

GUEST EDITORIAL Why Read Ethnographies?

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What is an ethnography? An ethnography is a study by an anthropologist of a society, an institution, a belief system, a people, or a segment of a population. An ethnography might examine trance among hunter-gatherers of the Kalahari, how American truckers manage to maintain their enterprises, playing the xylophone in Southern Africa, or the political organization of an Islamic state in Pakistan. Ethnographies can be so broad as to describe the cultural assumptions underlying social relations in modern Japan or the principles of rank and stratification found in all the different societies living on the Indian subcontinent. More often, ethnographies are more specific, situated in communities or segments of communities. Anthropologists have described the nature of space in suburban America, the changing social organization of neighborhoods in Kenya, and street corner behavior in Washington, D.C. Even such seemingly minute elements of a people's life and culture as the different meanings that Quakers and American Indians give to silence have been subjected to anthropological study.

While anthropologists have taken the total range of human behavior and productions as their field of inquiry, they have not been so successful at describing and explaining the centers of power of our own society. Even though anthropology is the child of colonial domination, other peoples of the world have been more willing to have their lives subjected to scrutiny than have the power brokers of our own society. Nonetheless, anthropologists try to set what they study in comparative perspective. They always strive to demonstrate how the exotic forms they describe are both similar to and different from what we ourselves know. None of the situations they describe are taken by them to be natural. Even anthropologists working in our own society adhere to this principle: people's assumption that *their* way of doing things is natural simply is not true from a cross-cultural perspective.

This book describes an attitude called ethnocentrism. Anthropologists usually argue that ethnocentrism is both wrong and harmful, especially when ethnocentrism is tied to racial, cultural and social prejudices. Ideas and feelings about the inferiority of blacks, the cupidity of Jews, or farmers' lack of cultural sophistication are surely to be condemned. But can we do without ethnocentrism? If we stopped to examine every custom and practice in our cultural repertoire, how would we get on? For example, if we always regarded marriage as something that can vary from society to society, would we be concerned about filling out the proper marriage documents, or even get married at all? Most of the time we suspend a quizzical stance toward our own customs and simply live life.

Yet many of our own practices are peculiar when viewed through the lenses of other cultures. Periodically for over fifteen years, I have worked with and lived among an African people. They are as amazed at our marriage customs as my students are at theirs. Both American students and

the Iteso of Kenya find it difficult to imagine how the other culture survives with the bizarre, exotic practices that are part of their respective marriage customs. Ethnocentrism works both ways. It can be practiced as much by other cultures as by our own.

Paradoxically, ethnographic literature combats ethnocentrism by showing that the practices of cultures (including our own) are “natural” in their own setting. What appears “natural” in one setting appears so because it was constructed in that setting—made and produced by human beings who could have done it some other way. Ethnography is a means of recording the range of human creativity and of demonstrating how universally shared capacities can produce cultural and social differences.

This anthropological way of looking at other cultures—and, by implication, at ourselves—constitutes a major reason for reading ethnography. The anthropological lens teaches us to question what we assume to be unquestionable. Ethnography teaches us that our human potentiality provides alternative means of organizing our lives and alternative modes of experiencing the world. Reading ethnographies trains us to question the received wisdom of our society and makes us receptive to change. In this sense, anthropology might be called the “subversive science.” We read ethnographies in order to learn about how other peoples produce their world and about how we might change our own patterns of production.