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978-0-521-27197-4 - Other Tribes, Other Scribes: Symbolic Anthropology in the Comparative Study of Cultures, Histories, Religions, and Texts

James A. Boon

Excerpt

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# Part I

## Initiations

So the suffering which [ascetic practices] impose is not arbitrary and sterile cruelty; it is a necessary school, where men form and temper themselves, and acquire the qualities of disinterestedness and endurance without which there would be no religion. If this result is to be obtained, it is even a good thing that the ascetic ideal be incarnated eminently in certain persons, whose specialty, so to speak, it is to represent, almost with excess, this aspect of the ritual life; for they are like so many living models, inciting to effort . . . But these exaggerations are necessary to sustain among the believers a sufficient disgust for an easy life and common pleasures. It is necessary that an elite put the end too high, if the crowd is not to put it too low. *It is necessary that some exaggerate*, if the average is to remain at a fitting level.

. . . So there is an asceticism which, being inherent in all social life, is destined to survive all the mythologies and all the dogmas; it is an integral part of all human culture.

Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (emphasis added)

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# 1. Introduction: The exaggeration of cultures

We are so made that we can derive intense enjoyment only from a contrast and very little from a state of things. (Goethe, indeed, warns us that “nothing is harder to bear than a succession of fair days.” [*Alles in der Welt lässt sich ertragen, / Nur nicht eine Reihe von schönen Tagen.*]) But this may be an exaggeration.

Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

Anthropology heightens our sense of human diversity, often routinely, sometimes painfully, sometimes making us giddy. Consider Max Weber – sociologist, political economist, philosopher, typologist, historian, translator – but nevertheless, I insist, an anthropologist. Even when discussing the ideal-type of otherworldly religious interests, Weber intersperses his values of the beyond with contrapuntal attitudes toward the here and now. Arguing that rationalized religions have sublimated the orgy into the sacrament, he contrasts a puritan sense of divine election with other concrete ideas:

The Buddhist monk, certain to enter Nirvana, seeks the sentiment of a cosmic love; the devout Hindu seeks either Bhakti (fervent love in the possession of God) or apathetic ecstasy. The Chlyst with his radjeny, as well as the dancing Dervish, strives for orgiastic ecstasy. Others seek to be possessed by God and to possess God, to be a bridegroom of the Virgin Mary, or to be the bride of the Savior. The Jesuit’s cult of the heart of Jesus, quietistic edification, the pietists’ tender love for the child Jesus and its “running sore,” the sexual and semi-sexual orgies at the wooing of Krishna, the sophisticated cultic dinners of the Vallabhacharis, the gnostic onanist cult activities, the various forms of the *unio mystica*, and the contemplative submersion in the All-one – these states undoubtedly have been sought, first of all, for the sake of such emotional values as they directly offered the devout. In this respect, they have in fact been absolutely equal to Dionysian or the soma cult; to totemic meat-orgies, the cannibalistic feasts, the ancient and religiously consecrated use of hashish, opium, and nicotine; and in general, to all sorts of magical intoxication. [Weber 1958a: 278]

The discipline of anthropology collectively performs in its fieldwork the kind of whirlwind cultural tours of which Weber so compellingly wrote. Yet Weber’s work illustrates that nonfieldworkers can gain vivid knowledge of remote traditions, if only from books and if only by contrast. By the same token today’s fieldworkers can learn from Weber not to mistake “their islands” as sole exemplars of humankind. The accumulation of anthropological

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field experience in fact confirms a profound implication of Weber's comparative sociology of religions: Every culture is equally an extreme, including one's own, even in its rationality and common sense.

