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Introduction

We begin, where anthropology properly begins: in the field. In a cavernous wooden hall, six feet above the ground, two men are contending in loud but measured voices. Their audience, roughly disposed about them in two camps, is attentive and respectful. The orators speak in turn, and each seems to address his own side rather than the opponents. Listeners murmur approval and wag their heads, bending to eject mouthfuls of blood-red beteljuice through holes in the floor. Each speaker nominates a confederate who echoes the more resonant phrases in overlapping cries, an antiphony that winds up the tension or clinches a point. But nobody interrupts. There is an etiquette, a procedure. The tone is reasonable if emphatic like that of a prosecutor, but the content is otherwise. An orator appeals, via the sympathies of his own side, to the 'hearts' of the other camp, anatomizing his cares, naming feelings unvoiced in English: hearts that are 'bright', 'cracked' or 'shrivelled'. The verbal formulas suggest something emotional; but neither context nor empathy can supply us with a meaning. The talk is all about debts and gifts, calculations of brideprice. As the antagonists give way to the next pair the tone shifts, but the heart, in all its phases, still figures. Speeches now alternate between ruminative soliloquy and abrupt violence, as when one man darts forward, eyes blazing, and stamps the floor (provoking a furious grunting from below where the pigs are corralled). A lull follows, listeners fish in their betel pouches or spit a longheld

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gobful. Unperturbed by the outburst the calmer opponent now replies in milder tones: 'As our friend was saying, *their* hearts are scorched. But we too have our stories. Are *our* hearts not squeezed?' '*Squeeeeeezed!*' returns his echo.

That was Nias. Another fieldwork snapshot, this time Java. In a formal parlour – all patterned tiles and curlicued teak chairs – a mother corrects her little son in front of visitors for failing to greet them. The visitors are impassive, blandly smiling behind the steaming glasses of tea they are too polite to sip. But the mother wants to make a point. 'Ashamed!' (*isin*) she declares to no one in particular; then, straightening the boy's shoulders, gently pushes him out to the sound of laughter. A simple scene, but hard to read. Who exactly is ashamed, or meant to be? Is the declaration of *isin* a reference to the boy's feelings or his mother's, a projection of her feelings onto him, a cover for those feelings, a judgment of the situation, an admonition, or an exhortation – amplified by laughter – to feel or act a certain way? In a similar incident a little girl, eyes downcast, is urged to stand up in a show of 'respect' to a stranger (again the word is announced). In a third, a child is prompted to show 'gratitude'. What is going on? Having learned the language we know roughly what the words mean – we know how to use them – but what is their function here: Descriptive, performative, educative? What is the psychological reality of the named process? How are word, context, and feeling connected?

Nitpicking questions like this do not normally trouble us as we go about our lives. By adulthood most people have enough savoir-faire to grasp quickly, if not always accurately, what is going on; but put them in a slightly unfamiliar setting – up an age-group, down a class, sideways across occupations – and the chances of being tone-deaf to some of the cues increase. In an alien field location all cues are potentially misleading. You might think you understand, but what do you understand?

The difficulties of recognizing and interpreting emotional episodes in the field – if we are alert to them – open onto general problems of

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method; and they mask deeper questions about the nature of emotion and the coherence of the emotion concept. So much hangs on a word or gesture, but how quickly we pass to generalities, skipping over the awkward detail! Doubts about the cultural appropriateness of our categories and the barriers to shared experience complicate all fieldwork, but in the case of emotion they seem especially acute. Their challenge should not be underestimated. For if we cannot reliably parse emotions away from home, or naively assume that we know what counts as such, our generalizations are unfounded and will in turn lead us to misconstrue other cases. Mistake the emotion and you mistake the scene; misread the scene and you confound the disposition of the actors; get that wrong and you bungle the whole story. But the challenge is not just practical, nor even theoretical (Who is to say what element has priority in the sequence of errors?). The ability to recognize and comprehend emotion affects the quality of our engagement with others, the sense we make of experience, and the life that goes into our ethnography. For the anthropologist the problem of what constitutes emotion begins and ends in the field.

