

# **Fuller as a Tribal Community**

## FULLER AS A TRIBAL COMMUNITY

Paul G. Hiebert

When Dr. Hubbard asked Chuck and me to talk about Fuller as a Tribe, I doubted that it could be done. We are a diverse, urban community.

Three things changed my mind. **First** Marshall McLuhen, Alvin Toffler and John Naisbett claim that we are moving into a post-modern era in which retribalization is taking place. **Second**, an anthropologist recently studied the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives and titled his book Tribes on the Hill. This gave me some hope to try the same for Fuller. **Third**, anthropologists are being forced to rethink the concept of "culture" as it applies to modern, complex societies. Traditionally anthropologists have studied small tribal societies and peasant villages. Now we have begun to study cities. What is a culture in an urban setting?

Anthropologists have begun to talk about "cultural frames" A cultural frame is a small community sharing a common culture that exists within the matrix of a larger social system. For example, a bank is a cultural frame. It is a group of people having clearly defined property, social roles, shared values and customs, and common symbols and rituals. Similarly, a grocery store is another frame with its own culture. It is in this sense, then as a tribe within a more complex society, that I will look at Fuller.

Anthropology takes two basic approaches to the study of tribes. I will do a brief ethnography of Fuller. Chuck will take a comparative approach.

I must preface my remarks with a disclaimer. I feel like a spokesman in one of Mr. Laxman's cartoons in the Bombay Times who was addressing an important audience. He said, "The subject I am about to discuss is so controversial that I will deny at the outset every remark I am about to make." I realize that it easier to do an enthography of a tribe in some

distant land than of one's own community. Anthropologists have been willing to study everyone else except themselves. An ethnography of anthropologists has yet to appear. So it is with fear that I take on this task.

### **FULLER AS A TRIBE**

I will start with a simple working definition of a tribe.

**A tribe is a group of people sharing a common territory, language, social organization, culture and world view, and sets of symbols and rituals by which these are expressed.**

Let us unpack this definition a little as it applies to Fuller.

#### Membership

First, a tribe is "a group of people". On the surface there seems to be no common criteria for membership in our tribe. We come from different lands, ethnic groups, classes, denominations and language groups. What, then makes us a "group"? I would suggest two things.

Marginality One of these is "marginality". All of us in some sense or another are marginal people. Many of us are **ecclesiastically marginal**. We have our roots in our respective denominations, and participate deeply in their activities. But we work in a multidenominational seminary and with other denominations. We are both insiders and outsiders in our denominations.

Anthropologists call us "culture-brokers" because we stand between two worlds. We are needed by our denominations as sources of outside ideas, but these are also suspect. We are invited to speak in our churches, but we are also under suspicion for we have not chosen to play the denominational games.

Many of us are marginal in our academic disciplines. Those in the School of Psychology are psychologists, but they are under suspicion by

mainstream psychologists for their involvement in theological issues. Similarly, those of us sociology and anthropology are marginalized through our involvement in Fuller.

Others at Fuller are geographically marginal. Our foreign students, for instance, are neither Americans nor Africans, Asians or Latin Americans when they are here. And when they return home, they will never fully fit back into their societies.

Wholistic A second characteristic of Fullerites is "wholism". People at Fuller tend to look at the big picture. We see not only our denominations, but the bigger church. We see not only our own disciplines but knowledge as a whole.

Creativity Marginality and wholism explain several characteristics of Fuller culture. The margin is a highly creative place. It is a place not yet rigidly defined. New theories and ideas often emerge there. For instance, new theories often emerge in the space between disciplines: between psychology and anthropology; or between the social sciences and theology. I believe this accounts for much of the intellectual excitement at Fuller.

Liminality The margin is also characterized by what Victor Turner calls "liminality" - being in a state of limbo. Consequently, we face periodic crises of identity and angst. We are all trying to create order on the margin and make it a center. But we do not all agree on what that order should be.

### Territoriality

Second, a tribe is characterized by territoriality. We can speak of this in terms of space. SWM, SOT and SOP are occupy different areas on

campus and in the library. And parking is divided into red, yellow and blue spaces.

I believe, however, that there is a more fundamental territoriality at work here, namely, intellectual territoriality. We are one of a series of tribes including Gordon-Conwell, Trinity, and the major universities, and we fight for our place among them.

Within our tribe SOT, SOP and SWM each claim their intellectual turf. And they are concerned when someone intrudes onto their territory. For example, when SOT began Marriage and Family ministries, SOP protested. Similarly, when SWM began teaching courses in theology, SOT was uneasy.

### Orality

Third, a tribe shares an oral tradition. At Fuller we stress writing, but, in fact, we are very much an oral society. To be an insider you must know the meanings of "provost," "garth," "refectory," Payton Hall, SOT, Lee Merritt and David Hubbard. You must also be a part of the inside discussins and scuttlebutt. I was not aware of how important this is until I went on sabbatical. I read the daily memos that flood our mailboxes, but these tell us little about the real life of the institution. Not being on campus I miss **the word "going around," the word "from above," and the word "from below."**

### Social Structure

Fourth, like a tribe Fuller has a well defined social structure. There are three clans: SOT, SOP, and SWM, each with its own identity, emblem, territory, organization and subculture. Each also has its own networks of kinship to other seminaries and schools. These clans tend to be exogamous for they are hesitate to hire their own graduates. They recruit faculty from other tribes in the U.S., England and Hong Kong.

