

Globalization, the nation states and the question of "culture"

The Unnatural History of Nations and Cultures

WHATEVER THE IMPRESSION conveyed by the early literature on national character, the relation between “nations” and “cultures” has always been unsteady and complex.^[i] The flows of human populations that have attended wars, epidemics, famines, colonization, global business and trade relations and all the other kinds of natural and manmade upheavals that dislocate people have all played their part in producing increasing discontinuities between the world’s political and cultural units. The period between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries saw the agglomeration of heterogeneous “tribal” entities (the natural atom of human societies) into a variety of artificial arrangements in the form of nation states and empires. The modern world was taking shape.

But the map-makers have been kept busy re-forming this world as states have fractured and boundaries shifted. Local claims of ethnic autonomy have often eroded and eventually overcome the encompassing claims of national sovereignty. Suddenly, small is beautiful again. Recent political upheavals ranging from Indonesia to the Balkan states to the political patchwork that was once the Soviet Union testify to the fragility and often illusory stability of the modern nation state. Many states, it turns out were originally cobbled together and maintained more by the sheer force of state-managed terror and by autocratic leaders than by popular will or common interest. The social contract has turned out with disturbing frequency to have been a military one in disguise. And these more dramatic late twentieth century events are just the tip of the iceberg.

Simultaneous Globalization and Localization of Identity

Throughout the world, claims of cultural authenticity and local identity have been marshaled to destabilize and throw into question the legitimacy of the encompassing transcultural political arrangements within which cultural groups were enmeshed. Here, at the turn of the millennium, the simultaneous globalization and localization of identity propose the dialectic of economic and cultural forces in our lives.^[ii]

Just as the state has asserted its claims on culture, so too has culture pushed its claims upon the state in the form of the rights of ethnic and religious minority groups to maintain their own traditional practices, even when those practices run counter to local norms and laws. In modern democracies, the battle between the claims of the center and those of the margins are more often fought in the media and in the courts than on the battlefield, though violence in the name of cultural autonomy is hardly unknown.

Many different issues become rallying points for the rights of culture. The most notorious deal with a local community’s claims of rights to control the lives and the bodies of women and children. These are compelling issues in contemporary American society and in the academy. They include “female circumcision” and other disfiguring and psychologically charged cultural practices involving children, the preeminent right of parents and other community elders to educate their children consistent with local cultural and religious beliefs, the right to arrange a child’s marriage whether or not they

approve, and debates over when corporal punishment becomes child-abuse. The resulting political and legal conundrums have made their way into the headlines and eventually into the courts.

What's an Anthropologist to Do?

What is the proper role of the anthropologist in confronting these cases? For most of us, our initial response is probably to make the case for culture against the claims of the state and to work to help make the voices and interests of minority populations heard by those in power. Anthropologists are usually pretty good at making exotic practices comprehensible by translating them into terms understandable by the dominant society. By filling in the cultural or religious context of otherwise anomalous beliefs and practices and providing the missing background information, anthropologists can help make the strange seem familiar, reasonable, or at least conceivable. Making the exotic familiar is an ordinary teaching mission for cultural anthropologists, and not just in the classroom. I myself have played this sort of translator role several times as an expert witness on Samoa in court and as a consultant to local school districts. Here the issues had to do with clarifying to American authorities Samoan notions of appropriate corporal punishment and child-rearing issues in relation to Samoans living in the United States.

Unfortunately, simply clarifying the local logic of a practice in this way is not always effective. It rarely resolves the underlying dilemma, the apparently irreconcilable difference in presuppositions or values between different communities living in the same society. And, like the rest of the world, anthropologists are often loathe to defend positions to which they have a personal aversion. Though we are supposed to champion diversity and cultural relativity as values in and of themselves, many anthropologists find themselves hard-pressed to defend, in the name of culture, positions which seem to violate an individual's welfare, despite our best attempts at contextualization and relativism. This is anthropology at its most uncomfortable, and many of us have been there.

Having spent several years analyzing and debating many of these specific cases of norm conflict in which the right of culture competes with those of the state or some general conception of human rights, it has become apparent to me that there can be no viable philosophical position on these sorts of issues *in general*. These issues are, after all, classic dilemmas and dilemmas are by their nature not resolvable. Dilemmas can be managed but not solved. To the extent that these cultural conundrums ever get dealt with at all, they are never resolved in principle, only in fact. Such solutions are, at best, merely local, temporary and partial resolutions of conflicts between local custom and national law. Such pragmatic solutions take the form of judicial decision, and political compromise, and they tend to be hammered out case-by-case.

