



Chapter 9

Drawing the lines

The limitations of intercultural *ekphrasis*

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What do I see in you?

The present paper offers the reader a brief personal reflection on the ekphrastic relations between visual and written imagery in anthropological research, followed by a self-critical reading of the possibilities and shortcomings of using visual recording techniques in the field (drawn from my own experience in Ethiopia, where I have been working both as anthropologist and as graphic illustrator).

By writing, anthropologists recreate transmitted social memories for the benefit of their readers and, in doing so, the literary nature of their endeavour becomes manifest. Much like a novelist, when the social scientist produces and publishes a written text, he/she offers the public a fictional reality shared between the transmitter of a memory and the reader's intellectual reception and aesthetic response. This shared reality is, in the proper sense, an imaginary universe that is summoned by the author (Atkinson 1990: 57–81; Hammersley 1992: 22–8; Iser 1980: 53–85).

Anthropology has traditionally been a literary activity deriving its self-legitimacy as a 'reproductive' device from a constant rhetoric contrast with the oral conditions of ethnographic enquiry (Atkinson 1990: 88–103; Sperber 1982: 32–3). Furthermore, anthropological language, style and argumentation have depended heavily on visual and geometric metaphors. That is, to analyse social life, we tend to use words that are imbued with imagistic powers. Anthropological discourse has always relied heavily on what we could call its ekphrastic value (from GK. *ekphrasis*, 'description'). But we frequently talk about 'centre' and 'periphery' in societies, 'high' and 'low levels', 'position', 'perspective', 'space', 'framework', 'dimension', etc., without generally considering what is implied in such recurring metaphors (Ramos 2001: 97).

The word 'ekphrasis' was originally used by Greek classical rhetoricians to qualify a description with great visual content. Its special use in the European history of art relates to the *ekphrasein* of ancient Greek paintings of sculptures that have since disappeared (Heffernan 1993; Hochmann 1994; Krieger 1992). A more recent meaning of 'ekphrasis' reflects both a stress on the intricate relations between the visual arts and literature, and on the possibility of using





the imagistic capacity of literature as a methodological lever to analyse art. A derivative use of the expression can be found in the study of the complementarities between travel literature and travel iconography.

In any case, 'ekphrasis' is conceived as an important tool in the study of the aesthetic impact of a description in the reader's/spectator's mind. In an article called 'From lies to truth: colonial *ekphrasis* and the act of cross-cultural translation', Thomas Cummins focuses his attention on how pictorial images were an important factor of multicultural translation (and evangelising) in the New World conquered by the Spanish. While a mutual learning of linguistic codes of communication served as a means to register and spread information and ideas, pictorial images were especially important to establish a common cognitive ground between colonisers and colonised (Cummins 1995: 172). Likewise, because they are designed to have an immediate aesthetic impact upon the spectator, pictorial or graphical images can be useful tools in interactive procedures of ethnographic construction.

Today, image-processing techniques have become increasingly available and popularised as research and discursive tools in the reinvigorated classical field of 'visual anthropology' (Pink 2001: 24–9), the fast expansion of which grows out of the widespread post-modern conception that a century-old obsession of asserting discursive legitimacy, in 'literary anthropology', may have hindered its heuristic potency. By connecting their (written) words with a variety of graphic devices (from opposition tables and kinship schemes to analytical diagrams, drawings, photographs, filmed data, computerized multimedia, web design, etc.), researchers are now offered a range of complementary possibilities of reporting on different social and cultural realities, and may indeed feel obliged to explore new ways of retrieving and managing such data.

Still, because such devices and techniques are material extensions of one's mental perspective, they very much abide to the rule that anthropological strategies of interpreting/reinventing social worlds are a measure of imposing the researcher's own cultural background on them (Pink 2001: 18–9, 24). At the end of the day, when anthropologists use 'visual' means of recording social and cultural data, they are, as ever, still dependent on their literary world-view, which, coincidentally, is marked by the above-mentioned set of metaphorical operations (based on 'objectivity', 'observations', 'points of view', 'perspectives', 'dimensions', etc.).

