BROKEN PREMISES[1]

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Abstract: This article attempts to explain in an unpedantic way how knowledge is arrived at in anthropological research. It does so by telling two anecdotes about the author's misinterpretation of people's activities while he was in the field. These errors, which are paradigmatic of anthropological research in general rather than the result of the author's obtuseness and superficiality alone, demonstrate the difficulty of conceptualizing the cultural *Other.* The article shows how objectivity and subjectivity, established conceptual schemas and unexamined personal feelings hinder the apprehension of this *Other.* The author is bold enough to believe that such an experience, undergone by all anthropologists, reproduces on a modest scale the discourse on *Tradition* and *Modernity* developed by the great 19th-century social theorists and that fieldwork is essentially a personal reinvention of the sociological/anthropological wheel.

Résumé: Cet article tente d'expliquer d'une manière qui ne se veut pas savante comment la recherche mène à la connaissance anthropologique. Y sont racontées deux anecdotes montrant que l'auteur a mal interprêté le comportement des gens qu'il observait lors de sa recherche sur le terrain. Ce genre d'erreurs, qui sont inhérentes à toute recherche anthropologique plutôt que le simple résultat d'un manque de perspicacité de la part de l'auteur, démontrent la difficulté de conceptualiser l'*Autre.* L'article indique comment objectivité et subjectivité, de vieux schèmes de pensée et des sentiments personnels à peine conscients font obstacle à l'appréhension de l'*Autre.* L'auteur considère qu'une telle expérience, partagée par tous les anthropologues, reproduit à petite échelle le discours sur la *Tradition* et la *Modernité* développé par les grands sociologues du 19ème siècle. En ce sens, l'expérience de terrain est en fait une redécouverte personnelle de la roue sociologique/anthropologique.

Introduction

I wish at the start to outline my argument as clearly as possible since parts of this article are written in a digressive style which does not easily allow for the marshalling of arguments like soldiers on a battlefield. On the other hand, such a style renders very well, in my opinion, the dynamics and tensions leading to the creation of anthropological knowledge, the subject of this article.

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Starting from the idea that fieldwork represents the key element of anthropology because it encapsulates fully the *grandeur et misère* of the anthropological project, I shall attempt to show that fieldwork leads by necessity to a reflection on *us* and *non-us*, on the available ways of conceptualizing a culturally different *Other*; that it is no simple matter to escape our own ideological discourses about this radically different *Other*, whether in the form of articulated anthropological ideas or unstated feelings; that the apprehension of this *Other* is through inherited models of *Tradition* (Primitivity) and *Modernity*,[2] reverse images of one another; and that if we wish to free ourselves from our own ideological projections, we must first understand the intellectual context of the birth of this pair of opposites. To accomplish the latter, we must know what 19th-century social theorists such as Tönnies and Durkheim were trying to say about their own society by inventing its opposite. Anthropology can only escape the circumstances of its birth by acknowledging its parentage.

I shall also argue that the inadequacy of anthropological models of the *traditional* leads researchers to consider models more congruent with their experience in the field and, in so doing, they duplicate the intellectual endeavour of the great 19th-century social theorists responsible for the invention of the *traditional society*; that although we know today a great deal more about traditional peoples, we are still inventing this *Other* in order to understand ourselves and that, furthermore, this *Other* can still only be grasped through our own intellectual schemas; and finally that fieldworkers become anthropologists when, after realizing that anthropology is part-truth and part-lies about ourselves and others, they develop the heroic resolve of making even the lies mean something.

I illustrate this process of becoming an anthropologist by presenting two vignettes of my fieldwork which show some ineptitude or, at the very least, some lack of perspicacity on my part. I have chosen to focus on mistakes and missed opportunities because, paradoxically, it is in showing the making of anthropological errors that the mechanisms of production of anthropological knowledge are the clearest.