Getting "Culture" Right

If there are no general solutions to these norm conflicts, there are at least better and worse approaches to sorting through the issues. Contributing to the confusion in these debates is the very idea of "culture," a concept that is frequently evoked as a basis for the defense of certain non-standard practices within a complex societies, but which remains imprecise and often muddled. But while the cultural defense is invoked frequently in our courts, anthropologists have been increasingly reluctant to defend the concept of culture itself. Though our discipline has long been defined in relation to the study of culture, anthropologists have been notoriously unable to agree on what the term "culture" means. A venerable synthesis of uses of the term "culture" done by Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn in the early fifties came up with 146 different definitions of the term "culture" implicit in anthropological writings on the subject, all sharing some concept of traditionally transmitted practices and beliefs within a

community. [\[iii\]](#)

Still, the notion of exactly what is shared and who is presumed to share it have troubled anthropology for the past two decades. So troubling has this imprecision of our foundational concept been within the discipline that many anthropologists have taken to avoiding the term altogether or even to writing “against culture.” Ironically, it sometimes seems that at the very moment that culture has moved into the center of discourse in both the business world (culture of the workplace) and in critical theory (cultural studies), anthropologists often seem embarrassed by the very word “culture” and seek to push it offstage altogether. [\[iv\]](#)

There are many good reasons for questioning the culture concept at this point in history, and a few bad ones. The world is not definable in units of culture because culture just does not seem to be a viable unit of human life. If the world ever did support the notion that it could be neatly carved up into discreet unit cultures, such a notion of culture as a geographic bit is today increasingly difficult to justify. This is in part because the flows of peoples that presumably populate these cultural units and the flows of ideas and artifacts that are a culture’s presumed contents do not permit simple mappings of cultural units onto geographic ones.

Today, Samoa, where I did my original fieldwork, is in fact not a place at all but a distributed network of historically linked artifacts, ideas, territories, people and institutions rather than a local entity. On the map, Samoa is two politically distinct groups of islands in the South Pacific, one an independent country and the other a territory of the United States. [\[v\]](#) But Samoa can also be found in Grey Lynn, New Zealand, in Compton, California, in Nanakuli, Hawaii and in Salt Lake City, Utah. And Samoa has taken its place in cyberspace as well, through internet sites such as Samoa Net, the Samoan Government Web Site, the website of Manu Samoa (the Samoan national Rugby Team) which features compilations of greetings from Samoans from all over the world, and numerous other internet locations bringing Samoa to the world. More archaically, a good deal of what passes for Samoan culture is also buried in the storage vaults of ethnographic museums in London, Berlin, New York and Washington, D.C., as well as in numerous ethnographic accounts in scholarly books and films. And of course the same is true for most of what used to pass for the world’s spatially bounded cultural units.

Matters of Form and Content

If a culture is difficult to define geographically, it is even more challenging to pin down its basic forms and its content. Outside of anthropology, the term “culture” is generally reserved for the what is considered the most refined expressions of human creativity and “breeding,” with all which that term implies. Being “cultured” suggests matters of both class and education. Typical of the Victorian views of culture was that of Matthew Arnold who, in 1876, in *Literature & Dogma*, defined culture as “the acquainting ourselves with the best that has been known and said in the world.” Linked with nineteenth century notions of historical evolution, this idea of culture is tied to the concept of “civilization” as embodied both human creations and in their effects on character and mind.

Popular notions of culture always are reflected in anthropologists’ uses of the term, but in general anthropologists have seen culture as a distinct feature of *Homo sapiens*’ adaptation to the world, an adaptation heavily reliant on invented traditions. But such a general view of culture does not make it clear how one goes about studying and comparing cultures. For generations, anthropologists have been trying, with limited success to agree on a unit of culture as a basis for comparative research.

