

> HOW WE BECOME WHO WE ARE.
INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTINA TOREN

by **Aline de Paula Regitano**¹

Professor Emeritus of the Department of Social Anthropology at University of St. Andrews and founding director of the Center for Pacific Studies, Christina Toren has been instrumental in charting the new directions of contemporary anthropology. Her contributions to the study of Fiji and the Pacific, sociality, kinship and ideas of the person, ontogeny as historical process, and epistemology, are remarkable, and have guided profound theoretical reformulations worldwide.

We met for this interview at her home in Dundee, Scotland, during the period she supervised a research study that we developed at the University of St. Andrews.

Aline (A): Christina, you graduated in Psychology, and then you did your doctoral research in Social Anthropology at London School of Economics. Do you think Anthropology needs Psychology in the same way Psychology needs Anthropology? I mean, do you think the dependence on each other is mutual?

Christina (C): I think they need each other. So, in that sense yes, I think the dependence is mutual. But they don't need each other for the same reasons. Psychology needs Anthropology because they really need to get hold of the idea that humans are historically constituted. This is not an idea psychologists particularly have. Anthropologists needs psychologists because it is important not to violate what is actually established about uh, you know, how the brain works, stuff like that. Okay? So the necessity for knowing about each other's discipline is mutual, but it's working in different ways.

A: In *Making Sense of Hierarchy*, you present a method for working with children's drawings. How did your interest in drawing came as a working tool, was it an inheritance of psychology?

C: It must have been, in part. I'm just trying to think ... it's too long since I started looking at this material. I think Vygotsky might have influenced drawings, or Luria, one of these sort of people. But to tell you the truth, I am not absolutely certain of this point, but

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somebody did. I wasn't the originator of this brilliant idea. But I think I used the drawings in a way that is different from anybody else, because I really was interested in finding out what children know about the world they live and I wasn't "testing" them. I wasn't trying to find out about the development of their perspective, let's say. I didn't have a notion of what sort of developmental end they would arrive at, I was using the drawings to throw up to me what ideas the kids had about the way things are.

A: Could you tell us a little bit about the process of developing this specific method that you used during your doctoral research?

C: I suppose one of the things that must have driven it...this is really an insight, because now it's nearly 40 years since I did that study, but little kids were quite wary of me, not just because I was an unusual looking person in their midst, but because they were wary of adults in general. And they were, you know, pretty sure there was a right answer, do you get what I mean? It doesn't really make sense to ask children stuff, unless you are doing it in the most informal way, and even then, they might be a bit worried about it. Drawings looked like a way of getting kids to tell me stuff, because they had fun doing it, I knew they loved it, you know, I gave them really nice pieces of paper, and sharp pencils. If you are wanting to get a child to talk it's much easier to be able to say "gosh, this is a great drawing, who is that? tell me about it", and usually, they just go, they tell you a whole lot of stuff.

A: You argue about the importance of working for a long period with the same interlocutors to see the changes over the time. Did you work with the same people over a long period of time?

C: No, they're not precisely the same, of course they're not. I mean, in some instances they are, so, the adult people I worked with who, of course during this period really you know, became friends, people who you might know well, sort of my generation, if you like. With the children...Of course I know adults whom I might have worked with as children, the material I have in hand from children comes from different generations of children, so, you know, they've grown up. In that sense I am working with the same small population, so, when I go to Sawaieki everyone knows who I am, because a lot of them knew me when they were children.

A: You said once that good anthropology should be done with extensive fieldwork and dense field notes. Do you think that the writing alone may be insufficient?

C: Well, had I been a better photographer, which I am not, that would have been useful. But I find the camera gets in the way for me, so, I was never comfortable with that. Were I working today, with the very simple camera technologies that you have, really fantastic cameras where

you're doing amazing videos with your Ipad and so on, I have no doubt I would've done lots of that. So I think you should have data of all kinds that you can get, because it's all grist to the mill, isn't it? But I still think that really, writing rich, dense fieldnotes, that's a really good idea.

A: Do you think that anthropological discipline is defined by ethnographic writing as a central issue? Is there a hierarchical relationship between writing and image?

C: I will start with the last bit. I suppose it has developed that way, at least, you know, if you think about it as purely academic trajectory and you are thinking about ethnography as analysis, but, of course there are brilliant ethnographic films. And, if there is a hierarchical relationship between writing and film it's a bit silly, isn't it? because clearly you can have fantastic ethnographic film analysis just as you can have fantastic ethnographic analysis in writing, so I don't think it's a given. What was the beginning of your question?

