

GUEST EDITORIAL

Into the Warp and Woof of Multicultural Worlds

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An enduring and powerful rationale for the research anthropologists do is that of capturing the distinctiveness and a sense of the fullness of other cultural worlds that are on the wane. Salvaging the systemic wholeness of other forms of human life, other cosmologies, on the precipice of irreversible change through contact with the West, or else demonstrating the resilience and integrity of such cultural systems even through such change, has been the primary way ethnographers have positioned themselves in the flow of history. Anthropologists have never been naive that, from the very origins of their subject, they have undertaken their research upriver, over the mountains, or on the atoll beyond—"where they still do it"—in the larger context of lands transformed by Western colonialism. Yet, still, they have been most effective in describing cultural difference, *as if* it were whole, integral, systematic, even long after the peoples studied have been integrated into national states and market economies.

The power of global cultural homogenization in the late twentieth century challenges the conventions and rationales by which anthropology has so far produced its knowledge of other cultures. The reorganization of the world economy through technological advances in communication, production processes, and marketing has thoroughly deterritorialized culture. For example, the Tongan islanders of Polynesia that I studied in the early 1970s now constitute a diaspora of communities in locales around the Pacific rim. As many, if not more, Tongans now live permanently in Australia, New Zealand, and the United States as in the islands themselves. One might fairly ponder where both the cultural and geographical center of the Tongan people resides. Their identity is produced in many locales and through the mix of many cultural elements. And their conditions are similar to those of numerous other peoples that anthropologists have traditionally studied. It is no longer just the most powerful, large-scale, and most modern societies, such as the United States and Japan, that exist in international, transcultural science.

Among such transcultural "traditional" peoples, levels of cultural self-consciousness and alternatives increase. The authenticity of performances, rituals, or apparently deep seated norms like those of kinship cannot be merely assumed, either by locals or by visitors such as anthropologists. To some extent, media documentaries have absorbed anthropology's function of presenting vividly the lifeways of other cultures to Euro-American publics that themselves can no longer be considered as homogeneous or mainstream. And, finally, the subjects of anthropological study independently and articulately translate their own perspectives with sensitivity to the effects of different media.

Peoples who in particular have become classic anthropological subjects, such as the Samoans, Trobriand Islanders, Hopi, and Todas of India, know their status well, and have, with some

ambivalence, assimilated anthropological knowledge about them as part of their sense of themselves. A recent example was the visit of a Toda woman to Houston. A trained nurse among her people as well as a cultural broker, she was on tour in the United States, giving talks about the Todas, of the sort that anthropologists might have given in past decades. By chance, she was visiting the home of a colleague just as a British documentary about the Todas appeared on the television—a documentary in which the visitor was featured prominently as the filmmaker's prime source of information. The visitor's comments as she watched the program along with my colleague did not much concern the details of Toda culture, but rather dealt with the ironies of the multiple representations of her people—by herself, by anthropologists, and by the British Broadcasting Corporation.

The lesson of this story is compelling. The penetrations of a world economy, communications, and the effects of multiple, fragmented identities on cultural authenticity, once thought restricted to advanced modernity, have increased markedly among most local and regional cultures worldwide. They have thus engendered an ethnography in reverse among many peoples who not only can assimilate the professional idioms of anthropology but can relativize them among other alternatives and ways of knowledge. This does not mean that the traditional task of anthropology to represent distinctive and systematic cultural forms of life has been fundamentally subverted by its own subjects. Rather, anthropology's traditional task is now much more complicated, requiring new sensibilities in undertaking fieldwork and different strategies for writing about it.

To find the centers of gravity by which cultural difference can be described cogently on a globe—which the ethnographic map constructed through ages of exploration, colonization, and westernization is transforming—becomes the great contemporary challenge for anthropology. For example, a renewal of interest has emerged among anthropologists in the ways different peoples conceive of the self and the person—what constitutes a self emotionally and cognitively, and what a person is capable of in social relations.