Early on, with interest in the diffusion of culture from region to region, culture was viewed as heterogeneous collections of traits, pottery types, languages, houses, tools, clothing styles, kinship systems and the like. There was, theoretically at least, no end to the number and variety of traits that comprised a particular culture. And using inventories of such traits, anthropologists had a way of scientifically classifying “culture areas” and their histories of contact. This approach became known as “diffusionism.” In the 1920s, diffusionism came under a devastating attack from some of Franz Boas’s famous students like Ruth Benedict, who found traits too atomistic an approach to culture, and not able to account for the systematic integration and patterning of cultural materials in emergent configurations. In American anthropology of the mid-twentieth century this idea that culture constituted semantically integrated, and patterned *systems* (of symbols, values, concepts and the like) took hold, just as functionally integrated

notions of social structure dominated British Anthropology of the same period. The modernist vision of culture came of age mid-century and dominated American views of culture until the early 1980s. [\[vi\]](#)

But viewing culture as coherent systems seemed to fly in the face of an increasingly fragmented social world, a world which appeared to be constituted more by unsteady flows than by stable things. And so there has been a renewed interest in recent years in an updated kind of trait theory in anthropology, a modular conception of culture as an unstable collection of heterogeneous things which flow, combine, disconnect and reform in all kinds of historically and politically mediated arrangements.

The conditions of the postmodern world have made for some odd bedfellows among culture theorists. Using a gene-transmission analogy for culture, Neo Darwinians conceive of the life of culture as the competition for survival and reproductive success among discrete cultural units. Richard Dawkins called them “memes” units of meaning transmitted culturally rather than genetically. [\[vii\]](#) Others, following the lead of Michel Foucault, see cultural flows in terms of the interaction of “discourses” understood as “epistemes,” coercive ways of speaking and imagining reality that bump into each other in all kinds of interesting ways. And still others who claim to do cultural studies focus on the transnational flows of objects and images, signs and representations. [\[viii\]](#) More cognitively oriented anthropologists (this includes myself) view culture in terms of a vast stock of “models” which circulate in complex ways within the world and between the mind and the world. [\[ix\]](#) While there are certainly significant differences among these ways of representing culture, modern culture theorists, for all their fractiousness, almost all share an unacknowledged assumption that the old trait theorists were onto something after all.

Culture as Models

Over a decade ago, as anthropologists were increasingly noting the lack of fit between current views of culture and the real world, I was looking for an approach to culture that made sense of the world as I saw it. Such a vision of culture would have to account for both the obvious reality of culture and the equally obvious fact that traditional coherence models were inadequate to describe what was going on. I had little sympathy with the call to abandon the concept. I was fortunate enough to have a year at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, where I had the chance to immerse myself in some of the key literature of cognitive psychology, cognitive linguistics and cognitive science. This, together with the already rich work on cultural models by Roy D’Andrade, Naomi Quinn and other cognitive anthropologists convinced me that culture might profitably be understood in relation to issues of how people understand what they understand. Specifically I saw a lot of interesting things going on in schema theory, in the study of category formation and in what came to be called “prototype theory” that made a lot of sense of culture.

The most useful unit of culture, I concluded, was the schema or (as I preferred to call it) the “model,” an organized framework for making sense of the world that exists in two basic forms: mental models in the mind, and instituted models in the world. A cultural community shared in a vast stock of conventional models of and for experience, and these models came in many forms. They were also distributed socially and personally in complex ways. Not every member of a community had to share equally every model. Culture in this view was a kind of distributed network of models, some more basic than others. This means, as Dan Sperber has put it, that culture has an “epidemiological” character, as a network of complex social distributions, rather than a typological character as a single all-encompassing unit. [X]

The life of culture, then, was tied up in the back-and-forth movement between a world of conventional social arrangements of all kinds, language scripts, house types, rituals, styles of dress, table manners and so on, and the stock of mental representations of those institutions that comprised an individual’s own cultural competence. While many mental models are highly conventional in form, people also have numerous idiosyncratic mental representations of the world, and these are most evident in dreams or in examples of individualistic art.

Culture as a knowledge system was both shared by a group and distributed differentially among its members. Cultural knowledge was also simultaneously highly personal and highly conventional, so that people might appear to share more than they actually did. Understanding culture in this more complex was required acknowledging two key distinctions: (1) the difference between *personal models* and *cultural models* and (2) that between *instituted models* (in the world) and *mental models* (in the mind). From this perspective, what we call “culture” was clearly a set of models that had evolved to promote social and meaning coordination among close-knit groups. But because cultural models were inevitably just a part of an individual’s set of mental models of the world (the part that is derived from experience with shared public institutions) culture would always be intimately tied up with the contingencies and complexity of social life, and with the dynamic relations between personal understandings of experience and conventional ones. Culture was real, but messy.

