

ROUTLEDGE

تَقِ الْأَمَانَ كَسَمِ خَيْتِهِ مَرُشِدَ قَرَاهِ
قَرِيبُ كَثِيرٍ سَمِ سَمِ هَلَقَدَتْ
سِلَاحُ خَطِيبُ كَسَمِ
مُورُشِدَ رَيْبُ خَطِيبُ
قَسِيبُ قَلْبِ كَثِيرٍ حَقِ
مُلْدُ ثَنُ هُ كَحْمِ أَيْبُ هُ
كَبِيبُ ثَنُ هُ

african voices, african lives

PERSONAL NARRATIVES *from a* SWAHILI VILLAGE

PAT CAPLAN

African Voices, African Lives

African Voices, African Lives explores the world of 'Mohammed', a Swahili peasant living on the coast of Tanzania. Through his own words—some written, some spoken—we glimpse the changing world he inhabits, which includes the invisible but ubiquitous spirits of land and sea, who play a significant role in his life. Other voices, too, are heard, principally those of Mohammed's wife 'Mwahadia', and one of their daughters, 'Subira', giving their own perspectives on events.

Pat Caplan, an anthropologist, has been working in this area for almost three decades during which time she has developed close personal ties with Mohammed and members of his family, as both she and they have moved through their respective life courses. Here she acts as translator, interpreter and facilitator of their voices, allowing them to speak, and at the same time utilising her own knowledge of Swahili society, gathered from intensive fieldwork over a long period, to provide relevant background and so assist the reader to a fuller understanding of the rich tapestries which are their lives.

By utilising a mixture of styles—narrative and life history, ethnographic observation, and the diary kept by Mohammed at the anthropologist's request—this book will make an important contribution to current debates in anthropology by grappling with issues of 'personal narratives', authorial authority and reflexive ethnographic writing.

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African Voices, African Lives

Personal narratives from a Swahili village

Pat Caplan



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For Mohammed, Mwahadia and Subira

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Dramatis personae and place names

Mohammed: Main character, informant, writer of diary. Husband of Mwahadia. Born around 1935.

Mwahadia: Mohammed's wife, and mother of all his children. Divorced in 1976. Re-married in 1986.

Kombo: one of Mohammed's older brothers who helped him financially until his death around 1980.

Seleman: eldest son of Mohammed and Mwahadia. Worked in hotels until his death in 1990.

Asha: eldest daughter of Mohammed and Mwahadia. Has been married and divorced several times. Was living with Mohammed in 1994.

Subira: second daughter of Mohammed and Mwahadia. Has been married and divorced several times. Was living in District Capital in 1994.

Waziri: second son of Mohammed and Mwahadia. Died in a shipwreck at the age of 19.

Amina: third daughter of Mohammed and Mwahadia. Lived in Zanzibar with her husband, and died there in her 30s around 1992.

Miza: fourth daughter of Mohammed and Mwahadia. Married and divorced. In 1994 was living with Mohammed.

Juma: third son of Mohammed and Mwahadia. He was living with Mwahadia in 1994.

Habiba: fifth and youngest daughter of Mohammed and Mwahadia. Married and living with her husband and baby son in 1994.

Pwani, Kisiwa, Karibu, Kisiki, Mashariki: places on Mafia Island mentioned regularly. They are all villages near to Minazini which have been given pseudonyms.

Baleni, Kirongwe, Utende: other villages on Mafia.

Kilindoni: district capital of Mafia.

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Pat Caplan
London, April 1996

Prologue

A special prayer

In the summer of 1994, I returned for the fourth time since the mid-1960s to a village on Mafia Island, Tanzania. The main purpose of my visit was to discuss with one of its inhabitants, 'Mohammed', the book I was writing and which focused upon him and the numerous texts he had given me over the years.¹

GREETINGS

Mohammed wanted to record himself giving me formal greetings, so we had to pretend that we were meeting again for the first time since my last visit.