The article is made up of four parts. The first is a bird's eye view of the emergence of the notion of traditional society used by anthropologists. The second and third parts are "true confessions from the field": a personally embarrassing story about gifts of food shows the underside of reciprocity and the costs of living in a close-knit community; the Ntuam Sok story, a case of modernization which has taken place in the absence of an expanding secular outlook, points to our faulty definition of religion. These vignettes, which show errors of interpretation committed in the field, lead me in the last section to reflect on the nature of anthropological understanding and to state what distinguishes anthropology from other social science disciplines.

The History of an Idea: The Invention of the Traditional Society

Anthropology has been from the start a somewhat desperate enterprise, no less rash and ill-considered than the behaviour of 19th-century European missionaries leaving home to save the souls of South Pacific Islanders living in the cultural antipodes, when they could not persuade the workers living in new industrial towns to practice Christianity. There is something senseless about both enterprises, which are but the two faces of the same coin, though what is even more astonishing is that both should have met with a measure of success. The project of anthropology is foolish because anthropologists choose to go where words are not simply bound to fail, but where they must fail in order for the fieldwork to succeed. How does it work? How can intellectuals, many of whom cannot, if truth be known, navigate the aisles of a supermarket at home, find their way in the South Pacific? How can people, who make a profession of learning a great deal more about the practices and beliefs of obscure peoples than they will ever know about their own society, convince those who considered all along that leaving home was pointless that they have returned with worthwhile knowledge? After all, even our informants ask us why we have come amongst them when we have everything we could possibly desire at home. Why willingly endure material privations? The answer is as obvious as it is difficult to explain: we study others in order to understand ourselves, for self-knowledge is only found through the eyes of the *Other.*

Ever since the Age of Enlightenment, Western intellectuals have invented the "Savage," to serve as a foil while attempting to understand, criticize and change their own world. By the 19th century, members of traditional societies were no longer regarded as "savages," people belonging to uncivil societies, in other words societies without government, organized religions, and complex legal systems. Instead they became primitives. This was because the leading metaphor explaining the difference between "us" and "them" was now provided by evolutionary theory. Time, a before and an after, became the filament connecting the observed cultural discontinuities. Unable to grasp the 19th-century social forms emerging out of the test tube of the French and industrial revolutions, toward the end of the century, sociologists invented, in an imaginative reach, the *traditional* society.

Let me describe the "invention" of the *traditional* in the 19th century because it has a close bearing on anthropology today in general and my behaviour in the field in particular. Sociology was, from the start, preoccupied with social pathology even while it was busy determining its subject matter. Given the rise of hygienist theories and practices and the growing "medicalization" of this period, it is perhaps not so surprising that sociology developed essentially as a form of social prophylaxis. Social commentators of the time believed they were faced with imminent social disintegration.

They witnessed the breakdown of the old social order with the development of the factory labour system, the appearance of the industrial city, the transformation of property, the political agitation of the working class, the secularization of the age, the emergence of mass culture, etc.

There was among members of the left and the right of the time, i.e. from the radicals as well as from the conservatives, perhaps because they could see so much of it, a general condemnation of individualism, this "social, moral and political isolation of self-interested individuals, unattached to social ideals and unanswerable to social control; and they saw it as a breakdown of social solidarity" (Lukes 73:96). But what matters even more than the anticipated spread of individualism was the reaction to it, a movement profoundly influenced by the rehabilitation of the medieval period going on at the time: critics of the age fell back on a romanticized view of the Middle Ages which, quite wrongly, made of the monasteries the standard of Middle Ages social institutions (Williams 1985:37).

