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From Original Evidence to Ordinary Epistemes

Authenticating the Knowledge We Live by

This contribution seeks to rekindle questions of authenticity. While the term continues to figure prominently in the realms of collective heritage, the tourist industry, and the branding of food and other items in modern consumerism, our concern with authenticity leads us directly to the efforts and effects of epistemic practice. These multiple modes of knowing and validating contingent knowledge claims can be analysed as matters of correspondence that pertain to a range of epistemic criteria. Starting our discussion on the multiplicity of authenticity with an ethnographic example from a fairly common context, we then move on to elaborate authenticity as an epistemic concept and illustrate it with the works of the four contributors to our workshop at this year's DGSKA conference in Munich. Finally, we consider authenticity as the validation of knowledge claims in cases where the legitimacy of knowledge is negotiated, and the dissemination of difficult and even harmful knowledge is contested.

Entering the 2000-inhabitant village on the main road, visitors to Siruela are welcomed to the "winter capital of transhumance". This is the caption on a sign attached to a monolith at the roadside of the municipality in the east of the Spanish region Extremadura, about 250 km from Madrid. The designation makes a strong claim about Siruela's pastoral heritage that is corroborated by allusion to its role as the wintering area for transhumant livestock "since time immemorial". During the most prosperous era of the Spanish transhumance in the Lower Middle Ages, millions of Merino sheep are said to have descended from the mountainous regions in the north to the large winter pastures in Extremadura, Castilla-La Mancha, and northern Andalusia. Another reason stated on the sign to declare Siruela the winter

capital of transhumance is “the fact that the winter meetings of the Honourable Council of the Mesta have been held here since the year 1500”. Between 1500 and 1578, Siruela was indeed the venue of a total of 17 meetings of the powerful Mesta, the association of wealthy livestock owners from northern Spain controlling the processes of the transhumance business that was an important source of income for the Spanish Crown. On the other hand, historical evidence holds that the Mesta met twice a year, amounting to more than 150 reunions during the mentioned period alone. Could it be that the village slightly exaggerates the significance of its role in the Spanish transhumance?

To attract public attention to Siruela’s pastoral heritage, it is celebrated with the annual Transhumance Festival. Launched in 2012, the heart of the festival is a collective walk of a group of villagers and visitors with a flock of some 800 black Merino sheep. Together, they trek across one of the ancient livestock trails (*cañada*) of 10km length which connects Siruela with its neighbouring village Tamurejo (Figure 1). Although it could be argued that the short-distance walk has little to do with the month-long herding activity and hardship endured by the shepherds of the transhumance, participants of the walk are able to experience the rural landscapes of the Comarca, which goes by the curious name *Siberia extremeña*, as a public good (Melles 2022). When they move along the many pasture plots on the way to Siruela, people will quickly realise the importance sheep hold to the village today: Numerous flocks bear witness to sheep farming being the most common form of livelihood in Siruela, where sheep numbered 55,483 in 2020 (together with the much less commonly reared goats). While the fleece colour of most sheep is white, a local farmer gained a reputation for rearing black Merino sheep, an autochthonous breed. Apart from building a stock of 4,000 animals, he is also the initiator and main organiser of the Transhumance Festival. It is therefore hardly surprising that the invitation to participate in the festival reads “Be a shepherd in Extremadura’s *Siberia* of authentic black Merino sheep!”

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"Shepherd for one day": Participants of the Transhumance Festival departing for the collective walk across the cañada to Siruela, Extremadura, Spain. Photo credit: Maike Melles, November 2018.