M. I will greet you and you reply.

P. Alright.

M. Peace be with you (*Asalaam aleikum*).

P. And with you (*Aleikum is salaam*).

M. Patricia Caplan,² welcome (*Ahlan wa sahlan*). My lord, my benefactor, how are you? (*Saidi yangu, mfidhili yangu, ke fahalik?*)

P. Well (Taib).³

M. How are things in London?

P. Everything in London is fine.

M. And are our children well?

P. They are all fine.

M. And is Mr Caplan well?

P. He's fine too.

M. And are all our elders quite well?

P. They are indeed.

M. What other news is there from London, Patricia?

P. There is no other news, everything is fine. And are you well?

2 Prologue

M. I am fine.

P. And our children and grandchildren?

M. All of them are well.

P. And our other relatives? What news is there from Minazini?

M. I have a lot to tell you and talk to you about. It must be about nine years since you left here, Patricia. There have been deaths, and eremonies (*mashughuli*) and troubles (*mashida*). I have been afflicted by many deaths, first our son Waziri, then our son Seleman, and our daughter Amina also died recently. Many, many things have happened. I have been seized by our ancestral spirit, and so has our daughter Subira. You will know about all those things when we talk.

We did talk, at great length, and usually in private. Mohammed often came to my house, especially in the late afternoon or the evening, and demanded to be admitted by knocking with his stick on the front door, as well as giving the verbal signal which is usual in Swahili: '*Hodi*' (Can I come in?).

I explained to him that one of the major tasks of my current visit was to collect material for a book about him, and that I wanted to tape-record his life story. Mohammed was fascinated and agreed to cooperate, but stipulated that we needed greater privacy for this work. My village house was far from soundproof, and its verandah was used by a wide variety of people, many of whom frequently chose to pay me a visit. So we decided to go to the south of the island, where I had some friends living in a large plantation with a substantial house. We spent several days together there, taping his life story, and discussing the proposed book.

DISCUSSING THE BOOK

P. You know that if this book comes out, it is sold in shops?

M. Over there?

P. Over there, anywhere—England, France, America, even East Africa.

So this book that I am writing is not my work alone, it is also yours [indicating his first diary]. But I have also worked on it because I have translated it, and furthermore, the other thing I have still to do is add explanations. Because people who read it and who do not know East Africa will be a bit surprised. For example, you have written here 'having a spirit' (*mwenye mzimu*) and people will wonder what that means. So I will have to explain it to them. [For such reasons] I thought that this book will be half mine and half yours. So you could have your name there if you wanted to, but if you decided not to [to protect his privacy], that's all right. As to the profits—if God grants me to finish the book, to send it to the publisher, and if they publish it and it gets

sold in bookshops, then I will divide this money with you. But this will not happen today or tomorrow. It is a lot of work, it might take a year or more.

What happens is this—each year they pay out [royalties]. But if you have written a book, you don't get all the money yourself. Suppose a book is sold for 1,000 shillings,⁴ you get only 100 shillings because the book sellers and the publishers take the rest. So if you are lucky you get 100 shillings [for each one]. They see how many copies they have sold. Suppose they sell 100 copies, that means they have sold them for 1 lakh, but I only get 10,000 shillings, and of that, half I think should be for you and half for me.

M. You know me, you understand me. So if you write my name, and if you get 1,000 shillings, you will know how much to give me, won't you? If it is [only] 500 shillings or 600 shillings you will know. I won't be able to know that. But it doesn't have to be this month or this year. All of these things you know about. So what I say to you is this, I do not know about these things, but I do know about your affection (*mapenzi na mahaba*).

P. Yes, you and I have known each other a long time. Do you trust me?

M. Yes, I do. If you had not been [that kind of person] I would not have told you [about these things]. But because you have told me this, we have started differently. I can tell you that in the village of Minazini, here in Mafia, there isn't anyone who received you right from the beginning as I did.