The Trouble With the Cultural Defense

So the culture concept might be saved from early retirement by acknowledging both its complexity and the obvious fact that the culture does indeed refer to a significant aspect of human life: the social and mental resources that promote a degree of social and semantic coordination among groups. Anyone who has traveled widely, or simply walks the streets of any cosmopolitan city, knows that culture points to something real and important in human life. But it usually takes difference or opposition between styles of living to bring the importance of culture home to people. Left to itself, a culture is generally invisible to its own adherents: it is just ordinary reality. So to illuminate culture, anthropologists have not usually studied themselves, but have left home and focused their attention on “the other.”

Culture also emerges most vividly through difference. And so anthropologists have specialized not so much in the study of culture, but, at least implicitly, in the study of cultural difference. Ethnography has always derived its power to engage our interest and imagination by invoking directly or by implication maximal contrast. The romance of the exotic has from the beginning been anthropology’s authentic mood. And while the underside of exoticism has been justifiably criticized in recent years as

patronizing “orientalism,” it also has a legitimate methodological justification. [\[xi\]](#) Somewhat paradoxically, Anthropologists propose to understand human nature by systematically studying human variation. This focus on exotic contrast is partly rhetorical, a compelling way of highlighting the very dimension of human life to which anthropologists want people to attend.

The problem is, of course, that contrastive analysis of culture conceals at least as much as it reveals. It encourages the artificial construction of sharp lines and crisp boundaries where normally there are only blurry edges. Identities are clarified by suppressing the actual complexity and fragility of what is shared within a community. British anthropologists noted decades ago the power of social opposition to crystallize temporarily concrete groups out of what were otherwise gradations of complex and mixed identities. African tribal societies like the Nuer and the Tiv employed such “segmentary opposition” in the form of feud or warfare to generate temporary political units in an otherwise fluid society. [\[xii\]](#)

Similarly, discrete “cultures” emerge out of the rougher textures of actual social life in part by the rhetorical act of contrast and opposition. Stubbornly idiosyncratic and local in their understandings of culture and notoriously unable to agree among themselves about almost anything significant in their day-to-day cultural life, Samoans nonetheless insist on representing themselves to outsiders as a coherent, unified cultural entity. Key cultural performances like the kava ceremony or a Samoan dance, or key political figures like the Head of State or a titled village maiden (*a taupou*) will serve as stand-ins for otherwise elusive unity and coherence of the whole of Samoan culture as an everyday lived reality.

Born From Opposition

These moments of opposition and maximal contrast are at the heart of the norm conflicts that pit minority cultural groups against the behavioral standards and laws of the greater society. And while we normally understand the situation as one where opposition is born from culture, it is equally the case that *culture is born from these situations of opposition*. Nothing will produce a coherent cultural identity more effectively than an embattled political position of opposition. As we shall see, the problem here is not simply that opposition produces a situationally primed cultural identity, but that the identity is forged not in its own terms but rather in terms of the issues defined by the encounter. Sudanese become “female circumscizers,” Pakistanis “forced marriage people,” Indians, “widow-burners,” Christian Scientists, “people who resist medical treatment” and Samoans emerge from these encounters as “child beaters” or “virginity enforcers.” Identity politics in these situations is a sad mix of identities claimed by groups and those imposed on them by the logic of the situation.

The point is that these situations generate notions of culture which no modern anthropologist could defend, culture based upon an image of a single, coherent body of practices and beliefs that are assumed to characterize a discrete community. And the logic of political opposition in which these embattled communities find themselves tends to make them complicit in the kind of reification process by which a complex cultural community of many different voices becomes reduced to a single entity defined by a single point of view on a single issue. Such situations suck the normal life out of cultural communities, reducing them to one-dimensional caricatures of themselves.

When claims are made in relation to a cultural community, anthropologists have grown accustomed to asking: “Whose version of the culture is this, and whose interests are being represented?” Many years ago I did research in Samoa dealing with social control and ethics. And I discovered that

Samoan culture could not be accurately described in terms of simple values or beliefs. The better way of describing what I saw was conventionally orchestrated conversations among several competing visions or models for almost any important issue. *The more ethically charged the issue, the more likely one was to find a complex interplay of models, positions, and contending voices on that issue.* [xiii]

For example Samoans I interviewed revealed a very complex set of views on respect and obedience for chiefs and elders. There were significant differences of opinion among individuals interviewed. There were the predictable but important differences between the old and the young, between men and women, and between relatively Westernized and relatively “traditional” individuals. Even more complex were the complex layers of belief *within an individual*, pockets of ambivalence and multiple voicing that had alternative legitimate expressions that emerged in different contexts, and in different speech registers (Samoan has distinct formal and intimate speech styles which produce very different responses from informants on key moral issues).

