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Disorientation and Orientation

Introduction; how culture provides orientation in the world; what is culture and how do anthropologists investigate it? Learning to think anthropologically.

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Introduction

A number of years ago I was asked to teach a course on anthropology and comparative religion to incoming freshmen at a large urban university on the East coast. I was intrigued because anthropology is not usually taught to freshmen, at least not in the United States. Furthermore, the course was to begin in two weeks, leaving me very little time to prepare a syllabus and order books. Consequently, I decided to take a bold approach. Rather than trying to do a typical survey course, beginning with human origins and moving on to hunters and gatherers, and then peasants, to modern urban society, I decided to treat the course as an anthropological experience. I wanted students to imagine themselves as anthropologists coming to study another culture, for, although they wouldn't think of it that way, that was a part of what they were doing when they entered college. I wanted them to learn not only *about* anthropology, but also about what it is to *be* an anthropologist.

That original course was an adventure for all of us and it was a great success. However, when I first came to Stanford, I was not able to teach it as a freshman course because freshmen were being tracked into a number of prescribed large lecture courses. Instead, I taught somewhat revised forms for upperclassmen, for students planning to go abroad for a time, and at the Stanford campus in Berlin. Other professors borrowed it, modified it, and taught it at Stanford campuses in Spain and Italy. When the university instituted a "freshman seminar" program a few years ago I was able, once again, to teach this course to entering freshmen. While the course can, obviously, be taught in a number of contexts, I still think it works

best for freshmen as they enter college or university, not because the material is simplified, but because their experience is fresh.

The course is an innovative way to introduce students to anthropology, and because it has been a success, I was asked by the publisher to write a textbook based on it so that it might become available to students elsewhere. Although each chapter is devoted to one of the topics I discuss in class, such as space or time or food, it is not meant to be an exhaustive analysis of any one of them. Otherwise, each chapter could easily have become a book on its own. Even less is this book meant to be an in-depth analysis of American, British, or any other culture, even as it is intended for use in the United States and Britain. I juxtapose a range of material – classical anthropological material about a variety of cultures, contemporary items drawn from the newspaper or the Web, from Stanford, and from my own fieldwork in Turkey – for the purpose of generating ideas and indicating the range of areas for further exploration.

My goal is not to teach *about* other cultures. That is the normal pedagogical approach adopted in schools, but it is passive and distanced learning. I believe that people learn best when they are actively involved in the process. You will learn about anthropology and about culture by learning how to think like an anthropologist, that is, by becoming amateur anthropologists. Not everyone is able to go to another culture to gain this experience, but it is possible to simulate it. As I illustrate below, you will learn to draw analogies between your own experience of entering and becoming acclimated to college life and the experience of anthropologists who go to study another culture. Both can be quite disorienting, at least initially. Hold on to the disorientation for a while because it provides some mental space from which you can grasp, as they occur, aspects of the new culture you have entered and how these aspects relate to each other. Even while the focus must be on your own environment, the aim is not to illuminate merely the “culture” of your particular school, but to explore the way those particular aspects connect to and represent concepts, values, and structures of the wider culture. Indeed, I think the use of the word “culture” in that restricted sense is inappropriate.

Clifford Geertz, probably the most famous American anthropologist alive today, made the point very clear: “[T]he locus of study is not the object of study. Anthropologists don’t study villages (tribes, towns, neighborhoods . . .); they study *in* villages” (1973: 22). Substitute “college” for village and you will see what I mean. Although I conducted my fieldwork in a village in central Turkey, my aim was to try to understand something about Turkish culture and how it was inflected in that one place. Analogously, the object of your study is the culture of your country even as you investigate it in your particular locale. My goal is to get you to learn *experientially*, to get you to adopt an anthropological approach that you can use to investigate any social or cultural phenomenon in any culture. Prerequisite is a mind open to new ways of thinking about things; it requires that you take nothing for granted. Anything is available for inspection, including the most ordinary, mundane items and events such as a McDonald’s hamburger, a pair of blue jeans, a birthday, or New Year’s Eve and so forth. These items and events are *clues* you can use to investigate your sociocultural system. Each of them provides a window into an entire system of beliefs, power relations, and values. For example, what would you make of a

culture that celebrates death days rather than birthdays? How might that fact relate to other facets of that society? What other kinds of questions would you need to ask to begin to understand not just that practice but the culture in which it occurs?

Disorientation

The experience of beginning college can be exhilarating, anxiety-producing, and disorienting. This is magnified for those who come from other parts of the country or from foreign countries. Even when the language is familiar and you have not moved from your home town or city, college life is different from high school. It is like entering a new world. You don't know where anything is or how to find it; you don't understand the time schedule or how to manage your time; you don't know the lingo – the insider abbreviations and acronyms; and you don't know the code of dress or behavior. For those who go away to college, it might be the first time you are away from home, alone. It might be the first time you share a room with someone or have a room of your own. It might be the first time you have to schedule your own time.

Listen to the echoes of your experience when you read what is one of the most famous and oft-quoted sentences in anthropology. It was written by Bronislaw Malinowski, who is credited with inventing the anthropological method of intensive fieldwork. This is what he said at the beginning of his work in the Trobriand Islands in the South Pacific, where he was interned during World War I:

Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight. ([1922] 1961: 4)

An analogous translation might be something like:

“Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone in your room but with unfamiliar people nearby, while the car that brought you drives away out of sight.”

Many students, just like many anthropologists, get a feeling of panic at that moment. “What am I doing here?” “Why didn't I go to X?” “I want to go home.” Anthropologists call this feeling of panic “culture shock.” The term is credited to Ruth Benedict, but Cora Du Bois defines it as a “syndrome precipitated by the anxiety that results from losing all your familiar cues” (cited in Golde [1970] 1986: 11); in short, you become disoriented. Culture shock is not confined to that initial moment but can resurface at various times at the beginning of any new adventure. Nor is it confined only to anthropologists or to students, but can occur at other life-changing moments, for example, when you take a new job or move to a new city. Anthropologists who have studied the phenomenon of “culture shock” have noted the following telltale signs: “frustration, repressed or expressed aggression against

the source of discomfort, an irrational fervor for the familiar and comforting, and disproportionate anger at trivial interferences” (Golde, [1970] 1986: 11).¹ It is useful to keep this in mind during the first few weeks of college life.

As an example, let me tell you about something that happened to me when I began my fieldwork in Turkey. I was excited to be there and ready to begin my fieldwork but I didn’t know how I was supposed to go about it or where to start. I recall that I got a craving for vanilla yogurt. This was a very trivial thing and I was never even that fond of yogurt at home, but in Turkey I had to have vanilla yogurt. Now you have to realize that Turkey is full of yogurt, it is one of their basic foods. Yogurt, yogurt everywhere, but no vanilla to be found anywhere. I was frustrated and angry: how could they not have vanilla? What kind of people are they anyway? I began a frantic search, feeling that I would not be happy until I found it; vanilla yogurt would be my comfort food, my little piece of home. I eventually found a few desiccated pods of vanilla in a spice shop and ground my own. After that I was prepared for anything.

In order to avoid severe culture shock and to overcome students’ initial disorientation, it is no wonder colleges set aside some time, often several days, for “Orientation.”

Orientation

An orientation program is, obviously, intended to help you get oriented in the new environment. Often you are told something about the history, the resources, and the rules of the school, you are shown where to go for class, for books, for food, for exercise, and for help if you get sick. Such a program helps you to get your bearings – literally and figuratively.

The purpose of orientation programs is to help you feel at home and become acclimated to your new environment. It can also be viewed quite productively as an *initiation* ritual, for it does initiate you into your new status – that of undergraduate. Initiation rituals are one type of *rites de passage* first analyzed by a Flemish anthropologist, Arnold Van Gennep, in 1909. Although there are a number of rites of passage, rites that mark transitions from one life stage to another, such as at birth, puberty, marriage, and death, Van Gennep focused primarily on initiation rites that occur around the time of puberty in a number of small-scale, kinship-based, hunter-gatherer societies, namely those societies we have so condescendingly called “primitive.”² Initiation rites are the rituals that transform youths/adolescents into adults; during the rituals they are initiated by tribal elders into the lore of the tribe and into adult responsibilities. In some places the rites occur over a number of weeks or months, but in others they have been known to last several years. Among Australian aborigines, for example, the initiation rites traditionally took about four years, exactly equivalent to a typical American college education.

According to Van Gennep’s schema, most *rites de passage* have three stages: (1) rites of separation, when the person is detached from his or her group or family; (2) rites that characterize the *liminal* period, which is *the* transitional stage. Victor

Turner, a famous British anthropologist who developed Van Gennep's schema in his own studies of ritual, characterized this stage as "betwixt and between" fixed statuses when a boy, for example, is no longer a child but not yet a man with adult responsibilities (1967: 93–111). The last stage (3) includes the rites of reaggregation when the transformed person is inserted back into society.