The shared cosmologies that organized daily life among many peoples have now become attenuated, fragmented, and mutually interpenetrated by a pervasive global culture of modernity. Nevertheless, the study of how a people conceive of personal experience and orient themselves to social life *anywhere* might reveal the most distinctive and profound level at which cultures can be described. Even if, say, Tongans, Iranians, Indians, and Papuans participate in certain global institutions as workers, consumers, bureaucrats, scientists, and so on, they do so distinctively. The key to making such distinctions clear and cogent is to explain enduring assumptions about personhood, self, and experience. Certain topics, especially those that concern the body and the life cycle, become particularly important in probing these deepest and most enduring levels of cultural distinction. This is where one set of bets has been placed, so to speak, in contemporary anthropological research to find one center of gravity for cultural description. However, if it is supposed that the old ethnographic map of distinct peoples survives purely and essentially even at the site of cultural conceptions of the self and personhood, the following parable suggests this is a questionable notion.

At a recent conference at the East-West Center in Hawaii on cross-cultural ideas of the self—one of many such gatherings occurring nowadays—nine of us anthropologists sat around the table in the presence of a small but culturally diverse audience of Asians, Pacific Islanders, and

Americans. During one session, the discussion turned on different concepts of mind and emotion by which experience is understood in the United States and Japan. One participant, seeking to add a different frame of comparison, addressed a man in the audience who had earlier been identified as Balinese. The anthropologist noted that he had been told by a colleague that the Balinese don't distinguish feeling and thinking as concepts. He then asked the Balinese attending whether he or his people make such a distinction. Suddenly, we had been transported into a fieldwork situation-the anthropologist seeking general information from the native informant as representative of his culture. The Balinese was startled at being addressed. Shy, but cooperative, he answered ambiguously: certainly there were different words for mind and heart (he pointed to his head and chest), but his response was unclear as to whether he or Balinese generally merged or distinguished these terms conceptually.

The situational and cognitive reasons why this person could not reply clearly to the question are interesting to contemplate. However, the point to note here is that while the anthropologist readily saw the Balinese as an access to his culture, the Balinese had difficulty conceiving himself in the same terms. After the session, I chatted with him, finding that he was a dancer, and that he had not been in Bali for twelve years. In the meantime, he had participated in experimental dance theater in New York, as well as in Europe and Hawaii. His ideas about the relationship between feeling and thought were as much informed by his experiences as a dancer abroad as by being Balinese. Thus, what is it to study this person's self-concept? Clearly, the standard anthropological frame for so doing, which sharply distances him from us in the West, is inadequate, as the incident of "fieldwork" within our conference suggests. This person does not represent a cultural system, integral unto itself, called Bali. His experiences are complexly intercultural and global, and so were those of the other Asians in the room. And to some degree, one might surmise, so are those of the Balinese in contemporary Bali.

So, the focus on the self is indeed a useful vantage point to explore how distinctive cultural difference is constituted in the contemporary world. Yet, difference does not represent the enduring rootedness of cultures in place, but rather emerges from the combinations of personal and collective experiences of cultures subject to unprecedented mobility and fragmentation. Thus, as evoked by the apparent Balinese "person" present at our conference, cultural diversity in the late twentieth century is generated by the very possibilities engendered by forces promoting global homogenization. Furthermore, this diversity is much less known and understood than our existing ethnographic archive of territorial cultures would lead us to expect.

To see the pervasiveness of multicultural worlds and experiences among the traditional subjects of anthropology, as well as among the observing and recording anthropologists themselves, requires a different set of lenses. The consequent revision of the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century ethnographic maps of the world by which knowledge of cultures has thus far been produced is the clear and present task of anthropology. This revision is necessary for sustaining anthropology's very traditional purpose of promoting an understanding of and respect for culturally generated variety. It is also needed to help us understand and respect anthropology's historic effects on human affairs, as they develop in the multitude of places among which anthropologists continue to explore and establish connections.