My examples – one exotic, dramaturgically complex, the other simple, even banal – come from two very different societies, both, as it happens, in Indonesia. The opacity of one and the seeming transparency of the other present different kinds of difficulty. Before the calculated passion of the orators we are clueless, yet long-term familiarity does not help much. The German missionary Heinrich Sundermann lived long enough in Nias to translate the Bible into *li niha* ('the speech of humans') but he remained baffled by its heart-speech. German hearts and human hearts were not the same. (Nor, as I would discover a century later, were English hearts.) By contrast, in the temperamentally cooler – but still equatorial – setting of the Javanese parlour, we have an immediate sense of familiarity: there seems to be nothing to explain. And if we misrecognize what is going on there will be no consequences, so no likelihood of being put right. Where Niasans take great pains to analyze and embroider your mistakes – a kind of mettle-testing not

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unrelated to the agonistic style of debate – a polite Javanese host, to save further trouble, only points out your worst *faux pas*. Either way, the fieldworker is wrongfooted. One society presents an intractable problem, the other an invisible one.

We shall have more to do with Nias and Java, with hearts and manners (and whether those hearts are really manners, those manners hearts). For the moment, grant an experiential fact. Against the caution of cultural relativism that, emotionally speaking, nothing is what it seems, field researchers do somehow, sometimes, manage to connect, even against the grain of their theoretical prejudices. The practical wisdom of fieldwork outlasts the tides of theory, a battered rock against its waves. Accordingly, the approach I develop in this book builds on ethnography's unique strengths: personal involvement, long-term familiarity, local knowledge, time-depth. The approach taken is a *narrative* one. Rather than focusing on artificially demarcated emotions, I consider *emotional episodes* within broader, often competing narratives. I develop my argument through a consideration of key texts and through analysis of my own fieldwork in these two contrasting settings: the tribal society of Nias, an island to the west of Sumatra, and the culturally plural, peasant society of rural Java. Both places make emotions, broadly understood, a cultural focus. In Nias (Chapter 2), emotions serve as a vehicle of political rhetoric in what was, until yesterday, largely an oral culture. In Java (Chapter 3), certain focal emotions ('shame', 'reluctance') serve as social antennae enabling mutual adjustments among villagers in a fractious, ideologically competitive setting. Like other Asian civilizations, Java also possesses a sophisticated psychology that offers an alternative perspective on human nature. In both societies, the psychological reality of certain key emotions appears to be indeterminate and ethnographically dubious, which prompts questions about the constitution of emotions and their cross-cultural comparability.

Although other examples will be drawn from around the world (notably the Utku and Bedouin in Chapter 5), the book has a Southeast

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Asian and Pacific bias. For this I make no apology. My own emotional explorations over many years have been among island peoples, and most of the pioneering work on emotion has been carried out in places like Tahiti, Bali, and Luzon. Happily, in a comparative venture of this kind, relevance is not established by quantity. Tiny Ifaluk, a pixel in the Pacific with a few hundred souls, has as much to tell us about emotion as certain other societies numbering millions. In the ethnographer's scales an island can outweigh a continent.

What is an emotion?

It is customary to begin any contribution to this subject with a definition, as William James did in his famous essay of 1884, *What is an Emotion?* (In fact, it's customary to begin by quoting James.) His counter-intuitive answer – emotions don't bring about bodily changes, as common sense assumes (tiger → fear → thumping heart), rather, 'our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion' – sparked a century of controversy. Yet despite the wealth of accumulated theory and experimental data we are not much nearer an agreed answer to James's question. Indeed, the problem has become a lot more complicated as the heterogeneity of emotions has become clearer.

Emotions colour our thoughts, shape our reactions, load our dreams with obscure significance, urge decisions, trigger action, frame the moment, revise the past, and alter the state of affairs. Inside us like thoughts and sensations yet somehow out there like speech and action, emotions are and do many things. But what are they? Among the leading answers: feelings, judgments, biological reactions, brain states, social roles, functional orientations, action tendencies, evolved responses to opportunity and danger, performances, transactions, cognitions, strategies, and words. Each has been offered as a definition ('emotions are a kind of X'), and all have a claim, though the truth of the matter is not to be discovered by adding them up, which would make

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emotions equivalent to practically everything human. To parse emotions, sort the sheep from the goats, we must be able to distinguish between feelings (or cognitions or judgments or roles) that are emotional and those that are not, or between dispositions to action that stem from emotion and those more coolly motivated. Pointing to thought, feeling, or action as your definition gets you no further. What *kind* of feeling or thought do you mean? Well, an emotional one, of course.