But if no exotic population is a universal paragon, why visit? Why, for example, like Victor Turner, map multivocality of symbols among the Ndembu of Africa to help refute positivistic views that words are simply referents to a preexistent inventory of meanings? Or why, like Clifford Geertz, disclose phenomenological depths of social experience in politicized Java, performative Bali, and manipulative Morocco? Or if, like Weber, one stays home, why turn to documents of India and China; why not investigate degrees of economic, political, and spiritual bureaucratization in Germany without going so far afield? At first glance, there appear to be decidedly easier ways of investigating matters. We might simply leave aside all those Bhakti cults, Dervish orgies, and cannibalistic feasts; human meaning can be quite well studied by just about anyone just about anywhere. Many phenomenologists study meaning by reflecting on themselves or on their sense of bounded selfhood versus diffuse otherhood. Hermeneuticists circle through texts, sacred and otherwise, with spiraling enthusiasm and insight. Academic philosophers ponder their own discussions in tight-knit groups. Many varieties of literary critic, philologist, and religious historian delve into documents of sensibility and belief. Anthropologists of symbolic forms borrow elements from all these endeavors (at the same time borrowing the accompanying drawbacks) and complicate matters by accentuating cultural extremes. Once back from the field, however, one confronts all the pitfalls of subjectivity, inexplicability, and nonconceivable falsifiability that characterize other interpretive pursuits (but they have fewer excuses than anthropology!). The disciplinary madness stems from a perpetual suspicion having the force of conviction: Without contrastive sweep, fundamental (not to mention superficial!) aspects of human meaning would remain unknown to us. Indeed, optimum contrast is needed to disclose the very terms of cultural discourse. Like comparative linguistics and folklore, the anthropology of meaning takes the greatest scope and humblest materials as a means to guard against artificial standardization – and elitism as well. Our own streetcorners are perhaps microsocieties, and our own quadrangles enclose semantic universes; but studying them alone cannot reveal the ultimate cultures that they contrastively represent. Hence anthropology's apparent inefficiency, its worldwide circumlocution, and its most distinctive fetish.

#### **Fetishism of the field**

In fact, the field research with which every ethnographic career begins is mother and nurse of doubt, the philosophic attitude *par excellence*.

Lévi-Strauss, "The Scope of Anthropology"

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## 5 Introduction: *The exaggeration of cultures*

To meet the age-old challenge of discovering the significance of human diversity, the thoroughly modern anthropologist packs her or his belongings, obtains visas if necessary, and boards a ship or plane (or bus or subway) to real or imagined exile, ready to suffer all the petty delays, cross-cultural misunderstandings, and confusing self-doubts that ordinary travelers, thanks to the successors of Cook's tours or Baedeker's guidebooks, avoid. Anthropologists snoop where nobody else foreign or native would either dare or care, in order to interpret diverse cultures in heightened contrast.

Fieldwork is a peculiar idea: a prolonged episode, ideally (since Malinowski), during which a lone researcher visits a remote population. The experience, not quite authentic when an entire expedition pursues it, must be hauntingly personal and richly particular; yet it becomes the basis for intercontinental comparisons. The prescribed method of fieldwork requires being there, participating and observing, and speaking the language. The ideal-type anthropologist (each individual anthropologist, of course, need not conform) clarifies – literally as a pedestrian – the highest-flying issues in human meaning: Icarus with dirty feet.

Fieldwork results often help support social and cultural generalizations that accentuate the exotic. Much of the history of professional anthropology has been marked by theories that make obscure rituals, myths, or praxis into touchstones of religion and society in general. Take, for example, suggestions that positive rules of exogamy – as bizarre to Americans as a requirement that Republicans marry Democrats – reveal basic properties of human communication. Do such “total anthropological facts” actually escape chauvinism? What explains the passion of Emile Durkheim's circle in France, of Franz Boas and his followers in America, and of J. P. B. de Josselin de Jong's school in Holland for dualism and exogamous clans?<sup>1</sup>

These questions have given rise to endless quandaries. Does apparent nonchauvinism subtly mask solipsism? Indeed, ethnographers themselves occasionally seem to resemble the exotic cultures they unveil, as in Lévi-Strauss's “neolithic mentality,” his self-confessed sense of identification with preliterate modes of information (1977). Such confessions aggravate suspicions that comparative anthropologists merely project a self-image when they claim to communicate cross-cultural understanding (cultural interpretation) or to understand cross-cultural communication (structuralism). Yet when Professor X looks suspiciously like culture X, we are obliged to remember that investigators themselves emerge from a society and history conforming to cultural patterns (cf. M. Douglas 1975:74ff.): The investigator is *native* to some culture or other. Many provocative episodes in anthropology (broadly construed) involve particular observers and cultures “finding each other” – Cushing and Zuni, Hocart and Fiji, Tocqueville and America. This discovery is a matter of more than simple subjectivity, if only because the exotic culture with which the investigator identifies represents what the investigator's native