These multiple layers of Samoan meaning were orchestrated in very predictable ways in Samoa, in differences between chiefly and non-chiefly models, in formal versus intimate discourse, in public versus private discussions, and sometimes in the form of comedy skits where they would be deliberately made to collide in public in a way that was not normally permitted. [xiv] The same complexity and multiple voicing of culture was equally true for Samoan views of sexuality, gender relations, attitudes towards modernity and foreigners, issues of honor and aggression, and understandings of how children should be treated. In recent years Anthropologists have been anxious to underscore these forms of complex multiple voicing. But such complexity has tended to make anthropologists want to give up on the culture concept altogether rather than simply reformulate in a basic way the kinds of models of culture they were using in the first place.

These complex conversations I experienced were neither infinitely variable nor simply generic. They were orchestrated in a distinctive and predictable Samoan way. And so they were clearly culture-specific Samoan ways of handling morally equivocal or otherwise ambiguous situations that had several conventional readings. In their distinct character these conversations pointed to a distinctive Samoan culture. But they did not add up to any kind of single coherent position that a judge or a newspaper reported dealing with a situation in an immigrant context would be able use readily in resolving inter-cultural conflict.

So it appears that at home the opposition and complexity are matter internal to the culture. But faced with norm conflict in a multi-cultural setting, this domestic complexity of voicing and position gets refocused on *inter-cultural difference*. Particularly on matters that are inherently morally ambiguous, those very issues that often become flash-points in the immigrant context, the actual complexity and heterogeneity of what goes on within a cultural community, disappears from sight. Thus reduced in complexity and remade to accommodate the situation, culture becomes “culture.”

Sources of Cultural Coherence

All of this complexity does not mean that there is no coherence or sharing within human communities. But it does suggest that such coherence is usually a partial picture of the situation. Or that what is framed as shared at one level of understanding may in fact dissolve at others. As Americans we may all agree in the importance of freedom as a cultural value. But a civil rights worker would clearly have a quite different set of more specific understandings of freedom than would a conservative economist justifying market systems and freedom of competition. Both are authentic American discourses.

At key moments in a community's life, unity may be stressed by a focus on shared but inherently ambiguous symbols, rather than on their divergent interpretations of applications. Given this complexity it is important to specify what is presumed to be shared and in what way it is shared. The sharing of symbols does not imply the sharing of meanings. Some of the most powerful sources of symbolic coherence in a community may well produce simultaneously sharing and discontinuity. Such fragile and partial kinds of coherence are not exceptional, but rather the norm for most of human experience. And I suspect that for certain issues, where cultural models only partly account for our experiences, the fragility of cultural understandings is inherent and inevitable.

Since coherence is not an essential property of culture, but rather a contingent product of circumstances, it is important to specify the variety of things that can produce the appearance of cultural coherence. There are in fact numerous kinds of coherence that get lumped together pass as culture. A few of the more important kinds of coherence are discussed below.

Ideological coherence is achieved for communities when, confronted by opposition from without, members of a community willingly fall into line to project a common front. Here differences and complexity are masked by a deliberate and often self-conscious collapsing of diversity into unity. These discourses thrive in arenas of political engagement when "culture" becomes a self-conscious tool to defend or promote the interests of a community faced with an external threat. Ideological considerations as well as pragmatic ones have a lot to do with perpetuating the notion that the world is composed of a finite number of discrete cultures.

Consensus is a kind of unity that is born of the give and take of debate and discussion. True consensus involves not automatic a priori agreement but the gradual transformation and convergence of individual understandings over time, in the context of common experiences and discussion. Argument can produce self-conscious consensus, while other kinds of common experiences produce what anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann calls "interpretive drift," a kind of tacit consensus made possible by the gradual shifting and convergence of individual understandings and experiences in relation to culturally orchestrated experiences. [\[XV\]](#)

Symbolic unity produces cultural coherence by using key cultural models or cultural symbols to stand for the culture as a whole. This kind of symbolic metonymy (a part-for whole relation) is a very common way in which the coherence of a culture is displayed and its inherent diversity is suppressed. Flags, sacred leaders or heroes, national songs and dances, civic rituals, official forms of dress, special foods are just some of the many symbolic forms that can stand for the unity of a community. Attacking these sources of symbolic unity, as in the case of flag-burnings, the demystifying of cultural heroes and leaders, refusing to participate in community ritual are very powerful ways of turning symbols of unity into equally powerful symbols of resistance and protest.