You will have to analyze your own orientation programs for some of these features. The example that follows, from my university, is meant to be used for comparative purposes; it is not held up as the norm or as an ideal, I use it because it is my locale. While some of the particulars vary from year to year, the orientation program follows quite closely the pattern laid down by Van Gennep. It is primarily for freshmen and it lasts for three days, a weekend, *before* the other students arrive. Students leave their homes, their familiar surroundings and friends. This is the beginning of the "separation" phase. On Friday the freshmen arrive, often with their parents, siblings, and sometimes friends in tow. Some come by car, others arrive by plane, train, or bus. They are taken to their living quarters and introduced to their roommates and the resident heads. After a few activities that include parents, there is an announced time when parents (and friends) are supposed to leave. This truly marks the "separation" phase, though at this point the separation is often more traumatic for the parents. Students then have their first dinner with their assembled dormmates.

Saturday resembles the "liminal" phase of the rite when initiates are expected to undergo a number of *ordeals*. At Stanford, these can vary from being led around campus in the dead of night not knowing where you are or where you are going, to being awakened at dawn and dragged out of bed to participate in a scavenger hunt. Later in the day students sit for hours and take placement exams that will determine what level of what classes they will be permitted to enroll in. They also must consider what other classes they will take and activities they would like to participate in. At least for a while, their choices will have an impact on their academic and social direction (or orientation). Other parts of the *ordeal* can include being quizzed on the names of other students, residence heads, the local jargon that they should have memorized, and so forth. In the evening they are sometimes required to participate in a race and gender sensitivity-training program, which can be unsettling for a number of students who must confront their prejudices. Then they are taught some of the new rules for academic and personal behavior – what is acceptable and what is not.

Culminating the orientation weekend is a football game, where the freshmen go *en masse* and sit in a special area reserved for them. Many alumni attend this game and faculty are given free passes. The freshmen are being made into Stanfordites; they are shown the school symbols, they hear the school songs and cheers for the first time, and they are being caught up in the school spirit, routing for *their* team against the opponents. This could be imagined as the *reaggregation* ritual, for symbolically, they are being incorporated into the Stanford community.

You could also easily imagine the entire four years of college as a prolonged initiation ritual; for during that time, you are separated from the rest of society. You are no longer a child, but are not yet a fully functioning adult. You have a special, liminal, "student" status that is socially recognized; you receive certain benefits –

discounts on buses, airplanes, movies, etc. and a wide berth for some types of disruptive behavior. During the college years students are freer than they ever will be again to “discover who they are,” to try on various identities, and to prepare themselves for their adult roles in society. In this latter task, they are aided by the wisdom of the elders – professors and counselors – just as in initiation rites among traditional societies.

For some students, the liminal phase is more interesting or even comforting than what awaits them “outside” in the “real world” and they desire to stay on as long as possible. Eventually, however, most of them pass through the initiation and come out ready to be reinserted, as adults, into society. This achievement is marked by the graduation ceremony, which, with ironic connotations, is called “Commencement,” no doubt to indicate that this is the *beginning* of the rest of your life, as a newly fledged person.

Anthropology

The foregoing may not be *at all* your image of what anthropology is. Most people think it has to do with *elsewhere* but not here, and think it has to do with “stones and bones.” This is a very common assumption that I hear in the responses of people when I tell them that I am an anthropologist. They often launch into an account of some program they have seen on television about an ancient site or a recent bone find. They are thinking of archaeology (the “stones”) and physical anthropology (the “bones”). Yet, these are only two of the traditional four subfields of anthropology. Linguistics is the third subfield. Other people sometimes think of Margaret Mead and realize that anthropology can also be about psychology and human behavior; the kinds of studies she conducted fall in the major “subfield” of the discipline – social and cultural anthropology. Many anthropologists today, myself included, no longer subscribe to the four-field division of the discipline but feel, instead, that the defining element is not so much what one studies but the *theoretical* stance one takes toward the material one studies. The difference has to do with the way people define or, at least, imagine human nature and culture (see Segal and Yanagisako 2004).

Nature/Culture

To give you some sense of what this means in practice, think about some of the ways you have tended to account for differences between *peoples*: environment, race, genetics, religion, economy, technology and development. Often these differences are collapsed into broader categories of *nature* vs. *culture*, with race and genetics put in the nature or biology box while religion, economy, and technology are put in the culture box. Yet the two categories can overlap since there has been an underlying assumption that those with the most advanced culture are also “better”

naturally, that is, they have the best natural endowment (genes, intelligence, strength).

But who was making these judgments about “advanced” vs. “primitive,” and whose scale was being used as the standard? Advanced in what sense? If kinship was the focus, then the system of the Australian aborigines was/is one of the most complex, as are, arguably, their religious concepts. If one takes technology of locomotion as an index, then some of the Western nations are more advanced, and if one takes meditative practices, then Hindus or Zen Buddhists might be the most sophisticated. In the nineteenth century, social theorists ranked peoples of the world on an evolutionary, progressive, unilinear, and universal scale of culture that ended, not coincidentally, with themselves at the top. It was simply assumed that all peoples necessarily tread the same path to civilization. There was only one scale and one orientation – up and West.

A very popular notion about anthropology is that it is the search for human universals with the corollary that whatever is universal must, *ipso facto*, be natural. People want to know what is natural to the human species and often try to make analogies from animal behavior to human behavior, believing that the overlap indicates what is natural about human nature. For a long time it was believed that *homo sapiens* developed to their modern form first (two-legged stance, opposable thumb, large brain), and *then* invented culture. Instead, it is now generally accepted not just that *homo sapiens* developed from their ape-ical ancestors to their modern form but also, more importantly, that culture was part of that development. Clifford Geertz informs us that “the greater part of human cortical expansion has *followed*, not preceded, the ‘beginning’ of culture” (1973: 64, emphasis mine). In other words, “cultural resources are ingredient, not accessory, to human thought” (Geertz 1973: 83).

Nevertheless, scientists continue to see in animal behavior (not so) faint echoes of our own. They persist in drawing analogies *from* animal to human, but really what they are doing is using concepts and beliefs drawn from human society, imposing them on animals, and then reading back again to human society. Curiously, Marx was the first to notice this sleight-of-hand movement: “It is remarkable how Darwin recognizes among beasts and plants his English society with its division of labour, competition, opening of new markets, ‘inventions,’ and the Malthusian ‘struggle for existence’” (cited in Sahlins 1976: 53). Engels continued:

The whole Darwinian teaching of the struggle for existence is simply a transference from society to living nature of Hobbes’s doctrine of “*bellum omnium contra omnes*” and of the bourgeois-economic doctrine of competition together with Malthus’s theory of population. When this conjurer’s trick has been performed . . . the same theories are transferred back again from organic nature into history and it is now claimed that their validity as eternal laws of human society has been proved. (Cited in Sahlins 1976: 54)

In no way is this meant to detract from the general notion of human physical evolution outlined by Darwin, but it does question some of the

“The war of all against all,” or everyone out for himself. Hobbes believed that in a state of nature, humans would be at each other’s throats. This assumption, at the heart of his philosophy, is behind much of economic rationality. However, *humans* were never in a state of nature; humans developed *in* society and *with* culture. That means that people are always affiliated with some group, such as a kinship group, where there are social ties that bind them to each other and rules that mitigate such actions. In addition, war is caused for all kinds of reasons; it is not the result of some innate human aggression.

This awareness is attributed to Franz Boas, the founder of American anthropology, by one of his famous students, Ruth Benedict. She believed that his fieldwork in Baffinland among people who could see different colors of sea water when he could not led him to the conclusion that the seeing eye is “not a mere physical organ but a means of perception conditioned by the tradition in which its possessor has been reared” (cited in Stocking, 1968: 146). There is a story that this experience is what converted Boas from a career in physics to one in anthropology. However, George Stocking, a leading historian of anthropology, has read Boas’s letters and diary and thinks the story apocryphal, that the awareness was much more gradual.

Stylites were hermit-like monks (fifth to seventh centuries in what is now Syria and Turkey) who sat on top of pillars to separate themselves from society and devote themselves to prayer. The most famous is St. Simon.

assumptions he made about what motivates the process and the ease with which the animal–human equation is drawn when it comes to “society” or “social relations.”³

A sense of the difference between those who assume they can “read” directly from animal behavior to human behavior and those who argue that there can be no unmediated account, that human culture must be considered, can readily be grasped from a film series produced by the BBC called *A Planet for the Taking*. In one of the films, identical sequences of animal behavior are shown but with different voice-over narratives; one about male dominance and aggression, the other about grooming behavior and bonding. It was easy to *see* the behavior in either scenario – another instance of the idea that we see what we are culturally trained to see, that the “seeing eye is the organ of tradition.”

In a short but insightful article, “Seeing is Believing,” Alan Dundes “shows how American culture affects the way Americans experience their world” (1972: 14; see chapter 4); especially illuminating is his discussion of the way we use sight metaphorically in describing the acquisition of knowledge (see my three examples in this sentence).⁴ A blind student in my Fall 2001 class made us all aware of the extent to which Americans depend on sight, and not just the metaphor of it, as the primary means of cultural knowledge. For instance, think how quickly you make judgments about people based solely on how they look or the clothes they wear. Nevertheless, the *judgments* are made not because of sight but because of the meanings and values supplied by the culture.