Age Grades Like East African tribes, Fuller has age-grades. There are Minors or students. Like minors everywhere, they are not seen as fully human. Consequently they are not expected to carry the heavy responsibilities of adulthood.

Above the Minors are the Adults divided into Juniors (staff members) and Seniors (faculty) which are further divided by ranks. Juniors include secretaries and administrators of various levels. Seniors are "instructors," "assistant professors," "associate professors," and "full professors."

Above the Adults are the Elders made up of the deans, the assistant chiefs, and the chief and the "talking chief" that speaks for him.

Above the Elders are the Patriarchs, the Board of Directors, who act as advisors and supervisors. Like Patriarchs everywhere, they are half humans and half divines. They are involved in the society, but not in the everyday work.

There are also several groups of Ancestors. The Living Ancestors - to use Mbiti's term - are the graduates who now live in the outside world, but who keep an interest in the school. The Clan Ancestors, such as Payton, Travis, Finch and McGavran, have special places within their respective clans. And the Tribal Ancestors are Ockengay, Carnell, and Charles E. Fuller, the founder of the Tribe.

### Culture

Fifth, a tribe shares a common culture. Here much can be said, but for sake of time let me only give a few illustrations. Fullerites have their own local ethnic foods - the Jack Rogers, Harold Lindsel and Bob Jones sandwiches; their own calender; and their own festivals such as the Day of Prayer and Fuller Follies.

There is considerable agreement in the area of Fuller high religion that answers questions of ultimate origins, meaning and destiny of the world, of human societies and of individuals. There is more debate on the level of folk religion which deals with the existential problems of everyday life.

### World View

Sixth, a tribe has a common set of implicit assumptions, a world view. If I were to describe Fuller's world view, I would use terms such as **open evangelical, Kingdom of God, critical realism and/or pragmatism, Kuhnian paradigms, integration and centered sets** rather than bounded or fuzzy sets. I would look at our Mission Beyond the Mission statement. And at our debates on how we should relate to the mechanistic, entrepreneurial assumptions of the American world view.

### Rituals, Symbols and Myths

Finally, a tribe has common rituals, symbols and myths.. And I believe that at Fuller it is largely our rituals that unite us.

Rites of Intensification. Anthropologist divide the former into two types: **rites of intensification** and **rites of transformation**. In the first of these we seek to reinforce the existing order underlying our beliefs and structures. As Victor Turner points out, these rituals are characterized by clearly ordered roles (such as the wearing of masks or robes), by a focus on what we already believe, and by a cyclical regularity.

Rites of intensification at Fuller include our chapels, the Payton, Finch and Church Growth lectureships sponsored by our three clans, and special clan meetings such as the SWM Wednesday noon luncheons. One special ritual of intensification is the dedicatory chapel when Faculty appear in

full regalia to show their place in the society, and when Seniors, Juniors and Minors pledge themselves to work in a spirit of dedication and cooperation.

In the past Fuller had a rite of intensification for all adults in the fall at the Brookside Country Club. In recent years, however, this has been replaced by a fall retreat for Seniors alone.

Of equal significance are the biannual meetings of the Patriarchs such as the one we now are attending. In tribal societies, intensification rites are often concerned with fertility and renewal, and it is interesting to me that our biannual meetings are preceeded by the spreading of steer manure on the Fuller lawns.

Rites of Transformation The second type of ritual is rites of transformation. These are concerned with bringing about change. Often this has to do with the changes in social roles that characterize our life cycles. In Fuller we have an Initiation Ritual in which new comers are changed into Minors. At that time they are taught the origin myths and other rudiments of Fuller culture and introduced to the Tribal ancestors by means of pictures. We have Graduation banquets and ceremonies in which Minors are transformed into Adults and sent out into the world. We also have installation ceremonies for Elders and retirement rites. All of these play an important part in helping us to understand the order that underlies Fuller Seminary.

Rituals in tribal societies, unlike those in modern societies, make no sharp distinction between forms and meanings. I think a case could be made that this is true to a considerable extent of Fuller rituals. To take part in them is itself to renew our identity with the school and to experience transformation. Rituals, to a considerable extent, hold us all together.



Myth I am using the term here in its technical sense, as the true big story. Tribes have a strong sense of their myth - their place in history. They have an awareness of their origins and their unique calling. They are keepers of their tribal lore. And they are custodians of tribal culture and land for their progeny.

In a sense, I believe Fuller shares a similar sense of purpose and destiny. It is aware that the future of the church in America, and around the world, in some measure are in its hands today. This sense of mission plays an important part in the way decisions are made in the school.

Symbols A word about symbols. While we may not want a football team, we do need a school symbol that helps give us a clear sense of identity among the tribes that surround us. Each clan has its symbol, and the SWM its annual picture postcard. But we need a symbol that unites us all. After some reflection, I recommend that we use the Pushme-Pullme of Doctor Doolittle fame - the horse that faces two ways at the same time because it has two heads, one on each end.