CULTURE AND CONDUCT

An Excursion in Anthropology

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To Dottie

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Preface

This book provides a brief introduction to cultural anthropology, but it is not a textbook. A text is one that sets forth the basic principles of a discipline and summarizes its conventional wisdom. In a typical anthropology text there are chapters on subsistence techniques, language, kinship systems, social organization, and the like.

Here a different tack is taken. The reader is introduced to anthropology by examining some of the fundamental ideas and insights that the discipline has to offer. Rather than focusing on topical divisions, each chapter deals with an intellectual problem or application of anthropological ideas. The aim is to arouse interest in these questions and to engage the reader's intellectual curiosity. The book is therefore a treatment of ideas, not a catalogue of information.

The organization is as follows. The first two chapters deal with the special features of cultural anthropology that set it apart from other academic disciplines. The third introduces the notion of culture, the dominant concept of our discipline and the master concept of this book. It is this chapter that sets the stage for virtually everything that follows, since it

highlights a discussion that is carried forth, in various guises, throughout. This is the question of the degree to which humans are most profitably viewed as products of their culture or, contrarily, as producers of it. As the reader will learn, this probably is not a question that can be resolved in either/or terms. All social life is made up of what have been termed (Moore 1976) processes of situational adjustment (coping with circumstances, adaptation) as well as processes of regularization (the imposition and confirmation of cultural form). Consequently in Chapter Four we see that as societies and individuals strive to adjust to changing circumstances, a new cultural inventory emerges that facilitates this adjustment. These processes do not continue indefinitely, however, since once cultural forms appear, new forces come into play that serve to perpetuate them. Hence the theme of cultural persistence that is the subject of Chapter Five.

Chapters Six and Seven also develop ideas that are only broached in Chapter Three. The power of culture over the individual is brought out particularly in the treatment of symbolical themes in Chapter Six. There it is demonstrated that many aspects of everyday behavior are subject to rules and principles of which the average individual is only vaguely aware. In Chapter Seven, however, there is an effort to show that individuals can never be thought of as mere creatures of their culture, and we examine some of the reasons why deviance and nonconformity are tolerated, even encouraged, in most societies. Chapter Eight is an epilogue in which certain of the ideas developed in earlier chapters are placed in the context of contemporary debate.

A final feature of the book deserves comment. Many of the examples and arguments relate directly to our own Western society, more perhaps than is common in an introduction to anthropology. This is so because I have wanted to show how the insights of anthropology bear upon our own lives. It is very easy for readers of anthropology to accept the explanations of other peoples' customs without applying very much of it to themselves. Those people over there can be made to appear very different from us. But it is just as true that we learn about ourselves by studying others. We see that our ways of doing things may not differ fundamentally

from the way they are done elsewhere. And, more importantly, we begin to view our own culture not as a natural taken-for-granted reality, but as the artifact it really is.

Acknowledgments

The inspiration for this book came many years ago when, as an undergraduate, I read Peter Berger's *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective*. Here was a book that presented a provocative introduction to sociology by concentrating on the seminal ideas and food for thought that sociology has to offer, and that specifically avoided the topical and descriptive approaches characteristic of the texts of the day. Stimulated by Berger's treatment, I thought that something like it should be attempted for cultural anthropology. Years later, while on sabbatical leave from the University of New Mexico, I sketched out a plan for the book and began filling it in. I am grateful to the university for the time and freedom that enabled me to begin the project.

The works of certain scholars have profoundly shaped my thinking, yet the references to their books in the text do not properly attest to the influence. They are: Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions;* Elvin Hatch, *Theories of Man and Culture;* Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason;* and Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols*. The book would have been very different had I not read each of these works.

I also want to thank those who have given me advice and encouragement. Carol Joiner was a constant intellectual companion with whom I discussed most of the ideas in the book, and she contributed many of her own. Gary Logsdon was a wonderfully sympathetic listener. My colleague Harry Basehart read the manuscript and made suggestions that led to significant additions, and I am grateful. My wife Dottie heard it all many times, and bore up well.

