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James L. Peacock

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Substance

Behold! I tell you a mystery!

1 Corinthians 15:51–2

What is life? What is the essence of human existence? Of what does experience consist?

Anthropology offers a variety of answers to these questions. This variety can be reduced to several major themes. Most prominent, perhaps, is this: Human life should be viewed as a whole – a configuration interwoven of many forces and aspects, all organized by culture. Yet the whole is dynamic, and the study of it fraught with debate.

IT'S REAL! CULTURE BEHELD

Surabaya – hot, crowded, impoverished – is a port city of Java, which is the most populous island of the world's fourth largest nation, Indonesia. In 1962, when I was doing fieldwork in Surabaya, an estimated 75,000 of its million inhabitants were beggars. Most people were undernourished, living on a third the food Westerners eat. Inflation had run away; prices were tripling monthly, and monthly wages were enough for only a few days of each month. The family with whom my wife and I were living, in a shantytown near the railroad tracks, were surviving but barely. Medicine was difficult to obtain; communications were uncertain; transportation, an adventure. The city was dominated by the Communist Party, which at the time was the second largest in Asia and was poised for revolution. Instability, hardships, and anxiety characterized this period

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titled by Indonesia's President Sukarno, "The Year of Living Dangerously."

Amazingly, despite the hard and uncertain conditions of life, the exquisitely refined values of Javanese culture were sustained. If one visited a house, one would be seated at a small table and served a drink of tea or sweetened water. One could not straightaway drink but had to wait until host or hostess gave the command, a crooned word, "Manggoooooo," after which both would drink. Thus began the formalized ceremony of a Javanese visit, properly terminated by intoning in the same refined language, "Now I ask permission to leave." Such ceremonialism was so solidly entrenched and well understood in Javanese life that it was even the subject of working-class theater: A clown, playing the host, would substitute for the high Javanese invitation "Drink" the crude Javanese command "Slurp it up," alluding to the animal impulse beneath the polite facade. But the civilized veneer, if satirized, was deeply valued.

The conventions of refined language and manners were elaborated also in a vast complex of ceremonial life. A Javanese wedding of an ordinary couple would not suffer in pomp and pageantry by comparison to the Royal Wedding. Exquisitely graceful dances, inspired by the Javanese courts, were performed not only in the courts on auspicious occasions but on ordinary days by slum children on rickety bamboo stages. Cults in mysticism and meditation abounded, and ordinary people worrying about their next meal would expound esoteric philosophies and theorize about the profundities of Javanese civilization.

All of this was Javanese culture. The manners, ceremonies, language, arts, and philosophies were so deeply ingrained that they did not disappear under awful conditions. The culture was as much a way of life as the deformed beggars, haggling merchants, and corrupt politicians; it still flourishes, even after a time of violence when, following "the year of living dangerously," an estimated half-million Indonesians were massacred and turbulent changes occurred.

As in this example, most anthropological fieldwork has been done in settings harsh, remote, or both – rarely in the comfortable suburbs or salons that we associate with culture and civilization. Yet out of these exposures to "harsh light" has come an appreciation

of what we have termed culture – an enduring way of thinking and of ordering our lives that survives the struggle to survive. Whatever culture is, “it’s real.” At least something is, which we can conveniently label “culture.”

Culture defined

In surveying the anthropological definitions of culture, one is reminded of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s lines: “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways . . .” Anthropologists have promiscuously showered affection on the notion of culture, a notion so obvious in their experience and so central to their discipline. Yet they have never agreed on a single definition. Certain commonalities are, however, apparent.

The classic definition was provided by Sir Edward Tylor, the founder of social anthropology, in 1871: “Culture . . . taken in its wide ethnographic sense is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”¹

In Tylor’s definition, culture is “acquired by man as a member of society.” This implies that culture is learned, rather than inherited biologically. It implies further that culture is social; it is shared, rather than a property of the individual. On these two features of culture, most anthropologists would agree. Some would distinguish the society of ants or bees from that of humans in that ant or bee society, although boasting division of labor (as between queens and workers) and other traits akin to human social organization, is seemingly an expression of inherited or instinctual rather than learned patterns. Others might distinguish the mental productions of the psychotic from that of a culture; the psychotic’s delusion is peculiar to himself, whereas the ideas in a culture, though sometimes equally bizarre, are shared rather than borne alone.