Authenticity, as in the "authentic black Merino sheep" just advertised, is the hard currency value in the tourist and self-branding business of cultural heritage. Authenticity often decides about the value of a cultural expression, be it in the form of an object, site, activity or utterance. As such, it is taken as the antidote of "whatever is fake, unreal, or false" (Lindholm 2008, 2). It is claimed and contested in the shared practices related to food and material culture, ritual and art. Although authenticity is widely regarded as a positive value, it is not "just there": At the heart of authenticity lie complex epistemic processes in which particular kinds of knowledge gain validity or, conversely, become contested. In the case of the

shepherd's village Siruela, a simultaneity of authenticity (Theodossopoulos 2013) is at play: Apart from purebred autochthonous Merino sheep certified by the breeding association and a claim to the title of transhumance capital with resort to 17 historically documented meetings of the Mesta, a third dimension of authenticity emerges in the embodied perception of landscapes during the joint walk, one that "gathers people together in collectives that are felt to be real, essential, and vital, providing participants with meaning, unity, and a surpassing sense of belonging" (Lindholm 2008, 1).

Yet when is an object, an identity claim, a historical document, a touristic experience or, say, a joke regarded as authentic? Which epistemic criteria are at play that render them "true" or "real"? The recurrent process of authentication usually involves communal negotiations: Disagreement about the authentic substance of an entity calls for an analysis of the wider epistemic fabric in which the outcome of such negotiations may, for example, be marred by power asymmetries (Bonilla 2011, 319-320). In this vein, knowledge about what cultural heritage is seemed clear in many contexts for a long time. It was defined by a canon established by few, usually white, male authorities in the field. Their knowledge about cultural heritage was then reproduced and disseminated in schoolbooks, travel guides, journals, and postcards. However, this canon has been shaken thoroughly, perhaps even shattered. What follows is the contestation of epistemic monopolies by a multitude of voices speaking for, of, and about cultural heritage. Many of these voices draw on muted histories of subaltern communities or individuals.

Although authenticity is all too often at play in the context of cultural heritage, its negotiation extents across a much wider range of realms and phenomena, given that knowledge claims, whether overtly or covertly voiced, are simultaneously claims about identity and belonging. Speaking from particular interests, authenticity also figures prominently in translocal contestations in the realm of food and material culture, or the interpretation of historical figures. The efficacy of authenticity in

political movements or the shared laughter over a joke attests to its protagonism in the validation of knowledges that act as congruent expressions of "a convincing framework for belief and action" (Lindholm 2008, 144). At its most basic, therefore, authenticity refers to knowledge inventories and their authentication in terms of different epistemic sources and practices, relating to embodiment, verbal or pictorial representations, and objects.

Multiple Modes of Knowing

The multifarious and seemingly contradictory character of authenticity has been accommodated in different ways. Using the example of museum objects, Thiemeyer (2017) distinguishes three different types of authentication. The first derives from the originality of the object, if, for example, it is a unique piece of art made by a certain artist. Objects may draw a second type of authenticity from being a witness to a specific event, activity or person, as in the case of the ragged Soviet flag displayed on the wall of the Mauer-Museum in Berlin. This flag is neither the only one of its kind nor particularly beautiful or economically valuable but serves as an affect-laden witness to the post-war division of the city. The third instance of authenticity concerns objects that are considered authentic because they are exemplars representative of thousands of "identical" objects that exist in the world. Lindholm, who strives for an anthropology of authenticity, distinguishes two modes in which it is practised, origin and of expressive content (Lindholm 2008, 2013). The first, authenticity of origin, relates to the genealogical and historical questions of authorship and provenance, as in legal disputes or the establishment of cultural heritage claims, and is corroborated with recourse to empirical verification methods and external sources. The second mode, authenticity of content, is found in connection with a wide range of phenomena and alludes to the experience of being at one with oneself during more or less expressive modes of identification in the – in many cases instantaneous – present. Melles (2022) argues that even though the two modes emphasise different aspects around which authenticity may revolve,

authenticity of origin is subsumable under a general notion of authenticity of content: Being a matter of a certain form of correspondence, the search for authenticity is motivated by reassurance, that is, the congruence of phenomena with knowledge that is already held or shared. In the authentication of contemporary identity, for instance, practices and representations are perceived to correspond to self- or externally imposed images of an individual or group. Historical authenticities, in turn, often have a large share in the constitution of individual and collective identities, visible in the invocation of a particular family lineage or in the establishment of nationalist movements.