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culture, insofar as he understands it, is *not*. Cross-cultural discourse emerges from anthropologists' sense of antithesis. Perhaps, dialectically, that's the best we can do.

More quandaries arise from the fact that any interpretation is culturally embedded. Perhaps anthropology is simply a roundabout ethnocentrism. Perhaps concern with exotica merely keeps scholars off certain political streets. This possibility looms more darkly if we recall the British in India, the Dutch in Indonesia, the Bureau of Indian Affairs on the reservations, the sociologists in Levittown, or all academic observers in the Third World. Can infrastructures (politics, economics) and/or superstructures (religion, ideology) account for the existence of comparative anthropology or for the cultural diversity it highlights? Are different anthropologies handmaidens of political, national, or philosophical interest groups without realizing it? Perhaps, we may say pessimistically. But more optimistically: What a way to serve interest groups! Why not simply dismiss clan-exogamy, totemism, or other exotic usages; why strive to identify them in the first place? One need not expect anthropology absolutely to transcend all ideologies; yet, following Weber, one may hope that comparative social science can avoid playing directly into the hands of a particular power sector. Perhaps, ironically, that's the best we can do.

Counterparts of anthropologists in less specialized culture include shamans, tricksters, clowns, and kind-fools. These figures, like professional anthropologists, doubt the absoluteness of their own culture; they displace the immediacy of their audience's social lives. It is therefore appropriate to greet the work of anthropologists (and our equivalents) with a dash of skepticism. More quandaries result. Perhaps ethnography is ultimately unverifiable. Because every "other" can only be known through translation, must anthropology dissolve its subject in the act of reaching it? Perhaps anthropology in any society necessarily produces only what that society's internal conditions require it to conceptualize as *other than* itself. (But our view of others may well be no more ideologically fantastic, or even figmentary, than their view of us; in any case figments, too, are culturally produced.) I am personally less skeptical about these issues, although I recognize that there are sources other than anthropology that provide contrastive perspectives on ourselves. Science fiction makes our norms problematic; religion and literature imagine heavens and hells, Utopias and Gomorrahs. I suspect, however, that anthropology's busy documentation of the customs and conventions of all human extremes does make a distinctive contribution to our sense of contrast. No science fiction, after all, quite matches the actual variation in human death rites. No Utopian dream has outstripped tribal ideals of the intermarriage of clans, perfect reciprocity-plus-difference.

Professional anthropologists of late have been willing to confront such quandaries and to stress the ways in which the crossing of cultures twists basic issues in knowledge and method. Lévi-Strauss, for example, in the finale of

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*Mythologiques*, returns to the polemics of *Tristes tropiques* and *The Savage Mind*. He decries the “rut of existentialism,”

this auto-admiring enterprise, not without *jobardise*, in which contemporary man is enclosed in a tête-à-tête with himself and falls in ecstasy before himself – cutting himself off from a scientific knowledge he scorns and from a real humanity whose historical depth and ethnographic dimensions he ignores, to set up a tiny world, closed and reserved: ideological Café du Commerce where, transpiring within the four walls of a human condition cut down to the size of a particular society, its frequenters sift anew the whole day through problems of local interest, beyond which the smoky atmosphere of their dialectical tobacco-talk prevents them from expanding their vista. [1971:572; my translation]

Many, needless to say and to put it mildly, would dispute this view of existentialism. Others would hurl Lévi-Strauss’s accusation at different philosophies or anthropologies; some would aim the same charge at the accuser. All might nevertheless doubt that rhetorical tobacco-talk or at-home heuristics permit adequate investigation of the so-variable human tribe. Still, although we may board the plane, the assertion that we ever *really* get away, even in encountering the exotic, remains profoundly problematic.

