

Of Ethnography and the Human Secret

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“... Hambali asked whether Lillie was prepared to join a suicide attack. When he replied yes, Lillie claimed he received an invitation to meet with Osama bin Laden in Kabul. There... he and ...other men swore allegiance to the al-Quada chief. Bin Laden...discussed the group’s commitment to Allah and told them their duty was ‘to suffer.’ Lillie said he understood that the group was to attack a U.S. target...” (Elegant, 2003-Time)

Abstract

This paper briefly addresses the increased importance of ethnography in light of the impact of the World Trade Center disaster and the Iraqi War. Our society has become less tolerant of other cultures so it would seem that the inculcation of cultural relativism is a more significant goal than ever now. Cultural relativism has been the “moral justification” for ethnology so one of the central goals in teaching would be to have students move away from the perspective of our culture of consumption and technological ethnocentrism towards a more culturally tolerant mentality.

Beginnings

The World Trade Center disaster was truly an event that symbolized many things but most particularly it represented a new manifestation of cultural conflict on a horrific macro-scale. As with Pearl Harbor the effects of cultural differences were radically “brought home” to our society as we watched the spectacle of the final agonizing moments of the World Trade center death throes. Such a shocking event certainly brought our society into a direct collision with another culture viewed moreover as a little understood religious terrorist enemy. Still, a year later somehow, following a war and continuing troubled occupation, we have more deeply cloaked ourselves in our ethnocentric perspective and become even more culturally xenophobic.

Our postmodern media engulfs us with us strands of images that offer little more than reinforcement of our hostile images of Muslims. As Pitrim Sorokin (1957) pointed out before the advent of “postmodernism,” television, and the internet that we seem to be a sensate society characterized by transient perceptions of reality based on the slew of fragmented video images of our world. Sorokin (1957) believed that power of such imagery and spectacle lie in its hedonistic, seductive power to render “the eye eating the brain.” Images without any contextuality or narrative render our society less and less capable of comprehending even the most basic dynamics of different cultures especially with regard to the growing struggle between the West and emergent Islamic socio-cultural global complexes.

A paradox of our postmodern world would seem that with all of technology to communicate huge amounts of data, especially visual data, we seem to be steadily sliding backward into a state of cultural anomie. Modernism was supposed to bring enlightenment but in the engulfing power of the omnipresent mass media we are steadily losing our capacity to understand other cultures. Hence we have tended to utilize baser types of military and political

means to deal with societies whose values have been in conflict with our secular capitalist, Judeo-Christian values. We struggle to hold on to some comprehension of the impact of worldwide events on our personal ones but are most often overwhelmed giving way to ambivalence.

This is the world that we as anthropologists and sociologists occupy along with our students. We are not immune to a sort of blindness that this toxic image environment has wrought on many in our society especially our students. Little understanding of why events take place since we are caught in a societal condition that seems to perpetuate a form of cognitive dissonance between what we see and the reasons underlying the event. The job of our disciplines, more than ever, is to help students overcome this persistent postmodern dissonance in an ethnographically relevant way. We should work toward sensitizing them towards seeing the interconnections between culture complexes and political conflicts. Instilling such a perspective will fulfill our commitment to engender in students a more holistic, culturally relativistic view.

Cry Lonesome

“The mullahs and teachers of religion in the peasntren, who were stirring up the people in Baten, took the opportunity given by the enormous and deep-felt impression left by the Krakatoa eruption, to expand their influence. Was it not, they said, the revenge of Allah, not only against the unbelieving dogs [Dutch], but also against those Bantenese people who were serving these kafirs, these infidels? There is no doubt: the disaster at Krakatoa was a sign of God, the great omen of the holy Abdul Karim had spoken...(van Sandick, 1892 from Winchester, 2003: 332-333).

The roots of the present Islamic conflict can be seen to be spreading and forming into the current global pattern back as early as 1872 as the observation indicates by a Dutch academician in Java soon after the Krakatoa explosion. One cannot help but seeing the American military experience with Islam as parallel to that of the British a century ago. Images of Lord Kitchener's

embattled army surrounded by Muslims in Khartoum seem to symbolize the beginning of the end of Western domination of Islam.