P. Yes I remember the first day when you came with Ali [my cook and his friend].

M. And I have no doubt that Ali told you that I am his friend.

P. Yes, indeed he did.

M. But the heart (*kiini*) of the matter is that I have remembered you and you have remembered me, all of our lives, up to the time recently when I was called, together with your [village] brother,⁵ to get the letters which you had sent us. And the word got around that Patricia had sent letters to Mohammed and to her brother and it is they who are the ones [who are special] in spite of the fact that you also have fathers and mothers here, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, grandparents. They are the ones she talks to in confidence (*pembeni*), isn't that right? Isn't that true?

P. Yes, completely. Now I want to ask you another question. If we write this book, I would like it to contain pictures. And on this trip I have taken many photos of you, so what do you feel about having some included?

M. [laughs] So what will people say about it? Will they think I have written the book?

P. They will be pleased.

M. But will they say I've written it?

P. If you want your name on the cover, fine. If you don't, then in the Preface I can say that I was helped in this work by so and so. But if you don't want that either, then I can use another name for you.

M. You will know what's best (*utaelewa wewe*) and you will know [who it is who has helped you].

P. But even if we use another name for you and someone from here reads it, they will know it is you because of the photos [if I include some of him]. I mean I can't say that copies of the book won't come here to East Africa.

M. No doubt. When people go on the pilgrimage to Mecca, they buy things there and bring them back here. So things do get around. In that way, it could happen that someone from Minazini might buy that book and say, 'Ah, this is Patricia and Mohammed', mightn't they? And a lot of people know me, not just in Minazini, but in Mafia, even in Dar es Salaam.

P. The way I see it is this—we are born and we die. If we are lucky, we leave some property in this world when we go. One is children [he says the word at the same moment as I do] and perhaps other property as well. If I write a book, when I die, it will still be here, and people can continue to read it. It becomes part of knowledge (*elimu*). Students in universities in England, America, France or other countries can still read the book. And with our book, it can be the same, so that even if we die, you and I, people will still know our names. What do you say?

M. [laughs] Fine, but what I think is what I already told you. You write your name [only], and you alone will know who is the man you have behind you (*ugongoni kwako*). So it is your decision (*wazo lako*).

But when your children come here,⁶ you should give them a good account of me: This man is such, and he has his children, and the end of all human beings is death. So if you come here, don't neglect to ask for him. And if you get a letter from Mohammed of Minazini, Mafia, this is the man himself.' And if they see my picture they will know it is me.

Since Mohammed did not want his name in the book, I decided not to include photographs of him either.

A SPECIAL PRAYER

Early in my stay, Mohammed came with a suggestion. He told me that the son of his half-sister by the same mother is a Koran school teacher (*mwalimu*) and is much respected. He first studied in the village, then in Zanzibar, and now he continues his studies every Wednesday with a Sheikh

in a neighbouring village. He performs marriages, prays over corpses after washing them, gives sermons and runs Koranic readings (*hitima*). 'Wherever he goes, he is called to lead (*mbele*), and he is called upon very often. This man does special prayers (*kuombea dua*) for people.'

Mohammed suggested that he should ask this relative to say a special prayer for me. 'You don't have to, only if you want to. Let him ask that your work prosper and that you be above everyone (*juu ya watu wote*).' I told him that the former, not the latter, was my primary wish, but agreed that we can do the prayer as I had not witnessed it before. The fee (*add*) was 1,500 shillings (500 shillings above the usual), plus the cost of incense (20 shillings) and tea (100 shillings).

From my notebook:

On July 10th, Mohammed comes to collect me in the evening after I have had supper at a friend's house. We walk up to his house in the darkness along the narrow winding path, with Mohammed stabbing at things which get in his way with his stick and indicating where the path becomes tricky—'Mind the roots here.'

