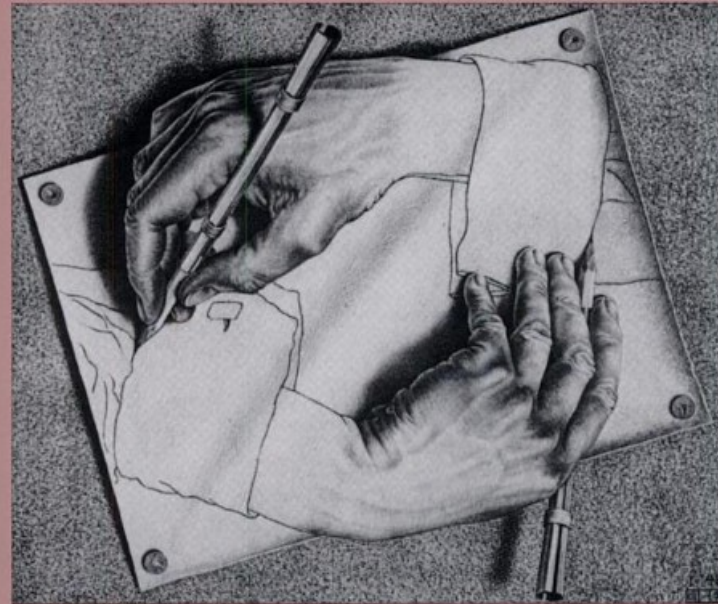


# The Invention of Culture

Revised and Expanded Edition

Roy Wagner





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# *The Invention of Culture*

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## Preface

The idea that man invents his own realities is not a new one; it is found in such diverse philosophies as the Muta'zilla of Islam and the teachings of Buddhism, as well as in many much less formal systems of thought. Perhaps it has always been known to man. Nevertheless, the prospect of introducing this idea to an anthropology and a culture that wants very much to control its own realities (as all cultures do) is a difficult one. An undertaking such as this one therefore requires far more encouragement than the more staid projects of ethnography, and I can safely say that without the strong and interested encouragement of David M. Schneider this book would not have been written. Its theoretical inspiration, moreover, owes much to his work, much that is too germinal to be easily acknowledged, as well as his very explicit insights into modern American culture, which are basic to what has become a consuming interest of my discourse.

Friends at Northwestern University and the University of Western Ontario have added the considerable support of their ideas and interest. In particular, I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to the members of my E70 seminar in the spring of 1972, Helen Beale, Barbara Jones, Marcene Marcoux, and Robert Welsch, and to John Schwartzman, Alan Darrah, and John Farella for the benefit of their

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**Introduction**

plight of a Chinese poet. He lived in that great, sleepy time when Confucius and the *tao* had taken care of China's spiritual discords, and the mandarins took care of everything else. And he would wistfully imagine, when he saw a great cloud of dust rise against the horizon, that it was "the dust of a thousand chariots." It never was. We live in interesting times.

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*The Invention of Culture*



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## chapter 1

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# The assumption of culture

### The idea of culture

Anthropology studies the phenomenon of man, not simply man's mind, his body, evolution, origins, tools, art, or groups alone, but as parts or aspects of a general pattern, or whole. To emphasize this fact and make it a part of their ongoing effort, anthropologists have brought a general word into widespread use to stand for the phenomenon, and that word is *culture*. When they speak as if there were only one culture, as in "human culture," this refers very broadly to the phenomenon of man; otherwise, in speaking of "a culture" or "the cultures of Africa," the reference is to specific historical and geographical traditions, special cases of the phenomenon of man. Thus culture has become a way of talking about man, and about particular instances of man, when viewed from a certain perspective. Of course the word "culture" has other connotations as well, and important ambiguities which we shall examine presently.

By and large, though, the concept of culture has come to be so completely associated with anthropological thinking that if we should ever want to, we could define an anthropologist as someone who uses the word "culture" habitually. Or else, since the process of coming to depend on this concept is generally something of a "conversion

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experience," we might want to amend this somewhat and say that an anthropologist is someone who uses the word "culture" with hope—or even with faith.

The perspective of the anthropologist is an especially grand and far-reaching one, for the phenomenon of man implies a comparison with the other phenomena of the universe, with animal societies and living species, with the fact of life, matter and space, and so forth. The term "culture," too, in its broadest sense, attempts to bring man's actions and meanings down to the most basic level of significance, to examine them in universal terms in an attempt to understand them. When we speak of people belonging to different cultures, then, we are referring to a very basic kind of difference between them, suggesting that there are specific varieties of the phenomenon of man. Although there has been much "inflation" of the word "culture," it is in this "strong" sense that I will use it here.