These features – that culture is learned and shared – state conditions of culture. But what is culture itself? Tylor lists several elements of culture: “knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” This list is long. It seems to include just about anything one can learn and share. Anthropologists have narrowed

the list in different ways. Some have emphasized the mental or attitudinal rather than the behavioral aspect of culture. In this view, culture is not behavior itself but the shared understandings that guide behavior and are expressed in behavior. How do we learn about these understandings? Through observing behaviors and other visible or audible forms that manifest them. Difficulties in this formulation need not detain us now. Our present task is to grasp that something – some kind of pattern or organized disposition – is expressed in behaviors characteristic of each group of people. We need to sense the importance of these patterns and the power they have in organizing our lives.

The example from Surabaya is extreme; there, people were maintaining culture under conditions imposing great strain. One thinks of other examples in history. Jan Bokelson's utopian religious community at Münster was besieged in 1535 by the royal armies of the Rhine. Cut off from food, the faithful were forced to celebrate the glories of God by performing athletic feats while starving to death. Most anthropological studies have not been carried out under conditions as severe as this, but, as noted, most have been carried out under conditions that were in some way harsh. Yet these are the experiences that have fueled the anthropological conviction that human culture has force and power: If culture survives here, it will prevail anywhere.

What are some of the qualities of culture that render it powerful?

Culture is taken for granted

In the metaphor of Edward Hall, culture is a “silent language.”² Traditions and conventions are silent in the sense that they are often unconscious. People who claim to act rationally, to be motivated only by considerations such as efficiency, unconsciously are guided by rigid and pervasive traditions. To lay bare these traditions is a central task of the anthropologist, not to mention the satirist. Hall's work exemplifies this approach.

Hall points out that for centuries the West has conceived of time as linear. Time is a line stretching between the past and the future, divided into centuries, years, months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, and seconds. Every event we unhesitatingly classify along

that line: The Age of Dinosaurs is many intervals back, World War II is near our present position; gestation may stretch nine months along the line, the act of birth is only a point. The future is similarly envisioned as a movement along a line: nations follow five-year plans and try to progress; individuals have careers. Everyone should make a determined movement down the line and overcome obstacles and interruptions in order to “get ahead.” This way of thinking is embedded in our culture from many sources. It is in our language, which, unlike many non-European languages, has tense; it categorizes experience in past, present, and future. It is in our Judeo-Christian religious tradition, which imagines that we have a history – a past progressing from the creation of the world through Abraham, Moses, and the prophets – and a future. It has been intensified by the machine age, which forces us to mechanize, plan, sequentialize with precision. We have been taught this way of thinking in schools, which carry us through a sequence of grades toward graduation; by our proverbs, which tell us that time is money, that time waits for no one, that time should be saved and not wasted. We have grown up thinking about time in this linear way. We think this way without thinking about the way we are thinking. We take this way of thinking for granted.

Anthropologists like Hall teach us that not everybody thinks this way. The Trobriand Islanders of the Western Pacific reportedly held different assumptions. It is said that, unlike the hard-driving achiever, the Trobrianders did not particularly mind interruptions or even see an obstacle to their completing a task as an interruption. To them, time was not so much a line along which one moved as it was a puddle in which one sat, splashed, or wallowed. Trobrianders imagined time as a directionless configuration rather than a directional line.

One should, of course, hasten to caution against the danger of stereotyping a culture. In Java, I once was introduced as a speaker on a program by the phrase, “Now Mr. James will *mengisi waktu*,” which means “fill up time.” I was inclined to interpret this as part of the elaborate ceremonialism noted earlier: that people cared less about what I said or accomplished than that I filled a slot in the ceremony. This sort of nonlinear pattern still can be seen in Javanese life, where time is traditionally based on cycles rather than

progressions and is associated with Hindu-Buddhist traditions; but Western linear calendars and drives toward striving and achieving are apparent too.