To be conscious of the virtues and shortcomings of the 'ekphrastic' endeavour is an important requirement in the search for a cognitive and aesthetic common ground between subject and researcher in anthropology, 'visual' or otherwise. In this respect, it is of little consequence whether the preferred tool for registering, mastering and treating visual data is the latest digital technological novelty or the humblest of pencil drawings. Personally, I tend to prefer the latter medium, since it relates better to the traditional craft-quality of anthropological practices and discourses. In fact, for some years now I have pursued two distinct, but increasingly convergent careers – as a researcher in Anthropology and





as a graphic illustrator (see Ramos 2000, 2002). My training and practice in these two areas have caused me to pay special attention to culturally meaningful visual elements, in connection with my written (and oral) productions. I personally tend to make an extensive, albeit prudent, use of graphic means of recording and interpreting my field experiences and to use them as a window for intercultural dialogue.

During fieldwork research, I have found that a trained eye and a skilled hand are useful instruments for documenting both material culture aspects and varied instances of social life. Yet, drawing is not merely a documenting activity but also an important and creative tool for interacting with and relating to human beings, of different cultures and languages. I have been using my meagre drawing skills in quite a systematic way while travelling and doing fieldwork. It generally strikes me that, whereas taking photographs or using a video camera frequently creates a barrier between me and the people I work with, when drawing I become the subject of a more benign form of curiosity, by many of those that I address. When travelling, I continuously use a sketchbook as a noting tool, where I draw everything that catches my eye. I am generally aware that by drawing in such places as in the middle of a cereal field, in a collective taxi, a religious festival or in a café I'm bound to attract people's curiosity. This habit has led me to all sorts of situations, some very gratifying, some disturbing, some life-imperilling (Plate 9.1).¹ The act of drawing can, then, be more than just a pastime or an exercise of visual discipline: being a source of interaction that helps to humanise me in other people's eyes, it becomes part of the anthropological process of tentatively bringing together observer and observed.²

Honi soit qui mal y peint

It would, of course, be naive to think that the practice of producing images for intercultural communication can be taken lightly, and that one doesn't have to be careful with how such images are perceived, handled and interpreted. In the following pages, I describe a situation where my willingness to interact through my own handmade images in a different culture was cut short by the negative expectation that such images might be interpreted in such way that could contribute to jeopardise my fieldwork. This situation will, I hope, offer a lesson of prudence, both in terms of one's interactions in the field and with regard to the epistemological limits of 'visual anthropology'. During a two-month stay in Ethiopia in 2002, where I was collecting ethnographic data, I was, quite unexpectedly, asked to produce two sets of paintings for the new display of the ethnographic collection of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (Addis Ababa University). The new display's curators, Carmen Porrás Gómez (a Spanish anthropologist) and Natalia Hirsch (a French art historian), who challenged me to make that contribution, were already familiar with some of my artwork on Ethiopia: two years before, I had published an illustrated travel and ethnographic account on Northern Ethiopia (Ramos 2000) and participated in the art show





that marked the opening of the new Harari Cultural Centre, in the south-eastern town of Harar.³

The commissioned work was (a) a set of 12 square painted canvases occupying the total space of 3×2 m., with a rendering of the legend of Makeda, the Queen of Sheba, and (b) a 2×1.5 m. diptych, equally on canvas, about the *buk* cult of the Nilotic Nuer. Regarding the first painting, I was particularly interested in producing a narrative sequence of the Ethiopian version of the Queen of Sheba story in a way that would evoke the popular painted strips (Plate 9.2), which are one of the most common objects in Ethiopian ‘airport art’. My idea was to produce a modernised version of the Sheba legend that would reflect my personal views on present-day Ethiopian society. The board of the IES accepted my proposal and I began toying with the script, until I settled on the story of a country girl who would become a beauty queen in Addis Ababa (Plate 9.3); when visiting her kin in Israel, she would somehow fall in love with a mysterious arms dealer conveniently called Solomon; their son Menelik would later turn out to be a shrewd politician whose goal would be to bring multi-ethnic Ethiopian society under his despotic wing.