Miles Richardson (1990: 11) asks “Now that I am one, now that I am one, what is it, being an anthropologist?” He notes that in the 1960s anthropologists, like their sociological kin, were to be critical of ourselves, our society, and our discipline to the point of being “suspicious, almost paranoiac”(Richardson, 1990:11).

...The anthropologist is an academician. We are nearly always located in a university, and the nature of university life—isolated from the rest of society but dependent in large measure for its existence on that society, each year coming to grips with a new set of students, naïve and sophisticated, demanding and apathetic—produces individuals drawn tight with contradictions: persons who arrogantly attack ignorance, but wistfully plead with the state legislature or board of trustees; who teach the love of learning but jealously erect walls between departments and who believe the search for knowledge is an end in itself, but worry at night that colleagues are advancing faster, gaining more prestige, and earning more money (Richardson, 1990: 11).

Richardson (1990) points to the contradictions that we face in teaching and in our own profession. Ethnologists make up the majority of anthropologists in academia and they are generally the ones who first expose students to different cultures. What is our responsibility towards students especially in wake of the continued global violence related to the growth of Islam?

Glenn E. King (2003: 3), an ethnographer, argues that one of the primary goals of our discipline in an “increasingly homogenous world, [is] to give us a better sense of the enormous

range of variation in human culture and achievement.” More than ever we should aim to help students understand the deep relevance of the profound impact of different cultural realities on global socio-cultural dynamics and their personal lives. King (2003: 3-4) goes on to say:

...Knowledge of cultural variation provides a better understanding of the causes and possibilities of human behavior. From a humanistic perspective, knowledge of human diversity will help anyone to better appreciate and empathize with perceptions and feelings of other human beings.

The study of tradition helps us to understand and cope with events in the world today. Although traditional cultures have been altered and disrupted they continue to affect contemporary life.

Conveying an effective cross cultural perspective that will sensitize students to the importance of being culturally relativistic will go a long way in helping them develop a more critical perspective of their world. This is one of the most important goals of anthropology that we should work to achieve in teaching.

John Bodley (1997: 1) sees that the very survival of humanity hinges more and more on developing a clear understanding of cultural variation:

The long-term survival of the human species depends on our ability to understand and manage the complex, often conflicting, cultural systems that dominate the globe. The threats of military conflict, poverty, famine, and environmental deterioration cannot be treated as merely technological issues—they are sociocultural problems. Cultural anthropology can help us think about these problems creatively because it offers a view of many alternate ways of living...*The primary concern is with understanding the significance of cultures for the security and well-being of humanity (author's italics).*

In our various anthropology courses that deal with Non-Western cultures (Cultural Anthropology, World Cultures, and North American Indians at Henderson) we have a significant responsibility to instill in the student that every culture has a certain unique internal sense of logic that guides their way of life. For sociologists, Mills called this the “sociological imagination—“ the ability to see the connection between one’s personal life and the broader dynamics of society.

A central tool of ethnological research is cultural relativism for this concept is the key to helping students free themselves from the postmodern ethnocentric blindness. Of cultural relativism Richardson (1990: 17) observes:

It belongs to that set of ethnographic core values that advocates taking cultures as they come, do not prejudge them, and do not impose your own ethnocentric categories upon them. To comprehend any item of a people’s culture, you have to view that item in its sociocultural context. Cultural relativism is as much a part of the ethnographer’s tool kit as are field notes, tape recorders, and cameras.

This concept should permeate all that anthropologists seek to teach about other cultures.

Richardson (1990:17-18) further points out that:

...Cultural relativism is more than a methodological tool for research; it is a moral justification for being anthropologists... Their mission was to preach the doctrine of cultural differences, to lecture their own society that there was no one path to the solution of human problems. They spoke clearly, ‘Here is a way of life that through the centuries has found some of the secrets of human existence. The way of our society is not the only way. Look upon this culture and be humble.’

Bring Them Our Justice, Our Education, and Our Science

Moral justification or not, anthropologists have sometimes not embraced cultural relativism as with British anthropologist Lord Fitzroy Raglan in 1940. He viewed tribal beliefs especially magic as one of the “worst evils of the day” (Bodley, 1990: 11). According to Bodley (1990: 11):

He [Raglan] argued that, as long as tribals persist in such beliefs, the rest of the world cannot be considered civilized. In his view, existing tribes constituted ‘plague spots’ that threatened to reinfect civilized areas, and the rapid imposition of civilization was the only solution.

