"native" anthropologists

One of the hallmarks of anthropology used to be, and still is to a large degree, that it is a study of other cultures. Those of us, including Edmund Leach and Margaret Mead, who have engaged in research in our own societies usually have done so after studying another culture. This emphasis on other cultures has distinguished anthropology from sociology, which in the main studies its own culture and society. Lately, however, sociology, history, political science, geography, and several other disciplines have begun to engage in studies of other societies. Conversely, an increasing number of anthropologists, including both so-called Third World and Western anthropologists, have chosen their own culture as their first culture of research. Studying one’s own culture is indeed very different from studying a foreign culture, and theoretical and even epistemological implications of such study are profound.

Early on, anthropologists such as Whorf (1952:5) pointed out that we do not “objectively” collect and interpret ethnographic data, and that even the process of basic data collection is heavily influenced by the native culture of the anthropologist: “The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which is to be organized by our mind.” We organize these impressions primarily according to the framework of our own cultural categories and meanings. Needham (1963) illustrates this point with an analogy between the person born blind and anthropologists who are culturally blind to the societies they attempt to understand.

Now that the objectivity of even the natural sciences has been increasingly questioned (Kuhn 1962), anthropologists are even more eager to reexamine basic assumptions about fieldwork and anthropological research in general. One very recent direction in the reexamination of research comes from those interested in the notions of “self” and “reflexivity.” Their main premise is that by studying another culture we become reflexive about our own collective self, our own culture, through a study of the Other, another culture. To be reflexive, rather than simply reflective about the collective self, one must achieve “the sense of distancing from self” (Fernandez 1980:28, 36). Reflexivity, then, is the capacity of the self “to become an object to itself,” that is, to objectify the self (Babcock 1980:1). Whereas reflectiveness simply involves “isolated attentiveness toward oneself,” reflexiveness “pulls one toward the Other” and away from oneself (Myerhoff and Ruby 1982:5). In the phraseology of semiotics, the self becomes a sign in the reflexive process (Babcock 1980:1). If studying cultures other than our own represents a journey out from and back to our collective self, as embodied in our own culture, and if “distancing” is critical for this endeavor, then it follows that native anthropologists face an even more difficult task in creating enough distance between themselves and their own cultures. I experienced this difficulty of distancing myself from Japanese culture although I had been away from Japanese society, both physically and psychologically, for two decades. Not only had I been living in the United States since 1958, but because of my research I had been absorbed in Ainu culture for many years. I went back to Japan frequently, but I went directly to the Ainu people in Hokkaido and did not pay serious attention to the Japanese. When I returned to Japan in 1979 to undertake anthropological research (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984) among my own people in Kobe, they seemed strange, with intriguing behavioral patterns and thought processes. Everywhere I went I observed incessantly and took copious notes. Astonishingly, however, my vivid reactions became increasingly milder after only a month and a half, and I found myself becoming more and more like “them.” Their behavior patterns no longer seemed as pronounced, and after about four months I felt the need to pull back from them to regain a sense of reflexive perspective. My return to the United States turned out to be a good strategy; I was able to regain my perspective and refine the focus on my research before I resumed fieldwork in 1980. Distancing is required not only in our endeavor for abstraction of models or patterns of and for behavior, which relies on our intellectual capacity; it is also required in abstracting the patterns of and for emotions. The task for this endeavor is complex.

On the one hand, native anthropologists are in a far more advantageous position in understanding the emotive dimensions of behavior—psychological dimensions of behavior are hard for outsiders to understand. However, the intensity with which native anthropologists recognize and even identify the emotive dimension can be an obstacle for discerning patterns of emotion. As an endeavor to arrive at abstractions for “the native’s point of view,” if nonnative anthropologists have difficulty in avoiding the superimposition of their own cultural categories and meanings, native anthropologists have the task of somehow “distancing” themselves, both intellectually and emotionally. On the other hand, there are enormous advantages in studying one’s own culture. Native anthropologists have intimate knowledge of daily routines that are exceedingly
difficult for outsiders to observe. Details such as when people wash their hands, how they treat and feel about the body and its physiological functions, and how they cook everyday food, rather than special food cooked only on festive occasions, are not readily evident to outsiders. Native anthropologists have easy access to not only the intellectual dimension but also to the emotive and the sensory dimensions of these behaviors. Perhaps one of the weakest areas of anthropological endeavor is the study of the emotive dimensions of our behavior and their relationship to culture. Durkheim and Mauss (1963[1903]:86) claimed that it is the “emotional value” of the collective representations that plays “the preponderant part in the manner in which ideas are connected and separated.” They saw the affective elements as “the dominant characteristic in classification.” Unfortunately, they viewed emotion to be something “essentially fluid and inconsistent” (1963:87) and left it out of their other considerations.

A frequent diatribe against Lévi-Strauss has been his focus on the intellect or cognition. Geertz (1973:356–358) sees Lévi-Strauss as the direct descendant of the French Enlightenment, epitomized in Rousseau. Geertz (1973:127) emphasizes the complementarity of world view, which makes ethos intellectually reasonable, and ethos, which renders world view emotionally acceptable. The emphasis on the equal importance of cognitive and emotive dimensions of our behavior is also expressed in Turner’s (1967) concept of evocative symbols and his recognition of the emotional resonance of symbols (for further discussion of this topic, see Ohnuki-Tierney 1981:8–9, 147–149). The sensory dimension is of equal importance. We react to external stimuli first with our senses. It is the smell or the sight of food to which we react with our emotion. For the Ainu, it is the smell of menstrual blood which is seen to be most offensive to their deities. Native anthropologists are in a position to offer intimate knowledge of these dimensions of human behavior and to make a great contribution not simply to our ethnographic knowledge but to theoretical treatments of human behavior.