While the capacity for culture is a human universal, that doesn’t explain why cultures are so different. The fact that “everywhere people mate and produce children, have some sense of mine and thine and protect themselves in one fashion or another from rain and sun are neither false nor, from some points of view, unimportant” (Geertz 1973: 40), but it is questionable, Geertz says, “whether a lowest-common-denominator view of humanity is what we want anyway . . . it may be in the cultural particularities of people – in their oddities – that some of the most instructive revelations of what it is to be generically human are to be found” (p. 43).

It is not only that humans developed along with culture in the generic sense, but we are always within culture in the particular sense. Humans cannot exist outside of culture, the tales of “wolf boys” – children reared by wolves or other animals – notwithstanding. Hermits or stylites – people who deliberately isolate themselves from society – are a different matter; they have already been reared in that society and, even when totally alone, carry on silent dialogue with it. People “unmodified by the customs of particular places do not in fact exist, have never existed, and most important, could not in the very nature of the case exist” (Geertz 1973: 35).

What Geertz and others argue is that there is no backstage, no place outside of culture in both the generic and particular senses, where you can go to study the so-called “naked ape” stripped of his or her culture. People are molded by culture from the moment of birth, and probably even before

that due to the cultural prescriptions for pregnancy and birth and the expectations that people have about the child.

For a very long time, however, a major assumption in the humanities has been that there is a constant human nature and that the differences are only superficial. Such an assumption implies that a Shakespeare play, for example, could be understood by all people (once it was translated) because people everywhere would have the same concepts, emotions, and motivations. Indeed, Shakespeare's genius, like that of any great artist, is supposed to rest on his ability to appeal to universal emotions and circumstances. But others have asked whether a people's emotions and responses are instead conditioned by the particularities of the culture they live in. Anthropologist Laura Bohannon put these different positions to the test when she told the story of Hamlet to a group of Africans with whom she was living and conducting her anthropological fieldwork. A major difficulty arose with the translation – not just the words, but the concepts. Was it possible to translate the concepts and emotions from Shakespeare's world into the African language and context to render the story understandable to them, or did the translation totally alter it? Her famous article is included with this chapter.

To understand people and cultures, you have to get into the particulars, in the details. That is where you pick up the clues. This is anthropology in a new key;⁵ it does not dismiss human universals, but discovering them is not its primary goal since they help us very little in understanding why different peoples do things differently. In short, although universals give us the common human denominator, they do not tell us very much about specific cultures. What, then, is this "culture" that we should be mindful of it?

Because I think it is important for you to come to your own understanding of culture, I do not intend to give it a specific definition, although, in the next section, I will briefly discuss some general ideas that have been put forth by a variety of theorists who have dealt with the concept. Before reading this section, it would be useful to stop here and define "culture" for yourself and then see how your understanding of it changes as you read further in the book.

Culture

Culture is, admittedly, a slippery concept, difficult to grasp. According to British social theorist Raymond Williams:

Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and *incompatible* systems of thought. (Williams [1976] 1983: 87, emphasis mine)

Culture has become such a contested word that some anthropologists think we should drop it. Since I have used the word in the title of this book, it is clear that I do not agree. To get some sense of the approach taken in this book it is helpful, I

think, to examine some of the meanings of the word. I begin with the historical etymology worked out by Williams in his helpful book, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* ([1976] 1983).

According to Williams, “[c]ulture in all its early uses was a noun of process: the tending of something, basically crops or animals.” This is the sense behind such words as *horticulture*; *vini/viticulture*, and *agriculture*. Beginning in the eighteenth century, the idea of *cultivation* was transferred to humans and with it was born the notion of a *cultivated* person. This had distinct class overtones and was closely related to the idea of *civilization*. That idea has not completely died out, for culture is still often associated with “great works” that are housed in libraries and museums or performed on stage. Poetry and literature, painting and sculpture, symphony and opera, theater and dance – these were, and still are to a large extent, what most people think of when they think of culture. Not so long ago, these were the things you went to college to learn about. To be a cultured person you had to know about them and know how to appreciate them. In addition, especially among the upper classes, it was thought essential that students complete their education with a European tour to absorb the great works of Western culture. Moreover, Western culture was held to be the epitome of civilization. When combined with a belief that culture is an evolutionary, unidirectional, and progressive phenomenon that all peoples are striving for, one can sense the way assumptions about class and race and gender were reinforced by such a tour.

In the twentieth century, many anthropologists have dropped this framework with the realization that different cultures are just different. And while cultures are conditioned by the global network of power and resources in which they are embedded, they nevertheless spring from different premises about what life is all about, and they have different goals and values. This idea stems from Johann Gottfried von Herder, an eighteenth-century German historian, who thought that every people, *volk*, had their own values, language, and *geist* or spirit. He also argued against the presumptions of European superiority:

Men of all the quarters of the globe, who have perished over the ages, you have not lived solely to manure the earth with your ashes, so that at the end of time your posterity should be made happy by European culture. The very thought of a superior European culture is a blatant insult to the majesty of Nature. (Cited in Williams [1976] 1983: 89)

It is from Herder that the notion of culture in the plural derives, and it is in this sense that the concept entered anthropology, notably through Franz Boas. Boas is credited with being the founder of American anthropology even though he was German and trained in the German intellectual tradition. In New York at Columbia University he established the first department of anthropology in the United States. Boas was also a major player in championing *nurture* over *nature*, a debate that did then and still has racial underpinnings and implications, for if your nature (now read “genes”) is responsible for your lowly position, nothing can be done. But

if that position can be attributed to (the lack of) nurture, here meaning not only food and nutriment but also cultural and social resources, then social measures can be instituted to ameliorate it.

Raymond Williams claims that “in archaeology and in *cultural anthropology* the reference to culture or a culture is primarily to *material* production, while in history and *cultural studies* the reference is primarily to *signifying* or *symbolic* systems” (p. 91). While that may be true in the British context, it is not so in the American. Culture, among American anthropologists, generally refers to signifying or symbolic systems, as we shall see. (More proof of George Bernard Shaw’s dictum that England and the United States are two countries divided by a common language.) No wonder some anthropologists wish to abandon the term culture altogether. But Williams’s take on this issue is, I believe, related to another important difference between British and American anthropology. As he notes, the adjective *cultural* came into prominence at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the emergence of anthropology. This usage develops in relation, and often in contrast, to the adjective *social*.

Social and Cultural Anthropology

Within the major (sub)field of social and cultural anthropology (see p. 8 above), there is yet another division around which some of the most contentious debates revolve. British anthropologists tend to emphasize the “social,” while American anthropologists tend to put a greater emphasis on the “cultural.” This is a gross generalization, since most anthropologists on both sides of the Atlantic try to do both, yet it helps to give a sense of the different orientations. Those who emphasize the social system tend to argue that it is social organization that determines the culture, often assuming that there are given or universal social domains (such as kinship, economy, and religion), instantiated in institutions, that can be compared cross-culturally. Those who emphasize the cultural system tend to argue that culture greatly influences the types of social organization found “on the ground,” and do not assume, *a priori*, that there are distinct universal domains (kinship etc.) that can be analyzed separately from the rest of the culture. They believe the domains of each culture must be arrived at by empirical investigation.

Each position stems from a different intellectual lineage – the American lineage draws, to a large extent, on the German tradition beginning with Herder through Boas, as noted above, while the British were heavily influenced by the French theorist Emile Durkheim and by utilitarianism, a socioeconomic theory developed by philosophers Hobbes and Locke and economists Malthus and Smith. Utilitarianism is an individualistic theory based on the rational pursuit of self-interest that assumes wants are *given* rather than produced by culture and society.⁶

Ideas about social evolution were also prominent in the works of British (as well as some American) social theorists like E. B. Tylor and Herbert Spencer, who might be considered the “founders” of British social anthropology. Durkheim, too, was

influenced by evolutionary theory. But his major contribution to anthropology was his belief that society is something *sui generis* (of its own kind, unique); this means that the functioning of society cannot be reduced to, or explained in terms of, psychology, and even less to biology. Society, for Durkheim, is greater than the parts it is composed of, and it has its own laws which the sociologist must discover. Society cannot be grasped except in its *collective representations*, which are essentially the shared categories (and the images and symbols) through which a society represents itself to itself. Some American anthropologists think these representations are analogous to culture. For Durkheim they are religious in origin: "If religion has given birth to all that is essential in society, it is because the idea of society is the soul of religion" ([1915] 1965: 466); what he means is that there is an integration between a particular society and its elementary religious concepts. Social anthropologists seem to have overlooked this aspect since they continue to treat religion as a separate domain.

An example of what is at stake in the debate between social and cultural anthropologists can be illustrated by material from two British social anthropologists, Peter Worsley and Meyer Fortes, as critiqued by an American, Marshall Sahlins. According to Sahlins, Worsley contends that among the Talensi, an African group he studied:

the jural or ritual relationship between a Tale father and son depends on their relationship in production (pp. 41–49, 62). Yet it is evident that their relationship in production also depends on the authority of the father in a patrilineal structure and the ritual piety of the son (Fortes, 1949, p. 204). But the basic dilemma in this, as throughout the analysis, is that one cannot determine the kinship properties of the relation by the economic coordinates of the interaction. Nothing in the material conditions or the economic interests specifies the quality of kinship as such. (Sahlins 1976: 9)

For Sahlins, therefore, one cannot assume there is a kinship relationship separate from an economic relationship or a ritual/religious one; first one needs to understand the domains and categories of that society rather than impose those from our own.