The second painting was more straightforward than the first but was still challenging, albeit at a different level: the requested subject was the fertility cult of the *buk*, of the Nuer⁴ and my task would be to illustrate its different ritual and symbolic aspects, according to the classical rules of ethnographical interpretation. I was only too aware that my knowledge of Nuer ethnography was mainly literary and, although I was in contact with Nuer immigrants in Addis Ababa, I had never been in Nuerland. As soon as I began referring the project to some Ethiopian friends and acquaintances, I started noticing a muted discomfort regarding my idea for the Queen of Sheba painting – whereas, they were basically unresponsive regarding the Nuer piece. The hints that I shouldn’t go ahead with the Sheba painting became stronger, and I finally decided to give up that part of the project. In the end, only the Nuer piece was put up for the opening of the new display, but not without some grumbles, as I was later informed (I had left Ethiopia a few weeks before the opening).

According to rumours reported by a friend, some members of the Society of Friends of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (SOFIES),⁵ once having seen the painting, had apparently suggested it should either be removed during the show’s opening or, at least, hung in a discreet place. They were worried about the possible disapproval of its contents from both the general (Ethiopian) public and the (Ethiopian) patrons of the collection. It was feared that the central upper part of the diptych would hurt people’s feelings of propriety, since it presented a black and white realistic scene of a naked black (Nuer) woman giving birth to a whitish baby, under the moonlight (Plate 9.4; inspired by photographs of Sharon Hutchinson, in Hutchinson, 1996: 194–5, pls 17 and 18). Two rather sketchy sections flanked this central section: on the left-hand side, the blood sacrifice of a spotted ox, and, on the right, a landscape of a Nuer village and field under heavy rainfall.





The three upper sections represented three complementary forms of manifestation of the *buk*, the white and black fertility spirit that the Nuer traditionally associated with rivers and streams: sacrificial blood, birth blood and rainy season water symbolically connected the upper to the lower part of the painting. The latter was further divided horizontally in two sections: the top one was a blood-red band bathing the blue silhouettes of various river animals (fishes, snakes, crocodiles, river birds, frogs, etc.) and water insects; the bottom section was a hydrographical and orographical map of a sun-scorched Nuerland, serving as background to a realistic representation of a pied crow, an animal avatar of the *buk* spirit (Evans Pritchard, 1956: 31–3, 45–6, 81, 125–7; Hutchinson, 1980: 224–7). The painting was meant to be an ethnographically accurate painted interpretation of a traditional Nuer ‘belief’, and there was not much ‘artistic’ licence in the portraying of the birth scene – that I chose to do a ‘photo-like’ portrait was stressed in the option of using only black, grey and white tones in the upper central section.

Some people were not very comfortable with the presence of the painting in the ethnographic display, but there wasn’t any special stir about it. Of course, I knew from the outset that it was unlikely that many Nuer would visit the exhibition. In fact, Nuer immigrants in Addis Ababa, more often than not a socially marginalised and politically voiceless community, are not the most frequent of visitors to the ethnographic displays of the IES – or to any highbrow ‘cultural event’ of the Ethiopian capital, for that matter.⁶ The main challenge of producing and displaying the *buk* painting was that a relevant number of the expected public (Ethiopian and foreign) of the IES display either has a training in anthropology and ‘knows’ about the Nuer, or is familiar with ethnographic museums and ‘knows’ that painted canvases are very rarely used to convey information about indigenous material or immaterial cultures. That said, the risk I felt I was taking was mainly epistemological: questions aroused in my mind as to what was the value, the meaning and the validity of painting and displaying (not in Nuerland but in Addis Ababa) a piece based on obvious ethnographic clichés. Also, what made me give up the Queen of Sheba project but not the *buk* one? With that other painting, I wouldn’t be portraying aspects of the traditional culture of indigenous peoples regarding whom many Northern Ethiopians still today derogatorily designate as *shankilla* (‘slaves’, ‘black’, or ‘primitive’ peoples), but I would rather be directly impinging on the ideological core of Abyssinian nationality.