On arrival I sit on the verandah. The *mwaliimu* is already there. On the other side of the unfenced courtyard sit the other members of Mohammed's household eating supper—his two divorced daughters and their children. The man says that it would be good to do this inside so we go into a room where a new mat is spread. We sit in the flickering light of a little wick lamp (*kibatali*).

On the way Mohammed had asked me if I had anything else that I wanted to add other than 'above all others'. I said that I was less interested in that than in good health and prosperity for my children, and safe journeys. Mohammed did explain some of this to the *mwaliimu* at the beginning, but the emphasis of both of them, rather to my embarrassment, is very much on 'Let her be above all others.'

The *mwaliimu* begins by explaining that in the Koran God tells people that they should pray; he lights the incense bit by bit and begins praying, using a book from which he reads in Arabic and then explains things to us and makes specific requests in Swahili. Mohammed listens intently and I notice that he knows many of the words and prays along quietly.

The prayer takes about 20 minutes. At the end we put our hands over our faces in the usual fashion. Then we retire outside to the verandah again. Mohammed calls for tea which is brought and which I decline on the grounds of potential insomnia. The *mwaliimu* says it has the same effect on him. Mohammed walks me back to my house. He is sure now that our work will be successful and that my career will benefit from it.

1 Introduction

Anthropology and personal narratives

ANTHROPOLOGIST AND INFORMANT

There are no conventional words for the relationship between the anthropologist and the 'key informant'.

(Prell 1989:244)

This book is a personal narrative which presents the life history and world-view of a Swahili man, a peasant from Mafia Island, Tanzania. As far as possible, this is done through his own words, but I have also used other voices, including those of his wife and children, as well as my own.

I have been carrying out field-work in one of the villages—'Minazini'—of Mafia Island for almost thirty years, with stays of eighteen months in 1965–7, and shorter visits of two to three months in 1976, 1985 and 1994. My interests have shifted from kinship and land tenure in the 1960s (Caplan 1975) to gender relations in the 1970s and beyond, encompassing food, health and fertility in the 1980s and 1990s.¹ In addition, throughout this period, I have gathered a considerable amount of data on spirit possession and its rituals. In much of this work, Mohammed has been an important informant, as have members of his family, and during my most recent visit, in the summer of 1994, as the Prologue suggests, we spent a good deal of time discussing this book.

As I have returned to the village each decade, subtle changes have taken place in individual inhabitants who, like the ethnographer, have been passing through the life cycle with all its attendant joys and sorrows. Each time we meet, we are slightly different people, even though we continue to recognise each other. Furthermore, the village itself, part of a wider society and economy, has also been changing, and although such changes are not at first sight very dramatic, it is apparent that there has

been an increase in the poverty of the majority of villagers, including the main characters in this book, as a result of wider social and economic forces (see Caplan 1992b). Also noteworthy, to myself at least, have been the changes in the discipline of anthropology from the time of my first foray in the 1960s as a postgraduate student, when it was still firmly embedded in structural functionalism, to its fragmentation into numerous strands in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the influence of structuralism, feminism and Marxism. More recently, even those who would not wish to be labelled as postmodernists have found themselves influenced by some of its currents, and obliged to think more carefully not only about how and what they do and why, but also what difference *who* they are makes to what they see and experience.

In all of this situation of flux—in persons, places and questions—there have remained areas of continuity provided by friendship and, in some instances, adoptive kinship between myself as ethnographer and certain people of Minazini. This has enabled each new encounter to possess a greater depth than previous ones—we now share something of a common history, and many of our conversations are on the lines of, ‘Do you remember when?’ This commonality is powerfully realised in the fact that my family and I appear in the photo albums which are beginning to be owned by a few people in the village, even as the villagers appear in mine. Many villagers are also actors in the film of the village which I helped make for the BBC in 1976,² and which has to be ritually screened each time I return. On my last visit, I also found a further dimension of communication; my village younger brother, who is relatively well-educated and can read English, had returned to live in the village after a long absence and for the first time I was able to discuss both my published work and work in progress with someone from Minazini itself.