The field (of symbols) affords a presumably privileged avenue of escape from the ideological café. Yet doing fieldwork has seldom brought forth a truly self-conscious ethnography and ethnology, this veritable “prose of the world.” Traditionally, few field accounts – Gregory Bateson’s *Naven* (1936/1958) is one vibrant exception – explored their own symbolic foundations as descriptions. Fewer still – here the classic exception is *Tristes tropiques* – explored their own nature as discourse. Recently the symbolic basis of the fieldwork experience, in particular the intensive writing that presumes to represent its findings, has itself become a subject of scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> In the past more conventional champions of the fieldwork ordeal routinely implied that cultures can be penetrated simply by entering *their* jungles, real or asphalt, and by participant-observing their daily affairs, particularly regular family life. Visit the island and enter the kinship system – then just write it up, sooner or later.

Margaret Mead in her early work promoted an oversimplified view of fieldwork. In 1937, when her study of Samoan adolescence was a popular success, Mead was ready to wrap up New Guinea. She wrote Ruth Benedict:

I am more and more convinced that there is no room in anthropology for philosophical concepts and deductive thinking. Of course Papa Franz [Boas] has always stood for empirical thinking, but he has never really determined what the data are in social anthropology on which the thinking is to be based. . . . [Radcliffe-] Brown has no tact and no political sense and needs a nurse. [1959:334]<sup>3</sup>

So Baconian a view of fieldwork sustains equally simplified confidence in its results. Three days later the Tchambuli had fallen into the ethnographer’s pocketbook:

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I've had a tremendous spurt of energy and I've gotten the key to this culture from my angle – got it yesterday during hours of sitting on the floor in a house of mourning. Now it's straight sailing ahead, just a matter of working out all the ramifications of my hunch. In fact I think we've both [Mead and Reo Fortune] had our big moments in this culture and the rest of the time will be just steady working ahead, verifying, recording, amplifying, and learning the dashed language which is really awful. [1959:334]

Even as the ink dried, Mead was off to yet another island, this time Bali, aiming again to determine “what the data are.” Her subsequent work in psychological anthropology belied her initial faith in fieldwork untainted by philosophical deduction. Yet Mead's earlier position reflected a naivete that persists in American anthropology.<sup>4</sup>

British anthropologists, too, disdain deduction. Their views usually take the guise of caustic rebuttals of armchair theorizing. Even Evans-Pritchard, hardly inductivist in his own work, when it came to legislating the norms of the profession could not resist swipes at *penseurs* who had never really roughed it. Durkheim himself, elsewhere credited by Evans-Pritchard with making social theory answerable to tribal systems, here falls victim: “One sometimes sighs – if only Tylor, Marett, Durkheim and all the rest of them could have spent a few weeks among the peoples about whom they so freely wrote” (1912/1965:67). This rhetoric with a small *r* is standard in empiricist simplification. Are we to believe that contact of a few weeks, a few years, or a few lifetimes between Durkheim and Australians (or Pueblos or archaic Chinese!) would have altered the views underlying *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* or *Primitive Classification*? On the other hand, should we be surprised that Spencer and Gillen or other long-term Australian ethnographers failed to produce general social theories? Such tossed-off remarks – “if only all the rest of them had performed fieldwork” – reinforce the mistaken view that cross-cultural interpretations happen empirically. Worse, these statements ignore the potential for a disciplinary division of labor. Worst of all, they prolong the fallacy that fieldwork is fundamentally “descriptive” and comparison more vaguely “theoretical.” Empiricists often advance methods of description and theories of comparison without stipulating that we require methods of comparison and theories of description in equal measure.<sup>5</sup>

The contemporary identity of the anthropological profession centers, rightly I think, on fieldwork – in act and ideal. This statement means neither that the history of the discipline commenced only with fieldwork nor that every anthropologist must practice it but only that fieldwork epitomizes what anthropologists do when they write. Yet cultures cannot be penetrated simply with passports, survey sheets, statistics, genealogies, and dictionaries (or by intuition, benign tolerance, indomitable self-confidence, or studious self-effacement) – although each of these may on occasion be helpful. Rather, cross-cultural interpretation must be *made* to happen, using symbolic conventions derived