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Chapter 1

The Anthropological Enterprise

The average person has only a vague notion of what cultural anthropology is about. I am aware of this from contact with students in the introductory course, and also from some experience with the general public. When I board a plane my seating companion frequently asks what I do for a living. I reply that I am a cultural anthropologist and this is generally followed by "Oh," or "How interesting." There is usually a brief pause and then the companion says something to the effect that he (or she) has always been interested in the study of ancient societies. This is my cue, and I take the opportunity to deliver a short lecture on the difference between *archeology*, which does in fact concentrate on ancient or prehistoric societies, and *cultural anthropology*, which deals overwhelmingly with living peoples that are accessible to firsthand observation and study.

The error made by my traveling companion is a natural one, since both archeology and cultural anthropology are considered subfields of the larger discipline of *anthropology*, the study of humankind. There are in addition two other subfields: *physical anthropology*, the study of the human as a biological being; and *linguistics*, the scientific study of human language. It was not uncommon some years ago for

those who called themselves anthropologists to write more or less authoritatively about all four branches of the field. But the enormous growth of the discipline in the past twenty years, plus the increasing specialization of the component subfields, has made it difficult for a single writer to do justice to the entire subject. I will not even make the attempt; I deal exclusively here with cultural anthropology, my own field of expertise.

Cultural anthropology is sometimes referred to as *social anthropology* or, alternatively, as *ethnology*. While it is true that anthropologists consider that each of these terms refer to slightly different subject matters, for the purposes of this book the terms may be considered virtually synonymous. Thus I will occasionally refer to my cultural anthropological colleagues as ethnologists and sometimes as social anthropologists without implying any basic differences among them. Regardless of the terms employed, cultural anthropology is the comparative study of human culture and society. Wherever men and women form into social groups, as tribespeople in New Guinea, as Bedouin nomads, or even as street junkies in New York City, they are of potential interest to cultural anthropologists.

In the remainder of this chapter the characteristics that distinguish anthropology from other academic disciplines are summarized and described.

Fieldwork

As mentioned above, anthropologists tend to deal with societies on the basis of "firsthand observation," and this is one of the important keys to the field. In fact what the layman does know about cultural anthropology usually stems from this characteristic. He or she has perhaps read occasional articles in *Newsweek*, *National Geographic*, or the daily newspaper about an anthropologist who lived for a year in igloos and tents among the Eskimo; or about one who wandered about northern Mexico in the company of an Indian medicine man; or, more sensationally, about a woman who became a nightclub stripper in order to obtain firsthand information about the underworld of pimps and prostitutes in San

Francisco. Through articles of this kind, the general public is made vaguely aware not only that such animals as cultural anthropologists exist, but also that they are willing to go to extraordinary lengths to gather information about other human societies.

What the public does not generally know is that this is an essential part of the training of nearly every cultural anthropologist. Any student who intends to become a member of the profession is expected to live for a year or more with some people until he has a satisfactory understanding of their society and culture, or at least of the facets of their way of life that he deems worthy of detailed investigation. This is what anthropologists term *fieldwork*, and it is without doubt the outstanding characteristic of the discipline; much that is valuable and distinctive in anthropology derives from the tradition of original fieldwork. When an anthropologist writes about a people, it is with the assuredness that comes from intimate association. He has learned their language, participated in the humdrum daily round, eaten their food, observed their ceremonies, and, normally, established lifelong friendships. He is not merely an outside observer of a foreign way of life. He has made an effort, albeit temporary, to accommodate himself to that way of life and to gain understanding from the experience.

It is true that there are some cultural anthropologists who have never undertaken fieldwork, but their number is extremely small. One reason is that graduate departments of anthropology typically make fieldwork a condition for granting the doctoral degree. Only under special circumstances are Ph.D. candidates allowed to write "library" dissertations, i.e., those based on information collected by others. But perhaps the principal reason that there are so few who have not undertaken fieldwork is that they bear a stigma within the discipline. Those who have not been through the challenge of fieldwork are never thought to have properly earned their stripes. And in the competition for jobs and professional status, there is a clear preference for those who have demonstrated a capacity for effective fieldwork. Cultural anthropology is the only discipline among the social sciences that makes this a virtual requirement for professional status. Many

sociologists also do fieldwork, and some employ approximately the same battery of techniques as anthropologists. But it is not a requirement in sociology as it is in anthropology, and no sociologist is considered a second-class member of the profession simply because he has never spent a year in the field.

