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0521818540 - Initiating Change in Highland Ethiopia: Causes and Consequences of Cultural Transformation

Dena Freeman

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1 Introduction: theorising change

In a remote part of southern Ethiopia there is a small farming community which has two forms of politico-ritual organisation. One is based on animal sacrifices and the other is based on initiations. The same people participate in both these systems. However, over the course of the past century or so the two systems have undergone very different types of change. The sacrificial system has retained more or less the same overall form although its practices have become less frequent and less elaborated; whereas the initiatory system, in contrast, has undergone a fairly radical transformation so that the form of the initiations is now quite different from how it was a hundred years ago. All the external factors are the same, indeed it is the very same people carrying out both these practices, so why do the two systems change in such different ways?

This ethnographic puzzle provides us with an opportunity to try to understand cultural change. The unusual situation of two cultural systems changing in different ways in the same circumstances will force us to tease apart the mechanisms that bring about change. We will need to look at causality, at individual action, at systemic organisation and at communal decision-making. These, then, are some of the issues that this book will address as it seeks to formulate a model of cultural change that will allow us to comprehend this unusual Ethiopian ethnography.

Anthropological approaches to change

Anthropological approaches to cultural change can be broadly divided into two camps. There are those that prioritise structural or systemic factors and there are those that prioritise individual action. Much of the history of anthropology can be seen as a series of attempts to bring together these two perspectives. And it is arguable that this synthesis has yet to be fully achieved. However, in order to explain our ethnographic case, where the actions of the same individuals lead to one system transforming and one system not, it will be necessary to understand both the individual and the systemic factors of change. This book then represents

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another attempt to synthesise individualist and systemic approaches to social life and to cultural change. Before outlining the approach taken in this book, it will be useful to take a look at some of the different varieties of systemic and individualist analyses that have been instructive in the development of anthropological theory.

The systemic mode of analysis

The systemic mode of analysis offers a way to understand the patterning of society or culture. By focusing on social and cultural systems, systemic analysis can offer insights as to how different parts of the system fit together and how changes in one part of the system will lead to changes in another part of the system. It allows us to take a holistic perspective and make some generalisations about the different forms of cultural life in different societies. Many different types of anthropological analysis can be classified as systemic analyses, but perhaps the two major anthropological traditions that fall into this category are functionalism and structuralism. Neither of these traditions is particularly noted for its focus on cultural change, but several anthropologists whose ideas have derived from these traditions have generated useful insights into the way in which cultural systems change over time.

Approaches derived from the functionalist tradition One approach to the study of cultural change has been to try to elucidate causal variables that determine the form of different cultural variants, which are seen to be transformations of each other. These variables in turn are generally seen to be driven by one particular independent variable which forms the base of the structural system. Within this broad functionalist framework, various independent variables have been suggested, most frequently either various elements of social organisation, such as property transmission or residence patterns, or environmental factors such as ecology or the technology of production.

Studies of cultural variation and transformation in the structural-functional framework (e.g. Nadel 1951; Goody 1962) posit some aspect of social organisation as the independent variable and then try to correlate changes in other variables with changes in this base variable. Jack Goody explains the position clearly: '[We must proceed by] comparing the standardised modes of acting in the two communities, in order to see where the differences lie. Having established the covariations, we have then to try to determine which are the dependent, which the independent variables' (Goody 1962:8). In his study of mortuary rituals among the LoDagaa of northern Ghana, Goody establishes correlations

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between a number of variables, including form of mortuary ritual, form of kinship organisation and the nature of father–son relations. He then suggests that the independent variable, which is thought to drive all the other variations, is in fact the system of inheritance. Among the LoWiili all property is transmitted agnatically, whereas among the LoDagaba immovable property is transmitted agnatically while movable property is inherited by uterine kin. So, for example, tense father–son relations are ‘caused’ among the LoWiili by the fact that the son is dependent on his father for his inheritance, and more relaxed father–son relations among the LoDagaba are ‘caused’ by the fact that the son is not so dependent on his father because much of his inheritance will come from his mother’s brother. It follows then that one variant is a transformation of the other: start with the LoWiili variant and change the inheritance pattern and you will end up with something very similar to the LoDagaba variant. Goody in fact suggests that this is what happens in LoWiili/LoDagaba border areas where, through intermarriage, sons of LoWiili men and LoDagaba women can choose to inherit either from their father or from their mother’s brother. If, for whatever reasons, they choose to inherit from their mother’s family then changes in the way they propitiate the ancestors and hold their mortuary rites, etc., will soon follow.