The fact that anthropology chooses to study man in terms that are at the same time so broad and so basic, to understand both man's uniqueness and his diversity through the notion of culture, poses a peculiar situation for the science. Like the epistemologist, who considers "the meaning of meaning," or like the psychologist, who thinks about how people think, the anthropologist is forced to include himself and his own way of life in his subject matter, and study himself. More accurately, since we speak of a person's total capability as "culture," the anthropologist uses his own culture to study others, and to study culture in general.

Thus the awareness of culture brings about an important qualification of the anthropologist's aims and viewpoint as a scientist: the classical rationalist's pretense of absolute objectivity must be given up in favor of a relative objectivity based on the characteristics of one's own culture. It is necessary, of course, for a research worker to be as unbiased as possible insofar as he is aware of his assumptions, but we often take our culture's more basic assumptions so much for granted that we are not even aware of them. Relative objectivity can be achieved through discovering what these tendencies are, the ways in which one's culture allows one to comprehend another, and the limitations it places on this comprehension. "Absolute" objectivity would require that the anthropologist have no biases, and hence no culture at all.

The idea of culture, in other words, places the researcher in a position of equality with his subjects: each "belongs to a culture." Because every culture can be understood as a specific manifestation, or example, of the phenomenon of man, and because no infallible method has ever been discovered for "grading" different cultures and

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sorting them into their natural types, we assume that every culture, as such, is equivalent to every other one. This assumption is called "cultural relativity."

The combination of these two implications of the idea of culture, the fact that we ourselves belong to a culture (relative objectivity), and that we must assume all cultures to be equivalent (cultural relativity), leads to a general proposition concerning the study of culture. As the repetition of the stem "relative" suggests, the understanding of another culture involves the relationship between two varieties of the human phenomenon; it aims at the creation of an intellectual relation between them, an understanding that includes both of them. The idea of "relationship" is important here because it is more appropriate to the bringing together of two equivalent entities, or viewpoints, than notions like "analysis" or "examination," with their pretensions of absolute objectivity.

Let us take a closer look at the way in which this relation is achieved. An anthropologist *experiences*, in one way or another, the subject of his study; he does so through the world of his own meanings, and then uses this meaningful experience to communicate an understanding to those of his own culture. He can only communicate this understanding if his account makes sense in the terms of his culture. And yet if these theories and discoveries represent uncontrolled fantasies, like many of the anecdotes of Herodotus, or the travelers' tales of the Middle Ages, we can scarcely speak of a proper relating of cultures. An "anthropology" which never leaves the boundaries of its own conventions, which disdains to invest its imagination in a world of experience, must always remain more an ideology than a science.

But here the question arises of how much experience is necessary. Must the anthropologist be adopted into a tribe, get on familiar terms with chiefs and kings, or marry into an average family? Need he only view slides, study maps, and interview captives? Optimally, of course, one would want to know as much as possible about one's subjects, but in practice the answer to this question depends upon how much time and money are available, and on the scope and intentions of the undertaking. For the quantitative researcher, the archeologist dealing with evidences of a culture, or the sociologist measuring its effects, the problem is one of obtaining an adequate *sample*, finding enough evidential material so that one's estimates are not too far off. But the cultural or social anthropologist, although he may at times be concerned with sampling, is committed to a different kind of thoroughness—one based on the depth and comprehensiveness of his insight into the subject culture.

If the thing that anthropologists call "culture" is as all-encompass-



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ing as we have assumed, then this obsession on the part of the fieldworker is not misplaced, for the subject culture is as much a separate world of thought and action as his own. The only way in which a researcher could possibly go about the job of creating a relation between such entities would be to simultaneously *know* both of them, to realize the relative character of his own culture through the concrete formulation of another. Thus gradually, in the course of fieldwork, he himself becomes the link between cultures through his living in both of them, and it is this "knowledge" and competence that he draws upon in describing and explaining the subject culture. "Culture" in this sense draws an invisible equal sign between the knower (who comes to know himself) and the known (who are a community of knowers).