Furthermore, while relationships with villagers are reaffirmed and renewed only on the occasion of my visits, in the interim there are letters which go back and forth; unfortunately, there have been virtually no reciprocal visits (a great contrast to my field-work in India where numerous informants have visited London and stayed with my family). Finally, relationships with villagers are also rethought and remembered in the process of writing ethnography.

I first met Mohammed because he was a friend of a man named Ali whom I employed as a cook³ during my first period of field-work. Mohammed and Ali had spent time together working on the dhows which ply up and down the East Coast of Africa. Ali was from the south of the island and a stranger in Minazini. He was very happy to discover that an old friend lived there, and encouraged Mohammed to

visit our house. In my own diary, the first mention of Mohammed includes a note that he had stayed for a long time and that, by the second visit, he had borrowed a shilling, the first of many such 'loans'. In fact it would be naive to pretend that Mohammed's willingness to act as informant did not have a pecuniary motive. He is a poor man, with a large family, and, as will become plain, most of his projects have failed to come to fruition.

It was not until half way through that first period of field-work, however, that I realised just how knowledgeable an informant Mohammed was. At that stage, I left the village for several weeks to travel on the mainland. As I was worried about missing several events, I asked a number of men in the village who could write (there were hardly any literate women at that time) to keep diaries for me. Several did so, but Mohammed's was the longest and fullest.

The diary proved so useful that I asked him to continue writing it even when I was back in the village, and later when I moved to carry out research in another village. In the second village, Mohammed, often accompanied by his wife Mwahadia, would visit me for several days at a time, and we would work on his diary, as well as going through notes from other informants to clarify certain points.

Strangely enough, although I found the information which it contained useful at the time, I did not think of the diary material as being *sui generis*; it was all just part of my 'field-notes', and awareness of the significance of different kinds of texts struck me only later. Indeed, when I went back to the village in 1976, I did not even ask him to keep a diary again, in spite of the fact that, in the interim, he had been my most regular correspondent. It was only in the 1980s, when I went through all my old field-notes during a year's sabbatical spent working on a new monograph, that I even remembered the existence of the diary as such, and extracted it from other material in my notebooks.

As I have stated elsewhere (Caplan 1992a), it is perhaps remarkable that Mohammed and I developed such a close relationship, given not only the difference in our backgrounds, but also in our genders. In my own 1966–7 diary, I wrote on one occasion, 'Mohammed makes me laugh.' My relationship with him has several unique qualities about it. To begin with, we have never attempted to put it onto a fictive or adoptive kinship plane, as has been the case for other villagers. Yet our relationship is a close one. Mohammed is the only person in the village who calls me by my name, with no embellishment, in contrast to others who use kinship terms, if appropriate, or preface my name with 'Mama' (lit. 'mother', but also 'woman', now extended to translate 'Mrs'). In the village,

relationships between non-related males and females often involve gifts of money and kind usually passing from male to female in return for sexual favours. In our case, however, there was never a hint of sexuality and the flow of goods was in the opposite direction: he provided me with information, and received in return gifts, money or loans. This must sometimes have made him uncomfortable, and at the end of my first stay, Mohammed tried to redress the balance by giving me a coconut tree for which he wrote out a document in *Kiarabu* (Swahili in Arabic script), and I of acceptance in *Kizungu* (Swahili in Roman script).⁴

ANTHROPOLOGY AND PERSONAL NARRATIVES: MONOLOGUE OR DIALOGUE?