That idea, too, is reflected in the position taken by David Schneider, who believed that culture is a system of symbols and meanings.

By symbols and meanings I mean the basic premises which a culture posits for life; what its units consist in; how those units are defined and differentiated; how they form an integrated order or classification; how the world is structured; in what parts it consists and on what premises it is conceived to exist, the categories and classifications of the various domains of the world of man and how they relate one with another, and the world that man sees himself living in. (Schneider 1972: 38)

"Culture," for Schneider, "concerns the stage, the stage setting, and the cast of characters; the normative system consists in the stage directions for the actors and how the actors should play their parts on the stage that is so set" (1972: 38). By "normative system" he meant the norms or rules of behavior in a society. Schneider believed that one needed first to learn how the X divide up the world, to see what

their major categories and domains are, before imposing our own as if they were natural, given, and universal. He objected to the piecemeal comparisons that result from attempts to compare “kinship systems,” for example, across different cultures, a method he felt was analogous to comparing apples and oranges, which similarly distorted the particular flavor of each culture.

Clifford Geertz, a former colleague of Schneider at the University of Chicago, took a similar approach. The following is one of Geertz’s most frequently quoted statements:

The concept of culture I espouse is essentially a semiotic one. Believing with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. (Geertz 1973: 5)

The difference between an explanatory science and an interpretative science is also a feature that tends to distinguish between the social and the cultural anthropologists. However, the differences between them need not be so rigidly defined, as people who concentrate on social organization, social phenomena “on the ground,” must also pay attention to culture and, conversely, those whose primary interest is “culture” – the symbols and meanings – must investigate the way they are expressed and embedded in social activity.

Marxist theory, which imagined culture as *superstructure* that reflects more basic economic realities, was taken up by some anthropologists and reworked into a variety of forms, notably “structural Marxism” and “political economy,” that deal with ideology, and the influence of capitalism on the world system.⁷ More sophisticated versions, called “praxis theory” and first developed by Pierre Bourdieu ([1972] 1977), attempt to understand how individual agency both reproduces and changes the “system.” Rather than singling out particular domains, especially “modes of production,” or prominent rituals of society, practice theorists, according to Sherry Ortner, pay more attention to:

the little routines people enact, again and again, in working, eating, sleeping, and relaxing, as well as the little scenarios of etiquette they play out again and again in social interaction. All of these routines and scenarios are predicated upon, and embody within themselves, the fundamental notions of temporal, spatial, and social ordering that underlie and organize the system as a whole. In enacting these routines, actors not only continue to be shaped by the underlying organizational principles involved, but continually re-endorse those principles in the world of public observation and discourse. (Ortner 1984: 154)

It seems to me that cultural anthropologists have been doing just that for quite some time. Another intellectual trend that uses the notion of culture is *cultural studies*, which spans a number of disciplines, particularly literary fields and anthropology. A cultural studies approach is concerned not only with the products of culture and their meanings, but also with the processes of production and the ways that certain meanings or works become valorized. Those who use a cultural studies approach

The concept of *hegemony* is attributed to Italian political intellectual Antonio Gramsci. He was interested in the way certain groups were able to dominate society not by coercion but by the power of their ideas and discourses to create widespread social consent and support.

attempt to expose the *hegemonic* order by which the dominant classes impose their values and meanings on the masses.

As we go about *investigating culture* in this book, I try to use insights from all of these theoretical approaches without becoming dogmatic about any of them. However, I wish to make it clear that my own training and inclination is oriented more toward *culture*, as its inclusion in the title suggests. I am, after all, an American, trained in the American cultural anthropological tradition, and include as my teachers and mentors David Schneider, Marshall Sahlins, and Clifford Geertz, the very theorists that British anthropologist Adam Kuper attacks in his book *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account* (1999). (Is it *the* anthropologists' account or *an* anthropologist's account?)

Subculture/Boundless Culture

In recent years, in the United States anyway, the idea of an "American" culture has been challenged; in a country with so many different ethnic groups, how can there be an overarching national culture? Instead, the word "culture" has come to be more often associated with ethnicity, as in "Latino culture," or "African American culture," part of the contested arena of identity politics in a *multicultural* society. I am not yet ready to throw out the idea of a mainstream or hegemonic culture, for it seems to me that the various subcultures define themselves against it or in relation to it while simultaneously incorporating many of its concepts and values. But I do feel

I intended to include public schooling until one of my students reminded me that she was home-schooled, and that a lot of people in the United States are engaged in alternative forms of education. Then, too, there is no nationwide curriculum as in France or the United Kingdom; instead, each county in each state determines what will be taught and what books will be ordered. Nevertheless, for a time there was considerable overlap. President Bush's program of school vouchers will further fragment the educational system and, thus, the people.

that the use of the term *culture* in phrases such as "corporate culture," "X school culture," or the "culture of the Boy Scouts" is much too narrow and urge that it be dropped in those senses. What these uses seem to be alluding to is the ambience or spirit of a place or group. Generally, discussions of culture in these restricted uses fail to relate the particular cases to the prevailing system of beliefs and values. So, for example, when you conduct your ethnographic research at your own school, you will, no doubt, reveal some unique features of that place, but do not stop your analysis there. Pick up the thread and follow it as it weaves into the concepts, values, and constraints of the broader cultural system.

Since the United States is multicultural, is there any sense in which we can speak of an "American" culture? Is there anything we share? Actually, I think there is quite a lot we share – television, movies, news, politics and voting, laws, rights, notions of freedom, independence, opportunity, and a host of other things – albeit in different degrees and from very different standpoints. For example, the notion and value of freedom will be very differently inflected in the life of a billionaire like Bill Gates and in the life of a welfare mother. Even the arch-intellectualist Claude Lévi-Strauss noted: "one has to be very naive or dishonest to imagine that men choose their beliefs independently of their situation" ([1955] 1975: 148). A cultural analysis should make explicit the particular positionality of the person

doing the analyzing as well as that of the people being analyzed, and more importantly, account for the differentials of power and inequality between people and between groups. However, as my colleague Sylvia Yanagisako and I argued in our co-edited volume, *Naturalizing Power*, it is important to recognize that these “differentials of power (often) come already embedded in culture . . . (so that) power appears natural, inevitable, even god-given” (Yanagisako and Delaney 1995: 1). Despite all these differences, however, many of the peoples who make up this nation came here precisely because of what “America” symbolizes – the land of opportunity, for example – regardless of what that may mean or how it may work out in practice. Investigating exactly what “America” does mean to its diverse citizens would make an excellent and important research project.

The whole issue of a national culture that is bounded and discrete has also recently been challenged. The challengers argue that the concept of culture has too often been equated with “nation” in the sense of nation-state with territorial boundaries. When it was realized that “nations,” especially as nation-states, were relatively recent constructions, that idea of a national culture began to break down. “Nation,” however, did not always have that meaning; instead it referred to a “people” bound by language, religion, and birth (from the Latin word *natio*, which comes from the verb to be born). The Ottoman Empire, for example, was composed of many nations – the Jewish nation, the (Greek) Orthodox nation, the Armenian nation, and the Muslim nation. These were different “confessional” groups where religion, language, and ethnicity went together. In addition, the borders of the Empire were not so distinct. Although Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic of Turkey, wanted to create a nation-state on the model of European nations, he also wanted to create a national identity different from the ethnic identities of the Ottoman Empire. Turkish identity would be based on language and civilization; different groups would be assimilated by means of education. “Turk,” during the Ottoman period, meant a country bumpkin and referred to the peasantry; it was not an ethnic designation even though Europeans called the people Turks. Unfortunately, the choice of Turkey rather than Anatolia as the name of the new nation had the result of perpetuating ethnic identities and divisions.

Anatolia, or *Anadolu* in Turkish, is the traditional name for all of the land mass on the Asian “side,” that is, the majority of the land, and where most of the peasants lived. Situating the capital in Ankara instead of Istanbul was another way Atatürk indicated that the new country was of, and for, the people.

In my view, the concept of culture need not be co-extensive with nation-state. For example, Turks living in Europe bring along many of the concepts, beliefs, values, feelings, foods, modes of social interaction, dress and aesthetics that were inculcated in Turkey. Surely this becomes diluted in the second and third generations born outside of Turkey, but it is not entirely wiped out. Turkish culture exceeds the boundaries of the nation of Turkey. If one thinks of culture not only as material items but as a system of symbols and meanings, then there is nothing that confines it to a specific place. At the same time, it is extremely important to investigate the ways in which power, aggression, repression, and exploitation have had an important influence on the development and expression of culture. Turks in Europe have many restrictions placed on their cultural expression and they are often the targets of state repression and private aggression. Their example helps to expose the processes of cultural production – who gets to make culture and how is it transmitted – as well as the creative ways that cultural expressions and productions persist

and flourish in an often hostile environment. For example, by modifying their traditional *döner kebab* to suit German tastes, Turks have been extremely successful in creating a very popular fast food snack in Germany. You can now find them being sold on almost every street corner and at every train station, and Germans have taken to them with gusto.