We might actually say that an anthropologist "invents" the culture he believes himself to be studying, that the relation is more "real" for being his particular acts and experiences than the things it "relates." Yet this explanation is only justified if we understand the invention to take place objectively, along the lines of observing and learning, and not as a kind of free fantasy. In experiencing a new culture, the fieldworker comes to realize new potentialities and possibilities for the living of life, and may in fact undergo a personality change himself. The subject culture becomes "visible," and then "believable" to him, he apprehends it first as a distinct entity, a way of doing things, and then secondly as a way in which he could be doing things. Thus he comprehends for the first time, through the intimacy of his own mistakes and triumphs, what anthropologists speak of when they use the word "culture." Before this he had no culture, as we might say, since the culture in which one grows up is never really "visible"—it is taken for granted, and its assumptions are felt to be self-evident. It is only through "invention" of this kind that the abstract significance of culture (and of many another concept) can be grasped, and only through the experienced contrast that his own culture becomes "visible." In the act of inventing another culture, the anthropologist invents his own, and in fact he reinvents the notion of culture itself.

##### **Making culture visible**

In spite of all he may have been told about fieldwork, in spite of all the descriptions of other cultures and other fieldworkers' experiences he may have read, the anthropologist first arriving among the people he will study is apt to feel lonely and helpless. He may or may not know something about the people he has arrived to work among, he

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may perhaps even be able to speak their language, but the fact remains that as a person he must start from scratch. It is as a person, then, as a participant, that his invention of the subject culture begins. He has heretofore experienced "culture" as an academic abstraction, a thing allegedly so diverse and multifaceted, yet monolithic, that it is difficult to grasp or visualize. But as long as he cannot "see" this culture in his surroundings, it is of little use or comfort to him.

The immediate problems facing the beginning fieldworker are not likely to be academic or intellectual; they are practical, and they have a definite cause. Disoriented and dazed as he may be, he often encounters a good deal of trouble in getting settled and making contacts. If a house is being built for him, all sorts of delays occur in the work; if he hires assistants or interpreters, they fail to show up. When he complains about delays and desertions the usual lame excuses are offered. His questions may be answered by obvious and deliberate lies. Dogs bark at him and children may follow him about in the streets. All these circumstances stem from the fact that people are usually uncomfortable with a stranger in their midst, more especially with an outsider who may be crazy, dangerous, or both. Often they create difficulties for him as "defenses," to keep him at a distance or at least stall him off while he is considered and examined more closely.

These delays, defenses, and other ways of putting off the fieldworker are neither necessarily hostile (though they may be) nor unique in human interaction. "Distance" of this sort is a common occurrence in the beginning stages of what might possibly become a close personal involvement, such as a friendship or a love affair, and it is commonly pointed out that too much familiarity at this point would tend to undermine the mutual respect of the parties concerned. However this may be, human beings in all societies are usually more perceptive than we give them credit for, and life in a small community is generally far more intimate than the newcomer imagines. Courtesy, an age-old "solution" to the problems of human encounter, has made situations of this sort the basis of a high art, and the kindest thing a distraught fieldworker can do is at least suspect his hosts of courtesy.

However much these first encounters are jarred by misunderstanding, masked by formalities, or cushioned by courtesies, they nevertheless must take place, for the simple facts of being human and being in a place generate certain dependencies on their own account. Thus it is often the most trivial and ludicrous occasions, like looking for a place to relieve oneself, trying to operate a stove, or dealing with the landlord, that form the bulk of a beginner's social relations. In fact, these occasions offer the only available "bridge" for empathy between stranger and native; they "humanize" the former, making his prob-

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lems so readily understandable that anybody could sympathize with them. And yet the laughter and warmth that comes so easily on these occasions can never be a substitute for the more intimate and penetrating companionship and understanding that are such an important part of life in any culture. A relationship which is based on simplifying oneself to the barest essentials has nowhere to go—unless one is willing to permanently adopt the role of village idiot.

Whether or not he finds these initial encounters satisfying, the fieldworker will nevertheless try to follow them up and build them into more substantial friendships. He will do this because he is lonely, perhaps, or because he knows that if he is to learn something about these people and their way of life, he will have to learn it from them. For casual acquaintance is the accepted prelude to closer relationship in all human societies. But as soon as he attempts anything more ambitious than simple pleasantries, he begins to experience contradictions in his basic expectations of how people should conduct their affairs. This will not involve things as abstract as “ideas” or “points of view,” at least not at this stage, but ordinary notions of “common decency,” and perhaps subliminal effects that tend to make one vaguely uncomfortable, such as physical closeness, rapidity of movement, gestures, and so on. Should the well-meaning stranger, perhaps feeling guilty because of the “mistakes” he has already made, redouble his efforts at friendship, he will only succeed in compounding his difficulties further. Perhaps, as in many small communities, the ties of friendship are so encompassing that a “friend” is expected to fit into the roles of confidant, kinsman, creditor, and business partner all at once; possibly there are excessive reciprocal expectations, or a kind of “one-upmanship” hospitality, or even strong feelings about the solidarity of friends in factional disputes.