A: Do you think that anthropological discipline is defined by ethnographic writing as a central issue?

C: I think it's defined by ethnographic analysis, which is a different matter, because really, you can certainly have terrific ethnographic analysis through a film and in writing, so that's what defines it for me, not the medium.

A: What do you consider to be the limitations of images? For example, you say that we should not make interpretations of the drawings by themselves, but we should use them as means for accessing interlocutors and their narratives. In this sense, how do you think we can define the limits of the images in expressing?

C: I think that the "limitations" are not confined to images, because you hit limitations in speech, don't you? When you might think, when you are 6 months in the field, that you understand x, y and z. And then at 9 months you think: "My god, actually I was completely wrong about x, y and z" and you're working through what you're attending to, what is said, what is done, but you've got it wrong...So, the thing with images, in a sense, it has, it obviously has the same problem, because you can look at them and think you know what you see, and actually you don't. May I give you a small example? Not Fijian. Now, this is a picture drawn by my granddaughter Sharon, now eleven, she did it when she was about 3, I guess, and it's a picture of her mother and herself, okay? So, when you look at it, people will fairly obviously think that [points at the big girl] this is her mother and [points at the small girl] this is her. No! Absolutely not. That's her [points at the big girl], and that's her mother [points at the small girl]. And had I not actually asked her I would've incorrectly assumed that, you know, she was the little one and her mother would be the big one. By no means, she is center stage

there. So, you know, it's a very small example. But it really shows you how easy it is to think that you've got something... You know, that you see things, but you can't.

A: So do you think the question relates more to anthropological analysis than to the nature of the images themselves?

C: Well, no, because people tell you what's happening. If the child tells you what's happening in the drawing, then the nature of the images can be very important. So, if you take this case here [Sharon's drawing], it tells you a lot once you know. Once you know, this one is Sharon, looking at the image really does help you, because you see immediately she actually is centre stage, in her own world, she drew this spontaneously, I didn't ask her to do it. She was drawing, "oh what's that?", but her mother is incredibly important, so she's there, you know? Very, clearly there. So it's not that somehow words overcome image, absolutely not, because then you can go on and look further into the image, and you can really see it then. So, for example, when I was doing a study, with the children's drawings of the village, it was very interesting to see how they really conceived it. Was the church there in the drawing or not? Was the village at all there or not? How was the image presented to you. You know, was the house center stage, and the other stuff off to the side? You see what I mean? There's plenty to be drawn from the image, but you do need to know what is depicted, you know, that the wee building there is the village hall of the toddler, that bigger one, it's the child's own house. It's that sort of thing, that's why you need to know.

A: You propose a model of a unified human being in which mind is a function of the whole person, which transforms itself through a unique micro-historical social process. Would you add some element to this model of human being today? Regarding the publication of "Mind, Materiality and History" is there anything that you would change?

C: I would have to go through it and read it, in order to answer that question. But probably not. Probably what I would be doing is trying to tweak it, to make it clearer, because I think biologists, and other people who read my work really don't quite get all of it. Some do, but a lot of people don't. When I talk about mind, I really do mean mind as an aspect of the whole person that is constituted over time in intersubjective relations with others in the enviroing world. I don't mean it's a function just of this [pointing to the region of the head]. I really do mean it's a function of this [indicating the whole body] in relation to all the other people in this world that we live. People, biologists, want me simply to have an idea that mind is a function of the whole body. No, that's not sufficient. It's a function of the whole body in intersubjective relations within the enviroing world. So, I am trying to work out better ways of saying that, of breaking down the binary models. Now if you look at the work of somebody

like Evan Thompson, brilliant Evan Thompson, who has a fantastic phenomenological model of embodied mind... But even he has ‘culture’ as some sort of separate domain. Well that doesn’t work for me. And that’s a problematic thing because, as I have always said – it’s not something new for me – ‘culture’ makes no sense to me as a kind of domain. I have no idea really what ‘culture’ is, despite everything written by generations of cultural anthropologists. In saying that, I am attacking the validity of an entire discipline. Well you don’t really get away with that, do you? You know, it’s interesting, it’s exactly the same problem that one had originally with the nature/nurture debate. If you like, it’s a dimension of that debate, but if you are to do away with the binary distinction between nature and culture it requires you to actually have the idea in your head that the constituting processes are transforming processes, going on all the time, all the time. And this applies just as much to evolution. History and evolution are continuous. Does that make sense?