The tradition of original fieldwork is of such crucial importance to anthropology partly because of the kinds of societies that anthropologists have studied. From the beginnings of academic anthropology in the late nineteenth century up until the 1950s, the primary attention of anthropology was concentrated on what may be called *tribal societies*: the American Indians, various peoples of Africa, the island societies of the Pacific, and so forth. Since the 1950s this focus has shifted dramatically, and anthropologists are now as likely to be studying a counterculture commune in New Mexico, or the social organization of a Tokyo bank, as they are to be roaming the Kalahari Desert with the Bushmen. But more of this change later.

Given the fact that anthropology began as the study of societies that were small in scale, preliterate, and exotic (from the European point of view), it was necessary to devise appropriate means for obtaining information. Since there were almost no written sources on these peoples—no literature, no documented history, not even reliable census information—anthropologists found it expedient to gather the primary data themselves. And so began the tradition of participant observation fieldwork, fostered in the early part of this century particularly by Bronislaw Malinowski in Britain, and by the students of Franz Boas in America.

This tradition that began almost from necessity has been retained even though anthropologists now investigate various types of modern communities that could more conveniently be studied using other techniques. The reason is, of course, that participant observation fieldwork has become virtually indispensable. Anthropologists have learned that by living with the people themselves, they can achieve a level of understanding that would be impossible by any other means. People tend to develop relationships of trust and confidence with someone who shares their life and becomes

a familiar presence. They will open up with such a person in ways that they would never do with strangers. It is also a means by which anthropologists discover aspects of the society that remain concealed to all but those who live there. It was only after one anthropologist was bitten by a centipede that he learned of the native medical lore that existed in the community where he was living. And almost every fieldworker has had the experience of some accident or trivial encounter that opens up totally unexpected perspectives on the culture he has been studying for months. These are the rewards of extended fieldwork, and they are unlikely to accrue to those who do not make a similar commitment. As one ethnologist (Downs 1973: 322) has expressed it:

> To find out about man, you must go among men. There is no other way. It is perhaps the most important contribution anthropology has made to science, this simple idea.

Cultural Relativism and Subjective Understanding

It is not my intention to discuss the technical or methodological aspects of fieldwork here, since that is a subject of the following chapter. Something should be said, however, about a perspective that is closely allied to the tradition of fieldwork and that has become one of the hallmarks of the anthropological approach. This is the effort anthropologists make to achieve dispassionate but at the same time empathetic accounts of the societies they investigate. Above all, they strive to prevent their own culturally determined values from prejudicing their evaluations of the culture in question.

This is of special importance in anthropology because of the variety of cultures dealt with. Anthropologists frequently encounter societies in which attitudes, values, and standards of appropriate conduct differ radically from those of the anthropologist's own society. They thus find themselves witness to practices that, if judged by the standards of American or European culture, would be nothing short of revolting. The Dani, for example, a tribal group of western New Guinea, practice the custom of cutting a finger from the hand of the

close female relatives of every man who dies. It is a standard part of their mourning rituals, and by the time a woman is old she may have only one or two fingers left on each hand. The Dodoth tribesmen of Uganda painfully pry out the lower front teeth of young girls because it is thought to make them attractive. An anthropologist recorded the following description (Thomas 1965: 88–89):

> When the family spontaneously decided to extract the lower teeth of all the little girls in the dwelling (except the baby, whose milk teeth had already been extracted), the operation was performed in Rengen's court. Her son Akral sat in her day house with one of his weeping little half-sisters between his knees. Her twenty-three-year-old son Akikar, mild and impassive, placed a stick as a bit in the girl's mouth, and while Akral held the girl tightly, Akikar expertly hooked out the lower teeth with an awl. They were second teeth, deeply rooted, and as they came, cracked loudly, and the smell of blood filled the air. The little girl screamed that she was dying, and vomited red foam.
> . . . her sister, begging and crying, her hands pressed over her mouth, was captured by Rengen, who firmly handed her over the heads of all the seated people to Akral, who gripped her with his knees. The weeping little girl began to scream: "Akikar, help me!" Akikar dispassionately pried open her jaw and forced the bit into her mouth. He worked carefully, the extraction took only a moment, but she struggled so much he nearly pierced her palate with the awl. She moaned hysterically when it was over and her teeth lay on the ground.