Goody is more subtle than many functionalists in that he explicitly repudiates the notion that all variations in social behaviour interlock with each other in a holistic manner (Goody 1962:419). However, the course of the transformation he suggests is still based on an essentially organicist view of culture, and there is little discussion of mechanism, beyond the initial choice made by borderland youths about their inheritance. Most of the work concentrates on drawing up structural correlations, and the issues of causality and the direction of change are only addressed briefly in the final discussion of borderland youths. Goody’s problem with causality is essentially that he wants to give structure causal efficacy, but because he also believes that structure is not a ‘thing’ that ‘exists’ he can find no way to ground his intuitions about change in any actual social mechanisms. Although Goody tackles this problem again in later works, it is not one that he successfully overcomes. In *Production and Reproduction* (1976), for example, he uses the statistical tools of linkage and path analysis to try to determine the direction of causality between a set of correlations regarding plough agriculture and diverging devolution. His use of these statistical tools is a brave attempt ‘to get a little beyond the circularity of structural-functionalism and the much simpler unilineal, single-factor hypotheses that dog so much work in the social sciences’ (Goody 1976:37), but ultimately it tells us little about the micro-mechanisms of change and how it actually takes place on the ground.

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The materialist approaches of ecological anthropology, cultural materialism and cultural ecology see cultures as adaptive solutions to environmental givens (e.g. Steward 1955; Sahlins 1958; Sahlins and Service 1960; Rappaport 1968, 1979; Harris 1979, 1980). They differ in the degree to which they acknowledge the importance of technology and the organisation of production (Thin 1996:186) and in the extent to which they include other societies as part of the 'environment', but they all share a view of causality that considers the material 'base' (or 'infrastructure') to determine the cultural 'superstructure'. In other words, they consider 'culture' in functionalist terms, as a coherent whole that adapts to its environment, much as a biological organism adapts to its environment. Within these approaches there are two related perspectives on cultural change. One seeks to understand culture as a homeostatic system that changes in order to keep its population in balance with its environment (e.g. Rappaport 1968), and the other seeks to understand the transformation of culture in response to changing environmental conditions.

Perhaps the best example of this latter perspective is Sahlins' comparative look at social stratification in Polynesia (Sahlins 1958). In this early work Sahlins looks at a number of Polynesian societies and attempts to understand gross variations in the form and degree of their social stratification as functional adaptations, or transformations, driven by different ecological and technological conditions. His causal model starts from environmental conditions and then extends to considerations of the organisation of production and exchange, then to social stratification, and finally, rather weakly, to vague extrapolations to other elements of cultural and ritual life. He writes:

Degree of stratification is directly related to surplus output of food producers. The greater the technological efficiency and surplus production, the greater will be the frequency and scope of [food] distribution [centred around chiefs] . . . Increase in scope, frequency and complexity of distribution implies increasing status differentiation between distributor and producer. This differentiation will be manifest in other economic processes besides distribution, and in sociopolitical and ceremonial life. Thereby the hypothesis: other factors being constant, the degree of stratification varies directly with productivity. (Sahlins 1958:5)

Through a fairly detailed look at fourteen Polynesian societies and their environments, Sahlins shows that this hypothesised correlation more or less holds. However, by simply comparing static, idealised structures he is unable to show that it is anything more than a correlation. By ignoring mechanism or process, or any real consideration of history, he is, like Goody, unable to prove his suggested causality, and unable to explain convincingly how the suggested changes actually occur. His analysis is

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devoid of subjects or agents, and thus causal mechanisms are implicitly considered to work at the level of 'structure', wherever this may be. As in many other models in ecological anthropology, 'the system' is imbued with causal efficacy while there is no adequate discussion of the ontological status of such a system. The causal model that results is as a consequence either teleological or downright mystical.