The Personal is Political

This discussion about culture and its many senses has been theoretical, but how you think about it affects your personal life. When you enter college or university, most of you will encounter some people very different from yourselves, people who come from different places, who have different values, different styles of interacting and of clothing, and different tastes in food and music. How do you interpret these differences?

Do you simply dismiss them with the thought “they are just different” and then seek out those similar to yourself? Do you dismiss them by assigning the differences to race or ethnicity, different religious backgrounds, the region of the country they are from, their socioeconomic class, or their upbringing and values? Or do you simply accept that they have different natural talents and endowments – intellectual, physical, and artistic?

At a small conference in 1993, Sylvia Yanagisako made an eloquent defense of retaining the concept of culture. “(W)e need to explore and refine explanations of difference other than what I call the three R’s: Race, Religion, and Reason or Rationality. These three R’s were the forms of explanation of social difference . . . in the 19th century” (n.d.: 9); they incorporated hierarchical and unidirectional notions of progress and advancement but they end by putting the beliefs and values of white, Christian, Euro-American males at the top.

The concept of culture should be retained, she said, because it “is the conceptual and discursive space we reserve to struggle to refine our understandings of social differences and similarities. It is that elusive abstraction we find it impossible to agree upon but one that we find it equally impossible to live without” (p. 10). The main features of this elusive concept, Yanagisako noted, have been with us since the 1920s. Perhaps we know what this concept isn’t better than we are able to grasp what it is. Culture is “learned not inherited [i.e., it is not biological]; it is shared and not idiosyncratic [i.e., it is not psychological]; and it is particular and not universal [i.e., it is not a matter of philosophy]” (p. 10).

The social differences noted above are important and need to be taken into our anthropological accounts. Rather than avoiding them, we need to become more aware of the ways these social differences and their *meanings* emerge in a particular cultural context. They are *culturally constituted*; that means they emerge in relation to interlocking patterns of meaning that are constructed by and struggled over by people who occupy different social positions that incorporate differentials of power. Some of these meanings we inherit (in the sense of being *socially*, not genetically, transmitted) from previous generations, some we can

affect and change, and some we can even invent – but only in relation to what went before.

Investigating

So, how does one go about investigating such an elusive thing as culture? Where is it and how do you find it? I find it helpful to think of culture as a big *mystery* and the anthropologist as a *detective*. To me, the primary anthropological question is: Why are things the way they are and not some other way? Do you think the way things are is natural, inevitable, and maybe even necessary? How do you feel when you realize that people elsewhere do things differently – that your way is just one among a number of possibilities? Do you assume your way is best or does the realization create doubt about your way? If the specter of doubt does not become too unsettling, it can be the goad to anthropological investigation. However, it does make some students nervous. That is how it should be. It is an indication of why anthropology is a very different enterprise from other disciplines. It is a critical discipline; it calls into question conventional knowledge and taken-for-granted truths.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French anthropologist known for his structuralist theories, felt that anthropological fieldwork was the nursemaid of doubt: “This anthropological doubt consists not merely in knowing that one knows nothing, but in resolutely exposing what one knows, even one’s own ignorance, to the insults and denials inflicted on one’s dearest ideas and habits by those ideas and habits which may contradict them to the highest degree” (cited in Sontag 1966: 188–9). While it is hard to imagine this most cerebral of anthropologists exposing his ignorance, that is what happens in fieldwork and it can induce a kind of psychological vertigo.

As an example, I will relate one of my more humiliating experiences during fieldwork in the Turkish village. Most of the time, except for breakfast, I ate at other people’s houses because there was no store in the village and, without fields and animals of my own, it was difficult to procure food. One day a fish vendor came to the village and I bought some to cook on my own. I was in the midst of steaming them with herbs and spices when several of my neighbors walked in. “That is no way to cook fish,” they said. “The only way is to fry them in oil.” I was becoming defensive; not only did they think my way was barbaric, they were also insulting my intelligence. I testily replied, “Well, I’ve been cooking for over twenty years and this is one of the ways I prepare fish” (so there!). They left without trying any, shaking their heads at my strange ways and scoffing at my lack of expertise; I was unnerved. Through this and other such trials I learned much about the rules and beliefs in that culture. These experiences also made me question the way “we” do things. I began to live teetering between two worlds – that is where the vertigo comes in – my old world no longer seemed so stable, so resolutely obvious.

When anthropologists conduct “fieldwork,” what they are really doing is collecting *clues* to help solve the mystery of culture: why do these people do things the way they do? What are their motivations and goals? How are they constrained by the cultural definitions of their race, gender, age, class, etc.? Where do you find the

clues? I believe you can begin anywhere, there is no privileged place to begin the investigation. When a detective is investigating a murder, there may be obvious clues such as a gun tossed in a trash bin – it might have fingerprints on it or, alternatively, the type of gun can be traced. But other clues are less obvious and may seem irrelevant at first, yet end up more significant. The analogy, of course, goes only so far – culture is not a crime! However, it is mysterious. Part of training to become a perspicacious observer is training yourself to look at things anew, to take nothing for granted, and to try not to let your preconceptions (or theory) dictate what you will see and include as evidence. Pick any aspect or item of culture and begin to ask questions about it. Who uses it? Where does it fit in the system of classifications? What resources are needed to make it, and how are these socially mobilized?

In Turkey, for example, children have to memorize vast quantities of knowledge. Education was not a “drawing out” as the etymology of the English word means, but was a “putting in.” (See also Eickelman 1978.) This was the mode of teaching in the secular schools, yet the pedagogical precedent can be found in the religious schools where memorization is very important. There are even illiterate villagers who can recite the entire Qur’an from memory in Arabic, a language totally unrelated to Turkish. They memorize in Arabic because it is held to be God’s literal word communicated through the angel Gabriel. A translation is not the same, merely an interpretation.

Take your classroom, for example. When I asked my graduate students to do a cultural analysis of our classroom, they were totally stumped. The freshmen got it much faster. You might begin by considering just who is sitting there. Only a certain segment of the population, a relatively privileged segment, is there. In order to be there, you must have completed high school or its equivalent and passed the rigorous entrance exams, and you or your parents must be able to pay for it whether in full or by a combination of scholarship and loans. Because you (or your parents) are willing to sacrifice a lot of money for a college education, you must think it is a worthwhile endeavor. Then you would need to contrast those who are sitting in the classroom with segments of the population who are not. How would you account for that? That should lead you to consider issues of class, race, gender, and social inequality. You could also begin by observing how the classroom is arranged spatially. Is the teacher in front and the desks set in rows facing him or her? Or do you sit around a big table? What different ideas and values are expressed just by this arrangement of space? One set-up implies a lecture format with the teacher talking and conveying knowledge, while the other implies a discussion group where the ideas are tossed back and forth and argued over. Both types are in use in most colleges, but they are constructed from different theories of education and perhaps are intended for different types of students – freshmen vs. upper-class or graduate students. Different theories of education relate to different theories of child development and other cultural values. How quickly one gets from such an ordinary thing as a classroom to much deeper theories and values in a culture. By following the threads where they lead,

you are pulling on the fabric of culture. You begin to understand that nothing in culture stands alone; each item is woven into a vast, interconnected web that no one person can ever really grasp in its entirety. That is the mystery and the challenge.

Fieldwork and Ethnography

Fieldwork is one of the things that sets anthropology apart from other academic disciplines – anthropologists must leave the library, the classroom, and their offices

and go out and live for extended periods of time among the people they study. An ethnography is what anthropologists write up after completing their fieldwork. However, it is not just a *description* of a particular society and culture (the X do it like this), but an *analysis* that tries to get at the question of why. In writing ethnographies, anthropologists utilize the theories and jargon of the discipline at the time of writing and hope to contribute new theoretical insights and knowledge. The practice of fieldwork has been discussed theoretically and there exist a number of descriptions *about* the experience of fieldwork,⁸ but nothing captures the experience itself as much as the ethnographic novel *Return to Laughter*, by Elenore Smith Bowen, the pseudonym for Laura Bohannan. For novels take us into the world they portray, and immerse us in that world for the period of reading.

Her novel is set in Africa where Bohannan actually conducted fieldwork. It was written in 1954, yet despite the outdated style and the problematics of doing fieldwork in an African nation under British colonial rule, it takes you into her *experience* of going to another culture and of how she gradually got oriented in it. She vividly describes the feeling of panic when she first arrived in the village where she was to live for a year; she lets us in on how and when she learned things, the ethical problems she encountered, the humiliating but illuminating incidents she endured, and she confesses her feelings and prejudices about some of their ways and her rising doubts about some of her own society's ways.

As David Riesman, a former Harvard sociologist, notes in his foreword to the 1964 edition of the book, it "focusses less on the West African tribe . . . and more on her own emotional hegira as a neophyte anthropologist" (Bowen 1964: x). I generally assign the book in the first week of my class; it forms a common experience we use as we begin to conduct our own fieldwork and we refer back to it throughout the course.