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from sources outside the conditions of fieldwork proper, as it is narrowly construed in the functionalist school (cf. Wagner 1975). Part of the business of anthropology is to make explicitly exotic populations appear implicitly familiar and explicitly familiar populations appear implicitly exotic. Although both sorts of population are *experienced* anthropologically “in the field,” they are *interpreted* anthropologically in books.

### Functionalist books versus Frazer

What does the ethnographer do? – he writes.

C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*

Whereas “isms” *look* positive, they are all negatively infused, taking their form antithetically to other “isms” (some elements of which, paradoxically, they often end by incorporating).

K. Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*

Anthropological functionalism commenced broadly, in fact sweepingly, and only narrowed as it prospered. Bronislaw Malinowski, “godfather and standard-bearer” of functionalism in Britain, first championed the idea of fieldwork as making possible total immersion in a particular society (1963:xxviii). Yet he concluded his initial book-length account of “native enterprise and adventure” in the Trobriand Islands not with final field data about *kula*-type inter-island exchange networks but with a florid salute to comparative studies extending well beyond Melanesia:

Thus the details and technicalities of the Kula acquire their meaning in so far only as they express some central attitude of mind of the natives, and thus broaden our knowledge, widen our outlook and deepen our grasp of human nature.

What interests me really in the study of the native is his outlook on things, his *Weltanschauung*, the breath of life and reality which he breathes and by which he lives. Every human culture gives its members a definite vision of the world, a definite zest of life. . .

Though it may be given to us for a moment to enter into the soul of a savage and through his eyes to look at the outer world and feel ourselves what it must feel to *him* to be himself – yet our final goal is to enrich and deepen our own world’s vision. . .

The study of Ethnology – so often mistaken by its very votaries for an idle hunting after curios, for a ramble among the savage and fantastic shapes of “barbarous customs and crude superstitions” – might become one of the most deeply philosophic, enlightening and elevating disciplines of scientific research. [1922/1961:517]

*Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) on Trobriand trade and economic life became an instant classic. This happy fate was foreseen by James G. Frazer, the eminent Scottish comparativist whose celebrated *Golden Bough* (1890, 1911–15) had inspired Malinowski to pursue anthropology. Frazer’s preface to *Argonauts* expresses boundless praise:



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It is characteristic of Dr. Malinowski's method that he takes full account of the complexity of human nature. He sees man, so to say, in the round and not in the flat. He remembers that man is a creature of emotion at least as much as of reason, and he is constantly at pains to discover the emotional as well as the rational basis of human action. The man of science, like the man of letters, is too apt to view mankind only in the abstract, selecting for his consideration a single side of our complex and many-sided being. Of this one-sided treatment Molière is a conspicuous example among great writers. . . . Very different is the presentation of human nature in the greater artists, such as Cervantes and Shakespeare: their characters are solid, being drawn not from one side only but from many. [1922/1961:ix]

The implicit compliment – Malinowski stands to ethnography as Shakespeare to literature – was gradually forgotten by its beneficiary. As Malinowski developed functionalist method and theory, his followers professed diminishing esteem for Frazer, the “father of institutionalized academic social anthropology” (Jarvie 1969:1).

Frazer's *Golden Bough* became the antithesis (along with evolutionism and diffusionism) of developing functionalism. I. C. Jarvie reviews the matter as purely political strategy:

Bronislaw Malinowski plotted and directed the revolution in social anthropology. It was a genuine revolution, aiming to overthrow the establishment of Frazer and Tylor and their ideas; but mainly it was against Frazer. . . .

One should not be misled by the curiously affectionate personal relations between Malinowski and Frazer. Admittedly Frazer wrote a nice foreword to *Argonauts* and Malinowski wrote a magnanimous tribute to Frazer after the latter's death; but this should not disguise the fact that Malinowski started a war for control and won it.