The workshop "The knowledge we live by: Authenticity and its contestations as epistemic process" at this year's DGSKA/GAA Conference set out to discuss different ethnographic examples in which authenticity appears on the nominal surface and accounts for underlying dynamics in the validation of knowledge. The multiple, and often contradicting, claims in those different settings are made by diverse social actors and allude to identities of various scales, from the individual or regional to the national. Anne Ebert (Freie Universität Berlin) looked at the role and meaning of archaeological sites for indigenous communities in in Bolivia. Far from constituting a homogeneous epistemic community, indigeneity is claimed by different groups who compete for sources of knowledge and identity in the form of the landmarked stone buildings at Tiwanaku. The physical proximity to this site enjoyed by urban indigenous community members provides them with an important resource for the authentication of identity claims that relate to ancestral practices. By contrast, the indigenous groups in the Amazonian lowlands are at a disadvantage when it comes to claiming authenticity of origin and, therefore, their indigenous identity itself. Another case in which knowledge practices are subject to ongoing efforts of authentication was presented by Diego Muñoz (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München), who studies the memorial practices in the Rapanui society on the Chilean Easter Island. The state's narrative of the incorporation of the Island by the Chilean State differs greatly in form and content from indigenous memory. The official

version authenticated by the Spanish-speaking annexation treaty has long been contested in Rapanui chants, gestures, narratives, and particular material expressions. With the recent rediscovery of the Polynesian version of the treaty the authentication of Rapanui concepts, epistemologies, and knowledges gains new momentum. Speaking with Banks (2013), the persuasive assertion of indigeneity can in both cases be regarded as an instance of "instrumental authenticity", which allows to consider strategic goals associated with the claim of authenticity, such as political leverage or social recognition.

A quite familiar realm for considerations of authenticity is tourism. Pascalle Sebus (Universiteit Antwerpen) examined how tourists' ideas of authentic experiences are shaped by digital visuality. She drew on her studies of touristic activities along the Camino de Santiago (Spain) and in the urban environments of Antwerp (Belgium) and Rotterdam (The Netherlands). While the ideas of authenticity tourists hold are individually shaped, their multimodal engagements with places and surroundings also reproduce pre-existing narratives about popular destinations. Finally, Cassis Kilian (Johannes-Gutenberg-Universität Mainz and Goethe University Frankfurt) took us to the captivating atmosphere of Berlin's comedy clubs. One question that guided her research with stand-up comedians was that of what makes people laugh. Using the example of her own performance, which she re-enacted in front of the panel audience, she explored the entanglements of humour and truth, aesthetics and authenticity.

From Authenticity to Contested Knowledge

In this way, authenticity lies at the heart of cultural practices around knowledges of value and meaning, yet it is not always explicitly referred to as such. What counts as affirmed knowledge is historically contingent and contested. Maybe the question should not be so much "what" tradition or heritage is but "when". Which time is it that is being referred to as "our past", which time merits the attribute "authentic"? Collectives but also individuals may hold different, even contradictory knowledges at

the same time. How do certain epistemic practices advance or obstruct the view of alternative visions and thus create "the knowledge we live by"? And how do we deal with the knowledge nobody wants to know about?

"Difficult heritage" (Macdonald 2009) is one of those types of knowledge that tend to be neglected or actively forgotten. Nevertheless, as Macdonald shows at the example of Germany's dealing with its Nazi past, difficult heritage may also serve as an alternative mode of crafting a self-image of accountability, active engagement through knowledge, and care. When driving towards the small town of Akmol in northern Kazakhstan, one spots a large cupola already from the road (Figure 2). It marks the entrance to the memorial complex that was opened in 2007 on the territory of the former Soviet labour camp Akmolinsk Camp of Wives of Traitors to the Motherland (ALZhIR). During its operation between 1937 to 1953, ALZhIR housed over 18,000 women, often together with their children. Only one of several other gulags in Kazakhstan, places like ALZhIR are hugely disturbing and present a difficult heritage for the country. In comparison to other Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan has decided to actively address this history. The site of ALZhIR has been turned into a memorial site with outdoor and indoor exhibitions, film screenings of interviews with survivors, memorial stones donated by all countries whose citizens were incarcerated (with the notable exception of the Russian Federation), and a wall with the names of the victims. The personal testimonies are moving as are narratives of spontaneous help from the local Kazakh population, and the victims with their daily fight for survival receive all due attention – but after the visit one feels that something is missing. The feeling is caused by the void that substitutes controversies that might be more hurtful to today's Kazakhstani citizens than the memory of labour camps on their territories. It is the question of individual and collective perpetration, guilt, collaboration, or deliberate looking the other way.

