Cultural Heritage protection
A response to Mike Rowland and Beverley Butler (AT 23 [1]).
As an anthropologist living and practicing in Africa, I identify a flaw in Rowland and Butler’s otherwise admirable analysis of heritage in conflict situations. First, the authors seem to imply that the nation-states created as a result of the relatively recent colonial experience are largely coterminous with the autochthonous cultural groups as owners of the inheritance they discuss. Second, the authors seem to assume also that under contemporary plural-society structure the constituent cultural groups negotiate their preferences on equal terms. I believe that neither assumption holds. Within many African countries the views of the strong are imposed on the marginalized and the weak without any recourse to national supervisory bodies that might redress the wrongs. It is on these grounds that the importance of intervention by appropriate supranational bodies such as UNESCO, whatever their faults, cannot be overemphasized.

Plural-society democracy is nascent and illiteracy too rampant to allow for the type of recommendations the authors have made. Because the smaller, weaker groups are disempowered in the new extraneous knowledge systems in which the discourse occurs they are unable to negotiate and secure their own positions in it. They are routinely imposed upon by a seeming conspiracy of officialdom, imported religion and big business working in favour of interests that are extraneous to these local ones. The present order using UNESCO and similar bodies at regional or global levels is the nearest the world can come to offering realistic assistance to the culturally weak and vulnerable. Anything less will surely exacerbate an already bad situation. It will amount to conspiring, or at least siding, with the self-serving mighty against the hapless weak.

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DARWINIAN EVOLUTION—BROAD ENOUGH FOR CULTURE?
Comment on Ingold and Mesoudi, Whiten and Laland (AT 23[2]) and Reynolds (AT 23[5])
In his critique of the recent article by Mesoudi, Whiten and Laland (2006), Tim Ingold observes that we need to ‘respond to the challenge of “evolutionary biology” in terms more robust and forthright than we have used up to now’ (2007: 17). Nonetheless, despite the forthrightness of his admonition, Ingold mainly ends up suggesting that we need a ‘wider concept of evolution’ that allows us to ‘understand the self-organizing and transformational dynamics of fields of relationships among both human and non-human being’ (ibid.). Yet evolutionary biology already involves what Ingold advocates. Self-organization and transformation are not terms antithetical to a Darwinian evolutionary perspective. What is missing, we argue, is substantive identification of the reasons why the umbrella of Darwinian evolution is not broad enough to include cultural evolution.

The difficulty social and cultural anthropologists have had with developing a unifying theory about cultural systems, their relationship to human behaviour, and how they change through time stems from the complexity of modelling self-modifying systems, not from failure to embed the enterprise in a Darwinian evolutionary framework as argued by Mesoudi et al. Self-modification is precisely where using classical mathematical modelling for social human social systems falters, since we need ‘models of how complex, information-processing, self-reflective, self-restructuring systems operate, develop and change’ (Read 1990: 55, emphasis added). It is the self-reflective, self-restructing aspects of human societies that make the Darwinian umbrella inadequate.

Though culture, a key characteristic of human societies, has biological origins driven by Darwinian evolution, once in place it has had consequences transcending those origins, just as life forms arising through physical and chemical processes had consequences transcending their physical and chemical origins. With the origin of life, fundamentally new physical forms arose that had within them the means for generating new forms that can be variants on the parent form. The new life forms could engage in endogenously initiated, rather than exogenously driven, reproduction and thereby set off a chain reaction of events that we refer to as biological evolution. The same is true, we argue, of the development of organisms having a cultural/conceptual basis for societal organization that arises endogenously from within the mind/brain of the societal members rather than exogenously from their behavioural interaction (Read 2007, Read et al. [forthcoming]). As Vernon Reynolds comments, ‘[a]nimals are different from humans in that, whereas animal social structures arise out of the behaviour and relationships of individuals (Hinde 1976), human social structures arise from the mental constructs of participant members of the society’ (Reynolds 2007: 24).

The distinction we are drawing starts with a Darwinian system defined by properties at a higher ontological level (e.g. phenotype versus genome) and subject to selection acting on variation occurring at a lower ontological level. This leads to ‘population thinking’, according to which Darwinian theory describes how the action of variation and selection mechanisms, both operating on distinct ‘short’ characteristic time scales, lead to changes in the frequency distribution of attributes in a population over longer time periods. Such a system contrasts with an organization in the form of a culturally framed social system that, because an organization can be self-monitoring and self-modifying, is capable of endogenously induced change. An organization need not be embedded in a population of organizations, nor is it reducible to a population of components with attributes that suffice to characterize the organization. An organization is not simply the aggregation of components; hence the processes we are concerned with do not involve variation and selection among components or properties, but are rather the processes of recruitment, differentiation, specialization and coordination among the parts of the organization/social system. Change arises from assessment of how well existing structure(s) and processes of the organization deliver the organization’s self-attributed functionality, and takes the form of change in structure and processes rather than change in attributes of components at a lower ontological level. Change, in this non-Darwinian scenario, also arises when the organization generates new attributes of functionality for itself, such as the change from a hunter-gatherer band form of organization to a tribal form of organization (Lane et al. [forthcoming]).

