THE USE OF ETHNOGRAPHY

'For the present, it is preferred that the main emphasis should be on analytical discussion rather than on description or ethnography'. Editorial Note.

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I want to discuss the use of ethnography in two senses, i) as a source for analysis and for illustration in 'analytical discussion', and ii) as an activity in its own right, a description which attempts to say what people are like. The validity of the first procedure is dependent on the validity of the second.

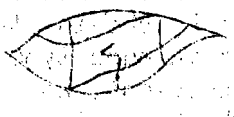
If I say that, to the anthropologist, 'theory' and 'facts' have never been mutually independent, and the writing of ethnography has necessarily been an exercise in analysis, I repeat the obvious. If I go on to talk of the shift from functionalist assumptions to transactionalism or the analysis of symbolic communication, I move into language which has a well-worn look. But, although the debates which sprang from say 'Rethinking Anthropology' may have run their course, that does not mean that the issues therein raised have been satisfactorily dealt with. The implications of the notion of 'social structure', for instance, need to be understood: is it possible to create ethnographic reality without some such notion ?

For the uses of the idea of social structure, let us go back to Radcliffe-Brown, who in 1940 mentioned

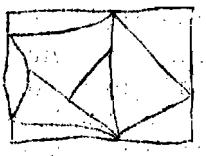
> 'a difficulty which I do not think that sociologists have really faced, the difficulty of defining what is meant by the term 'a society' ....
> If we say that our subject is the study and comparison of human societies, we ought to be able to say what are the unit entities with which we are concerned.
> If we take any convenient locality of a suitable size, we can study the structural system as it appears in and from that region, i.e. the network of relations connecting the inhabitants amongst themselves and with the people of other regions. We can thus observe, describe, and compare the systems of social structure of as many localities as we wish'. (1952:193)

This procedure can be demonstrated by the following diagram:

1. aerial view of 'convenient locality' (unstructured)



2. anthropologist's eye view (structuring)



3. anthropologist's model (structured)

We know that perception is active, not passive. Judging by Radcliffe-Brown, it looks as if the reason why sociologists have not really asked the question 'what is a society' is that they have necessarily created a society out of each set of observations. The visiting anthropologist, rather more at the mercy of the forces of nature and anomie than the surrounding primitives, has to make sense of what he sees, to structure it into manageable bounds. He tries to get some power

over this threatening Outside by naming it (the Bongo-Bongo, Kachin, LoWiili etc.)

James Thurber could never use a microscope - when at last he managed to see something and draw it, it turned out to be his own eye.... But, of course, what a participant observer records is the outcome of his interaction with the Outside, the Other which is very much there and with which he is trying to cope every day. The resultant ethnography is something else again - an attempt at an 'objective' view of how the system really works. If the language of 'social structure' etc. is used it is a misnomer to call this second process abstraction, for it is really reification or re-incarnation. Hence the difficulty of getting through 'structure', a defence system of concrete pillar boxes, to any life there may be behind.

In this view of ethnography, la pensée sauvage is shown to be universal. Anthropologists see structure because they cannot do anything else, and they can only translate what they see into concrete language: people must be characterised as part of a larger entity, equally an incarnation, called society. The existence of 'a society' is a given, it is not problematic; the questions asked, have, in the past, turned on the circumstances of its existence.

The anthropologist may be able to justify his structure as coinciding with a structure recognised by the inhabitants. I take an example from West African ethnography (since it was an examination of this which set me off on this essay). Nadel explained, in A Black Byzantium, why he thought that a Nupe society existed. He examined the processes of Nupeization and the ways in which a Nupe identity was promoted and acknowledged. 'The Nupe' are thus made credible, and we are as well told at what levels this identity exists, or is in abeyance in respect of other identities. Goody, on the other hand, attempted to differentiate an apparently amorphous mass of people, compared with the inhabitants of the Nupe kingdom. He traced the concomitants of two choices of inheritance regulation, and reified the resultant principles into two 'societies': 'The LoWiili' and 'the LoDagaba'. It is a pity that Leach was tempted to be frivolous about the organization of Goody's fieldnotes: people have argued about the insult instead of following up Leach's criticism that these are not 'societies'.

Whatever a society is, it is not presumably going to be defined in any simple or regular way as the sum of a set of isomorphic elements - social structure, political system, ritual intensity or whatever. Such assumptions have inhibited the comparison of political organization and the understanding of complex societies. Societies are not particoloured beach balls, differing only in size. Yet I wonder if the assumptions entailed in much of the use of ethnography are not simplistic in this way. Ethnographic illustrations, referring to 'the Tallensi' or 'the Azande' often seem to me to assume these isomorphisms. Mary Douglas' analysis of grid and group relies on the existence of societies as givens, identified by their names, and classified by the nature of their 'social structure' in concomitant variation with other variables. Indeed, the aim is to prove that the concomitances are mutually determining. It is not therefore the users of earlier, functionalist, ethnography only who may be tempted into assuming the existence of these relationships. The less interested anthropologists are in 'social structure' the more possible - one might say - that it becomes assumed by default. Any analysis is derived from a universe: the tendency is for this to acquire a socially bounded reality from its very selection by an anthropologist. Hence the value of those studies which are attempts to understand boundary making and maintenance at different levels.

Whatever the nature of ethnographic pre-structuring, the source of the anthropologist's generalisations has been a specific human experience. Yet we know that it is usually difficult to get even the feel of the actuality of the people observed, of the thinginess of things, from ethnographic accounts. Since the anthropologist was inevitably the mediator of the life which he translates into the language of his readers, his personal evaluation of it is surely a proper part of the ethnography. Where such an account is made, (usually as a 'popular' piece of autobiography) I believe it enriches the 'academic' presentation. Examples are the dual studies of pygmy life by Turnbull and of the Akwe-Shavante by Maybury-Lewis. I have suggested that we still need to ask what is a society; why not also consider what is ethnography ?

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