Riesman was curious about why Bohannan decided to use a pseudonym for this book. Although she claimed it was to protect the tribe, he felt that she might also be afraid "that the book might hurt her reputation as a competent and objective ethnographer" (p. xvi). That was probably an accurate assessment of the times, but he went on to say that "as a work of ethnography, and as a primer of anthropological method, *Return to Laughter* can stand on its own feet" (p. xvi). Fieldwork is messy and it contradicts the image most people have of scientific research; one cannot perform experiments on a living group, nor can one submit them to detached observation as a slide under a microscope. But that, too, was the image of science at the time. Today there is more awareness that even the "hard" physical sciences are not as objective as they were assumed to be; that the frameworks and theories of science are themselves human constructions that depend on all kinds of "subjective" features that include the personal concerns of the scientists and the particular social and political milieu that determines, through networks of support, what to study and how to study it.⁹

For several decades now, anthropologists have been discussing the very craft of writing an ethnography. It is a *construction* made from their experience in the field. What, then, is the difference between an ethnographic novel and a "scientific" ethnography? If fieldwork is *one and the same* experience for the anthropologist, what is it that gets converted into "fact" in a standard monograph and into "fiction" in an

ethnographic novel? What is the difference between creating composite characters or events, and writing up “marriage rules” or “kinship structures?” These questions also raise the issue of truth – what kind of truth and for what purpose?

Orientation to the Book

As I noted earlier, this book is not intended to be a compendium of knowledge about anthropology or about any particular culture. Nor does it make pronouncements about universals of human behavior or human nature because, as should be clear by now, I feel these are strongly inflected by particular cultures and the ways in which power is encoded and enacted. The purpose of the book and the course is, first, to sensitize you to the *culturally specific* ways that humans orient themselves – in space and time, by means of language and social relations, with the body, food, and clothes, by the structures of everyday life, and in terms of the symbols and frameworks provided by public myth, religion, and ritual. The book is not organized to focus on specific institutions or domains such as kinship, the economy, or religion. Instead, these are discussed as they relate to the topics dealt with in each chapter.

Second, the goal is to get you to dig deeper and analyze both the particular meanings embodied in these phenomena and the ways they are interconnected. Aspects of power and economy are integrated into the discussion of each topic and attention is paid to the way all of these are experienced differently depending on race, class, and gender. Examples are drawn from a number of different cultures, and throughout I will insert material from my own fieldwork in Turkey.¹⁰

It is expected that this book will be used in conjunction with other readings; a bibliography is appended at the end of each chapter from which you or your teacher can select additional material. Drawing on the readings, class discussions are meant to compare and contrast classic anthropological works with contemporary articles whether these are academic papers, newspaper articles, or material on the Web. At the end of each chapter are ethnographic exercises where you will conduct your own research and get a chance to use what you have learned. (Sometimes I find that it is more exciting to conduct the research *before* the reading assignment.) With this textbook, the supplementary readings, the ethnographic exercises, and the class discussions, my expectation is that you will become aware that (each) culture is neither inevitable nor natural, but constructed by humans struggling to make meaning of their lives. As a constructed phenomenon, culture is available to the investigation of its explicit forms and implicit premises.

The next chapter takes up the topic of space in order to give you some metaphorical grounding, since space is the widest cosmological framework within which humans live. From there we move to time, another extremely important coordinate of human life, and take up the question of whether people perceive of, and categorize, time in the same way everywhere. If not, what are the consequences? Language is, of course, the major way we communicate with each other, but as you will see in chapter 4, it is also instrumental in constructing the world conceptually.

Humans are social animals, so the fifth chapter is devoted to social relations. We are also physical beings and chapter 6 takes up notions of the body, while chapters 7 and 8 discuss what we put into and onto our bodies, that is, food and clothes. Finally, the last substantive chapter looks at significant cultural icons – places, people, and events – that both grasp the imaginations of the majority of the population and symbolize important cultural values.

Most people have the idea that anthropologists have to work in faraway places, whether to study ancient archaeological sites or exotic “primitive” peoples. While that was true, to a large extent, during the period when anthropology was becoming a distinctive discipline, it is only partially so today. While some anthropologists still go off to cultures very different from their own, more and more are turning their focus to modern, industrial societies, including their own. In either case, it is an adventure in which you learn as much about yourself as about the culture you are studying.

Notes

- 1 See also the introduction to Lewis and Jungman (1986).
- 2 Because of the pejorative connotations that have become attached to the word *primitive*, some anthropologists refuse to use it. For a defense of the term and the virtues of primitive society, see Stanley Diamond’s *In Search of the Primitive* (1974), which is also a scathing critique of so-called modern, industrial society.
- 3 For those who wish to explore this issue further, you might begin with Haraway (1989, 1991) and Marks (1995).
- 4 “insightful,” “illuminating,” and “see.”
- 5 This is an allusion to Suzanne Langer’s book *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942), which Geertz acknowledges as being influential in bringing to scholarly attention the role and importance of the symbolic function in human life (1973: 3).
- 6 To get a more complete definition of utilitarianism consult the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. It is an excellent reference work that also includes articles on major theorists such as Durkheim, Spencer, Hobbes, etc.
- 7 For structural Marxism, see the work of Meillassoux, Althusser, Godelier, and for political economy look at the work of Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz, who utilize theories from Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1976). For some problems with these theories, see Ortner (1984).
- 8 For example: Andre Beteille and T. N. Madan, *Encounter and Experience: Personal Accounts of Fieldwork* (1974); Jean Briggs, *Never in Anger: Portrait of an Eskimo Family* (1970); Manda Cesara, *Reflections of a Woman Anthropologist: No Hiding Place* (1982); Peggy Golde, ed., *Women in the Field: Anthropological Experiences* (1970); Bronislaw Malinowski, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1967); David Maybury-Lewis, *The Savage and the Innocent* (1965); Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (1977); M. N. Srinivas, A. M. Shah, E. A. Ramaswamy, eds., *The Fieldworker and the Field: Problems and Challenges in Sociological Investigation* (1979); and Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes, *In Sorcery’s Shadow: A Memoir of Apprenticeship among the Songhay of Niger* (1987), to name just a few.
- 9 One early and accessible presentation of this idea can be found in the first section of Suzanne Langer’s *Philosophy in a New Key* (1942). See also Donna Haraway’s “Animal

Sociology and a Natural Economy of the Body,” Parts 1 and 2, in *Signs*, 4 (1978): 21–36, 37–60. “Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism as a Site of Discourse on the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” in *Feminist Studies*, 14 (1988): 575–99, and *Primate Visions* (1989); Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (1986); and Stefan Helmreich, *Silicon Second Nature: Culturing Artificial Life in a Digital World* (1998).

10 For a fuller account of that work, see Delaney (1991).

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Shakespeare in the Bush

Laura Bohannon

Just before I left Oxford for the Tiv in West Africa, conversation turned to the season at Stratford. "You Americans," said a friend, "often have difficulty with Shakespeare. He was, after all, a very English poet, and one can easily misinterpret the universal by misunderstanding the particular."

I protested that human nature is pretty much the same the whole world over; at least the general plot and motivation of the greater tragedies would always be clear – everywhere – although some details of custom might have to be explained and difficulties of translation might produce other slight changes. To end an argument we could not conclude, my friend gave me a copy of *Hamlet* to study in the African bush: it would, he hoped, lift my mind above its primitive surroundings, and possibly I might, by prolonged meditation, achieve the grace of correct interpretation.

It was my second field trip to that African tribe, and I thought myself ready to live in one of its remote sections – an area difficult to cross even on foot. I eventually settled on the hillock of a very knowledgeable old man, the head of a homestead of some hundred and forty people, all of whom were either his close relatives or their wives and children.

Like the other elders of the vicinity, the old man spent most of his time performing ceremonies seldom seen these days in the more accessible parts of the tribe. I was delighted. Soon there would be three months of enforced isolation and leisure, between the harvest that takes place just before the rising of the swamps and the clearing of new farms when the water goes down. Then, I thought, they would have even more time to perform ceremonies and explain them to me.

I was quite mistaken. Most of the ceremonies demanded the presence of elders from several homesteads. As the swamps rose, the old men found it too difficult to walk from one homestead to the next, and the ceremonies gradually ceased. As the swamps rose even higher, all activities but one came to an end. The women brewed beer from maize and millet. Men, women, and children sat on their hillocks and drank it.

People began to drink at dawn. By midmorning the whole homestead was singing, dancing, and drumming. When it rained, people had to sit inside their huts: there they drank and sang or they drank and told stories. In any case, by noon or before, I either had to join the party or retire to my own hut

and my books. "One does not discuss serious matters when there is beer. Come, drink with us." Since I lacked their capacity for the thick native beer, I spent more and more time with *Hamlet*. Before the end of the second month, grace descended on me. I was quite sure that *Hamlet* had only one possible interpretation, and that one universally obvious.

Early every morning, in the hope of having some serious talk before the beer party, I used to call on the old man at his reception hut – a circle of posts supporting a thatched roof above a low mud wall to keep out wind and rain. One day I crawled through the low doorway and found most of the men of the homestead sitting huddled in their ragged cloths on stools, low plank beds, and reclining chairs, warming themselves against the chill of the rain around a smoky fire. In the center were three pots of beer. The party had started.