The striking characteristic of the Ethiopian elaboration of the biblical story of the ‘Queen of the South’, known as Makeda in Ethiopia, and Bilkis in the Arabian versions, is that it establishes a very special alliance between Yahweh and the *abasha*. The fruit of the brief union between her and the Israeli King Solomon, Menelik I, brings the Ark of the Covenant from Jerusalem and is crowned in the holy city of Aksum as the first king of the Solomonic dynasty in Ethiopia.⁷

This fabulous narrative is used to explain the historical connection of the Amhara and Tygrinean with the Semitic world, and, until recently, to legitimise





their political hold of the country. My proposed version was a somewhat satirical portrait of the present, post-socialist, Ethiopia, where the political tensions that result from the federal system now put in place are expressed through the language of ethnicity. The feeling of many Ethiopians today is that the federal government structures have been taken over by the members of the TPLF, a Tygrentian-based guerrilla movement that fought the socialist dictatorship with the military, political and financial support of foreign governments such as the United States of America – now explicitly consolidated in the good diplomatic relations of the Ethiopian government with both the USA and Israel.

Of course, had I finished the Sheba painting, it wouldn't have been the first non-traditional interpretation of the legend. The lobby of the Hilton Hotel, in Addis Ababa, displays in permanence a late 1960s personal interpretation of the story by the Ethiopian painter Eskender Boghossian (of Armenian origin). On the other hand, the love story of Sheba and Solomon, already known in medieval Europe and popularised in the Renaissance, became a very fashionable artistic motto in the late nineteenth century, as an epitome of orientalist romance.⁸

In present day Ethiopia, Makeda is a very popular iconic figure, just as Solomon is a key figure in popular wisdom and medicine (Mercier 1992: 138). The references to their love story are, actually, a recurring element in many instances of Ethiopian social life, not least because of its linkage with the Christian liturgy: the *tabot*, i.e. the Ark of the Covenant, representations of which play a central part in the public ceremonies of *Fassika* (Easter) and *Temqat* (Epiphany), is said to have been brought from Israel to Ethiopia by Menelik, the son of Makeda and Solomon, as already mentioned. The 'airport art' paintings that circulate in souvenirs and handicrafts shops (see Plate 9.2) echo the vitality with which oral popular culture has developed and transformed the old literary legend of the *Kebra Nagast*: the love story is collated with the myth of the great serpent Arwe, Menelik has a half-brother of *shankilla* descent, and it is the queen, and not Solomon, who is depicted with the Lion of Judah.

Still, as far as I am aware, it would have been a novelty in Addis Ababa for a *ferenj* (pl. *ferenjoch*; a 'Frank', or 'white person'), if not to go about painting the Solomon–Sheba story, at least to actually display it in one of the most visited museums of the Ethiopian capital. That, in fact, had been the reason why I was, in the beginning, so wilfully drawn to accept the proposal: I felt I was simultaneously being offered a unique chance to evaluate the social impact of introducing both a variation of meaning to the Abyssinian national myth and a new mode and style of visual representation unmistakably foreign to the customary 'cultural paintings', as Ethiopians call (in English) their traditional/airport art.

Contacting my friends and acquaintances in Addis Ababa, I soon recognized that, seductive as it seemed, the project could unfortunately imperil my professional status in Ethiopia. The painting would most likely be subjected to levels of reading and appreciation beyond my control, with the risk of provoking a negative reaction from either the Ethiopian Church authorities or some political





and intellectual circles – or even, as I knew had happened before, a popular outburst of anger towards a *ferenj* (see below).

