

EDITORIAL IMPRESSIONS: ABOUT 'VERNACULAR' AND THE OTHER CONCEPTS*

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It is slightly eccentric that when we try to discuss a concept that we use often as a point of departure, the effort fails. We believe, through deduction, in focussing on it, but it remains somewhat evasive, untouchable. In the framework of the disciplines of words this is a rather peculiar complication.

Therefore it is justified to ask: what is a concept after all? Why is none of them completely satisfying? Why do they disturb something in our minds, and, potentially, miss some aspect of real life as well?

The steps between different stages of scientific cognition and reasoning remain obscure. Even humble feelings are perplexed (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 3) while thoughts are embraced by a “nimbus” (Wittgenstein 2009: 49). Clifford Geertz (1973: 97) proposes that ethnographic interpretation grows from cultural moods that vary in intensity: “Like fogs, they just settle and lift; like scents, suffuse and evaporate.” It seems that we understand some phenomena deductively but cannot grasp them with words. Furthermore, our concern is to avoid any real or imaginary harm caused to the communities we study and their world perception while cutting the theoretical edge. Apparently, such an evasion is a very complicated effort.

This confusion starts with early attempts to establish theoretical connection between peoples, cultures and nature. Although the cultural evolutionists and other early ethnologists and anthropologists were (from a contemporary point of view) racist colonial agents and supporters of class segregation, they still introduced the idea that all humans are humans, and all the people have culture, history, and religion. They accidentally enabled us to treat everybody as equal (while not considering this to be the case). The scholars simultaneously forgot to expand this equality to animals and wild nature in general.

When looking at this peculiar way to make a quantitative difference in quality between living beings, it appears obvious that, according to Indigenous understanding, nonhumans are “everywhere at the very heart of social life” (Descola 2013: xix). For three decades, I have explored the hunting practice and world-understanding of the Komi people, a Finno-Ugric community inhabiting the western slopes of the Ural

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Mountains. My Komi friends still remember this sameness, claiming that dogs and horses are also humans, just a different kind. Apparently, it is complicated to ensure dignity for all beings, even if we try not to insult anybody theoretically. Scholars struggle to see themselves as a random human group or subjects of the animal kingdom. Attempts to neutralise scientific vocabulary while maintaining its creative and heuristic potential are ongoing with little hope for a victorious ending or overall agreement.

Apparently, there is ongoing competition in distancing oneself from loaded concepts. However, it is complicated to tell which one involves the smaller burden of colonialism, ethnocentrism, or “primitivism, classism, and marginalization”, as Simon Bronner (2022) claims regarding the recent rise in application of the concept ‘vernacular’ in folkloristics. Curiously enough, several prominent scholars propose that the ‘vernacular’ concept is a cure for scholarly pains in approaching people’s worldview and designates personal spiritual self-expression, engagement and understanding (see Primiano 1995; 2012; Bowman and Valk 2012; Valk 2023). Marion Bowman (2014: 101) defines this approach as connected to an attempt to comprehend “how one would act in the world were one to be operating within a particular worldview”. It seems that these scholars talk about completely different things. Is somebody completely wrong? Or is the ‘vernacular’ a particularly obscure concept?

Why is there a discrepancy? When I have proposed the concept of ‘vernacular belief’ or ‘vernacular religion’ in anthropology papers, my colleagues cannot even understand what I am talking about. They ask, do I mean ‘folk religion’, and suggest replacing the term ‘vernacular’ with a more comprehensive one. And if I want to be understood and have no desire to engage in conceptual discussion in every article, I follow the advice. So, I appear as a random user of the term ‘vernacular’ who avoids involvement in theoretical debate and hopes somebody equips us with good words. Besides, the ‘vernacular’ proves to be a disciplinarily limited concept.

Ambivalence is not distinctive only to the concept under discussion. Contradiction appears common in various intellectual domains. Uncertainty empowers beliefs (Leete and Lipin 2015: 79–82; Valk 2015: 161), and can do the same for knowledge (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 7). But then this hesitant cognition may be obstructed by disregarding senses because it can also be true that “the expression of uncertainty is senseless” (Wittgenstein 2009: 96).

Connection between different forms of cognition appear problematic. Does it mean that concepts stand apart or stay distant from immediate experience and sensibility? Or does our knowledge still evolve from meaningful dialogue on the ethnographic field? Can we sense or copy the immediate knowledge at the ethnographic field and convert it into academic form?

Feeling is a mysterious consequence of impressions (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 4–5). Uncertainty of ethnographic feeling and thought is somehow strict and organised. According to my field impressions, Komi hunters aim to be evasive in their practical conduct, thoughts and narratives, employing reasonably rigorous rules for uncertainty (Leete and Lipin 2012: 295–298; 2015: 77–79). They expect that I will do the same in my scholarly research (Leete 2020: i–ii). These claims put me into an obscure scholarly position, driving me to think about “the other side of transparency” (Leete 2019: 3) and claiming that “hybridity is a peculiar kind of uncertainty” (Leete 2022a: 16), because even intrinsically coherent concepts appear ambivalent (*ibid.*).

The application of Indigenous knowledge as a source for scholarly concepts is complicated by the process of the hybridisation of Indigenous world perception in the contemporary world. Our fieldwork partners have access to written sources and incorporate ethnographic research results into their narratives. (Leete 2022b: 96–97) This does not mean that contemporary Indigenous knowledge is spoiled and useless in the discussion of ‘vernacular’ or ‘folk’ ideas. But we need to consider carefully heterogeneous composition and the background of Indigenous narratives.

Our Indigenous fieldwork partners might construct their knowledge from various sources and this makes it intriguing to derive ethnographic comprehension directly from the field. Concepts appear obstructed from the ultimate truth even in abstract reasoning. Deduction regularly evades expression and precision. The heterogeneity of fieldwork data and impressions regarding Indigenous knowledge somehow correspond to our perplexed interpretations of basic concepts. By enabling comprehension with people’s experience, the ‘vernacular’ is not misused today, although the loaded history of the concept makes it ambivalent and problematic. In its own turn, this contradiction provokes the desire to discuss the ‘vernacular’ more deeply.

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