That a sense of time varies is obvious to anyone who looks and listens, for differences are apparent even within our own society. Black time occasionally differs from white time, and other ethnic and regional variations are noticeable too: “I’d love you in a New York minute but take my Texas time,” goes a country and western song. Despite noticing the variations, most of us take for granted whatever notion of time is governing us. Achievers who claim simply to act efficiently and rationally are really performing a giant ritual expressing traditions of their particular culture and subculture. One may choose consciously a particular career or life-style and may justify a particular creed or set of values and goals, but no one ever uncovers all of the taken-for-granted premises that are part of one’s culture – the “tacit knowledge” by which one lives in the world.

Culture is shared

Linguistic anthropology offers one of the most striking examples of this: the phoneme. The phoneme is a feature of sound that is crucial for communication. If you compare the way different people talk, even those who speak the same language and have the same “accent,” you can hear all kinds of variations. Speakers use different pitch, volume, tone quality, stress, and patterns of breathing. They have different kinds of vocal organs, and some may even lack teeth or have other peculiarities. Incredibly, despite these differences, they communicate. How does language accomplish this? Every language identifies a small number of distinctions in sound (some languages have as few as a dozen, none has more than ninety, English has about forty) that are absolutely critical; these distinctions are phonemes. So long as these are produced and understood, communication can occur. For example, in English it is necessary that the speaker distinguish between “b” and “p” (otherwise he would confuse “pin” and “bin,” “bull” and “pull,” “pan” and “ban”). It is not necessary that he make all possible distinctions. Some that are critical in other languages make no difference in ours. For example, such Asian languages as Chinese and Thai

distinguish tones that change the meanings of words. Without practice, an English speaker cannot even hear the difference between such tones, much less reproduce them, for tonal difference is not phonemic in English.

Shared patterning in language illustrates a feature of culture that has impressed anthropologists and anyone else who has thought about it. With no individual intending or planning it, a group establishes rules, codes, values, and conventions that its members share. Not confined to any single person, shared culture is beyond the control of any single person; it takes on a power of its own.

Encounter with the other

Once in a small-town mosque in Java, a congregation of several hundred prayed that I convert to Islam. What was the source of my resistance? For one thing, I had taken the stance of the “researcher,” the fieldworker “studying” this tradition, rather than the stance of a believer in one thing open to something else. In fact, when the Muslim group once asked me, “What is your religion?” I replied, “My religion is anthropology”; I meant that I was a student of belief, rather than a believer. At a deeper level, to convert would have meant giving up a cultural identity as well as accepting a religious commitment.

Encounter with the other intensifies awareness of one’s own cultural identity. This principle explains the anthropologist’s insistence on fieldwork in a now alien setting, and it explains his use of comparison between the foreign and the familiar. The fish is the last to understand the water; perhaps he can do so in contrast to the land. Some kind of encounter with an other is necessary to grasp the power and reality of culture.

Culture, then, is a name anthropologists give to the taken-for-granted but powerfully influential understandings and codes that are learned and shared by members of a group. Different schools and branches of anthropology differ in the emphasis they give to culture (for example, British social anthropology emphasizes more the social context of culture, whereas American cultural anthropology emphasizes culture itself), but the concept of culture is important throughout anthropology. A major mission and

contribution of anthropology has long been, and continues to be, to enhance our awareness of the power and reality of culture in our existence.

ANTHROPOLOGY DEFINED: A HOLISTIC DISCIPLINE

“As few as you can, as many as you must” was John Stuart Mill’s advice concerning definitions. His British countrymen excelled in definitions at once terse and acerbic. Oats are what Englishmen feed to horses and Scotsmen to men, according to Samuel Johnson, and Oscar Wilde termed the fox hunter “the unspeakable in pursuit of the inedible.” Perhaps the wittiest definition of anthropology is Margaret Mead’s “the study of man, embracing women.” In a way, the purpose of this entire volume is to define anthropology, so we begin by providing some idea of what anthropology is about before we proceed.

