



Research Cluster Graduate School
Society and Culture in Motion
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in collaboration with the Seminar für Ethnologie

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Public lecture

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Putting complex worlds into words - by doing comparison, for example

**Venue: Reichardtstr. 6, seminar room
4.30 p.m.**

Ethnographic knowledge is in demand. Science, politics and regulation suspect that anthropology can deliver much needed in-depth expertise on peoples, regions and all kinds of 'cultural' phenomena. Yet their idea of ethnographic knowledge is an idea of knowledge that *represents* the world in more detail than other methods are able to offer: close-up, fine-grained, rich in detail. In its native terrain anthropology, however, the idea of representing the world through ethnography has seen better days. The writing culture debate and several "turns" have left ethnographic knowledge unsure of its epistemic or even ontic status. This is felt nowhere more keenly than in ethnographic comparison. While the method of comparison has always been "impossible" (E. E. Pritchard), it is today particularly challenged by wider debates about post-constructivism, the poverty of critique and attempts at developing non-representational theory.

I want to put in a good word for comparing. As a research practice, comparing is not only inevitable but also a productive form of producing knowledges. I speak of comparing and doing comparison rather than the method of comparison, because I want to emphasise the necessity to understand the *process* of comparing as a relational practice that carries the chance of making discoveries and producing something for others "to invent around" (Strathern). It is in the production of comparability – producing objects of comparison, relating them to each other, or failing to do so, and giving them a chance to "talk back" at us, the researchers – it is in this process of producing comparability rather than consciously seeking comparative results that analytical ethnography comes into its own. This particular form of entangling empirical research and theorising, I call thick comparison. In the following, I will discuss three dimensions that I associate with thick comparing: witness to witness, reflection to diffraction, identity to collaboration.

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