These initial frustrations can be expected to build up, for the pattern for friendship is often repeated in many other particulars of social life. Gradually the fieldworker begins to feel his effectiveness as a person undermined, and it is small consolation to know that the local people may be “humoring” the stranger, or trying to make life easy for him. Better an honest mistake than a false conviviality. Even the most tolerant and well-meaning outsider, who keeps his own counsel and strives to avoid showing his frustration eventually finds the strain of trying to maintain his own thoughts and expectations while “respecting” those of the local people extremely wearing. He may feel inadequate, or perhaps suspect that he has allowed his ideals of tolerance and relativity to trap him in a situation that is beyond his control.

This feeling is known to anthropologists as “culture shock.” In it the local “culture” first manifests itself to the anthropologist through

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his own *inadequacy*; against the backdrop of his new surroundings it is he who has become “visible.” The situation has some parallels within our own society: the freshman first entering college, the new army recruit, and anyone else who is compelled to live in “new” or alien surroundings, all have had some taste of this kind of “shock.” Typically the sufferer is depressed and anxious, he may withdraw into himself, or grasp at any chance to communicate with others. To a degree that we seldom realize, we depend upon the participation of others in our lives, and upon our own participation in the lives of others. Our success and effectiveness as persons is based upon this participation, and upon an ability to maintain a controlling competence in communicating with others. Culture shock is a loss of the self through the loss of these supports. College freshmen and army recruits, who find themselves, after all, in another segment of their own culture, soon establish some control over the situation. For the anthropological fieldworker, however, the problem is both more pressing and more enduring.

The problem also exists, though not exactly in the same way, for the people the anthropologist has come to work among. They are faced with an odd, prying, curious-looking, and strangely naive outsider in their midst, one who, like a child, keeps asking questions and must be taught everything, and who, also like a child, is apt to get into trouble. In spite of the defenses that have been erected against him, he remains an object of curiosity and often fear, fitting many of the rather ambiguous stereotypes of the “dangerous” outsider, or perhaps the conniving Westerner. The community may experience a mild “shock” of its own—perhaps we ought to call it “anthropologist shock”—and become self-conscious about its doings.<sup>1</sup> It finds “control” an important problem, too. But the community’s problem is not the anthropologist’s problem of managing personal competence in dealing with others. The community’s problem is simply controlling the anthropologist.

The solution for all concerned lies in the anthropologist’s efforts to control his culture shock, to deal with the frustration and helplessness of his initial situation. Since his control involves acquiring a competence in the local language and ways of life (and who but the natives are experts in this?), the local people are given a chance to do

1. Thus the Reverend Kenneth Mesplay, who was in charge of a mission school and other services at Karimui, where I did my fieldwork, claims that villages where an anthropologist has lived show distinctive patterns in dealing with Europeans. School attendance drops off, the people show more self-assurance, etc. An anthropologist is something of a “culture missionary,” believing (like all good missionaries) in the thing he invents, and is apt to acquire a substantial local following in his efforts to invent the local culture.



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their part in controlling the outsider, domesticating him, as it were. And here is where the anthropologist's experiences differ from those of missionaries and other emissaries of Western society. The latter are often compelled by their chosen roles and apprehensions of the situation either to interpret their shortcomings as personal inadequacy—and go crazy—or as native cussedness and slovenliness, thus reinforcing their own elitist self-images.

But anthropology teaches us to objectify the thing we are adjusting to as "culture," much as the psychoanalyst or shaman exorcises the patient's anxieties by objectifying their source. Once the new situation has been objectified as "culture," it is possible to say that the fieldworker is "learning" that culture, the way one might learn a card game. On the other hand, since the objectification takes place simultaneously with the learning, it could as well be said that the fieldworker is "inventing" the culture.

The distinction is a crucial one, though, from the standpoint of how an anthropologist comes to understand and explain the situation he experiences. The fieldworker's belief that the new situation he is dealing with is a concrete entity, a "thing" that has rules, "works" in a certain way, and can be learned, will help and encourage him in his attempts to come to grips with it. And yet in a very important sense he is *not* learning the culture the way a child would, for he approaches the situation already an adult who has effectively internalized his own culture. His efforts to understand the subjects of his research, to make them and their ways meaningful, and to communicate this meaningfulness to others, will grow out of his abilities to make meaning within his own culture. Whatever he "learns" from his subjects will therefore take the form of an extension or superstructure, built upon that which he already knows, and built *of* that which he already knows. He will "participate" in the subject culture, not in the way a native does, but as someone who is simultaneously enveloped in his own world of meanings, *and these meanings will also participate*. If we recall what was said earlier about relative objectivity, we remember it is the set of cultural predispositions that an outsider brings with him that makes all the difference in his understanding of what is "there."