If definitions of emotion tend to be circular, perhaps emotions are simply givens in the world, fundamental ingredients of experience that we know without being able to define, as Augustine famously said of time. Yet the overarching category of emotion – self-evident to modern English speakers – is unnamed in many other traditions, as are numerous instances of what *we* would call emotions, such as love, guilt, even sadness. The Chewong of Malaysia are said to possess seven emotion words; English has over 2,000 (Russell 1991: 428). What to make of the discrepancy? The lack of translation equivalents in other languages might be an historical curiosity, a cause for smug celebration, or an obstacle in the way of a general theory. It could be that each emotion – anger, jealousy, joy – forms a natural kind, whether or not we name it. It could also be that anger and joy belong to a broader natural class of phenomena, Emotion, named in some traditions, undiscriminated in others. Only the dizziest postmodernist would deny that genes and kangaroos existed before they were known and named; so why should nostalgia, embarrassment, *Schadenfreude* and *amae* (Japanese for dependent love) require cultural formulation for their existence? As I explore in Chapter 9, much depends on *how much* depends on words.

Changing cultural perspectives

The slippery problem of definition, even of recognition, is mirrored in doubts over how we should *feel* about emotion, an ambivalence that has a history so deep and ramifying that it almost defines a civilization.

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Greeks v. Persians, rationalists v. Romantics, reason and passion, culture and nature. Similar binaries figure in other traditions – Islam for one – but they are peculiarly central to Western self-definition, echoing down the millennia as if responding to some deeper prompting unbounded by history. Emotion (variously conceived and emphasized) is a touchstone of cultural value, a sluggish barometer of social change; in our own time, a spinning weathervane. For however indelible the categories and motifs, recent decades have seen an unmistakable resurgence of interest in the emotional. Once confined to psychology and philosophy, emotion has seized centre-stage in scholarly areas as different as geography and cultural studies, literary theory and artificial intelligence. In the applied fields of nursing, management, and market research, workshops on 'emotional labour' are now routine. Emotion is an obsession of our media-saturated world. Footballers undergo rage-counselling; men in suits train in 'emotional intelligence'; text messages are studded with emojis.

But the shift in sensibility, the growing cultural importance given to reflective emotion that historians have traced over the *longue durée*, and which sociologists have linked to the rise of bourgeois society and, latterly, consumerism, has ushered in a period of enormous confusion. On the crest of the Enlightenment, Kant knew where he stood: emotions were an 'illness of the mind'. But the contemporary scene is one of bewilderment. A listing of emotion titles on amazon.com – a market in present anxieties – brings up a puzzling mixture, ranging from the doubtful (*Emotions: Can You Trust Them?*) and alarmist (*Your Killer Emotions*), to the desperate (*SOS Help for Emotions*), and plain paranoid (*Enemies of the Heart: Breaking Free from Emotions that Control You*). Subtitles register alienation (*What Your Feelings Are Trying to Tell You*), emotional constipation (*How to Release Your Trapped Feelings*), and a dark night of the soul (*Why You Feel the Way You Do and What God Wants You to Do about It*). Remedies – at least the worldly kind – tend to the managerial (*The 4-Step Program to Take*

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Charge of Your Emotions). 'Control' figures prominently (*Controlling Emotions so They Don't Control You; How to Control and React to the Size of Your Emotions).* Where the self-help manuals stir panic only to dispel it, for a modest outlay, popular science promises a solid, governable reality, preferring no-nonsense titles like *The Emotion Machine* and *Molecules of Emotion.* All seem to be telling us that emotions are inscrutable, predatory, and alien; above all they are *things*: things we mostly do not want to have.

One of the difficulties with getting a grip on emotion is that – for those deep civilizational reasons – our feelings about feelings tend to slant our understanding of their nature and significance, confusing the role they play with the role we think they ought to play. From the time of the Stoics, emotion and ethics have been deeply entangled. One reason why it is hard to grasp what emotions *are* is because, as food for thought, they are inescapably emotive.