Structural coherence is probably the most mysterious source of unity in a cultural community, since the experienced cultural unity is largely an unconscious property of the very form of cultural models. Numerous Samoan institutions, for example, share a common abstract structure based on a body-based "kinesthetic schema" of front-back. This front-back schema organizes institutions as diverse as kinship relations, the physical layout of villages, formal and intimate speech styles, styles of dance and many other specific cultural models, yet few Samoans are conscious of these parallels unless they are pointed out by an outsider. They are understood as forms of tacit knowledge that convey a distinctive Samoan feel to many institutions. I have called these underlying structural models "foundational schemas" and have suggested that they account for much of the characteristic feel of a cultural

community. [\[xvi\]](#)

Finally, there is *forced coherence* that is the product of deliberate domination of a

community by an autocratic individual or group. Strictly speaking this is not coherence at all, but rather its opposite in disguise. Totalitarian societies are notorious for producing public images of forced coherence, and often use terror and violence to maintain the illusion of unity.

None of these kinds of coherence preclude the fact that cultural communities are always at the nexus of the sharing and the divergence of understandings. Indeed they all presume different orchestrations of the tension between unity and divergence. Earlier on I suggested that the conditions of norm-conflict that are common in multi-cultural societies tend to favor the muting of internal complexity of cultures in favor of various sorts of constructed unity. But it is important to stress here that these various forms of coherence are no more basic to the idea of culture than are the divergences in experience that they often mask. They are best understood as a function of communities in a specific set of circumstances (i.e., oppositional politics) rather than a defining essential feature of that community.

Finding a Place for Culture in Multiculturalism: Some Propositions

My general point here is that the very context within which the cultural defense[@] has operated has actually served to distort and reify culture until it becomes more an ideological label than an account of a group's lived reality. The "culture" of identity politics is quite different in almost every significant way from the distributed notion of culture I have been describing in this essay. We can call the former "identity culture." *Identity culture* is its own thing, an important thing, a product of power struggles and their oppositional dynamics. But it is not exactly the same thing as "ordinary culture," the everyday cultural life of communities where cultural models of all sorts are in play, where many voices speak, and where boundaries are contingent, and often blurred.

This view of culture renders the very idea of the cultural defense problematical. The essentially politicized conditions of such engagements tend to transform culture into ideological culture, and thereby suppress the real complexity and multiple voicing that is normal to the life of cultural communities. Therefore the notion of "culture" that is in play in these disputes is not really the same thing that many of study in other contexts. This fact changes dramatically the place of ordinary culture in the complex situation of problematical multiculturalism. So what can we conclude about the place of ordinary culture in the kinds of norm conflicts that pit minority cultural groups against prevailing norms and laws? My answer to this comes in the form of a set of propositions with which I will end this essay.

1. *A cultural community is linked by the sharing of socially distributed models and differentially internalized versions of those models.* Therefore such a community has the character of a network of differentially shared understandings, rather than a group that has a single common position. This is ordinary culture and is quite different from the ideological culture that is reified at the time of multi-cultural conflict.

2. *A vast number of things are modeled in human communities at different scales of experience.* Cultural models range from micro-models of postural dynamics (how to walk, sit, touch etc), to taxonomies for kinship, color, disease, objects, plants and animals, to models of social behavior such as

how to eat a meal or greet someone, or arrange a marriage or respond to pain, to more abstract cosmologies and ultimate conceptions of what is true, good and right. In this sense, the subject matter of ethnography has no natural boundaries. The description of what passes for a culture is as much a matter of ethnographic conventions as it is of what is empirically true.

3. *Communities often possess multiple models, even conflicting ones, for the same phenomena.* Many of these alternative models pass as simple variations on a theme, such as how to prepare a turkey for Thanksgiving, or how to celebrate Hanukkah, or when to greet someone with a hug rather than a kiss or a handshake. Sometimes they take the form of contextually dissociated models, as in the case of Samoan attitudes towards chiefly authority, which I discovered was often modeled differently in intimate Samoan than it is in formal discourse. At other times the multiple models engage political conflict, as in the case of different models of fundamental human rights that underlie the charged debates about abortion. And finally, conflicting models can be internalized by individuals who experience internal conflict and ambivalence. In America, for instance, incompatible but highly motivating cultural models of liberty, justice and freedom engage not just political conflict but often personal ambivalence over issues like welfare, the market place and the nature of fundamental human rights.