If culture were an absolute, objective "thing," then "learning" it would be the same for all people, native as well as outsider, adult as well as child. But people have all sorts of predispositions and biases, and the notion of culture as an objective, inflexible entity can only be useful as a sort of "prop" to aid the anthropologist in his invention and understanding. For this, and for many other purposes in anthropology, it is necessary to proceed *as if* culture existed as some monolithic "thing," but for the purpose of demonstrating how it is that

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an anthropologist attains his comprehension of another people, it is necessary to realize that culture is a "prop."

The relation that the anthropologist builds between two cultures—which, in turn, objectifies and hence "creates" those cultures for him—arises precisely from his act of "invention," his use of meanings known to him in constructing an understandable representation of his subject matter. The result is an analogy, or a set of analogies, that "translates" one group of basic meanings into the other, and can be said to participate in both meaning systems at the same time in the same way that their creator does. This is the simplest, most basic, and most important consideration of all; the anthropologist cannot simply "learn" the new culture and place it beside the one he already knows, but must rather "take it on" so as to experience a transformation of his own world. "Going native" is as unprofitable from the standpoint of fieldwork as staying at the airport or hotel and making up stories about the natives; in neither case is there any possibility of a meaningful relation (and invention) of cultures. It is naive to suggest that going native is the only way to really "learn" another culture, since this would necessitate giving up one's own. Thus, since every effort to know another culture must at least begin with an act of invention, the would-be native could only enter a world of his own creation, like a schizophrenic or that apocryphal Chinese painter who, pursued by creditors, painted a goose on the wall, mounted it, and flew away!

Culture is made visible by culture-shock, by subjecting oneself to situations beyond one's normal interpersonal competence and objectifying the discrepancy as an entity; it is delineated through an inventive realization of that entity following the initial experience. For the anthropologist this delineation usually proceeds along the lines of anthropological expectations of what culture and cultural difference should be. Once the realization occurs, the fieldworker acquires a heightened awareness of the kinds of differences and similarities implied by the term "culture," and he begins to use it more and more as an explanatory construct. He begins to see his own way of life in sharp relief against the background of the other "cultures" he knows, and he may try consciously to objectify it (although it is "there," by implication at least, in the analogies he has already created). Thus the invention of cultures, and of culture in general, often begins with the invention of one particular culture, and this, by the process of invention, both is and is not the inventor's own.

The peculiar situation of the anthropological fieldworker, participating simultaneously in two distinct worlds of meaning and action, requires that he relate to his research subjects as an "outsider," trying to "learn" and penetrate their way of life, while relating to his own



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culture as a kind of metaphorical “native.” To both groups he is a professional stranger, a person who holds himself aloof from their lives in order to gain perspective. This “strangeness” and the “in-between” character of the anthropologist has been the cause of many misunderstandings and exaggerations on the part of those he comes into contact with. Those of his own society imagine he has “gone native,” whereas the natives often feel he is a spy or a government agent. Troublesome as these suspicions may be, they are outweighed by the impact of his situation on the anthropologist himself. Insofar as he functions as a “bridge” or point of relation between two ways of life, he creates for himself an illusion of transcending them. This point accounts for much of the power anthropology has over its converts, its evangelistic message: it draws people who want to emancipate themselves from their culture.

Emancipation may indeed follow, less from the fact that the fieldworker has made good his “escape” than from the circumstance that he has found a powerful new “control” on his invention. The relation that he creates binds the inventor quite as much as it binds the “cultures” that he invents. The experience of culture, endowed with the very formidable reality of the difficulties involved, lends a sureness to his thinking and feeling that confirmed belief seems always to afford its adherents.

### **The invention of culture**

Anthropology is the study of man “as if” there were culture. It is brought into being by the invention of culture, both in the general sense, as a concept, and in the specific sense, through the invention of particular cultures. Since anthropology exists through the idea of culture, this has become its overall idiom, a way of talking about, understanding, and dealing with things, and it is incidental to ask whether cultures exist. They exist through the fact of their being invented, and through the effectiveness of this invention.