A: Yes, it does. Actually it brings us to my next question. Well, you have already answered me about the binary concepts such nature/culture affirming that we cannot get away with these notions so easily. Since the Key debate organized by Tim Ingold, where you and Marilyn Strathern have proved the theoretical obsolescence of the concept “society”.

C: Well I am glad you said ‘proved’, Aline. I am not sure everybody would agree with you but anyway, on you go.

A: You clearly proved it. I would like to ask you what do you think that has changed since then, has this issue been overcome?

C: That’s an interesting question because of course if you think in terms of ethnographic categories ‘society’, ‘culture’, ‘nurture’, all of these terms are in common usage, so you could do a brilliant ethnographic study of how these ideas are constituted, what they mean for the way people live with one another in the world. In other words, out there in Dundee how are those terms used by actual living people? You could do a study of what sense kids are making of the use of those terms. The term “culture” is all over the place, used completely differently by different people, as you would expect also for the term for ‘society’. So you could do a fantastic ethnographic analysis, in fact I would love somebody to do it. Whether or not anthropologists themselves are all aware that you can’t take any analytical term for granted is another matter, because sometimes people seem to be very aware that you can’t take terms for granted, if they are looking at something like hierarchy, for example, and then they lose this awareness when it comes to a term like culture, which they may seem happy enough to accept ... Do you see what I mean? So, I am sure it’s still going on. I mean, out there, there are anthropologists teaching students, all about “society”,

all about “culture”, I am sure that’s the case, and but likewise there are people who say “please, don’t take these terms for granted, these analytical terms are not given in the nature of things”, you know, better to say how they are established, “they are established in these kinds of ways”, and so on.

A: And what about the concept of sociality, do you see the limitations for its use? Does it make sense to you using it locally in a more general way?

C: Oh yeah, it’s a problem, isn’t it? Because this is ultimately the problem: that we have to speak to one another, and we want to talk to one another about stuff that we consider to be important, about what is to be human and so on, so, a term like sociality is useful provided you don’t have it sitting in a separate little space of its own. In psychological theory you can have cognizing that isn’t informed necessarily by sociality. That’s when you’re back in the “nature/nurture” debate. So, as long as you are saying that sociality is itself historically constituted like every other aspect of human being – our genes are historically constituted – as long as you’re holding to that, then yes, you’re sort of okay. But let’s say, you’re working with Mehinako people, and you speak well Mehinako language, you might find a term that is sort of similar, then you can discuss what you know, the nature of the term, can’t you? And you could begin to see how these things speak to one another, how you’re talking of the same thing, how different is the phenomenon you’re talking about.

A: So you think it would be interesting to try to get close to the local terms and the local language for something that relates to the idea of sociality?

C: Only if you can see that the people you are working with are sort of fascinated by the same thing, because one of the key things that you learn as an anthropologist is that, usually, when you’re doing your first long period of fieldwork, you see that your obsessions are not necessarily the obsessions of the people you’re working with, and you may ditch a whole ... you know ... just throw away the things that you originally thought you were going to work on, and discover yourself going down a completely different path, because that’s the path people are leading you on, because that’s what they’re talking about all the time, that’s what they’re doing, that’s what concerns them, that’s where the most important relations reside. So that pushes you down a particular kind of path.

A: And did it happen to you in Fiji?

C: Well, absolutely. I wanted to work on what in those days was called “the domain of the symbolic”. I knew that I wouldn’t actually know what I’d be doing really until it sort of threw itself up. I didn’t know that. On the other hand, among my papers, I have records of

close work with the kids, you know, the conservation volume, all kind of stuff which I've never used.

A: So you explore ontogenesis dealing with intersubjectivity, consciousness, and sociality, but you do not assume the concept of agency, that has been explored by anthropologists such as Alfred Gell, Marilyn Strathern and Tim Ingold. Which critics do you address to this category. And if you have any proposition to do about it, what would that be?