There is another significant theoretical point which has important methodological implications. Crapanzano (1980) cautions against a tacit assumption by anthropologists that we do get to know our informants and their culture. He questions the nature of our ethnographic description, which he views not as the reality of another culture but as “the negotiated reality” created during the ethnographic encounter between the anthropologist and the informant(s). This reality is neither that of an anthropologist nor that of the informants, since the presence of the anthropologist and his or her interest in their culture encourage the informants to be reflexive about their culture (Schechner 1982:80; see also Dumont 1978; Rabinow 1977). The anthropologist’s presence encourages the informants to “perform,” to tell their own stories about themselves. The effect of the presence of an anthropologist differs greatly between native and nonnative anthropologists. For fieldwork in Japan, foreign anthropologists initially have a tremendous advantage. All foreigners, especially Westerners, usually receive the red-carpet treatment from the Japanese, who go out of their way to accommodate their visitors. To some extent, this happens (or used to happen) for Western anthropologists in many Third World countries. Unfortunately, the drawback of this favorable treatment is that the host people “perform” for them; the anthropologist’s presence becomes an important factor in the way the host people react. The ethnographic observation tends to become the “negotiated reality” between the informants and the anthropologist, at least until the anthropologist’s presence becomes less conspicuous.

Native anthropologists have a definite advantage in being part of the society from the start, unless they are working in a segment of society radically different from their own. When I visited doctors with relatives and friends, or when I observed at clinics and hospitals, I fit in well enough that people seldom reacted strongly, even though I explained the reason for my presence. Seen from this perspective, it is unfortunate that “participant observation,” the traditional and much-heralded field method of anthropologists, implies an illusion that the anthropologist either becomes a member of the society or immediately gains the inside “feel” of the culture. Stories about being adopted by the host people do convey the anthropologists’ enthusiasm and success in establishing rapport with the people. Such stories, however, are akin to those told by “man, the hunter” to women and children after a glorious expedition of big-game hunting. I think it is presumptuous, or even condescending, to think that the “natives” consider anthropologists, who may stay only a year or two, as members of their own society. In fact, my Ainu friends delighted in discussing how their way differed from both the Japanese and American way.

If native anthropologists can gain enough distance between their personal selves and their collective selves—their cultures—they can make an important contribution to anthropology because of their access to intimate knowledge of their own culture. The task is not an automatic or even easy one, however, and there are definite advantages for nonnative anthropologists. The two can indeed perform complementary roles in studying a culture.

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Agricultural and Political Change in the Ugandan Economic Crisis

In a recent issue of this journal (AE 10:749–769, 1983) I predicted that the export-promotion and economic rehabilitation programs which the present Uganda government established in 1980 would create conditions for effective demands for a return to local control of crop marketing. Subsequent fieldwork in Uganda has revealed that the intervention of international aid and credit agencies in the Ugandan economy has so diminished the political space open to peasant organization that effective local challenges to central state market control are still largely ineffective. In this commentary I show how the state’s dependency on external agencies has allowed it to ignore peasant demands and how the peasant members of one ethnic group, the Bagisu, have responded.

The Bagisu had effectively combatted central state market control until 1970 by threatening to withdraw from commercial agriculture when the state imposed unpopular programs. The state reduced the formal powers of local leaders and office holders whenever their local autonomy began to threaten its ability to appropriate revenues from cash cropping, but it was so dependent on the valuable coffee which the Bagisu produced that locally based organizations won effective decentralization of both political and economic control. Strong new pressures under a single-party state were reducing local autonomy by the end of the 1960s, and Amin’s repressive regime made local organization impossible after 1971. The Bagisu did, however, largely withdraw from controlled commercial markets during the 1970s.

I initially believed that the second Obote regime’s programs to resuscitate coffee exports would require the state to make significant new concessions to the peasants, and that peasant organizations would be able to renew their earlier bargaining strategies against the state. When I returned to Uganda in 1983, however, I found that the economic damages inflicted by Amin’s rule, and by the war which ended it, left the new Obote regime highly dependent on international lending agencies and therefore subordinate to their exigencies. This new form of dependency offsets the state’s dependency on peasant production and therefore reduces its sensitivity to the economic and political demands of locally based peasant organizations.

Until 1971, Uganda maintained consistently favorable trade balances, based primarily on its exports of peasant-produced coffee and cotton. The Amin regime exhausted foreign currency reserves and allowed extensive deterioration of crop-processing and transport infrastructure. Lootings and rampant inflation after the 1979 war aggravated the general economic decline.

Obote’s economic rehabilitation programs have been predicated on foreign credits. To attract the foreign currency it required, his regime has acquiesced to and publicly acknowledges its subordination to and dependence on the IMF and the World Bank. These organizations, together with a number of bilateral agencies such as the EEC and USAID, exercise considerable control over policies which affect crop prices, capital investment, and rural extension programs. Although still dependent in the long run on peasant crop production, the Ugandan state is more concerned with maintaining the flow of international credits. At the same time, it justifies low prices to farmers and its own appropriation of