This invention need not take place in the course of fieldwork; it can be said to occur whenever and wherever some “alien” or “foreign” set of conventions is brought into relation with one’s own. Fieldwork is a particularly instructive example because it develops the relation out of the field situation and its ensuing personal problems. But many anthropologists never do fieldwork, and for many who do, fieldwork is just a special instance (although a highly instructive one) of the invention of culture. This invention, in turn, is part of the more gen-

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eral phenomenon of human creativity—it transforms the mere assumption of culture into a creative art.

An anthropologist calls the situation he is studying “culture” first of all so that he can *understand* it in familiar terms, so he knows how to deal with and control his experience. But he also does so in order to see what calling this situation “culture” does to his understanding of culture in general. Whether he knows it or not, and whether he intends it or not, his “safe” act of making the strange familiar always makes the familiar a little bit strange. And the more familiar the strange becomes, the more and more strange the familiar will appear. It is a kind of game, if you will, a game of pretending that the ideas and conventions of other peoples are the same (in one broadly conceived way or another) as our own so that we can see what happens when we “play” our own concepts through the lives and actions of others. As the anthropologist uses the notion of culture to control his field experiences, those experiences will, in turn, come to control his notion of culture. He invents “a culture” for people, and *they* invent “culture” for him.

Once the fieldworker’s experience is organized around culture and controlled by it, his invention will retain a meaningful relation to our own mode of life and thought. Thus it comes to embody a kind of metamorphosis, an effort of continued, ongoing change in our culture’s forms and possibilities brought about by a concern with the understanding of other peoples. We cannot use analogies to reveal the idiosyncrasies of other life styles without applying the latter, as “controls,” in the rearticulation of our own. Anthropological understanding becomes an “investment” of our ideas and our way of life in the broadest sense possible, and the gains to be realized have correspondingly far-reaching implications. The “Culture” we live is threatened, criticized, counterexemplified by the “cultures” we create—and vice versa.

The study or representation of another culture is no more a mere “description” of the subject matter than a painting “describes” the thing it depicts. In both cases there is a symbolization, one that is connected with the anthropologist’s or artist’s intention to represent the subject in the first place. And yet the creator cannot be conscious of this symbolic intent in pursuing the details of his invention, for that would nullify the guiding effect of his “control,” and thus make his invention self-conscious. A self-conscious anthropological study or work of art is one that is manipulated by its author to the point where it says exactly what he wanted it to say, and excludes that kind of extension or self-transformation that we call “learning” or “expression.”

Thus our understanding needs the external, the objective, whether



this be technique itself, as in “nonobjective” art, or palpable research subjects. By forcing his imagination, through analogy, to follow the detailed conformations of some external and unpredictable subject, the scientist’s or artist’s invention gains a sureness it would not otherwise command. Invention is “controlled” by the image of reality and the creator’s lack of awareness that he is creating. His imagination, and often his whole management of himself, is compelled to come to grips with a new situation; it is frustrated, as in culture shock, in its initial intention, and so brought to invent a solution.

What the fieldworker invents, then, is his own understanding; the analogies he creates are extensions of his own notions and those of his culture, transformed by his experiences of the field situation. He uses the latter as a kind of “lever,” the way a pole vaulter uses his pole, to catapult his comprehension beyond the limitations imposed by earlier viewpoints. If he intends his analogies to be no analogies at all, but an objective description of the culture, he will make every effort to refine them into a closer and closer approximation of his experience. Where he finds discrepancies between his own invention and the native “culture” as he comes to know it, he changes and reworks his invention until its analogies seem more appropriate or “accurate.” If this process is prolonged, as it is in the course of fieldwork, the anthropologist’s use of the idea of “culture” will eventually assume a sophisticated and articulate form. Gradually the subject, the objectified element that serves as a “control” for his invention, is invented through analogies incorporating progressively more comprehensive articulations, so that a set of impressions is re-created as a set of meanings.

The effect of this invention is as profound as it is unconscious; it creates the subject in the act of trying to represent it more objectively, and simultaneously creates (through analogous extension) the ideas and forms through which it is invented. The “control,” whether subject culture or artist’s model, forces the representer to live up to his impressions of it, yet those impressions themselves change as he becomes more and more absorbed in his task. A good artist or scientist becomes a detached part of his culture, one that grows in strange new ways, and carries its ideas through transformations that others may never experience. This is why artists can be called “educators”; we have something—a development of our thoughts—to learn from them. And this is why it is worthwhile studying other peoples, because every understanding of another culture is an experiment with our own.