A bourgeoisie which had barely had the time to savour the fruits of power was now confronted with the end of the social order it dominated: their fear in turn helped shape the image of the good society held by conservatives. The rediscovery of the "community," as a counterpoint to individualism, represents "unquestionably the most distinctive development in 19th-century social thought" (Nisbet 1966:47). But what did the term community mean in the last century? To quote Nisbet again, at some length, the term

> encompasses all forms of relationship which are characterized by a high degree of personal intimacy, emotional depth, moral commitment, social cohesion, and continuity in time. . . . Its archetype, both historically and symbolically, is the family. . . . Fundamental to the strength of the bond of community is the real or imagined antithesis formed in the same social setting by the non-communal relations of competition or conflict, utility or contractual assent (ibid.:47-48).

This brings us to what Nisbet penetratingly sees as the paradox of sociology. Although the discipline "falls, in its objectives and in the political and scientific values of the principal figures, in the mainstream of modernism, its essential concepts and its implicit perspectives place it much closer, generally speaking, to philosophical conservatism. Community, authority, tradition, the sacred: these are primary conservative preoccupations in the age . . ." (ibid.:18). If the medieval town with its guilds and other groups forms the natural, organic community, then it follows that the newly-born industrial city could not escape being the locus of most sociological propositions about social disorganization and modern alienation.

This contrapuntal opposition of tradition and modernity finds its most accomplished exposition in Tönnies' models of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society). Each social world exemplifies different sorts of

social bonds: in one case, human wills (we would say individuals) are united by blood ties, common morality and common world view; in the other, individual wills are joined purely instrumentally in social relations typified by the business contract. The point is that neither polar opposite really exists: the family is after all the usual stage of most acts of emotional and physical violence and 20th-century capitalist society has not become the Hobbesian world entirely dominated by the "cash nexus" predicted by many 19th-century social critics.

The theoretical itinerary which concerns us here starts with Emile Durkheim. Although for him community was a form of society based on mechanical solidarity, he did not on the whole greatly modify Tönnies' notion. What he did, in his book *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895; trans. 1938), was to transmute "the attributes of mechanical solidarity into the eternal characteristics of social facts in general" (Nisbet 1966:86) and these became the hallmark of the *traditional.*

Durkheim's thought reaches us through a double current of ideas in social anthropology: Radcliffe-Brown took his ideas to England and made them the foundation stones of British social anthropology; a second current, faithful to another dimension of Durkheim's work, goes from Mauss to Lévi-Strauss. Mauss, studying forms of primitive exchange in traditional societies, made of reciprocity the essence of society in his justly famous book *The Gift* (1924; trans. 1967). The structure of society is reciprocity itself; the whole is made up of holes, of discontinuities between the parts, and the structure consists of the tension between them, a sort of mobile without strings.[3] Going a step further, Lévi-Strauss studied societies as though they were a vast communication system, an exchange of various forms of messages such as greetings, ideas, material goods, women, etc.

The reason that I have described at some length the emergence of the notion of tradition and modernity is that my research had to do with the transition from one to the other. I had chosen to study a "modern" peri-urban village in Vanuatu, a country that had experienced several cargo cults,[4] a sure sign that the modernization process was running into difficulties.

I thus left for the field armed with an ideal model of the *traditional* and the *modern* which had perforce to be polar opposites of one another if they were to hold any explanatory value. They were more recent versions of Tönnies' and Durkheim's ideas, but not fundamentally different ones. My error, as we shall see, consisted in taking this oil and water model of societies for the reality.

Food for Thought

Before leaving for the field in 1972, I had been told what all anthropology students have drummed into them, that the notion of reciprocity is not only fundamental to understanding traditional societies, that it amounts to traditional life itself, although, as all but anthropologists know, social life is by definition an endless round of give-and-take in *all* societies, with a division of labour usually prevailing between those who mostly give and those who mostly take. I received my first practical lesson in the intricacies of gift giving from my advisor prior to leaving for the field. It took the form of a warning about presents of yams and what to do with them when they become too numerous to eat by oneself. To give them away seems to be the answer, except, as my advisor pointed out, that people recognize their own and other peoples' yams. It would be like giving away unwanted gifts.