Ethnocentrism has corrupted other anthropologists as well including Arthur Hippler who “argued that national religions are superior to the ‘terrors of shamanism’ (Bodley, 1990: 11). He even argued that coercive measures were necessary from inside some societies to affect a positive, productive course for tribal societies. The outcomes of such biased views can be seen in the American approach to Native Americans—namely the reservation system.

The power of the Postmodern Culture grows more overwhelming all the time. This is a culture of consumption in which everything can be consumed or appropriated including people and things. Resting firmly on technological ethnocentrism, this culture of consumption pivots on the central principle that:

“All people share our desire for what we define as material wealth, prosperity, and progress and that others have different cultures only because they have not yet been exposed to the superior technological alternatives offered by industrial civilization (Bodley, 1990: 13).

Growing from this maxim is that our civilized life is always a better alternative than the prevailing way of life a people has successfully enjoyed for centuries. Many of the problems affecting tribal peoples today stem from the global effects of industrialization and civilization. Until these incursions they were self-sufficient sociocultural systems but now face being wards of nation-states.

Anthropologists and sociologists must be the stewards of cultural relativism. We must hold fast to our moral justification of cultural relativism.

Being Human Is Being Heroic

Richardson (1990) sees the task before anthropology as being similar to being a myth-teller. We must somehow convey that being human in all its shapes and forms is heroic. The evolutionary path we have followed successfully has been on heroism. Culture is our reason for success for in it lies “our ability to symbolize experience, to dream what might be and then to act as if the dreams were real (White 1949; Burke, 1966; and Duncan, 1968)” (Richardson 1990: 26). Through this ability to symbolize, once again Richardson (1990: 26):

We know the world because of culture; because of culture we also know fear. The fear that we humans know is not solely the fear of imminent danger: It is the fear of being evil, of being dead, of being alone. While culture allows us to talk to each other, it also prohibits us from being with one another. We can no longer reach out and touch our others; we can only encounter what we imagine others to be. We can't approach our other

selves directly, but only as we symbolize the others to be: man, woman, black, white, friend, enemy.

Culture is both a blessing and a curse. Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf proposed in what is now known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis that the language we speak determines our sense of reality and that one cultural reality is not fully translatable to another. In culture lies the primary reason our species has been so successful while simultaneously it has been the source of our deepest failures. Culture amplifies both positively and negatively our primate predispositions of altruism, aggression, territoriality, and need to live in social groups.

Once again Richardson (1990: 27-28) lays out the ultimate task of anthropology so this essay ends with more of his thoughts:

The ability to symbolize makes us who we are. It accounts for our successes; it is the reason for our failures. Being human is an impossible task, but it is our task.

The anthropologist's job is to tell of that task, to glorify the species by composing and reciting with skill and passion the human myth. Like the poet recording the exploits of the epic hero, the anthropologist mythicizes the human record. He takes the discrete bits of human data, the pelvic girdle, Acheulean hand axes, Eskimo kinship, and phonemic contrast, and narrates the human story: how we came to be, how we fought in the past, how we live today. As the teller of that human story, the anthropologist cannot falsify what we are. He seeks to find the full range of human variation, the cruelty, the magnificence, the love that is in us all and in all of our cultures. But the anthropologist is not a passive recorder of human data; he searches for the human secret.

May we tell the story well ...

Final Image Fallujah, Iraq

“Specialist John Fox was walking point... when [he] heard a pop and felt a round hit his bullet proof chest plate...The squad opened up on the gunman. His RPK machine gun dropped to the ground, and he collapsed on the street. The wounded gunman was still alive and quietly repeated in Arabic, ‘God is Great!’... [Sergeant Roger] Vazquez ...[took] a set of prayer beads out of the dying man’s pocket and place[d] them in his left hand... Within five minutes the man was dead (Bennett, 2003).

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Biography

Herman (Doc) Gibson, an Associate Professor of sociology, has been at Henderson State University since 1995 serving as Chair of the Department of Sociology and Human Services. A native of Louisiana, he received B.A. in sociology from Louisiana Tech in 1974, an M.A. in anthropology and Ph.D. in sociology from Louisiana State University respectively in 1976 and 1979. He has written a number of papers over topics in both fields over the years. Most recently he has pursued an interest in Postmodernism and also has done research on socio-historical trends that began during the Depression.