

# **Cultural Anthropology**

## Cultural Anthropology

In recent years cultural anthropology has emerged as one of the major paradigms for understanding human beings and the mission of the church. Its particular contribution is deep ethnographic studies of different peoples to build bridges of understanding between them, and the use of intercultural comparison to develop broad theories of human organization.

Anthropology in Britain had its origins in the broad Christian humanitarian movement of the nineteenth century which was concerned with the welfare of natives in the colonies. In 1843 a split occurred over how to protect their rights. Some wanted to grant them immediately the full “privileges” of western civilization. The others wanted to study them before seeking to “raise and protect them.” The latter formed the Anthropological Association in 1863, and eventually found their home in universities.

In the early twentieth century anthropologists, such as E. B. Tylor (1832-1917), Sir James Frazer (1854-1941) and Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881), postulated the evolution of societies from savagery to civilization, and attributed this to the growth of human rationality from prelogical to logical. Missionaries, too, were influenced by this theory. Many assumed the superiority of western civilization and saw it their task to Civilize as well as Christianize the people they served.

After nineteen-thirty the theory of evolution came under attack, and, after a fierce battle, the term ‘civilization’ was replaced by ‘culture.’ Cultures were assumed to be *sui generis*, and their preservation an unquestioned good. Introducing change from the outside was condemned.

Two schools of thought emerged after World War I. The first was social anthropology which emerged in Britain under the leadership of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955), and

Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942). Both did anthropological fieldwork and learned to know other peoples personally as fully human beings. Drawing on Durkheim they argued that systems of relationships are the foundation for human life, and that these obey laws discoverable by empirical observation and human reason.

Social anthropologists studied tribes in Africa and the South Pacific Islands in which tribes were living, functioning realities. They saw each society as unique, bounded and more or less successful adaptation to a particular environment. Each was homogeneous, and could be explained fully in terms of "social facts". Each was made up of parts that 'function' to maintain a harmonious, balanced whole. Societies were seen as morally neutral. Religions and other belief systems were seen as social constructs needed to maintain the social order. For people in one society to judge those in another was seen as ethnocentrism and imperialism. There were no moral or cognitive universals by which cultures could be evaluated. Social anthropology tends towards social reductionism, and a static view of societies that sees change and conflict as pathological. It has a weak view of history and culture, and wrestles with its view of cultural relativism.

Social anthropology has had a deep impact on missions. Liberation theology, the Church Growth Movement, and the emphasis on "people groups," "mass movements" and receptivity/resistance show how social dynamics play a major role in the growth and organization of the church.

The second school emerged in North America, and was known as cultural anthropology. It was pioneered by Franz Boas (1858-1942), A. L. Kroeber (1876-1960) and their disciples. They studied the North American Indians whose cultures had been scattered. The questions they faced to do with cultural change and collapse. For these scholars, culture--the beliefs and

practices of a people, was the basis for human organization. Cultures were not seen as a bounded, tightly integrated units but as dynamic systems of symbols, rituals, myths, beliefs and worldviews. They saw culture as constantly changing, and change as potentially good. This gave rise to the field of applied anthropology which seeks to introduce change with a minimum of cultural dislocation. Christian missions have drawn widely on its insights in developing culturally sensitive outreach and church planting.

Cultural anthropology gave birth to descriptive linguistics which enabled scholars analyze oral languages. In missions this led to new methods for language learning and dynamic-equivalent Bible translations.

Another offspring was the in-depth study of cultures as seen by the people themselves, and the analysis of cross-cultural communication. In mission this led to a growing rejection of colonial attitudes, to training culturally incarnational missionaries and to working towards partnership in mission. It also led to concern for the contextualization of the Gospel not only in worship forms, church polity and evangelistic methods, but also in the development of local theologies.

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Submitted to WCC July 10, 1997

## Cultural Anthropology

Anthropology is the study of human beings in the broadest sense. Unlike its cognate human sciences, it is global in scope and nonreductionist in nature. Cultural anthropology is the study of the societies and cultures of human around the world, and draws widely from the other social sciences. Its particular contribution is deep ethnographic studies of different peoples, and the use of intercultural comparison to develop broad theories of human organization.