The answer, an obvious one upon reflection, is to give the yams away in the form of cooked food. So I left for the field[5] with a heightened appreciation for the symbolic role of food sharing and with the firm intention of eating and drinking, come what may, whatever would be put in front of me.

My neighbour, the ex-village chief, had been singlehandedly responsible for my being in Erakor village. He did it mostly to spite the villagers who had forced him to resign from his hereditary post. It was months later that I found out that villagers had been opposed to the presence of a white man in the village, to someone whose reason for being there could only be "to steal their land," a statement meaning that the worst was bound to happen.

> At the beginning of my stay, when I was trying to learn the language while I was kept under constant observation, I asked my neighbour, the ex-chief, if I could try some of his food. I was really fishing for an invitation to dinner where I could meet people in a normal social context. Good idea, he said, but no invitation came. Most nights, half indulging in the fantasy that soon an informant would arrive, uninvited, to lay bare to me the structure of the community, I stayed in our small hut reading novels by the Coleman lamp. One night, around 8:30, there was a knock at my door and in came one of his granddaughters with a plate full of *laplap*. The latter is a delicacy made of grated tuber (yam, manioc, taro) or plantain which is diluted with coconut milk and to which is added salt, and, on good days, small shellfish, or small pieces of chicken or pork. The pudding is so heavy that, paradoxically, it induces a feeling of lightness as the blood rushes from the brain to the stomach to cope with the extra work. Having already had our dinner, my wife and I took a few nibbles commenting on "how extraordinary the texture was"; a few more nibbles, "like nothing ever experienced before"; still more nibbles, "the dominant flavour must be yam or is it taro?" In short, we thought it tasted revolting! Not knowing what to do with the large amount left over, we decided to keep it until the next day in the hope that the flavour would improve overnight. It did not, and with much guilt we secreted the food away in the garbage can.

> A few days later, a new present of food appeared at the same hour. We sampled it, left the rest for the following day and discarded it in the garbage can with the same sense of unease. It went on like this for about a month. Growing confident that my secret was well guarded, my scruples had been firmly reined in.
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> Children would spend the day with us, watching and reporting to adults what we were doing, this being one of the social roles of children. One day I threw away some old ball point pens. The following day they were back on the shelf where I kept them. Not absolutely sure that I had discarded them, I threw them again in the garbage can. They were back the following day. At the same time, I got rid of leather shoes with holes in the sole as there was no cobbler in town. The following day they were back. Horrified by the suspicion slowly forming in my mind, I asked the child who took our garbage away about the shoes. He thought I had inadvertently thrown them away so he had retrieved them as he emptied the pail on the garbage pile. It suddenly dawned on me that, from the first day, the children had systematically gone through our garbage with the application, method and dispassionate curiosity only found among archaeologists before reporting their findings to their parents. A sense of embarrassment and shame descended upon me which has not entirely left me even today. I had broken one of the fieldworkers' rules by throwing away presents of prepared food!
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> Prepared food is one of the richest media for expressing sociability and closeness as indicated in English in the following expression of distance or dislike, "I will not break bread with them." Moreover, the preparation of these delicacies reserved for special occasions required a considerable amount of labor and time. What compounded my ignominy was that my neighbour knew about my unspeakable behavior from the first day, yet kept sending more food. His *grand seigneur* gesture emphasized even more my ungratefulness. My only hope, I selfishly thought, was that the local whites were so very awful that I would not be found too wanting in comparison.

My neighbour and I were looking at each other across a divide we were both powerless to cross. Given the special role of food as a medium through which social relations are expressed, it is not surprising that it is often the form first misunderstandings take in the field. There was more than simply a question of taste in our inability to cope with the gifts of food: there was the problem of quantity as well. My neighbour no doubt knew that foreigners do not like native food at the first try. Yet he could not stop sending some, because this is the way sociability is expressed, nor could he send less, because parsimony would have amounted to a denial of the message he wanted to send. We, on our part, knew we had to accept the gift, although it was more than we could consume. The statements made through this exchange needed to be made and this is why it continued for a while even though the ex-chief knew that the food was discarded. The message that we were welcome could only be encoded one way.