In focusing upon an individual in this way, I can of course make no claims to originality. There is a respectable lineage of anthropological life histories,⁵ and in contemplating the literature which this genre has already produced, we are faced with a number of questions. One is that of voice—is it that of the subject alone, or should it include others, such as members of his or her family? Second, what of the ethnographer and his or her presence—should this appear in the text and if so in what form? Possibilities include dialogue between anthropologist and informant, or the anthropologist's framing of the informant's text. Whatever method is chosen, ultimately, the anthropologist has the job of editing the final manuscript, and presenting it in a way which is intelligible to a wide range of readers. As will be seen, different anthropologists have used different styles in presenting life histories.⁶

One of the earliest examples of a life history presented by an anthropologist is Paul Radin's *Crashing Thunder* (1926). Radin himself maintained that the only acceptable form of ethnology was the life history, self-told, but for a long period of time relatively few anthropologists followed his example of allowing informants to speak for themselves.

One notable exception, albeit twenty years later, was Marcel Griaule's work with the Dogon elder Ogotemmeli (*Dieu d'Eaux: Entretiens avec Ogotemmeli* (1948) (later published in English as *Conversations with Ogotemmeli* in 1965), in which Griaule recorded thirty-three days of conversation with a key informant who provided an outline of Dogon cosmology. Although this is not a life history, it is worth mentioning at this point because the text is dialogical: we hear the words of both Griaule himself as well as those of Ogotemmeli.⁷

Although between the 1930s and 1960s several distinguished anthropologists, such as Dollard, Kluckhohn and Langness, noted that the potential of the life history is great (Watson 1976:95), the genre remained a marginal technique until relatively recently. A few American anthropologists did publish life histories prior to the 1950s (see, for example, Dyk's *Son of Old Hat* (1938)), but no British anthropologists did.

In the 1950s and 1960s a small number of important life histories appeared; again, most were by American anthropologists, such as Sidney Mintz's *Worker in the Cane* (1960), Theodora Kroeber's *Ishi in Two Worlds* (1961) and *Ishi—Last of His Tribe* (1973 [1964]). Casagrande also published an edited collection of what he called 'portraits' of twenty anthropological informants (1960), one of which was of Victor Turner's informant, Muchona the Hornet. From the British side there also appeared Mary Smith's *Baba of Karo: A Woman of the Nigerian Hausa* (1981 [1954]).

Mintz's work is the life history of a Puerto Rican sugar cane worker who was his close friend. Mintz is aware that the format of interviews was based largely on his questions and Taso's answers and in the introduction notes that, as a result, the text varies from long uninterrupted passages of Taso's words, to short dialogues between himself and Taso (1960:6, 8).

Theodora Kroeber wrote two books about Ishi, a 'wild' American Yahi Indian who was 'found' in 1911, and thereafter spent the rest of his life in the company of white people, including anthropologists who made him a subject of research. Kroeber describes her first book (1961) as a biography, but it contains few of Ishi's own words. The second book (1973 [1964]) is written as a novel, but although much of the material must have come from Ishi himself, he is referred to in the third, not the first person.

In Mary Smith's book (1981 [1954]) there are three voices: that of the author herself, that of Baba, an elderly Hausa woman talking about her life in response to Smith's questions, and that of the anthropologist M.G.Smith (the author's husband), who wrote the introduction and explanations. For some time, this book did not receive much recognition, perhaps because it was seen as the work of an anthropologist's wife, rather than of a *bona fide* anthropologist, perhaps because British anthropology at the time was uncomfortable with the genre. Several decades later, it was 'rediscovered', and in a Foreword to a later edition of the book, Hilda Kuper notes the importance of such a text which can confront 'the human condition ...the existential reality' (Kuper 1981:9).

In none of these works, however, does the anthropologist him- or herself appear other than fleetingly, and we learn little about them or their relationships with their subjects. Life histories or 'personal narratives' from the 1970s onwards, however, such as the work of Dumont, Freeman and Crapanzano discussed below, have tended to be much more self-conscious about the role of the ethnographer in their construction. Rabinow, writing of the ethnographic enterprise in general, notes that:

The data we collect is doubly mediated, first by our own presence and then by the second order reflection we demand from our informants.

(1977:119)

As a result, 'a system of shared symbols must be developed if this process of object formation is to continue' (1977:153).