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In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries anthropologists, such as E. B. Tylor (1832-1917), Sir James Frazer (1854-1941) and Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881), postulated the evolution of societies from savagery to civilization, and attributed this to the growth of human rationality from prelogical to logical. After nineteen-thirty this theory came under attack, and, after a fierce battle, the term ‘civilization’ was replaced by ‘culture.’ Cultures were assumed to be *sui generis*, and their preservation an unquestioned good. Attempts to change them from outside were seen as imperialistic and colonial.

Two schools of thought emerged after World War I. The first was social anthropology which emerged in Britain under the leadership of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955), and Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942). Both did anthropological fieldwork and learned to know

other peoples personally as fully human beings. Social anthropologists drew heavily on Durkheim and sociology, and argued that the systems of human relationships are the foundation for human life, and that these, like natural phenomena, obey laws discoverable by empirical observation and human reason.

Social anthropologists studied tribes in Africa and the South Pacific Islands in which tribes were living, functioning realities. They saw each society as unique and wholly *sui generis*--a unique, bounded and more or less successful adaptation to a particular environment. Each was homogeneous and uniform, and could be explained fully in terms of "social facts". Each was made up of parts that 'function' to maintain a harmonious, balanced whole. Religions and other belief systems were seen as social constructs needed to maintain the social order. There was nothing 'true' about them. Moreover, societies were seen as morally neutral. For people in one society to judge those in another was seen as ethnocentrism and imperialism. There were no moral or cognitive universals by which cultures could be evaluated. By comparing societies, social anthropologists sought to explain human behavior in terms of social principles. Economic, social, political and legal anthropology emerged as subdisciplines.

Social anthropology has contributed greatly to our understanding of the nature and power of social systems. It has tended towards social reductionism, and to a static view of societies that sees change and conflict as pathological. It has a weak view of history and culture, and wrestles with its view of cultural relativism.

The second school emerged in North America, and was known as cultural anthropology. It was pioneered by Franz Boas (1858-1942), A. L. Kroeber (1876-1960) and their disciples. They studied the North American Indians whose cultures had been scattered, and the questions they faced to do with cultural change and collapse. For these scholars culture, namely the beliefs

and practices of a people, was the basis for human organization. It was not seen as a bounded, tightly integrated whole. Rather, they described cultural cores and areas in the way linguists defined linguistic families and regions. Moreover, they saw culture as constantly changing, and change as potentially good.

Several important fields emerged out of cultural anthropology. The first was descriptive linguistics which enabled scholars to learn and analyze oral languages. This led to the concept of dynamic-equivalent translations. A second was ethnoscience. Anthropologists began in-depth field based research in which they sought to "enter inside the head" of their informants using linguistic componential analysis rather than psychological methods. This led to ethnomusicology, ethnobotany, ethnopsychology, ethnomethodology and ethnotheology. These new ethnologists have questioned the possibility of making valid cross-cultural comparisons. Ethnoscience failed to 'remake' anthropology, as some claimed it would, but it is now one of the many streams in anthropology.

Psychological anthropology emerged as the field concerned with how cultures shape human personalities through child rearing and enculturation, and how cultures define and deal with mental deviance. Applied anthropology seeks to introduce change with a minimum of cultural dislocation. After some rough beginnings, applied anthropologists today are widely used in government and nongovernment development agencies, and in Christian missions.

One stream of contemporary anthropology has focused on the deep structures of human thought. Following the lead of Levi-Strauss, cognitive structuralists seek to understand the fundamental structure of the mind. Symbolic anthropologists such as Mary Douglas and Victor Turner examine the symbols, myths and rituals of people to determine how these shape the way people order their lives. Clifford Geertz, Robin Horton and others see anthropology as essentially

a hermeneutical task, as dealing with people not as scientific objects, but as thinking, strategizing human beings. Today many see anthropology as much a humanity as a science.

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