

## COMPARISON IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Why and how do social and cultural anthropologists make comparisons? What problems do they encounter in doing so, and how might these be resolved? What, if anything, makes one comparison better than another? This book answers these questions by exploring the many ways in which, from the nineteenth century to the present day, comparative methods have been conceptualised and reinvented, praised and rejected, multiplied and unified. Anthropologists today use comparisons to describe and to explain, to generalise and to challenge generalisations, to critique and to create new concepts. In this multiplicity of often contradictory aims lie both the key challenge of anthropological comparison, and also its key strength. Matei Candea maps a path through that entangled conversation, providing a ground-up reassessment of the key conceptual issues at the heart of any form of anthropological comparison, whilst creating a bold charter for reconsidering the value of comparison in anthropology and beyond.

Matei Candea is a reader at the University of Cambridge and a former honorary editor of the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*. He is the author of *Corsican Fragments* (2010), and editor of *The Social after Gabriel Tarde: Debates and Assessments* (2010) and *Schools and Styles of Anthropological Theory* (2018).

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# Comparison in Anthropology

The Impossible Method



**MATEI CANDEA**  
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*To Iris and to Alex, for the method and the madness*

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## Preface: What We Know in our Elbows

For 30 years at least, we have been able to fit together the pieces of a culture to make some sort of logical or psychological sense. But we still do not know how we do this, or what it means. Perhaps, as creatures that live in culture, we know in our elbows what sort of a thing a culture is, but have some fear of making this knowledge explicit. The problem is to make articulate and explicit the knowledge that we already possess in implicit form.

(Bateson 1967: 765)

This book started with a question: what is anthropological comparison today? This bears asking, because what Bateson writes about culture resonates also for comparison. We,<sup>1</sup> anthropologists, all live in comparison, and we all know in our elbows what it is, but an explicit account of our conventions remains strangely elusive, for reasons which this book seeks to examine, and in part, to remedy.

Having asked this question, I tried to trace the answer back through the enormous amount which anthropologists have written about comparison since the inception of the discipline. This ethnographic foray into anthropology's own analytics, which is retraced in Part I of this book, left me with the sense that trying to tease out our comparative conventions was an unexpectedly radical project. For, indeed, a key feature of anthropological discussions of comparison has precisely been a recurrent focus on invention.<sup>2</sup> Comparison is ever being reinvented, past visions abandoned, and new dawns glimpsed. The manifold problems

## Preface

and limitations of comparative methods are, time and again, blamed on the imperfections of our forebears, whilst our gaze is fixed on the horizon, on what comparison might become. In that context, to ask about convention, to ask what it is that, as a matter of fact, we do – and have been doing all these years – is less banal than it might seem. It is a way of ‘staying with the trouble’ of comparison, to borrow a phrase from Donna Haraway (2016). And in that trouble, in the imperfection, cross-cutting limitations and conflicting requirements is also, this book argues, where the value of comparison lies. What these pages seek to offer is not the promise of a new method, the dawn of yet another new comparatism – rather it is a refreshed vision of the potential of what we already do.

This book has been many years in the writing and I have in the process accumulated many debts. My most direct have been to the generosity of those who have read and commented on the entire manuscript – Catherine Candea, Harri Englund, Paolo Heywood, James Laidlaw, Victor I. Stoichita, Marilyn Strathern and Tom Yarrow. I have also benefited hugely from the reactions and advice of readers who have commented on parts of the manuscript, or on one of the many versions of an earlier paper (Candea 2016a),<sup>3</sup> the argument of which prefaces the one pursued in this book: Pierre Charbonnier, Alberto Corsín-Jiménez, Philippe Descola, Carlos Fausto, Simon Goldhill, Martin Holbraad, Caroline Humphrey, Geoffrey Lloyd, Morten Axel Pedersen, Gildas Salmon, Carlo Severi, Rupert Stasch, Pedro Stoichita and Victor A. Stoichita. Particular thanks go to the series editors, Michael Lambek and Jonathan Spencer, and to the anonymous reviewer for Cambridge University Press. The combination of generous advice, encouraging comments and bracing critiques from all of these readers has helped me avoid many pitfalls. For the remaining traps I have surely fallen into, they cannot be blamed.

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of Anthropology in Durham, and audiences at seminars in Cambridge, Durham, Aberdeen, the New School of Social Research, Copenhagen University, the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, as well as the participants and organisers of the 2015 Sawyer Seminar (The History of Cross-Cultural Comparatism: Modern Doubts and New Beginnings) at the Centre for Research in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences.

This book would not have seen the light of day without the European Research Council. An important initial impetus for writing it was the elaboration of a proposal for an ERC grant in which the question of comparative method loomed large. The actual award of the grant 'Situating Free Speech: European Parrhesias in Comparative Perspective' (grant agreement 683033) provided both the necessity and the time to follow up on the promise of working out the fundamentals of comparative method.

I am grateful to all at Cambridge University Press, and in particular to Andrew Winnard who prompted me to embark upon a book of this kind in the first place and then, together with Stephanie Taylor, brilliantly shepherded the manuscript through production. The text was immeasurably improved by the outstanding copy-editing of Carol Fellingham-Webb.

I owe a very particular kind of debt also, for reasons which will become clear in the introduction, to researchers associated with the Kalahari Meerkat Project and the Large Animal Research Group in Cambridge, who, for nearly a decade, have allowed me to hang out ethnographically in the close yet distant field of behavioural biology. Even though this book is not about that, it would not have been possible without them. Particular thanks go to Tim Clutton-Brock, Andrew Bateman, Alecia Carter and Dieter Lukas.

Finally, I want to thank Kat for tolerating the 5 p.m. lows and the 5 a.m. highs, and for being, for ten years and still, that incomparable person who, as Marguerite Yourcenar somewhere described, 'leaves you divinely free, and yet requires you to be fully what you are'.