If, for the sake of argument, we were to accept his model of causality, then the explanation of cultural change that we are left with is essentially linear and evolutionist. The basic cultural structure is elaborated to a greater or lesser extent according to the amount of surplus available. Implicit in this argument is the idea of reversibility: if one of the less stratified societies were to become more productive then they would evolve into a form like that of the more stratified societies existing in its vicinity, and if one of these more stratified societies were somehow to become less productive they would devolve into a form like their less stratified neighbours. In a later publication Sahlins expands his set of factors which might cause devolution to include greedy chiefs, status rivalry and other non-environmental factors (Sahlins 1963:297–300), but the essentially linear nature of his model remains the same. There is no room in this model for structural transformation, or what we might call non-linear change.

Edmund Leach's study of political systems in highland Burma suffers a similar problem (Leach 1981 [1954]). Although purporting to be a model of 'structural change' and 'historical transformation', it is in reality a linear model which sees variants of Kachin culture forever oscillating between two fixed ideological points. The stumbling block for Leach is his analytical separation of the 'system on the ground' from the 'system of ideas'. By this analytical twist Leach can ignore the spiralling effects brought about because, on the ground, 'the facts at the end of the cycle are quite different from the facts at the beginning of the cycle' (1981 [1954]:xiii), and instead concentrate on the supposed cyclical oscillation of the 'system of ideas'. By ironing out these on-the-ground differences, he implies that they have no causal power to *interact* with the system of ideas and, perhaps, transform it. Instead they can only *drive* the system into more (*gumsa*) or less (*gumlao*) hierarchical form, while the system itself is untransformable.

Leach's model is thus linear for different reasons than Sahlins' (1958) model. Sahlins' model is linear because it is essentially unicausal. Productivity determines all. Whenever there is more than one causal variable the rest are 'held constant' so that the linear variations with one variable can be seen. But Leach's model ostensibly embraces multicausality, as he looks at the causal effects of ecology, political history and the actions of individuals (1981 [1954]:228–63). However, by rendering the system of

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ideas off-limits to any effects of these factors, and yet imbuing these ideas with causal power over the actions of individuals, Leach short-circuits the multicausal model of complex interactions between different factors, and effectively ends up with a linear model.

There are, I think, two major reasons for the weaknesses in Leach's model which are pertinent to this discussion. One is that Leach was arguing against the functional holism that was common at the time, and exemplified, for example, by Sahlins' (1958) book. However, he does not fully manage to step out of this framework, for although he insists that the system 'on the ground' is full of incoherencies, he still feels the need to posit a 'system of ideas' that is a coherent whole. The other reason for the incoherence of Leach's own model is that he is ultimately unsure whether to place causality in the realm of structure or in the realm of individuals. On the one hand he sees the structural contradictions between the *mayu-dama* marriage system and both *gumlao* and Shan ideology as driving 'structural change', and yet on the other hand he states that 'every individual of a society, each in his own interest, endeavours to exploit the situation as he perceives it and in so doing the collectivity of individuals alters the structure of the society itself' (1981 [1954]:8). Leach is thus acutely aware of the ontological problems of seeing structure as causal, and is trying to incorporate a more ontologically sound individualist view into what is essentially a structural account. While this is definitely a step in the right direction, Leach does not quite succeed in combining these two approaches in a rigorous manner. I will return to this below, but first let us take a look at another set of approaches to cultural variation, those that take their inspiration from Claude Lévi-Strauss and structuralism.

Approaches derived from the structuralist tradition For Lévi-Strauss, studying cultural variation and transformation is fundamental to any study of culture. Whether looking at kinship organisation or myth (1963, 1994 [1964], 1981 [1971]), his works proceed not by generalisation into 'ideal types', but by the explication of numerous variants, of which no one is more 'true' than any other. He is interested in the way that different versions of a cultural element represent transformations of its basic structure. Thus he looks for underlying patterns which form the 'structure' of all variants, and at the same time seeks to understand the logic by which one can transform into another.

Lévi-Strauss's conception of 'structure' is thus radically different from that of the structural-functionalists. He sees structure not as the holistic, organically functioning backbone of society, but rather as the logical patterning of principles existing behind surface variations in cultural elements. This structure is 'deep', and can only be uncovered by the study of

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surface variation. Furthermore, it never forms coherent wholes, but is a matter of continual communication and modification (Bloch 1996:535).

