these songs, for instance, the joy of Diamond Fish who is light-heartedly darting in and out of the waves is counterposed to Long Tom's aggressive nature. The violence and roar of the waves in the storm is placed against the firmness, fearlessness and obstinacy of Stone who resists them. The disorientation and listlessness of Driftwood adrift in the sea is opposed to the energy and determination of Seagull's flight, who challenges the storm in order to take some grass to his/her nest. The stillness of the calm sea water is shattered by the Oyster Catcher's loud call who, deeply moved, cries for Driftwood's endless and aimless wandering. The mourning sadness of Turtle and the homesickness of Porpoise are played out against the thinking clouds-turned-into-words on their way to the territory of each subgroup where they belong. Reproducing similar contrasts, other songs of both moieties, describe, for instance, the rage, the courage but also the impotence and pain of the Shark Ancestor who, fatally wounded to death and drained of blood, wants revenge; cunning Mouse who tells lies and brings Barramundi and Dog to fight each other in a deadly struggle. Many songs also elaborate the malice of seduction, the eagerness and lust of sexual desire (Berndt 1952). In addition, the song texts describe in full detail how the environment is perceived through all the senses: the rain that makes one cold, the sound of the rain on Turtle's carapace, the sea water lapping Purpoise's shiny black skin, the first monsoon rain that obscures the sky and changes the colour of the sea, the shimmering of Diamond Fish through the transparent water, the changing colours of Stone being covered by molluscs, Seagull's nourishing beak, the sound of the waves, and their bright white foam. Other recurrent senses through which the world is perceived in other songs include: the whistling of the wind through the casuarina trees, the taste of turtle blood, the enfolding reddish light of the sunset, the lightness of a butterfly's wings, the flash of lightning, the roaring of thunder, but also the smell of decomposition, and the appearance of festering boils. Songs describe a world that is known through sensory experience and feelings, a way of knowing that changes the observer and the observed, the subject and the object, the sentient and the sensible, the dancers and the spectator. As in everyday life, the Law set down by ancestral beings that is reproduced in ritual implies an epistemology that does not separate cognition and affect, language and body, content and performance, representation and expression (cf. Tamisari 1998; 2005:177; 2006).

SLIDE (Gattjirrk Festival logo 2003)

- 14 The image of the fire ashes was also used for the logo of the 2003 Gattjirrk Festival organised in Milingimbi by Keith Lapulung, leader of the Djambarrpuyngu group and songwriter of the local music group called Wirrinyga Band. In one of our conversations on that year edition, entitled after one of his albums "Dreamtime Wisdom, Modern-time Vision", Lapulung explained to me that the footprints in the logo represent the different people who participate in the Festival: the young and the old, the different clan groups from the region, the Yolngu and the *balanda*; while the "charcoal embers" is the Festival itself, the point of arrival, the moment of encounter, "the connection between present circumstances and the living wisdom from the past", the space and

time for "sharing culture" accepting and confronting the Other's diversity, including the *balanda*, white, or non indigenous people. In Lapulung's words:

- 15 "Dreamtime Wisdom, Modern-Time Vision" is like a story. It is like that ashes (*ganu'*) that burn at an old site where you and your old people had once let a campfire burn ... Well, our knowledge is encountered in the form of the ashes [*ganu'*] that had been burnt and buried in a fireplace. When you pick up ... that charcoal (*lirrawi'*) had been left there from the old people, there is a bit of knowledge that is hidden in those charcoals and buried, and this is like opening a filing cabinet through our knowledge. It's Yolngu knowledge that is buried in the ashes so the interpretation of "Dreamtime Wisdom, Modern-Time Vision" [is that] it's like a scope ... looking into ... the big picture that brings our reality—the formation of ... reality in our lives suiting today's modern society and the knowledge that had been told in [elders'] stories. We still have to hold onto that ... because [of its] very important [and] vital role in Yolngu knowledge (Keith Lapulung, Milingimbi 2 July 2003 in Djambarrpuyngu and English).
- 16 However, the 'fire ashes' is not only a symbol of relatedness characterising the intimacy of the domestic sphere (cf. Carsten 2000) nor a metaphor for cultural exchange. In the same way that an emphasis on the social structures takes the individual for granted (Cohen 1994:6), it would be equally reductive to give priority to 'culture intended as a system of values', shared symbols and meanings. It is not only the socialisation of a person into the values shared by a group that shapes her personality. It is rather the individual sensitivity — the manner in which one opens oneself to another person — that is called on to verify, define and redefine the fundamental socio-cultural values of the group one inhabits. We encounter and continually discover another person moving through layers of feeling at a different level of intensity and depth, and it is through this process of mutual personal acquaintance that, each time, a personality is formed and acquires a temporary profile, face and gait to the extent that one con/sents or dis/sents with another any aspects of the social and moral value order of the group (De Monticelli 2003:166 ff.). The feeling of embarrassment I experienced and shared with my adoptive sister Rraying and others signalled that my sensitivity was ready to open up to a new sphere and order of values. We can speak of an 'awakening' of the self which opens a passage onto the depths of the other person through which one accepts or refuses to enter. And '[t]he awakening to the value sphere is always mediated by an existing essential identity, by a person, and linked to this [personal] knowledge...' (De Monticelli 2003:168). The fire ashes are not only a generalised image of Yolngu cultural identity, subjectivity, sociality and relatedness. Each encounter around the fire ashes goes beyond a shared ethos, in general terms as 'standing' or 'sitting' around the fire ashes', but points toward *how* each person 'stands' or 'sits' with another: consenting and dissenting tois always a con/senting and dis/senting withanother person in specific encounters through a gradual and never-ending process of personal acquaintance (De Monticelli 2003:168). Examples of these encounters, in everyday life and in ritual contexts are endless and include all forms of positive and negative affective engagements — generosity and resentment, respect and insolence, modesty and boastfulness, love and hatred and the many shadows of grey in between accompanying all events and interactions: from the simplest gestures to the more complex occasions.
- 17 It is this priority of 'sensing in' (Stein 1989:58) or 'tuning in' (Shcultz 1951:79) with others, taking on its endless positive and negative possibilities actualised in each

encounter, that demonstrates that individuality is ontologically deeper than the generalised categories of subjectivity and agency<sup>4</sup>.

- 18 Beyond the 'frivolous show of fashionable cultural models proposed on the catwalk of "science" by a frigid...anthropologist' (De Martino 1980:103, my translation), or the fragmentation of theoretical paradigms, beyond the sustained self-critique on the reproduction of power relationships in the politics of representation, there is a personal reality which is irreducible to any other category or notion and can only be approached not in the terms of but with another person, in encounters where one is open to be literally sub/jected, in the sense of being touched and changed, committed to and accountable for the people we become embroiled with.

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## NOTES

1. In asking the question: "What kind of things are we, persons?", De Monticelli (2000:XV) challenges the most popular answers: "the one that reduces us to invisible identities that are mysteriously embodied in – or emerging from – our organisms, and the one that reduces us to complex physiological systems, mere supports of cognitive and operating functions akin to computer programs" (original text: "quella che ci riduce a delle identità invisibili misteriosamente incorporate nei – o emergenti dai – nostri organismi e quella che ci riduce a sistemi fisici complessi, supporti di funzionicognitive e operative paragonabili a programmi informatici". On the approaches and debates on the person and individuality starting with Mauss' paper to the work by Cohen (1994), Amit and Rapport (2002), Rapport (2001 and 2005), see Tamisari 2006:23-27.

2. As I noted elsewhere, (Tamisari 2006:29) several anthropologists have noted and explained the basis and logic of relatedness in Australian Indigenous communities as stemming from co-residence, everyday cooperation and ritual association. Sansom (1980:12) describes how mobs constitute themselves in grounding their 'union in histories of shared experience between people "who have 'run together' for years n years"'. Myers (1986:91) reports that 'one countrymen... "used to travel together", even though their homelands were separate'; and one's walytja ('one family' and 'all related') are not all consanguines but 'include those with whom one grows up, those with whom one is familiar, those who have fed and cared for one, and those with whom one camps frequently' (Myers 1986:110; see also Myers 1979).

3. Here it would be necessary to explain how many kinship relationships are lived in and continuously negotiated in everyday life in the community.

4. Empathy does not, however, mean a form of affective communion with the other, one's participation in the other's feelings. Empathy is a modality of co-presence and co-presencing, an initial contact which, by changing the dimensions of perception, opens a way to get acquainted with the unexplored depths of another person (Dufrenne 1973:398-407; De Monticelli 1998:134ff).

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