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The "Arch of Sorrow", entrance to the memorial site and museum of the ALZhIR labour camp for the "wives of traitors to the homeland", Akmola, Kazakhstan. The monument by Saken Narinov is shaped in the form of a traditional Kazakh headgear, the camp's inmates, however, hailed from all kinds of ethnic, religious and social backgrounds. Photo credit: Jeanine Dağyeli, September 2019.

The example shows how the dissemination of knowledge and, ultimately, heritagization of violent pasts work in two directions: They foster an active knowing in society about these atrocities and may present at least a symbolic reparation of harm done. In this sense, it may work towards a societal reconciliation. If done consequently, however, a truly knowledgeable discussion that asks about personal, communal, and national responsibilities for acts of violence seems to be regarded as a danger to social peace in the present: Because of its potential to open old and painstakingly varnished rifts in an ethnically and religiously fragmented society, unmitigated communication of this knowledge is considered harmful.

On the other hand, where knowledge about problematic pasts is held back, censored

or discouraged, it resurfaces otherwise, often through rumour, sometimes through allegories, jokes or satire. Many years back, one of the authors of this blog entry was sitting in a courtyard of a traditional house in Uzbekistan. It was summer, yet there were heavy clouds in the evening sky that heralded rain, which in those years was still a rarity in this part of Central Asia at that time of the year. Now, we would probably see in hindsight that this was one of the early signs of climate change or at least label the meteorological anomaly as such. Back then, the host found a very different, surprising explanation. She was convinced that "the Russians" had started another space shuttle in the spaceport Baykonur hundreds of kilometres away. There was nothing in the news about any event like this but she remained adamant. Claims about authenticity come with claims about knowing. Rumour, in this case one that was shared by many Central Asians, may easily transform into conspiration narratives if no contradictory information is accepted as equally authentic. Here, the underlying narrative was that of a foreign (Russian) state on Central Asian territory engaged in larger-than-life undertakings such as bringing people into space without concern for local populations on the ground. It was grounded in bitter memories of Soviet nuclear testing and similar destructive activities that were made a secret but fed into grey publications, rumours, jokes, and satire.

Knowing the "real" history of a place, a practice or an object, and knowing the "real" way a performance should be conducted implies habitual contact with the authentic matter. The reception of things, activities, persons, and sites as authentic or inauthentic is contingent upon constant re-evaluations in correspondence with wider dimensions of knowledge processes, such as meaning, valuation, interests, authority, and power relations. In this sense, authenticity is not a static property but emerges, develops, and changes. If we take knowledge about our past, our cultural heritage, and representations of ourselves as something we live by, what does this mean for our current situation in which knowledge claims, alternative truths or subjective convictions seem to be negotiable on equal levels of authenticity? If all kinds of perceptions of, say, historical reality are subject to changing valuations, how

do these constant (d)evaluations respond to claims about authenticity? (Dağyeli 2017: 65).

Knowledge is not just there but relates to practice. It has been good anthropological practice for a long time not to ask primarily, "is this authentic or inauthentic?" but to scrutinise how something becomes or became authentic. At the moment, we are witnessing how epistemic habits are changing and the question remains whether we consider all knowledge as equally valid even if, as at present, it reiterates antisemitic stereotypes or refutes scientific evidence, not only for climate change. What scales of authenticity do we apply to rumour, or subjective and objective truth (Pabst 2018:92) in our ethnographic writing and/or as a political individual?

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