His notion of ‘transformation’ is also more complicated. He considers that myths, for example, are genetic, as well as formal, transformations of other myths (Sperber 1985:84). By this he means that when a myth-teller recounts a myth he is transforming a myth that he himself heard earlier – transforming the version that he heard by forgetting bits, adding new elements, changing the order, and so on. This is genetic transformation, transformation in its genesis. Formal transformation, which is the notion of transformation more commonly associated with structuralism, refers to the processes of opposition, inversion, symmetry, substitution and permutation by which different variants can be logically related to each other (D’Anglure 1996:335). Since it is difficult to follow the actual genetic transformations which myths undergo in their telling and retelling, he suggests that it is possible to try to reconstruct this history by taking ‘formal transformations between related myths as hypothetical models for genetic transformations’ (Sperber 1985:84). Thus although Lévi-Strauss’s study of myth is for the most part synchronic, much of his causality lies in the realm of history, as he sees one variant generating another through time, in response to changing external conditions.

For the most part Lévi-Strauss does not attempt to explain how myths actually transform in practice, but limits himself to showing how variants of myths can be seen to be logical transformations of each other. Near the beginning of the first volume of his magnum opus on Native American myth he states the case plainly:

By demonstrating that myths from widely divergent sources can be seen objectively as a set, it presents history with a problem and invites it to set about finding a solution. I have defined such a set, and I hope I have supplied proof of it being a set. It is the business of ethnographers, historians and archaeologists to explain how and why it exists. (Lévi-Strauss 1994 [1964]:8)

Many anthropologists working in the structuralist tradition have followed this path, and thus stuck to formal analyses of variation which are ahistorical and non-causal. Thus, to cite but one example, Nur Yalman provides a formal analysis of Sri Lankan and South Indian kinship systems, showing how they are all variations of one underlying structure (Yalman 1967).

Another branch of Lévi-Strauss’s intellectual descendants, however, have sought to ground such formal analysis of structure and variation in the external world, by trying to look at the causal effects of politics, ecology and what have you, as they transform structures through history (e.g. Sahlins 1985; Piot 1995). These efforts differ from Leach’s model in that external factors are considered not just to drive structure into

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greater or lesser elaborations of its basic form, but actually to transform it. In this way the short-circuit between the external world and symbolic ideas that doomed Leach's model to linearity is opened out, and these historical structuralist models take on a non-linear nature. In other words, they try to model the recursive way in which the external environment affects structure, and in turn how structure affects the form of interaction with the external environment. Structure and history become analytically inseparable.

Thus Sahlins, to cite a well-known example, suggests in his later work that external events, such as the arrival of Captain Cook in Hawaii, are initially understood through local cultural structures and then transform these structures, as cultural categories take on new meanings and connotations in the new context. And Piot suggests that the symbolic structure of Kabre society in Togo both influenced the way in which large numbers of immigrants were absorbed in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, and in turn was itself transformed by these politico-historical events. The innovation in these models is that causality is not seen as unidirectional, and the insights of both Marx and Weber are brought together to understand cultural change. In this way they attempt to transcend the distinction between materialist and idealist approaches, and between structure and history. Thus Sahlins' notion of the 'structure of the conjuncture' focuses on neither 'structure' nor 'history', but compounds the two to focus on the 'practical realization of the cultural categories in a specific historical context, as expressed in the interested action of the historic agents' (Sahlins 1985:xiv).

Bruce Knauff uses a similar approach to great effect in his book on south coast New Guinea cultures (Knauff 1993). But in contrast to Sahlins' formulation, Knauff does not require the influence of foreign forces or events to set change into motion. Rather, he focuses on 'how structures feed upon changes that they themselves generate' (1993:11). Through a detailed look at the variations between the many cultures of south coast New Guinea, he argues that structure should be seen not as a synchronic entity that might be revalued as the historical context changes, but rather as an entity that might *itself* transform. He shows how the unintended consequences of some actions will 'act as irritants' and lead to structures 'self-transforming from the inside as they respond dialectically to their own prior actualisations' (1993:11, 14). Socio-material factors in the external, or non-symbolic, world feed into this recursive process, offering both constraints and opportunities for development in certain directions.