In fact, the subjects of study that we pursue in the arts and sciences can be seen as “controls” on the creation of our culture. Our “learning” and “development” always carry forward the meaningful articula-

tion and movement of the ideas that provide our orientation. As an example, and a “control” on a discussion that has necessarily tended toward abstraction, let us consider the work of an artist who took such an interest in man in general and his life styles that he might almost be called an anthropologist: the Flemish painter Peter Bruegel the elder.

As with all historical examples, the background of Bruegel’s life and work was complex, with many cross-cutting influences, and a simplification is necessary to any discussion. In artistic terms, a most important consideration is the tradition of painting that grew up in the Low Countries and the Duchy of Burgundy from the early 1400s onwards, which contrasted with, and sometimes fed upon, the renaissance art of Italy. The early masters of this Flemish school, among them Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, and Hans Memlinc, developed a style of depiction based on perspective, graphic realism, and intensive detail. The force of this art was its realization of idealized religious scenes and subjects in the most convincing forms possible; each picture is a study in intricacy. The crucifixion, the Virgin and Child, and other themes were given “life” and immediacy through the artist’s uncanny control over the “look” and “feel” of familiar objects: the gleam of light on polished metal, the folds of skin or fabric, or the precise outlines of leaves or branches.

As this general style became established, it provided a basis for further development. Its uncanny command of detail and convincing ability to counterfeit reality increased enormously the range of invention possible to the artist. Whereas painters of the early and middle 1400s enriched their own (and their countrymen’s) understanding of the Gospel by recreating it in reality, their successors used this technique to study (and broaden) their entire world view. Hieronymus Bosch mastered a whole genre by merging the realism of Flemish painting with fantastic allegories of the human condition. His pictures of vermin and birds in men’s clothing, atrocities, and weirdly juxtaposed objects use the realism of the earlier masters as a means of stark caricature. It was in this form, the most extreme possible, that character and moral differentiation were introduced into the realm of realistic depiction.

The art of Peter Bruegel constituted an analogous, though rather different, departure from the earlier realism. Bruegel’s works retained the force of allegory, including the irony of treating profane subjects in intricate detail, but he tempered his caricature. Much more than Bosch, who generally relied on the fantastic, the caricature and symbolic irony of Bruegel’s works is achieved through the detailed portrayal of Flemish peasants and their folkways. The contrast between



this subject matter, depicted with a penetrating characterization that implies long observation, and the themes Bruegel chose to illustrate, creates an irony and an explanatory force not unlike that of anthropology, which also objectifies its insights through the folkways of others. In both cases the life of the people is described, explained, made plausible; but in the process the whole work comes to mean something more than the mere description or understanding of a people.

Bruegel was fascinated, as his sketches show, with the circumstances of life among the peasants of his country; their clothing, their houses, their habits and amusements. He took an artist's delight in the geometry of their forms, accentuated by the postures characteristic of their labor or merriment, and harmonized his total compositions with a fine sense of the intimacy between peasant and landscape. The significance of this superb artistic penetration of folkways is evident in another fascination of the artist: his obsession with proverb and allegory. Proverb and peasantry are indeed two aspects of the same interest, for proverbs are themselves part of the folk wisdom of a peasantry, understandable in its terms, whereas the depictions of peasants in the styles, themes, and genres of Flemish painting *creates* allegory by rendering the traditional subjects in analogic form; it humanizes them. Allegory came to be the form in which the meaning of Bruegel's pictures was imparted, and intended. Like the anthropologist, his invention of familiar ideas and themes in an exotic medium produced an automatic analogic extension of his world. And since these ideas and themes remained recognizable, their transformation in the process embodied the kind of resymbolization that we call allegory—analogy with a pointed significance.

The "bite" of Bruegel's particular kind of anthropology is most apparent in some of his street scenes depicting religious themes. These pictures recall the nearly contemporary dramas of Shakespeare in the universality of their vision, their concern to generalize human life by characterizing its immense variety. The resemblance is heightened by the fact that the humanism of both artists serves often as a means to interpret, comprehend, and even learn from the exotic. Shakespeare used the variety, brilliance, and wit of Elizabethan life as a seedbed of analogy for his penetration of ancient Rome, contemporary Venice, or medieval Denmark, and of course his depiction of their inhabitants as metaphorical Englishmen produced caricatures to delight his countrymen.