It took me months to face the man once more with a semblance of equanimity and I was never again comfortable enough with him to use him as an informant. I had found out what shame was, the loss of face, the vulnerability resulting from everyone knowing the unmentionable acts one has committed. I then realized that the harmonious community I was living in resulted as much, if not more, from an unforgiving form of social control than from an "organic harmony of human wills." Let me explain. In modern societies, social order results from the interplay of complex social institutions. Civil order is not taken for granted and the social system receives constant adjustments in the form of new welfare policies or laws protecting various rights or new measures for suppressing dissent. Before my neighbour's failure to comment upon my own lapse led me to look beneath apparently harmonious surfaces, I naturally assumed that the social harmony achieved in Erakor without the use of such complex mechanisms must be the by-product of reciprocity in the raw, the result of numerous forms of mutual help built into the kinship system, life-long friendships and neighbourhood ties. I had overlooked the different sort of social control found in close-knit communities. What had been until then separate observations suddenly formed a pattern: juniors and women barred from speaking in the council meetings in which community decisions are taken; juniors forbidden to disagree in public with seniors; parents placing a curse on their children; mild rules of avoidance between in-laws pointing out the tensions between them; men with a legitimate grudge having to get "blind drunk," as they put it, before confronting those who caused them to be angry; sporadic outburts of inexplicable violent behaviour in unlikely quarters; a prevalent fear of sorcery reflecting the smoldering tensions in that sort of community. This is when I discovered that I could not have spent my life there.

The range of human experiences conceptualized by the opposing pair *tradition/modernity* is also expressed through the couple *country/city*, the *country* forming a powerful image of an organic society. My desire to see in Erakor the workings of an organic community came from a lack of theoretical sophistication, that much is clear. However, it was not caused simply by over-theorizing the ethnographic reality, imposing on it a 19th-century conservative view of the good society. It also came from a more insidious source: I had unintentionally invested the model with childhood memories. Nostalgia is not exclusively an affliction of old age! Childhood memories of simpler times, when life seemed more authentic, feelings less ambiguous, the meaning of experiences clearer, are what we use to make sense of our adult life. There exists a *Gemeinschaft* of youth in the form of a "structure of feelings" rather than articulated thought which makes its containment all the more difficult. My childhood consisted of school years spent in town and summer vacations in the country helping relatives on their farms. By the time I

became a young man, I knew that farming had fewer rewards than I had imagined at first; my cousins certainly did not mind leaving it for a job in town. Yet the feeling of belonging associated with this period of my life was never examined, let alone questioned, in the light of the realistic attitude to rural life acquired later. Finding myself once again in a rural community in which sharing and cooperation were everyday events, I had transferred my feelings from one context to another. And it is these unwitting feelings which prevented me from seeing the village reality for what it was.

As for native food, we eventually developed a taste for it though never the ability to consume it in quantities even approaching what the villagers consider an elegant sufficiency. We also became involved in reciprocal exchanges of food on Sundays. Sunday lunch, after service, is the special meal of the week. Kinsmen, neighbours and friends send each other a plate full of *laplap*, fish or watery stew. The following week, this plate is returned also full of food. Friends had instigated these informal exchanges and we soon found ourselves exchanging with four or five households every Sunday. We have here a good illustration of the fictitious character of the participation of anthropologists in local life. We had finally mastered the code for such food exchanges: we knew what to cook and how to cook it, as well as how and to whom to give it. Yet some artifice was still required on our part to give the act the appearance of being natural: we had to stick labels on the empty plates in order to be able to identify a week later whose plates they were.

In time, we discovered what to do with excess food because we were now getting more of it than ever. It is perfectly acceptable to feed children from the neighbourhood with leftovers. What the children left we surreptitiously fed to dogs and what the dogs left we took to town under cover of darkness to dispose of in friends' garbage cans.