That the intention of producing a modernised version of the Sheba story could be read as insulting by Orthodox Christians was specially worrying to me, since the feeling one has is that the Orthodox Christian Church feels it is somehow under constant threat and tends to react defensively against any further erosion of its traditional hold over Ethiopian society. That could definitely be the case with a ‘heterodox’ painting relating to the most sacred of Christian Ethiopian traditions: that of the coming of the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia, in the hands of Menelik, the first-born son of Solomon and the ‘Queen of the South’. It must be noted that the present social context of the country is one of great competition between the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and, on the one hand, an increasingly self-affirming Muslim community, on the other, growingly popular Protestant alternative sects – a situation that is enmeshed with the new political situation created by the change of regime, in 1991, that led to the present federal, regionalised and ethnicised state.

Blinding

I should state that part of my research work in oral history has been carried out in Northern Ethiopia, in predominantly Christian areas, where I tend to collaborate with local Church people (priests and deacons, laymen, erudites, etc.; see Ramos 2000). Thanks to my friends’ somewhat muted advice and the total lack of enthusiasm they invariably expressed each time I’d mention the project, it became growingly clear to me that nurturing (even if involuntarily) a reputation as an *agent provocateur* in Addis Ababa could actually harm my anthropological research, in the very conservative areas of the North Amhara region – either because the necessary letters of authorisation could be hard to come by or simply because people would prefer not to talk to me if they were informed (through a newspaper column or by way of mouth, for instance) that I was the author of a painting that seemed to insult Abyssinian *affatarik* (‘traditional history’). Moreover, I was conscious of the fact that, in previous instances, not long before, other *ferenjoch* had been in trouble for having, in one way or another, been involuntarily caught in situations where their behaviour was considered insulting to the Ethiopian state and/or society. The most telling of the cases that came to my knowledge was the following.

In 1994, a German couple living in Addis asked the renowned Harari artist Tibebe Terrfa to paint their car and the gate of their house. He acquiesced and decided to make a strongly expressionist depiction of a multitude of distorted and anguished human faces. For a westerner, these were somewhat reminiscent of Munch’s *The Cry*, but for Ethiopians the more immediate reading was that they represented evil *zar* spirits or *ganen* demons. According to rumours that spread quickly in the ‘Old Airport’ neighbourhood (the quarter of Addis Ababa





where the couple lived), the paintings were read as evidence that satanic rites were taking place in the *ferenjoch* house.

Unfortunately for the Germans, the completion of the paintings coincided with the publication of the results of the referendum in which the Eritreans chose to become independent from Ethiopia, an event that many Ethiopians saw as immensely traumatic, and so people's emotions were running high in Addis Ababa. In the day when Eritrea became effectively independent, an angry mob concentrated in front of the house's gate, and started shouting accusations of Devil worship against the Germans, clearly intent on sacking the house and expelling the owners, in front of a television camera. The police finally intervened and the Germans managed to get out of the situation physically unharmed. A few weeks later, unable to deal with the negative social pressure, the couple painfully decided to leave Ethiopia for good.⁹ As the above-mentioned episodes remind us, a possible outcome of an intercultural 'ekphrasis' is what one could call the *Salmon Rushdie Syndrome*¹⁰ – a contextual combination of interpretations that concur to bring the meanings of an intended action totally out of the control of the one who promoted it. There are things that ought not be said, done, shown or seen, in certain circumstances, lest misunderstanding prevails, research is hindered and understanding is denied. Such, in a way, is a precious lesson to be learned from Andersen's tale *The Emperor's Clothes*. Our ingrained desire, as humans, to communicate, to expose our convictions, to say something, put us sometimes on the oblique tracks of gullibility, misunderstanding or conflict.