The old man greeted me cordially. "Sit down and drink." I accepted a large calabash full of beer, poured some into a small drinking gourd, and tossed it down. Then I poured some more into the same gourd for the man second in seniority to my host before I handed my calabash over to a young man for further distribution. Important people shouldn't ladle beer themselves.

"It is better like this," the old man said, looking at me approvingly and plucking at the thatch that had caught in my hair. "You should sit and drink with us more often. Your servants tell me that when you are not with us, you sit inside your hut looking at a paper."

The old man was acquainted with four kinds of "papers": tax receipts, bride price receipts, court fee receipts, and letters. The messenger who brought him letters from the chief used them mainly as a badge of office, for he always knew what was in them and told the old man. Personal letters for the few who had relatives in the government or mission stations were kept until someone went to a large market where there was a letter writer and reader. Since my arrival, letters were brought to me to be read. A few men also brought me bride price receipts, privately, with requests to change the figures to a higher sum. I found moral arguments were of no avail, since in-laws are fair game, and the technical hazards of forgery difficult to explain to an

illiterate people. I did not wish them to think me silly enough to look at any such papers for days on end, and I hastily explained that my "paper" was one of the "things of long ago" of my country.

"Ah," said the old man. "Tell us."

I protested that I was not a storyteller. Storytelling is a skilled art among them; their standards are high, and the audiences critical – and vocal in their criticism. I protested in vain. This morning they wanted to hear a story while they drank. They threatened to tell me no more stories until I told them one of mine. Finally, the old man promised that no one would criticize my style "for we know you are struggling with our language." "But," put in one of the elders, "you must explain what we do not understand, as we do when we tell you our stories." Realizing that here was my chance to prove *Hamlet* universally intelligible, I agreed.

The old man handed me some more beer to help me on with my storytelling. Men filled their long wooden pipes and knocked coals from the fire to place in the pipe bowls; then, puffing contentedly, they sat back to listen. I began in the proper style, "Not yesterday, not yesterday, but long ago, a thing occurred. One night three men were keeping watch outside the homestead of the great chief, when suddenly they saw the former chief approach them."

"Why was he no longer their chief?"

"He was dead," I explained. "That is why they were troubled and afraid when they saw him."

"Impossible," began one of the elders, handing his pipe on to his neighbor, who interrupted, "Of course it wasn't the dead chief. It was an omen sent by a witch. Go on."

Slightly shaken, I continued. "One of these three was a man who knew things" – the closest translation for scholar, but unfortunately it also meant witch. The second elder looked triumphantly at the first. "So he spoke to the dead chief saying, 'Tell us what we must do so you may rest in your grave,' but the dead chief did not answer. He vanished, and they could see him no more. Then the man who knew things – his name was Horatio – said this event was the affair of the dead chief's son, *Hamlet*."

There was a general shaking of heads round the circle. "Had the dead chief no living brothers? Or was this son the chief?"

"No," I replied. "That is, he had one living brother who became the chief when the elder brother died."

The old men muttered: such omens were matters for chiefs and elders, not for youngsters; no good could come of going behind a chief's back; clearly Horatio was not a man who knew things.

"Yes, he was," I insisted, shooing a chicken away from my beer. "In our country the son is next to the father. The dead chief's younger brother had become the great chief. He had also married his elder brother's widow only about a month after the funeral."

"He did well," the old man beamed and announced to the others, "I told you that if we knew more about Europeans, we would find they really were very like us. In our country also," he added to me, "the younger brother marries the elder brother's widow and becomes the father of his children. Now, if your uncle, who married your widowed mother, is your father's full brother, then he will be a real father to you. Did Hamlet's father and uncle have one mother?"

His question barely penetrated my mind: I was too upset and thrown too far off balance by having one of the most important elements of *Hamlet* knocked straight out of the picture. Rather uncertainly I said that I thought they had the same mother, but I wasn't sure – the story didn't say. The old man told me severely that these genealogical details made all the difference and that when I got home I must ask the elders about it. He shouted out the door to one of his younger wives to bring his goatskin bag.

Determined to save what I could of the mother motif, I took a deep breath and began again. "The son Hamlet was very sad because his mother had married again so quickly. There was no need for her to do so, and it is our custom for a widow not to go to her next husband until she has mourned for two years."

"Two years is too long," objected the wife, who had appeared with the old man's battered goatskin bag. "Who will hoe your farms for you while you have no husband?"

"Hamlet," I retorted without thinking, "was old enough to hoe his mother's farms himself. There was no need for her to remarry." No one looked convinced. I gave up. "His mother and the great chief told Hamlet not to be sad, for the great chief himself

would be a father to Hamlet. Furthermore, Hamlet would be the next chief: therefore he must stay to learn the things of a chief. Hamlet agreed to remain, and all the rest went off to drink beer."

While I paused, perplexed at how to render Hamlet's disgusted soliloquy to an audience convinced that Claudius and Gertrude had behaved in the best possible manner, one of the younger men asked me who had married the other wives of the dead chief.

"He had no other wives," I told him.

"But a chief must have many wives! How else can he brew beer and prepare food for all his guests?"

I said firmly that in our country even chiefs had only one wife, that they had servants to do their work, and that they paid them from tax money.

It was better, they returned, for a chief to have many wives and sons who would help him hoe his farms and feed his people: then everyone loved the chief who gave much and took nothing – taxes were a bad thing.

I agreed with the last comment, but for the rest fell back on their favorite way of fobbing off my questions: "That is the way it is done, so that is how we do it."

I decided to skip the soliloquy. Even if Claudius was here thought quite right to marry his brother's widow, there remained the poison motif, and I knew they would disapprove of fratricide. More hopefully I resumed. "That night Hamlet kept watch with the three who had seen his dead father. The dead chief again appeared, and although the others were afraid, Hamlet followed his dead father off to one side. When they were alone, Hamlet's dead father spoke."

"Omens can't talk!" The old man was emphatic.

"Hamlet's dead father wasn't an omen. Seeing him might have been an omen, but he was not." My audience looked as confused as I sounded. "It was Hamlet's dead father. It was a thing we call a 'ghost.'" I had to use the English word, for unlike many of the neighboring tribes, these people didn't believe in the survival after death of any individuating part of the personality.

"What is a 'ghost?' An omen?"

"No, a 'ghost' is someone who is dead but who walks around and can talk, and people can hear him and see him but not touch him."

They objected. "One can touch zombis."

"No, no! It was not a dead body the witches had animated to sacrifice and eat. No one else made Hamlet's dead father walk. He did it himself."

"Dead men can't walk," protested my audience as one man.

I was quite willing to compromise. "A 'ghost' is the dead man's shadow."

But again they objected. "Dead men cast no shadows."

"They do in my country," I snapped.

The old man quelled the babble of disbelief that arose immediately and told me with that insincere, but courteous, agreement one extends to the fancies of the young, ignorant, and superstitious. "No doubt in your country the dead can also walk without being zombis." From the depths of his bag he produced a withered fragment of kola nut, bit off one end to show it wasn't poisoned, and handed me the rest as a peace offering.

"Anyhow," I resumed, "Hamlet's dead father said that his own brother, the one who became chief, had poisoned him. He wanted Hamlet to avenge him. Hamlet believed this in his heart, for he did not like his father's brother." I took another swallow of beer. "In the country of the great chief, living in the same homestead, for it was a very large one, was an important elder who was often with the chief to advise and help him. His name was Polonius. Hamlet was courting his daughter, but her father and her brother . . . [I cast hastily about for some tribal analogy] warned her not to let Hamlet visit her when she was alone on her farm, for he would be a great chief and so could not marry her."

"Why not?" asked the wife, who had settled down on the edge of the old man's chair. He frowned at her for asking stupid questions and growled, "They lived in the same homestead."

"That was not the reason," I informed them. "Polonius was a stranger who lived in the homestead because he helped the chief, not because he was a relative."

"Then why couldn't Hamlet marry her?"

"He could have," I explained, "but Polonius didn't think he would. After all, Hamlet was a man of great importance who ought to marry a chief's daughter, for in his country a man could have only one wife. Polonius was afraid that if Hamlet made

love to his daughter, then no one else would give a high price for her."

"That might be true," remarked one of the shrewder elders, "but a chief's son would give his mistress's father enough presents and patronage to more than make up the difference. Polonius sounds like a fool to me."

"Many people think he was," I agreed. "Meanwhile Polonius sent his son Laertes off to Paris to learn the things of that country, for it was the homestead of a very great chief indeed. Because he was afraid that Laertes might waste a lot of money on beer and women and gambling, or get into trouble by fighting, he sent one of his servants to Paris secretly, to spy out what Laertes was doing. One day Hamlet came upon Polonius's daughter Ophelia. He behaved so oddly he frightened her. Indeed" – I was fumbling for words to express the dubious quality of Hamlet's madness – "the chief and many others had also noticed that when Hamlet talked one could understand the words but not what they meant. Many people thought that he had become mad." My audience suddenly became much more attentive. "The great chief wanted to know what was wrong with Hamlet, so he sent for two of Hamlet's age mates [school friends would have taken long explanation] to talk to Hamlet and find out what troubled his heart. Hamlet, seeing that they had been bribed by the chief to betray him, told them nothing. Polonius, however, insisted that Hamlet was mad because he had been forbidden to see Ophelia, whom he loved."