Likewise, the biblical villages portrayed in Bruegel's paintings *The Numbering at Bethlehem* and *The Massacre of the Innocents* are in every respect Flemish communities of the day. The occasions them-

selves, Mary and Joseph's arrival at Bethlehem for the census, or the soldiers of Herod intent on murdering the infant Jesus, can be recognized in the pictures; Mary has a blue cloak and is seated on a donkey, Joseph carries a carpenter's saw, a census is being taken, soldiers are harrying the populace, and so on. Otherwise, the village is snowbound in both scenes, the people are dressed as northern peasants, and the high, stepped rooves, the cropped trees, and the landscape itself are typical of the Low Countries. All these details served to "bring home" the events of the Bible, to make them believable and sympathetic to his audience, and, if pressed, Bruegel could have "explained" his efforts on that basis.

But the thrust of interpretation goes much deeper than mere "translation," for analogy always retains the potential of allegory. By showing figures and scenes from the Bible in a contemporary setting, Bruegel also implied the judgment of his own Flemish society in biblical terms. Thus the significance of *The Numbering at Bethlehem* is not only that "Jesus was born of man, in humble surroundings, just as people live today," but also that "if Mary and Joseph came to a Flemish town, they would *still* have to stay in a manger." *The Massacre of the Innocents* is even more pointed, for it depicts the soldiers of Herod, intent on murdering the Christ child, as the Spanish troops of the Habsburgs, ravaging the Low Countries for equally nefarious ends. Whether in art or anthropology, the elements we are forced to use as analogic "models" for the interpretation or explanation of our subject are themselves interpreted in the process.

We could go on to consider the development of Flemish painting from this point; Rubens' use of brushstroke to create an impressionistic art that played upon the viewer's expectations, or the superbly comprehensive works of masters like Rembrandt or Vermeer. As the tradition developed, its allegorical center of gravity changed, moving from the delineation on the canvas itself to the relation between artist (or viewer) and picture, and through this means to a highly sophisticated means of communication. As the meaningful content of painting came to be more and more clearly focused on the act of painting, symbolized in the emphasis on brushstroke, choice of subject, and so forth, the artists grew to realize a certain self-awareness. Rembrandt was an art collector, and Vermeer was a dealer as well, pursuits that were in both cases rendered appropriate by the intense personal (almost confessional) involvement that bound these men to every aspect of their work. So much of themselves was created through the realization of painting.

But we should return, at this point, and ask whether this degree of self-knowledge is attainable in our own discipline, whether a self-



aware (rather than a self-conscious) anthropology is possible. Like the art of Rubens or Vermeer, such a science would be based on an introspective understanding of its own operations and capabilities; it would develop the relationship between technique and subject matter into a means of drawing self-knowledge from the understanding of others, and vice versa. Finally, it would make the selection and use of explanatory “models” and analogies from our own culture obvious and understandable as part of the simultaneous extension of our own understanding and penetration of other understandings. We would learn to externalize notions like “natural law,” “logic,” or even “culture” (as Rembrandt did with his own demeanor and character in his self portraits), and, seeing them as we view the concepts of other peoples, come to apprehend our own meanings from a truly relative viewpoint.

The study of culture *is* culture, and an anthropology that wishes to be aware, and to develop its sense of relative objectivity, must come to terms with this fact. The study of culture is in fact *our* culture; it operates through our forms, creates in our terms, borrows our words and concepts for its meanings, and re-creates us through our efforts. And every anthropological undertaking therefore stands at a crossroads: it can choose between an open-ended experience of mutual creativity, in which “culture” in general is created through the “cultures” that we use this concept to create, and a forcing of our own preconceptions onto other peoples. The crucial step—which is simultaneously ethical and theoretical—is that of remaining true to the implications of our assumption of culture. If our culture is creative, then the “cultures” we study, as other examples of this phenomenon, must also be. For every time we make others part of a “reality” that we alone invent, denying their creativity by usurping the right to create, we *use* those people and their way of life and make them subservient to ourselves. And if creativity and invention emerge as *the* salient qualities of culture, then it is to these that our focus must now shift.

## chapter 2

# Culture as creativity

### Fieldwork is work in the field

When I first went to do fieldwork among the Daribi people of New Guinea, I had certain expectations of what I hoped to accomplish, though of course I had few preconceived notions about what the people would be “like.” Fieldwork is after all a kind of “work”; it is a creative, productive experience, although its “rewards” are not necessarily realized in the same way as are those of other forms of work. The fieldworker produces a kind of knowledge as a result of his experiences, a product that can be peddled as “qualifications” in the academic marketplace, or written into books. The resultant commodity falls into a class with other unique experiences: the memoirs of famous statesmen or entertainers, the journals of mountain climbers, arctic explorers, and adventurers, as well as accounts of exciting artistic or scientific achievements. Though they may attract special attention, such products are nonetheless products, and their creation is still “work.”

The anthropologist in the field does work; his “working hours” are