For this reason, and in order to satisfy a possible (and legitimate) desire of my western readers to see the abovementioned, not displayed, version of the legend of the Queen of Sheba, without unnecessarily annoying their Ethiopian counterparts, I decided to reproduce the painting here, dully covered in black ink and without the corresponding legends (Plate 9.5).¹¹

Notes

- 1 Specially in Muslim regions, where many coach and taxi drivers cannot repress their curiosity and tend to turn their head back, or sideways, to be able to see what I'm drawing.
- 2 A very interesting experiment in this regard is Deena Newman's use of a comic-strip structure to narrate the web of rumours surrounding the strange death of a *babtawwy* ('hermit' or 'aucherite') in Addis Ababa (Newman 1998).
- 3 The Harari Cultural Centre is located in what was formerly a rich indian merchant's house. Although Arthur Rimbaud never lived there, the Centre was baptised by the French Cultural Cooperation as the 'Maison de Rimbaud' – the Centre is locally known as *Rambo bet* or 'Rambo house'.
- 4 E. E. Evans Pritchard, who raised the Nuer to anthropological fame, has done his fieldwork among the Western Nuer, from Sudan. But it is the material culture of the Eastern Nuer, who live across the border, in Ethiopia (in the administrative region of Gambela) that is represented in the IES collection. The civil war in Sudan caused





- an eastwards flow of refugees, who settled in refugee camps in the Gambela region. Addis Ababa also harbours a growing migrant population from Nuerland.
- 5 SOFIES was founded in 1968 to support the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, then under the auspices of Emperor Haile Selassie. SOFIES has always been a very active fundraiser for the IES library, archive and museum, and is to this day an independent organization with obvious influence in the decision-making processes of the IES.
 - 6 It should be mentioned that, due partly to the presence of a large and mixed expatriate community of diplomats (from more than seventy embassies), members of a variety of international organisations and NGOs, Addis Ababa has a surprisingly cosmopolitan feel about it.
 - 7 The oldest surviving document that relates this legend is the *Kebra Nagast*, or the 'Glory of Kings', a fourteenth-century manuscript contemporary of the rise of the so-called Solomonic dynasty in Ethiopia (Munro-Hay 2001; Wallis-Budge 1932).
 - 8 An early version of the story appears in the Qur'an and in old Arabic folktales as well as in Jew post-biblical literature (in the *Targum Sheni*, the *Midrash Mishle* and in the *Midrash Hachefez*). In European lore, it appears in the guise of the 'Queen with an ass' foot' and in the tales of the Sybil. The encounter of the Queen of Sheba and Solomon is depicted, among others, in a panel painting by Tintoretto, in Rubens' *The Visit of the Queen of Sheba*, in Veronese's, *The Queen kneeling to Solomon* and in Lorrain's *The Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba*. The theme became quite popular in dramatic literature and music (from Calderon de la Barca's *The Oriental Sybil* and Rider Haggard's *Queen of Sheba's Ring* to Goldmark's and Gounod's operas, to Respighi's ballet, and Yeats' poems).
 - 9 These events were first referred to me by Tibebe Terra herself, during a taped interview, and later confirmed by a number of other sources.
 - 10 As a reminder to the situation of extreme discomfort that the writer Indian-born Salmon Rushdie had to endure for several years as a result from having been the subject of a *Fatwah* pronounced by the hardline Iranian religious authorities, after the publication of his novel *Satanic Verses*.
 - 11 See *Secret Painting*, by the British conceptual art group, Art & Language (1967–8), and the short story 'Tafas' by Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares (in *Las Cronicas de Bustos Domecq* 1967); these are recent refinements of an old motif in European art and literature, that of the invisible painting (from *Father Amis*, by Stricker and Juan Manuel's *exempla* about the king and the weavers, to Cervantes' *El retabulo de Maravilla*, Stendhal's *Le chef d'oeuvre inconnu* or even Mairgitte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*).

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