4. *Cultural models are not fixed, but are living responses to human needs.* They are subject to change, challenge as well as to continuity.

5. *Cultural models are not all equally concerned with moral issues.* Some are largely pragmatic and technological, such as how to handle a tool, or hunt an animal or identify a kind of edible berry. Of course any cultural model can take on moral implications to the extent that its performance is taken as an index of one's membership in or commitment to a community. And relatively pragmatic information (such as the nature of the environment) can be given heightened salience and memorability for people by association with basic moral and cosmological values. But for our purposes it is important to note that serious norm-conflicts have tended to engage a fairly narrow range of cultural models. I have not heard any court case dealing with the right of people to eat with chopsticks in public spaces, or the right of people to greet each other by bowing rather than shaking hands, though one might imagine in our society that the right of people to greet by touching each other's genitals might be challenged. It would be important to study empirically just which areas of life are likely to engage such conflict, and whether this is simply a function of local priorities or whether there are inherently problematical issues.

6. *Cultural models are notoriously diverse, and they are surely conventional in their origins. But they are not arbitrary.* Beliefs and practices are motivated by a host of factors that limit the notion that cultures are infinitely variable and that cultural practices are arbitrary. These factors include biological constraints, ecological constraints, historical antecedents, power, particular personalities etc. In fact, while we sometimes make claims for the arbitrariness of cultural beliefs and practices, our analyses work hard at providing a variety of explanations which serve to show how these beliefs and practices are motivated and thus non-arbitrary. Functionalist analysis tries to show precisely why apparently irrational beliefs and practices make sense in their context.

7. *It is precisely the non arbitrariness of cultural beliefs and practices that allows us to discuss, evaluate, appreciate and even challenge prevailing cultural models of our own and other communities on grounds other than the simple fact that they exist.* The value of anthropology is thus not limited to the simple documentation of diversity, but to the refinement of our judgments about the larger implications of those models we observe.

8. *Anthropology leads not so much to a relativistic sensibility as to a comparative one.* The distinction between a relativistic and comparative perspective is important, but is not often appreciated

with anthropology.

9. *The simple existence of a practice or belief as a possession of a cultural community is not in and of itself a justification for its virtue, its goodness or its viability.* This is true for discourse within cultural communities, and it is equally true for the disputes between them. Disputes over the value and rightness of cultural models are as much a part of discourse with a cultural community as they are features of disputes between communities. This is as true for our own cultural models as it is for those of others.

10. *Moral or ethical judgments are possible between cultures, but only if one recognizes that inter-cultural or trans-cultural knowledge is possible.* If comparative ethnology is possible and has the potential to refine our moral sensibilities it is only because cultural models are not the only way we can understand things. Intelligent inter-cultural engagement always produces four kinds of understanding:

- a. A clearer understanding of one's own assumptions;
- b. A subtle understanding of other possibilities as embedded in alien cultural models;
- c. An appreciation of some of the factors that have produced these differences; and
- d. A refined ability to evaluate, synthesize and, if called for or necessary, choose between these human possibilities.

Most anthropologists would subscribe to the first three of these understandings. The fourth is the tough one, since it undercuts a strong view of cultural relativism and proposes as a powerful form of knowledge trans-cultural or inter-cultural understanding. While many of us resist this notion in principle, I suspect that we in fact experience the power of this trans-cultural and inter-cultural knowledge in our very vocations, and in our teaching. So inter-cultural communication means that it is conceivable that the host society has something important to learn from the immigrant one, as well as the other way around. It is the job of local community "experts" and anthropologists alike to effectively translate and convey the significance and implications of alien cultural models, in order to make the case for their contribution not just to the minority community but to the society as a whole. This is fundamentally different from arguing for the rightness of a model simply because it is claimed to be part of a culture.

11. *In complex societies, resolutions of cultural conflicts, even at their best, will inevitably involve considerations that include but are not limited to the cultural defense.* Maintaining and encouraging diversity is an important and desirable value, but is not the only value. Others include:

- I. the impact of the practice on the viability and continuity of the greater society's own traditions and norms;
- II. the equitable distribution of societal resources;
- III. maintaining some shared fundamental norms of interaction that make a society possible;

considerations of individual and group welfare;

- I. the long-term welfare of a group as a member of a larger community;
- II. a sense of basic human rights

In other words, resolutions to such conflicts are inevitably and rightly political matters.