Dumont, too, recognises the dialogue which is established in the doing of ethnography; in *The Headman and I* (1978) he asks 'Who or what was I for the Panare?' and notes the importance of understanding 'how they gaze at me' (1978:3). Here, then, there is a suggestion that informants too have agency, and actively construct the encounter.

In his life history of Muli, an Indian transvestite (*Untouchable*, 1978, 1979) James Freeman suggests, following Schechner (1977), that taking a life history is rather like being a theatre director, and that it is important to understand this liminal phase of the creative process (1979:399–400). He introduces a third possible actor, the assistant/ interpreter, maintaining that the book is the creation of three people—Muli, Freeman, and his assistant Hari, and acknowledges that the last played a crucial role. However, several other studies which record that translators, assistants or stenographers were present at interviews do not attribute a significant role to this third party (e.g. Griaule 1965 [1948], Lewis 1976 [1959], Crapanzano 1980).

Crapanzano describes his book, *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan* (1980), as the life history of a Moroccan tilemaker married to a female jinn (*jinniyya*) named A'isha Qandisha. Crapanzano is not only concerned to reproduce some of Tuhami's words, many of which focus upon his sexuality and his relationship with the spirit, but also to discuss the encounter between the anthropologist and the informant:

The life history, like the autobiography, presents the subject from his own perspective. It differs from autobiography in that it is an immediate response to a demand posed by an Other and carries

within it the expectations of that Other. It is, as it were, doubly edited: during the encounter itself and during the literary (re)encounter.

(1980:8)

Indeed, more of the book is taken up with Crapanzano's musings upon Tuhami and his relationship with him, than by Tuhami's own words. Crapanzano maintains that as the interlocutor he was an active participant in Tuhami's life history, even though he rarely appears directly in what the latter has to say, and anthropologist and informant do not appear to have met outside of the interview situation. Towards the end of the book, Crapanzano writes of himself as having become a 'curer': Tuhami and I negotiated our exchange into a therapeutic one' (1980:133), and thus their encounter became 'an articulatory pivot around which he could spin out his fantasies in order to create himself as he desired' (1980:140). Crapanzano also suggests that the ethnographer's presence inevitably produces a change of consciousness in the informant and, indeed, in the ethnographer himself (1980:11). Such work presages the debate on authorial authority which was to be the hallmark of much of the anthropology of the latter part of the 1980s and early 1990s.

Similar concerns had, however, already been raised by feminists (see Caplan 1988, Mascia-Lees *et al.* 1989, Bell 1993), and it is not surprising that the 1980s also saw the publication of a large number of life histories by and about women, of which perhaps the most often cited is Marjorie Shostak's *Nisa: The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman* (1981). Shostak describes the book as 'my work but her story' (1981:350). In a later article (1989), she notes that there are actually three distinct voices in the book: that of Nisa, that of the 'professional anthropologist' who writes the framing explanatory sections which introduce each chapter, and 'my own' which appears in the introduction and epilogue. Here Shostak explains what motivated this work: 'I hoped I would learn from the !Kung what it meant to be human' (1989:238). Her further concerns as an American feminist seeking to understand what it meant to be a woman in another society are also clearly articulated, although this agenda was later to be criticised by some (e.g. Clifford 1986).

In writing the book about Nisa, Shostak decided to leave out her own questions and promptings (a decision for which she was taken to task by Crapanzano (1984), but this is a convention which has been followed in a number of life histories of women published during the 1980s. One such is Burgos-Debray's editing of *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian*

Woman in Guatemala (1984), which is the life story of a politically active 23-year-old Quiche Indian recorded during the latter's stay in Paris. Burgos-Debray notes in the introduction that she decided to utilise a monological form and delete all her own questions: 'By doing so I became what I really was: Rigoberta's listener' (1984: xx). Another book which utilises a similar format is Mayra Atiya's *Khul Khaal: Five Egyptian Women Tell Their Stories* (1988). Atiya, an Egyptian woman brought up abroad, and not an anthropologist, gives as her reason for doing the work her desire to know more about the world from which her family had originated. She herself taped, transcribed and translated the accounts, but she says almost nothing about her relationship to the women; furthermore, their lives are not framed by her, but in an introduction written by an American anthropologist (Andrea Rugh) who has herself carried out field-work in Cairo.