Developing a scholarly approach: The example of history

To say that anthropology is not immune to this problem is no more than to say that it has a history. Like the other social sciences it operates with the tools of ordinary language, sometimes struggling to shed their historical baggage, sometimes as heedless of the linguistic medium as the proverbial fish in water. 'Culture', 'society', and 'religion', heading the list of key terms, seem made for debate; they are, in a famous phrase, essentially contested concepts. But 'emotion' is transparent. Or so we assume. And with transparency comes theoretical invisibility. You won't find a relevant entry in the index of most ethnographies.

One way of making the shape of a concept visible is to look at its history. How did people in the past think about emotions? How did emotions play out in social life? Is there compelling evidence of emotional climate change? These historical questions are not very different from the kind posed by anthropologists; and if the past is another

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country social historians can be reckoned ethnography's time-travellers. Historians of emotion attend to public and private sentiment, changing norms of expression, and what used to be called folk psychology (a concept nowadays considered a little too tidy). Rather than the conventional documents of social history – the wills, deeds, and pamphlets that graph the rhythms of civil society – their evidence is gleaned from the marginalia of everyday life – letters, jottings, diaries, and popular song – besides the worked-up presentations of literature and art (Matt 2011; Matt & Stearns 2014; Plamper 2015; Reddy 2001; Rosenwein 2006; Stearns 2008). Historical research also works backwards, genealogically, retracing the roots of contemporary notions to show how, for example, from the eighteenth century, 'emotions' gradually replaced the 'passions': concepts with quite different resonances and ideological functions (Dixon 2003, 2012).

Modern historians have become adept at finding emotional clues in the minutiae their forbears passed over in silence. Masters of the craft, like the French writers of the *Annales* school, offer a picture of vanished worlds as vivid as any ethnography and a reminder that making the past speak is a matter not only of knowing how to listen but of narrative and imaginative engagement.

An anthropological approach to emotion complements this vital historical work. It differs in its focus on the here and now, above all in its contact with everyday life. However personally invested in the past, the historian stands at a distance from the objects of enquiry. For the most part life is not written down but lived between the lines; the written record, such as it is, provides an ambiguous witness to how people felt and thought. As Eamon Duffy laments, 'routine . . . leaves few records, even though most of what is fundamental to ordinary existence is a matter of routine – undocumented, invisible and, as a consequence, far too easily discounted by the historian seeking to touch the texture of the life of the past' (2002: 67). Does a sparse diary entry on the death of a child imply lack of grief; or does grief go without saying

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(Pollock 1983)? Were emotional lives substantially different in the past? Duffy does a magnificent job in evoking the religious ethos of life in a sixteenth-century English village, piecing together the 'busy piety' of villagers from parish records and clerical accounts. Plenty of texture there, to be sure. But like any historian he faces 'the difficulty in all attempts at close encounter with the people of the past, of grasping what it was that mattered most to them' (Duffy 2002: 68), a problem compounded by history's silence on what the unlettered thought and felt.

The elusive object, the problem of reporting

In writing about emotions, anthropologists have the singular advantage of *being there*: they live the life, share the joys and sorrows. Freed of the written record (or unfazed by its absence) they ought to be better attuned to what goes without saying – or at least what goes without writing. Yet as ethnographers privately admit, in the retelling much of the life drains away. Emotion, like poetry, gets lost in translation. The living evidence can be as inscrutable as the laconic diary entry; either that or the analytical gaze withers its object. And there are further hazards. If historians fret about anachronism, the anthropologist's cardinal sin is ethnocentrism, the projection onto cultural others of one's own ways of thinking and – we must add – *feeling*. Against parochialism in *thought* there are ample safeguards: the comparative perspective, a century of field research, the massed chorus of world ethnographers. But feeling is trickier. For one thing, the doctrine of the Psychic Unity of Mankind espoused by Franz Boas, founding father of American anthropology, and generations of his followers, inhibits inquiry. The doctrine recognized diversity of cultural content but not of psychological faculties, which Papa Franz saw as biologically given, therefore invariable. Psychic unity implied emotional uniformity. But who is to say what counts as psychic or what constitutes unity? And where do emotions begin and end: in the mind, the situation, the cultural values? The

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