As both Reynolds and Ingold note, turf is not the issue. Nor, as Reynolds observes, is it a matter of ‘a separate realm of discourse for human society, human ideas and human actions, setting them apart from the rest of the biological world’ (Reynolds 2007: 24), if only because the capacity for human ideas and human actions arose through a Darwinian process of biological evolution.

But the processes giving rise to new forms may also give rise to new processes that are not variants of themselves; otherwise biology would be reducible to chemistry and physics. Though the ‘theory’ of the unilinear evolution of societies has rightly been critiqued as overly simplistic, inconsistent with empirical patterns of change, and failing to identify an adequate process whereby the supposed evolutionary pattern could arise, there is validity in its focus on organizational self-transformation as the primary modality through which evolution has taken place in human societies. For example, social organization in so-called kinship-based societies derives from a constructed, conceptual system expressed through the logic of a kinship terminology that also determines possible trajectories for expansion of its scope (Read 2001). What constitutes the generating concepts of a kinship terminology is mathematically demonstrable (Read 1984), thereby making it possible to identify, in a precise manner, the sense in which it is a conceptual construction (but not the tetradic structure hypothesized by Allen [2004]). It follows that kinship structures do not arise simply through emergence from behaviour, as would have to be the case if the origin of kinship structures was to be included within the Darwinian framework of evolution viewed as a population process acting on the characteristics of individuals.
There needs to be dialogue as Ingold and Reynolds suggest, but dialogue that first recognizes the shift in the modality through which evolution takes place.

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‘Travelling spirits: Migrants, markets and moralities’, in Berlin in September 2007. Keynote speaker Michael Lambek presented a range of ethnographic examples from Mayotte, Madagascar and Switzerland, and reminded the audience that the movement essential to spirits is not across space but rather from the ethereal into the material world. Furthermore, the spirits’ journeys do not necessarily relate to contemporary journeys of their mediums but rather to their own travels in past lives, for instance when they need to find information on certain events or therapies. Lambek’s statement that the ‘essence’ of spirits lies in their materialization, their repeated coming into presence, formed a leitmotif of the conference and invited the participants not to focus narrowly on physical mobility but to include the spirits’ capacities to negotiate between concealment and revelation.

The first session addressed ‘commodification and economic success’ in relation to the merging of economic and religious activities in transnational networks, which can provide alternative moral meanings for financial obligations, but also transfer neoliberal business ideas into the religious realm. Rijk van Dijk argued that the success of urban Ghanaian Pentecostalists needs to be understood in relation to the spirit of entrepreneurialism, which reflects moralities of the market and can foster individual competition as well as feelings of insecurity. Other papers examined a rapidly growing spirit industry, for instance in Vietnam, where consumer tastes shape religious products and master mediums have to apply the economic laws of supply and demand in order to compete for custom among different consumer groups by effectively marketing the goods of salvation.

Clearly, economic issues related either to the commercialization of religious practice or to the definition of power relations within cult communities have gained significance in transnational networks and can also underlie modes of religious inclusion and exclusion. The session on ‘place-making’ started with John Eade, who elaborated on the history of sacred spatialization in world cities such as London, where new groups of migrants contribute to the re-ordering of urban belonging. But the continuing spread of new temples and mosques, and the integration of new styles of music and dance can indicate the recent arrival of more immigrants and serve as a marker of a group’s distinctiveness. Throughout the conference symbolic geographies of the sacred, and ritual space production and appropriation, which are contested in the social spheres linking home countries and diasporas, were central to discussion of the transnational politics of belonging. This also involves the increasing mobility of religious specialists, some of whom don’t need to move physically, but employ technologies of audio/video and tele-evangelism to spread their religious messages and find new adherents.

Karen Fjelstad opened the session on ‘mobility of spirits and religious agents’, and

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Religious belonging today is increasingly practised on the move, or in religious networks that cross the borders of different nation-states. Anthropologists working on religion are thus challenged by new questions. When religions travel, what are the pathways and routes of religious agents? How are power relations negotiated in transnational religious networks, between travelling religious experts and their followers, and within religious communities? Another issue is the question of place-making: where do migrants gather, meet, and find places for worship? How do people in religious networks simultaneously engage with more than one locality? And how do economic and religious activities overlap? These and other issues central to research on religions in migration were debated in the workshop

The programme and list of participants can be found at www2.hu-berlin.de/ethno/pdf/Conference_Travelling_Spirits.pdf