These eleven propositions may not seem to be what one would expect from a cultural anthropologist. But I am convinced that in recognizing the real power or ordinary culture in our lives, one is forced to also acknowledge the limits of culture as a source of human understanding. Moreover, given the vision I have laid out for culture in this essay, a position which simply supports the “cultural defense” as the main relevant consideration in inter-cultural disputes, is, ironically enough, not a viable defense of “culture” as it lives and breathes in human life.

References

[i] Although the notion of national character linking culture, personality and nation, has been around since Herodotus, the idea gained notoriety and a robust literature during World War II when anthropologists were called upon to provide psychological/cultural portraits of whole nations for Military strategists dealing with such issues as occupation of conquered nations, the psychological tendencies of different national armies in the face of defeat and the likely problems to be encountered in managing multinational forces. Classic versions of national character studies include Margaret Mead, *And Keep Your Powder Dry* (New York, 1943), Geoffrey Gorer, *The American People* (New York, 1948), and Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Cambridge, Mass., 1946). For a contemporary account of national character see Alex Inkeles, *National Character: A Psycho-social Perspective* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1997).

[ii] *Rethinking Globalization : From Corporate Transnationalism To Local Intervention* , Preet S. Aulakh and Michael G. Schechter, eds. (Basingstoke, England, 1999); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1996); *Globalization and Culture*, John Tomlinson, ed. (Chicago, 1999).

[iii] Kroeber, Alfred L. and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture; a Critical Review of*

Concepts.(Cambridge, Mass., 1952).

[iv] Terrence Deal and Allen Kennedy, *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*(Reading, Mass., 1982); James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass. 1982); Frederik Barth, “A Personal View of Present Tasks and Priorities in Cultural and Social

Anthropology, in *Assessing Cultural Anthropology*, Robert Borofsky (ed.) (New York, 1994), pp. 350-359.

[v] The authentication and grounding of the “real” Samoa is a matter of considerable interest to modern Samoans, who have a strong sense of their own authenticity as a culture and a people. Geographic authenticity figures prominently in the Samoan Government Website (www.interwebinc.com/samoa/), which identifies Samoa as “The Cradle of Polynesia” and opens with a photograph of a lush waterfall scene that is accompanied by the words “There is nowhere else in the South Pacific like the lush tropical islands of Samoa. . . . Polynesia at its purest.” Samoans will often introduce themselves with nervous pride to outsiders as “real Samoans.” In 1962 when the Western Islands of the group became an independent nation, these Samoans adopted the official name Western Samoa to distinguish themselves from American Samoa to the east. Recently however the country went generic, changing its official name to simply Samoa, an edgy move, reflecting by denial the fact of the increasing dislocation of Samoa.

[vi] Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston, 1934); David M. Schneider, *American Kinship: A Cultural Account* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968); Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973); Gary Witherspoon, *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1977); *The Imagination of reality : essays in Southeast Asian coherence systems*, A. L. Becker and Aram A. Yengoyan, eds. (Norwood, N.J., 1979).

[vii] Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York, 1976).

[viii] *The Social Life Of Things : Commodities In Cultural Perspective*, Arjun Appadurai, ed. (Cambridge, England, 1986).

[ix] *Cultural Models of Language and Thought*, Dorothy Holland and Naomi Quinn, eds. (New York, 1987); Bradd Shore, *Culture in Mind: Cognition, Culture and the Problem of Meaning* (New York, 1996); Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn, *A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning* (New York, 1998);

Bradd Shore, "Cultural Models: A Framework for Media Studies," Birgitta Hoijer, ed. *Cognitive Approaches to Media Studies* (Stockholm, 1998), pp. 1-52.

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[xi] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978).

[xii] Edward Evans-Prichard, *The Nuer: A Description Of The Modes Of Livelihood And Political Institutions Of A Nilotic People* (Oxford, 1940); Laura and Paul Bohannan, *The Tiv of Central Nigeria* (London, 1963).

[xiii] Bradd Shore, *Sala'ilua: A Samoan Mystery* (New York, 1982).

[xiv] This complexity of voicing and the existence of multiple models for the same domain of understanding account, in great part, for the notoriously divergent ethnographies of Samoan sexual and political values and behavior that were evident in the work of Margaret Mead and her chief critic, Derek Freeman. See Derek Freeman, *Margaret Mead: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983)

[xv] Tanya Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).

[xvi] Bradd Shore, *Culture in Mind: Cognition, Culture and the Problem of Meaning* (New York, 1996), Chap. 2.

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