Malinowski's new ways were fieldwork (“come down off the verandah”) and functionalism (“study the ritual, not the belief”). . . . The difference between Frazer's work and Malinowski's is not merely in methodology, as it should have been. In Malinowski's hands the science of man was twisted into an inductivist and relativist science, with no clear connections with the basic metaphysical problem of the unity of mankind at all. In all this I think the role of Radcliffe-Brown was that of a consolidator. His contribution was to strengthen the doctrine of functionalism by bringing in the element of structure; in almost all else connected with the revolution he went along with Malinowski. [1969:173–5]

With hindsight the reason for the apparent revolution appears clear enough. Frazer deemed primitive life and ritual – echoed in our own folklore, superstitions, and ceremony – an allegory of a sensational tragic theme that underlies basic religious and political institutions: The officeholder is slain to perpetuate the office. As we shall see, the only thing that is whole in *The Golden Bough*, eventually thirteen volumes long, is the allegory itself. In contrast, functionalists came to construe primitive groups as routine individuals interrelated through the stable mechanisms of their whole-societies, whose workings could be thoroughly documented by the lone participant-observer. Theirs was an open-air anthropology freed from the complacencies of the armchair. The standardized history of modern British social anthropology is often presented as a self-

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congratulatory chronicle of the scientific fieldwork method emerging triumphant from Victorian blather.

The contrast between Frazer and Malinowski was exaggerated by functionalists in retrospect (and was reexaggerated later in Jarvie's tabloidlike account). Their compatibility ran deeper than a token tribute paid by the elder in the novice's professional birth announcement and later reciprocated in the elder's official death notice. The functionalist emphasis on ritual rather than belief (or, more fancily, on action rather than idea or perhaps, nowadays, on praxis rather than exegesis) in fact recalls Frazer's methodological advance over Tylor's less paradoxical *Primitive Culture* (1871/1958). Tylor had reduced nonliterate religions to beliefs in the pervasive agency-spirit of matter, the primitive doctrine of animism. Frazer bypassed the pale foreshadowing of doctrine to emphasize the rich array of primitive rite. *The Golden Bough* internalizes the contrast between itself and its subject matter; its prose paradoxically describes unbelievable rites believably. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* attempted merely to collate and to compare native creeds implicit in field reports. *Primitive Culture* offered not a prose of rites but a creed ("animism") of presumed native creeds. (Any discrepancy between source material and ethnological account remains back in the piecemeal field reports by missionaries, civil servants, or travelers). Frazer, on the other hand, introduces a basic discrepancy (we might call it rite/write) into ethnological tomes themselves, as a motive force generating *The Golden Bough's* expanding volumes of prose. This contrast between Tylor and Frazer suggests a development from one-dimensional reportage to multidimensional representation. Why else would Eliot, Joyce, Lawrence, and "all the rest of them" have thrived on Frazer?

Thus Malinowski's emphasis on rites itself derives from Frazer. Unlike Frazer's work, however, Malinowski's prose accounts adopt mechanistic models and conventions of space-time isolates that are associated with realist and naturalist novels (and literary theories). Nevertheless, and this point is crucial, both Frazer and Malinowski could be – in the Auerbachian sense implying representational illusionism – *read*. Moreover, judging from the early reactions to Malinowski's books of even professional anthropological readers, Frazer became passé less because Malinowski converted Frazer's rambling evolutionism into systematic science than because Frazer's expanding literary allegory was updated by Malinowski until it resembled narrative realism. As A. I. Richards has recalled: "In comparison with works such as those of Frazer, Crawley, Westermarck, or Durkheim which we read at the time . . . , [Malinowski's] work seemed lively and stimulating, and we began actually to visualize ourselves 'in the field.' The couvade was no longer a laughable eccentricity but a social mechanism for the public assumption of the father's duties towards the child" (1957:19). "Actually to visualize ourselves 'in the field'": Richards read Malinowski as Emma Bovary read novels.

The most conspicuous continuity between Frazer's and Malinowski's writ-