Anthropology is what anthropologists do. That is a succinct way to characterize the discipline, and an approach some favor. But is it correct? Obviously it is wrong. Anthropologists spend much of their time doing what everybody else does. They sleep and eat, work (intensively), talk (interminably), travel (frequently). These doings are not all anthropology. What about the things anthropologists do that only they, and no others, do? Now we approach precision, but the definition is still inadequate. Owing to the demands of their research, anthropologists may spend more time than most people traveling to exotic places and recovering from exotic diseases; these traits are distinctive, but do travel and disease define anthropology? What we need to know is what anthropologists do as anthropologists – the part of their activity that constitutes anthropology. But how is one to know when anthropologists act as anthropologists without first knowing what anthropology is? We are back where we started.

One might begin with activities but now select those generally regarded as “professional.” Such a list would include all of the different kinds of research that anthropologists do, from digging up fossils to living among the people in contemporary out-of-the-way places. Some notion of the range of subject matter treated by anthropology is given by a list of such courses taught in college. The

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following list is from a term's offerings in a middle-sized department in an American state university:

Origins of Civilization and State
 Culture: What a Concept!
 General Anthropology
 Local Cultures, Global Forces
 Human Evolution and Adaptation
 Human Dilemmas
 Comparative Healing Systems
 Introduction to Civilizations of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh
 Global Issues
 Social Theory and Cultural Diversity
 World Prehistory
 Paleoanthropology
 Culture and Personality
 Magic, Ritual, Belief
 Emotions and Society
 Art and Culture
 Gender and Performance
 North American Archaeology
 Gardens, Shrines, Temples of Japan
 Bioarchaeology
 African Cultural Dynamics
 Anthropology and Public Interest
 Globalization and Local Islam in Asia
 Evolution of Landscapes
 Sociocultural Theory and Ethnography
 Ecology and Evolution Core
 Identity and Agency
 Art and Ethnography
 Hunter/Gatherer Seminar
 Politics of Nature
 Household Archaeology

For comparison, consider this list of courses offered in a term at a Swedish university:

Introduction to Social Anthropology
 The Anthropological Research Process

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Varieties in Societies and Cultures
 Contemporary Issues in Social Anthropological Perspective
 History of Anthropological Theory
 Studies in Cultural Forms
 Ethnicity, Identity, and Migration
 Economic Anthropology
 Power, Inequality, Stratification
 Current Texts in Social Anthropology
 Nationalism in Anthropological Perspective
 Socrates Course
 Cultural Complexity
 Social Problems in the Third World

The variety and range of topics in anthropology are vast. They include the full length of human history and prehistory, spanning millions of years. They encompass the globe, excluding no space or group. In terms of aspects, anthropology includes the biological as well as the cultural, the economic and psychological, the aesthetic and political. Methods range from quantitative to qualitative, from archeological to sociological, and from particularistic fieldwork to global generalization and philosophizing. So-called relevant and topical issues include feminism, racism, population explosions, crises of meaning and disbelief, evolutionism and creationism. Anthropology encroaches on the territory of the sciences as well as the humanities, and transcends the conventional boundaries of both while addressing questions to the distant past and the pressing present – perhaps with implications for the future.

This broad view, sometimes termed “holistic,” is perhaps the most striking single quality of anthropology. Whatever definition of anthropology one chooses, it should stress that this is a discipline for understanding humankind in its many facets – holistically.

If anthropology tries to see everything and everywhere, then does it have a distinctive focus? As was suggested earlier, that focus is culture. This is not to say that anthropology is exclusively pre-occupied with culture; it is very much concerned with what some might term the “harsh reality” of the material world as well. But anthropological studies are distinctive in attempting to connect this material world to cultural meanings. Studies of fossil humans