What's in a Name?

Interested in the process of transition from traditional to market economy, I had devoted in 1972 much time to studying the remarkable career of a successful entrepreneur in Erakor who had, almost entirely by himself, built from scratch a large and diversified commercial enterprise.

> Kaloris' father had asked his son to claim from the French Residency land that had once belonged to their ancestors in Rentapao. This land had been abandoned roughly at the turn of the century when Rentapao people resettled in coastal villages such as Erakor at the suggestion of a Christian missionary. After persistent petitioning, Kaloris obtained from the French Residency 200 ha of land for the small sum of $500.00 on behalf of the descendants of Rentapao people. This land however had to be fenced and partially cleared within a period of three years. Kaloris then became director of Ntuam Sook (N.S.K.), the joint stock company formed to receive the land from the Residency.

The financing of the company was quick, with enthusiasm running high in the village: in only two years, the company had raised in capital the sum of $10 000.00. The director then decided to expand operations in the retail field and the company joined the cooperative movement. Between 1966 and 1970, N.S.K. built and operated two retail stores, acquired three pickup trucks and a 25-passenger bus. A second 200 ha of land was purchased from the Residency which was later divided into three sections: one was made into a paddock for 60 head of cattle; a second was developed into a cocoa plantation of 5000 trees; the third part was used for commercial gardening. By 1970, the 182-member cooperative had a capital of $22 524.00 and annual sales of $29 339.00. Kaloris' was a success story, and yet his leadership was seriously questioned in the village.

It was clear that this man had no problem speaking the language of various government representatives, such as district agent, land officer, and cooperative officer. In fact, he was so well thought of by them that he received, from the hands of the French Prime Minister, the *Médaille du Mérite Agricole*. The contrast between capitalist and pre-capitalist enterprise was, paradoxically, at the heart of his problem with shareholders. In a way, a cooperative is a "traditional" institution: membership is made up of small shareholders, the decision making is communal, and the yearly profits of the enterprise are distributed amongst members in the form of dividends. Kaloris' management was felt to be autocratic by members who were rarely consulted. He behaved like an entrepreneur by re-investing profits rather than paying dividends to members. He firmly believed that he knew better than the shareholders what was good for the company and he was, in my opinion, right on this score. Finally, he had a standard of living superior to that of the villagers, keeping a truck for his personal use, helping himself at will to tinned food from the co-op store and drawing a good salary. Members found him simply too enterprising with and for their own good(s).

During interviews with him, I was struck with his business acumen, his handling of figures, his understanding of concepts such as costs, capital, profits, etc., and attached great importance to his contribution to village economic life. It was after all, in reaction to him, that villagers refused to accept the entrepreneurial role in the village. In 1979, when I went back to Erakor, he unexpectedly revealed to me over a few beers (his treat) the magical origin of the company.

His father had taken Kaloris' two sisters to the Rentapao bush. At the foot of a mango tree near the seashore, he told them to dig a large hole in the sand and, after the water filled the hole, to drop a fishing line. Immediately a big red fish hooked the line. The father instructed his oldest daughter to bring the fish in and to kill it as soon as it touched the ground. She replied she was afraid to do so. He ordered her to be silent and to get on with it. After the fish was killed, they threw its body back into the sea and returned home. Afterwards, their father informed them that they had become lucky (*kasem laki*), but that they were to give this "luck" to their eldest brother, Kaloris. This is how the co-operative *Ntuam sook*—"a spirit emerges"—was created under the sign of spiritual forces. A spirit inhabiting the sea at their ancestral home had been tricked to come on land where part of his "power" had been taken away

from him and transferred to members of Kaloris' family.