Knauff goes further than many other theorists in explicitly acknowledging the unpredictability and non-linearity that transformation through

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such recursive processes generates, and stresses the sensitivity to initial conditions whereby very similar forms can diverge quickly into strikingly different cultural variants. He appears to give symbolic and non-symbolic factors the same ontological status, and thus sees both as causally efficacious. However, because his scale of analysis is large, encompassing the many cultures of south coast New Guinea, he does not attempt to theorise the micro-mechanisms that actually bring about the transformational change that he describes.

This is perhaps the greatest weakness of any form of systemic analysis. Focusing on large-scale systems, studies in this mode tend to lose sight of the individuals whose actions actually generate the social system. Structure tends to become reified and it is often implicitly seen as a causal entity that somehow constrains the actions of individuals. And at its most extreme, individuals become almost like automatons who blindly follow the rules of the social system. Even in less extreme forms it is often unclear how individuals live through the system and how the actions of individuals somehow add up to 'create' that very social system. To explore these types of questions we need to turn to the individualist mode of analysis.

The individualist mode of analysis

The greatest strength of the individualist mode of analysis is that it offers ways to understand the actions of individuals. Analyses in this mode take the individual as the starting point, not 'society' or 'structure'. They are thus far more ontologically rigorous than systemic analyses and they try to explain social or cultural phenomena from the bottom up, rather than the top down. They do not portray individuals in far-away places as exotic 'others' and we can generally sympathise, if not empathise, with the subjects of this type of analysis. The most important traditions within this mode of analysis are transactionalism and what I shall refer to as the cultural transmission tradition.

Approaches derived from the transactionalist tradition A transactionalist approach sees society as the product of the interactions between individual actors. Structure is not considered to be a 'thing' that determines people's actions, but rather is seen as an emergent phenomenon that derives from the cumulative effects of the freely chosen actions of individuals. In order to understand why individuals act in the way that they do, it is instead necessary to consider their motives and goals and then to look at the strategies that they use to accomplish these goals. These strategies will often involve manipulating social values and institutions.

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Structure, in other words, can itself be used as a tool, or as a resource, in the negotiations between individuals.

Perhaps the best example of a transactionalist analysis is Fredrik Barth's *Political Leadership among Swat Pathans* (1959). In this account Barth argues that Swat politics can be understood by looking at the relations between leaders and their clients. Individuals choose to become clients when they make the choice to enter into a relationship with a leader. There are various different types of leader, such as chiefs and saints, and various different types of political grouping. Individuals choose which relationships they wish to enter into and, indeed, whether they enter into any relationships at all. Local politics can then be understood as the series of negotiations that take place between individuals, as the various leaders and the many clients try to get into relationships which they believe will be the most beneficial to them. Everyone is acting in their own self-interest and trying to manipulate the accepted social order in the pursuit of their own goals.

This approach to culture provides a dynamic action-oriented perspective. The focus placed on individual choice would seem to offer a useful way to approach the question of cultural change, because if individuals are always choosing what to do, they are always free to choose to do something differently. If we can understand what would make them choose to do things differently, then we would be a long way towards understanding how cultural change actually takes place.

But what this approach does not offer us is a way to understand how systemic change takes place. It is unclear quite how structure 'emerges' from individual actions and why the cumulation of lots of individual actions has a pattern at all. While society or culture may not be as ordered as some of the systemic analyses suggest, there certainly is some degree of coherence in socio-cultural life that cannot be adequately explained by the transactionalist approach. And what happens to this pattern if some people begin to change their individual actions? How does the pattern itself change and why does it not simply fall apart? I will return to these points later, but first it will be useful to take a look at a very different type of individualist analysis.

Approaches derived from the cultural transmission tradition The final group of theoretical approaches to cultural change that I will discuss here focus on the way that incremental transformations take place during cultural transmission. These approaches (e.g. Dawkins 1982; Barth 1987; Sperber 1996) see culture not as some overarching whole, but rather as being made up of units that are continually communicated between individuals. They have a firmly materialist ontology and give little or no