"Why," inquired a bewildered voice, "should anyone bewitch Hamlet on that account?"

"Bewitch him?"

"Yes, only witchcraft can make anyone mad, unless, of course, one sees the beings that lurk in the forest."

I stopped being a storyteller, took out my notebook and demanded to be told more about these two causes of madness. Even while they spoke and I jotted notes, I tried to calculate the effect of this new factor on the plot. Hamlet had not been exposed to the beings that lurk in the forests. Only his relatives in the male line could bewitch him. Barring relatives not mentioned by Shakespeare, it had to be Claudius who was attempting to harm him. And, of course, it was.

For the moment I staved off questions by saying that the great chief also refused to believe that Hamlet was mad for the love of Ophelia and nothing else. "He was sure that something much more important was troubling Hamlet's heart."

"Now Hamlet's age mates," I continued, "had brought with them a famous storyteller. Hamlet decided to have this man tell the chief and all his homestead a story about a man who had poisoned his brother because he desired his brother's wife and wished to be chief himself. Hamlet was sure the great chief could not hear the story without making a sign if he was indeed guilty, and then he would discover whether his dead father had told him the truth."

The old man interrupted, with deep cunning, "Why should a father lie to his son?" he asked.

I hedged: "Hamlet wasn't sure that it really was his dead father." It was impossible to say anything, in that language, about devil-inspired visions.

"You mean," he said, "it actually was an omen, and he knew witches sometimes send false ones. Hamlet was a fool not to go to one skilled in reading omens and divining the truth in the first place. A man-who-sees-the-truth could have told him how his father died, if he really had been poisoned, and if there was witchcraft in it; then Hamlet could have called the elders to settle the matter."

The shrewd elder ventured to disagree. "Because his father's brother was a great chief, one-who-sees-the-truth might therefore have been afraid to tell it. I think it was for that reason that a friend of Hamlet's father – a witch and an elder – sent an omen so his friend's son would know. Was the omen true?"

"Yes," I said, abandoning ghosts and the devil; a witch-sent omen it would have to be. "It was true, for when the storyteller was telling his tale before all the homestead, the great chief rose in fear. Afraid that Hamlet knew his secret he planned to have him killed."

The stage set of the next bit presented some difficulties of translation. I began cautiously. "The great chief told Hamlet's mother to find out from her son what he knew. But because a woman's children are always first in her heart, he had the important elder Polonius hide behind a cloth that hung against the wall of Hamlet's mother's sleeping hut.

Hamlet started to scold his mother for what she had done."

There was a shocked murmur from everyone. A man should never scold his mother.

"She called out in fear, and Polonius moved behind the cloth. Shouting, 'A rat!' Hamlet took his machete and slashed through the cloth." I paused for dramatic effect. "He had killed Polonius!"

The old men looked at each other in supreme disgust. "That Polonius truly was a fool and a man who knew nothing! What child would not know enough to shout, 'It's me!'" With a pang, I remembered that these people are ardent hunters, always armed with bow, arrow, and machete; at the first rustle in the grass an arrow is aimed and ready, and the hunter shouts "Game!" If no human voice answers immediately, the arrow speeds on its way. Like a good hunter Hamlet had shouted, "A rat!"

I rushed in to save Polonius's reputation. "Polonius did speak. Hamlet heard him. But he thought it was the chief and wished to kill him to avenge his father. He had meant to kill him earlier that evening. . . ." I broke down, unable to describe to these pagans, who had no belief in individual after-life, the difference between dying at one's prayers and dying "unhousell'd, disappointed, unaneled."

This time I had shocked my audience seriously. "For a man to raise his hand against his father's brother and the one who has become his father – that is a terrible thing. The elders ought to let such a man be bewitched."

I nibbled at my kola nut in some perplexity, then pointed out that after all the man had killed Hamlet's father.

"No," pronounced the old man, speaking less to me than to the young men sitting behind the elders. "If your father's brother has killed your father, you must appeal to your father's age mates; *they* may avenge him. No man may use violence against his senior relatives." Another thought struck him. "But if his father's brother had indeed been wicked enough to bewitch Hamlet and make him mad that would be a good story indeed, for it would be his fault that Hamlet, being mad, no longer had any sense and thus was ready to kill his father's brother."

There was a murmur of applause. *Hamlet* was again a good story to them, but it no longer seemed quite the same story to me. As I thought over the

coming complications of plot and motive, I lost courage and decided to skim over dangerous ground quickly.

“The great chief,” I went on, “was not sorry that Hamlet had killed Polonius. It gave him a reason to send Hamlet away, with his two treacherous age mates, with letters to a chief of a far country, saying that Hamlet should be killed. But Hamlet changed the writing on their papers, so that the chief killed his age mates instead.” I encountered a reproachful glare from one of the men whom I had told undetectable forgery was not merely immoral but beyond human skill. I looked the other way.

“Before Hamlet could return, Laertes came back for his father’s funeral. The great chief told him Hamlet had killed Polonius. Laertes swore to kill Hamlet because of this, and because his sister Ophelia, hearing her father had been killed by the man she loved, went mad and drowned in the river.”

“Have you already forgotten what we told you?” The old man was reproachful. “One cannot take vengeance on a madman: Hamlet killed Polonius in his madness. As for the girl, she not only went mad, she was drowned. Only witches can make people drown. Water itself can’t hurt anything. It is merely something one drinks and bathes in.”

I began to get cross. “If you don’t like the story, I’ll stop.”

The old man made soothing noises and himself poured me some more beer. “You tell the story well, and we are listening. But it is clear that the elders of your country have never told you what the story really means. No, don’t interrupt! We believe you when you say your marriage customs are different, or your clothes and weapons. But people are the same everywhere; therefore, there are always witches and it is we, the elders, who know how witches work. We told you it was the great chief who wished to kill Hamlet, and now your own words have proved us right. Who were Ophelia’s male relatives?”

“There were only her father and her brother.” Hamlet was clearly out of my hands.

“There must have been many more; this also you must ask of your elders when you get back to your country. From what you tell us, since Polonius was dead, it must have been Laertes who killed Ophelia, although I do not see the reason for it.”

We had emptied one pot of beer, and the old men

argued the point with slightly tipsy interest. Finally one of them demanded of me, “What did the servant of Polonius say on his return?”

With difficulty I recollected Reynaldo and his mission. “I don’t think he did return before Polonius was killed.”

“Listen,” said the elder, “and I will tell you how it was and how your story will go, then you may tell me if I am right. Polonius knew his son would get into trouble, and so he did. He had many fines to pay for fighting, and debts from gambling. But he had only two ways of getting money quickly. One was to marry off his sister at once, but it is difficult to find a man who will marry a woman desired by the son of a chief. For if the chief’s heir commits adultery with your wife, what can you do? Only a fool calls a case against a man who will someday be his judge. Therefore Laertes had to take the second way: he killed his sister by witchcraft, drowning her so he could secretly sell her body to the witches.”

I raised an objection. “They found her body and buried it. Indeed Laertes jumped into the grave to see his sister once more – so, you see, the body was truly there. Hamlet, who had just come back, jumped in after him.”

“What did I tell you?” The elder appealed to the others. “Laertes was up to no good with his sister’s body. Hamlet prevented him, because the chief’s heir, like a chief, does not wish any other man to grow rich and powerful. Laertes would be angry, because he would have killed his sister without benefit to himself. In our country he would try to kill Hamlet for that reason. Is this not what happened?”

“More or less,” I admitted. “When the great chief found Hamlet was still alive, he encouraged Laertes to try to kill Hamlet and arranged a fight with machetes between them. In the fight both the young men were wounded to death. Hamlet’s mother drank the poisoned beer that the chief meant for Hamlet in case he won the fight. When he saw his mother die of poison, Hamlet, dying, managed to kill his father’s brother with his machete.”

“You see, I was right!” exclaimed the elder.

“That was a very good story,” added the old man, “and you told it with very few mistakes. There was just one more error, at the very end. The poison Hamlet’s mother drank was obviously meant for the survivor of the fight, whichever it was. If Laertes

had won, the great chief would have poisoned him, for no one would know that he arranged Hamlet's death. Then, too, he need not fear Laertes' witchcraft; it takes a strong heart to kill one's only sister by witchcraft."

"Sometime," concluded the old man, gathering his ragged toga about him, "you must tell us some

more stories of your country. We, who are elders, will instruct you in their true meaning, so that when you return to your own land your elders will see that you have not been sitting in the bush, but among those who know things and who have taught you wisdom."

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- 1 You are about to leave for another culture (you may specify the one you are going to or would like to go to) for a stay of at least 6 months.
 - What do you think you will need to take?
 - What do you think will sustain you while you are there – here you may think of favorite books or other items as well as certain psychological capacities.

 - 2 When you were planning to leave home for college or university, what did you think you would need to bring?
 - What did you bring? Why?
 - What do you think will prove to be important? Unnecessary?
 - What do you wish you *had* brought?
 - What has been the most difficult thing to get used to since you arrived? How is it different from your former life?