I was shocked by the story! All I had written about Kaloris had followed what I thought were exhaustive interviews with him on the origins of the enterprise, a careful study of the workings of the company, double-checking the information received with other informants, some of whom were his opponents, and government officials. It had led me to talk about the emergence of a new role model, that of the entrepreneur, in Erakor. It puts a somewhat different complexion on the matter when tutelary spirits are involved from the start to act as guarantors of the success of a modern enterprise.

When I forcefully asked him why he had not told me this story in 1972, he gave me the classic answer, "You never asked." He added, "you only seemed to be interested in figures, so figures are what I gave you." He no doubt thought that I was singularly obtuse not to have suspected or anticipated what was in his eyes the most important event in the creation of the enterprise. I remember asking Kaloris' brother about the company's name and being told that there was a good story attached to it. He added, "You should ask Kaloris about it. He tells the story so well that you would enjoy it. Do you want to see the accounts now?" He had been so matter-of-fact about it that by the time I was able to work with Kaloris, months later, I had forgotten his suggestion.

The discovery of the spiritual origin of the company led me to be more sensitive to religious issues. Indeed, what struck me in 1979 was the place occupied by supernatural and occult forces in what is the most modern village of Vanuatu. It had taken me months of persistent questioning in 1972 to get these deeply committed Christians to admit the existence of traditional spirits and to express their fear of sorcery. By 1979, it came up all the time even on the lips of *church elders*. Villagers had a different presentation of self during my second stay, almost as if the time of my absence had been considered by them to be a continuous learning process on my part, which in some ways it was. There was either nothing left to dissimulate or else, like old actors, they could not remember their lines. As for myself, I could now use the right words and expressions to imply that I knew a great deal more than I really did. This did not always work in my favour as people would refuse to discuss certain topics on the ground that I already knew all there was to know about them. They reacted the way people react to a foreigner stating in unaccented English that he does not speak English: no one believes him and his claim to ignorance is simply taken to be false modesty.

Was my blind spot regarding the religious component of a modern business enterprise simply then the result of a well-executed mystification by Erakor villagers? I think not for a number of reasons. I had decided to start my research with an historical reconstruction of the *traditional* way of life because it is a neutral subject, less threatening than being asked by a stranger belonging to a powerful social group about land ownership, monthly income or patterns of household expenditure. Yet I was from the start confronted with what can only be described as cultural amnesia. Knowledge about the

pre-European past was fragmentary at best. It never amounted to a systematic view of the kinship system, the political organization or the cosmology. Villagers had bits of knowledge about traditional life, but these never formed a whole; it was like asking second generation immigrants to describe their parents' culture in their former country. Informants kept saying, "If only you had come fifteen years ago, so-and-so was still alive then and he knew. We are ignorant because our parents have never told us about these things. They thought it did not matter anymore." A break, a cultural hiatus occurred at the end of the 19th century (Philibert 1982). The contrast between the "time of light" (the historical, European-Christian period) and the "time of darkness" (the prehistoric, traditional period), the way villagers conceptualize this break, is still today of considerable ideological importance.

Something else also explains my shortsightedness. Modernization in the West has meant the secularization of society, the role of religion being reduced by the growth of scientific knowledge, and national bureaucracies taking over public education, health care, welfare, etc. The opposite took place in Vanuatu: there, modernity has been phrased as the transition from paganism to Christianity. Christian churches from the 1870s onward established schools and hospitals and supplied ni-Vanuatu with the vocabulary with which to make sense of the modern world.

These two factors taken in conjunction—a dimly remembered past and the present-day situation expressed largely in religious terms—led me to conclude that villagers who spent so much of their time in church must be devout Christians. The large number of Christian churches and sects in existence in the country (five in Erakor alone) bears witness to a ceaseless religious quest. I thus assumed that, except for the use of magical aids during times of particularly intense lust or hatred, a behaviour only too human and easily understood, there was little left of their traditional religious world. What I saw as remnants, however, were on the contrary only the tip of the iceberg. The two systems of beliefs naturally appeared to me as antithetical, while for villagers they are simply complementary dimensions of the same reality; the two systems have the same factuality, the same legitimacy, except that they operate in different contexts. That Europeans do not see it this way can only mean they are very naive in some matters. The special genius of Melanesian culture seems to be the ability to reconcile the most diverse ideas in such a way that a belief in magical stones and bush spirits, the expression of traditional spirituality, can coexist with a profound Christian faith.