A third book from this period which also uses a monological format is Mirza and Strobel's *Three Swahili Women: Life Stones from Mombasa, Kenya* (1989). The authors see life histories as very much part of a historical project: 'The explicitly historical use of personal narratives contrasts with the more common anthropological perspective of classical texts documenting the lives of African women' (Mirza and Strobel 1989:2). Unusually, this book gives the real names (and photographs) of the subjects, who present very little of their personal lives or emotions, but rather talk about their public lives, especially the associations to which they belong. Mirza and Strobel are obviously acutely aware that their book will be read not only by a Western audience (for whom copious footnotes are provided at the end) but that it could, and indeed *should* be read by a local audience. At the end, Mirza took the transcripts back to Mombasa to gain the approval of the women before publication. Uniquely, the book was published in both English and Swahili (*Wanawake Watatu wa Kiswahili: Hadithi Kutoka Mombasa, Kenya* (1991)). The Swahili version is much shorter than the English version because of the omission of both the footnotes and much of the discussion in the introduction which considers theories of personal narratives and oral history; these, presumably, were thought unnecessary for a Swahili audience.

However, other writers of this period have explicitly decided upon a dialogical mode, such as Kevin Dwyer in his *Moroccan Dialogues: Anthropology in Question* (1982). Dwyer maintains that dialogue is essential in order to represent the presence of the anthropologist, and its important effects. He suggests that without this clear acknowledgement, anthropologists risk a 'contemplative stance': 'perpetuating dominance, and refusing to explore the subjectivity of

the Self or to allow the challenges of the Other' (1982:269). Dwyer argues that the text should be distorted as little as possible by 'cutting into bits and pieces', and that much of the work of interpretation of it should be done by the reader, whose participation he describes as 'crucial' (1982:281).

Fatima Mernissi's book, *Le Maroc Raconté par ses Femmes* (1984), later published in English as *Doing Daily Battle: Interviews with Moroccan Women* (1988) also retains her own voice in interviews with eleven women who talk about their lives. In the introduction, Mernissi notes that she broke the first rule which had been taught her in universities in both France and America: 'I identified with the interviewee' (1984:31). Mernissi's discussion of the role of the interviewer arises not only out of her epistemological and methodological problems, but also out of her feminist commitment: 'I left a space free for the personality of the interviewee to expand herself—that is why I renounced the control so beloved of researchers' (1984:31, my translation).

In much recent writing of this genre, the term 'personal narratives' has been adopted in place of 'life histories' or 'biographies'. As the members of the Personal Narratives Group note, this genre can take many forms: diaries, journals, letters, life histories, biographies, autobiographies. What such diverse texts have in common is that:

They recount a process of the construction of the self, the evolution of subjectivity...they also provide a vital entry point in interaction between the individual and society.

(1989:6)

Thus 'personal narratives' is a broad term, and allows us to subsume within it a range of literature which not only encompasses the narrative or story of a life, but which is 'personal' and focuses upon individuals.

Furthermore, such work need not concentrate upon a single individual—several anthropologists have chosen to utilise whole families as their subject, notably Oscar Lewis in his series of studies of poverty in Mexico and Puerto Rico during the 1940s and 1950s: *Five Families* (1976 [1959]), *La Vida* (1965), *A Death in the Sanchez Family* (1972 [1969]) and *The Children of Sanchez* (1983 [1961]). He looks at the family through the eyes of each of its members, focusing both on the everyday and on a special event or crisis which is related from differing perspectives. Lewis himself argued that, at that period, anthropologists had a new function to serve as reporters on peasants, the crucial feature of whose