This is powerful, yet it probably never seriously occurred to the anthropologists, either among the Dani or the Dodoth, to condemn or interfere. Such a course would, in the first place, be impolitic and would certainly make the anthropologist's presence unwelcome at such events in the future. More importantly, it is simply not the mission of anthropologists to attempt to reform the society. Their task is to achieve understanding: to discover the meaning that these

practices have for individual participants and to determine the part that they play within the context of the culture as a whole. This in no way implies, of course, that they endorse the customs they describe. There is hardly an anthropologist in the world who approves of hacking off little girls' fingers or of prying out their healthy teeth. But that is not the issue. The issue is whether or not objective description and interpretation of such customs further the aim of understanding human cultures in all their variety. Most members of the profession agree that this neutrality is a *sine qua non* of successful anthropological research.

There are two important means by which anthropologists strive for this level of detachment. Most subscribe to what is known as *cultural relativism*, and they also attempt to achieve a subjective understanding of the societies they study. Cultural relativism is the belief that any particular set of customs, values, and moral precepts are relative to a specific cultural tradition, and that they can only be understood and evaluated within that particular milieu. Thus Eskimo marriage practices, religious beliefs, and artistic expression all "make sense" if we place them in the context of their surrounding circumstances and historical tradition. They make much less sense if we wrench them out of their natural setting in order to contrast them with our own customs. The Eskimo practice of infanticide, for example, would appear in our society as a callous and atrocious custom. But if the practice is viewed within the context of traditional Eskimo life, a different light is shed on the matter. In the absence of effective means of birth control, infanticide was one method of limiting population in a situation of harsh environment and narrowly limited resources. Overexpansion of the population could, and frequently did, mean hardships and even famine for the entire community. Thus families did not characteristically retain more children than they could provide for, and by eliminating unwanted infants they were thought to contribute to the welfare of the ongoing community. And so it is with most customs that on first impression appear extreme: there is usually a logic to them when placed in appropriate context.

What cultural relativism means in practical terms, therefore, is that anthropologists tend to adopt a very tolerant attitude toward all manner of foreign customs and beliefs. They strive to avoid any suggestion of *ethnocentrism*, which is the tendency to evaluate other cultural practices from the vantage point of one's own culture. This is not to suggest, on the other hand, that all societies must be treated sympathetically. There certainly exist moribund or pathological social systems that would be difficult even for anthropologists to defend; the examples of Nazi Germany and certain criminal subcultures in the United States spring to mind. But the occasional tendency for anthropologists to treat other cultures with excessive approbation, to the extent that they have sometimes idealized them, is less cause for concern than the possibility that they will misrepresent other societies by viewing them through the prism of their own cultures.

Another and more important means that anthropologists employ to eliminate ethnocentric bias is the attempt to understand other cultures from the inside, to view them to a certain extent from the natives' point of view. This is what is known as *subjective understanding*. The idea is simple: the anthropologist attempts to assimilate the outlook of his informants to such a degree that he can begin to perceive the world as it appears to them. It involves mentally placing himself in their circumstances, comprehending their logic and value orientations, and in the light of these, assessing their behavioral choices. Some very sensitive portraits of other peoples have been produced by anthropologists who have followed this technique. It can be especially useful when the investigator deals with a culture that accents values and behaviors that run counter to those cherished in the enthnographer's society.

The potential difficulties can be illustrated by the situation, say, of a female American anthropologist who undertakes a study of the role of women in traditional Middle Eastern society. If the community selected for study has not been deeply influenced by recent social change, our anthropologist will likely discover that the women are permitted few of the freedoms that Western women take for granted. The rules of decency in Muslim society require that proper