C: I think that agency is a slippery term and that's why probably, in part, I don't use it. I never really quite know what it means. Now, as used by, let's say Marilyn Strathern and Alfred Gell, they would be mostly talking about the capacity to act. That's of course something that you can analyse ethnographically, but when people are talking agency, somehow it's not confined to the capacity to act, it gets shades of choice and individuality and stuff that cries out for analysis itself. And although I guess you could hear perhaps, to a degree, out there some people talking about whether or not they have agency, or whether other people have agency, and who is an agent and who isn't. It's not really one of these terms, is it, that people are generally using? I don't know, I just find it too slippery. I don't find it useful. I get why Marilyn uses it, because in her analysis of relations between relations and so on, her analysis of gender, the capacity to act has everything to do with the nature of those relations. Alfred, he wants to have the agency in the object, and I find that problematic, because as far as I can see it would always have to be a matter of projection.

A: It may be the case that sometimes we act without a projection?

C: No, no, sorry. You always have the projection, but it's not conscious. You've hit on the real problem with agency. All the things that you do are, as it were, already decided before you're conscious of what you are going to do or say. So where does the choosing aspect of agency come in? I would say, and I am speaking for myself here, I like to think that I choose between doing this and doing that, but really when it comes down to it, I know that my choices are as it were foreordained in who I am at the point where I make them. They're done already. The fact that I am then able to make them, speak them, doesn't do away with that process.

A: In *The Challenge of Epistemology* you organize with Joao de Pina-Cabral a collection dedicated to reflect, among other topics, on epistemology and ontology, examining the conditions and scope of anthropological knowledge. How was your meeting with de Pina-Cabral and what inspired you to organize this book?

C: I've known João for a long time, and we certainly came together in that regard, but of course, I have always had this interest in epistemology, because if you're looking at ontogeny that's part of what you're doing. And in so far as I thought about it, for me ontology and epistemology are aspects of one another. Then you get to the point where everyone is talking about ontology – and I am a great admirer of the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, so this is not a kind of anti-anthropology position – but it throws up immediately for me how was that ontology constituted. And as I've just said I take ontology and epistemology to be dimensions of one another. So it's not a question of saying people shouldn't be looking to ontology, of course they should be, absolutely, but it's a thing to bear in mind that the unanswered questions are still there and answering them is a means to understanding that ontology itself, because it's historically constituted. The problem arises when people think that they've found the philosopher's stone in one bit or the other bit, that's always the problem “you gotta go this way” “oh no, you gotta go that way”. I've always tried to do everything at the same time, or to at least keep it in my head, you know?

A: What challenges and paths do you envision for social anthropology to follow from now on?

C: I suppose they are the same as they always were. I think that the thing that has to push people is to understand that humans are historically constituted in every aspect of who they are, in every dimension of their being. We all now know that we are surrounded by people with the most complex histories, from everywhere in the world, and this means there are different understandings of what is going on meeting one another, but they're not making people the same, in any kind of obvious way at all, absolutely not. So really, understanding that process, you know, how we become who we are, seems to me exactly the same challenge that was always there. It means that you really do have to understand the nature of the historical development of anthropology as well. You can't just say “oh that's no longer relevant”, because even to understand your own discipline, to get a handle on your own discipline you have to have some knowledge of where it came from, so I think the problems are very much the same. They're interesting. You have to do it in a different way, but I don't think that you would ever really be able to do away with long term participant observation. I think that is absolutely crucial. I also think that it's good for people to go work with people who are not the same as themselves. A Fijian person doing a study in a highland PNG or a Fijian person doing study in rural France. That would be really interesting I think, but unfortunately, an idea has grown up that you're not allowed to do that. That, in some way or another, you should only be looking at the ideas of people who are sort of like you, because anything else is “cultural appropriation”. What nonsense. I understand why the ideas developed. I understand the whole thing about colonial history and everything like that. Fine. But you want to get free of that, you don't want to perpetuate

it in some kind of absurd idea that puts people into neat boxes of what they are allowed, or not allowed, to think or do. And I do think that's actually a genuine problem.

A: So you consider being different important in terms of alterity?

C: Well we all are always different, but yes, it's absolutely wonderful. I really do think it's wonderful, and that's what you find out when you get to know other people, don't you? When you get to know people absolutely different from yourself and I think I say it in the introduction to *Mind, Materiality and History*, I said it in somewhere. The answer is to assume difference and then, as time goes along and along, you discover similarity. The assumption of similarity works exactly the same way. When you assume similarity, you meet someone and you think "Oh gosh we have these things so much in common. Do you do that too? So do I". And then as times goes along and along, the differences between you emerge, and that's how it works. But I think there's something absolutely fascinating about getting to know about people. I've always thought that..

VIDEO INTERVIEW

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HxAKs2ecb8&t>