Upon reflection, there is no reason why these two sets of beliefs should not coexist when they account for different sorts of experience. An illuminating analogy is that of the treatment of disease in Erakor. Villagers believe that diseases can be caused by germs and viruses, though like us they are not always very knowledgeable about these, but also by offended bush spirits and

sorcery. They first go to a dispensary or hospital when they recognize the symptoms of well-known afflictions. However, if the treatment does not produce the expected cure, then it is clear that there is more to the disease than meets the eye. They then consult a *kleva* (native doctor) who will diagnose the "true" cause of the illness and provide a remedy.

This is precisely the procedure they follow in their religious life. The fact that a doctrine is true does not imply that another is automatically false. The contradiction that I saw between the beliefs was entirely of my own cultural making. It is perfectly acceptable for anthropologists to use models built around pairs of opposites for the purpose of understanding the way very complex factors fit together, indeed we cannot escape using models, but we should not take such models for the reality. Our category of religion is simply too narrow to render adequately the Melanesian religious experience. We must enlarge our notion. After all, the fabulous and magical world found today in the pages of the *National Enquirer* and other newspapers of the same ilk belonged, not that long ago, to the field of religion in our own culture. They no longer do, but such ideas, the closest we come to beliefs in bush spirits and magical stones, have not disappeared for all that. They are now diffused according to methods of distribution only found in advanced capitalist economies, in the form of weekly newspapers purchased at the checkout counters of supermarkets.

Anthropological knowledge usually starts with the discovery that our sociological categories such as the family, economic exchanges, or the state, are born out of our own society, out of a particular social and cultural setting; they are derived from common sense and as such carry limited scientific content. But we only become aware that we have categories of our own when we discover those of others. The realization that what we had until then taken for a fact of nature exists side by side with different notions is no small achievement. Not only is anthropology as scientific as the other social sciences in that it attempts to prove or disprove given hypotheses about social life, it goes even further by challenging the conceptual tools themselves. It places such concepts in situation, to use an existentialist expression; it relativizes these ideas by showing them to be dependent on a particular social and cultural weft; finally, it forces us to step ever further beyond our own culture to search for the meaning others attach to these concepts.

To return to the villagers' religious world, I am tempted to say that although they have become Christians, they still live in a spiritual world far richer than our own, a world in which Christianity has displaced but not destroyed the spirits of the old order which have retreated to the bush, gone literally underground. The dark forces of nature have not been evacuated from what is now for us a mechanistic universe; the varied sources of human experience are refracted in a number of water and bush spirits which are subse-

quently used to explain the behaviour of individuals. As for us, having unduly simplified nature in our culture, we have had to make human nature more complex and to give ourselves a subconscious to account for what cannot be readily understood; the operative forces which we place inside individuals, they leave in some contexts outside, in nature.

The opposition between *traditional* and *modern* was no more true in the field of religion than it was in economics. Although still a practicing atheist, I can now more easily think of myself as religious. Adopting the villagers' notion of spirituality has allowed me to regard some of my own experiences as being fundamentally religious in a way that I would not, or could not, have done before. What's in a name? There is plenty in a name! Half of the ideological battles we constantly wage with ourselves and others are resolved, less by changing the culturally defined experience of, let us say, age or gender, a hard thing to do in any case, than by finding a new and more acceptable label for it.

Conclusion

The 19th century had only just rediscovered medievalism, which it romanticized beyond recognition, when it made the "community" into a utopian image of an organic social grouping modelled after the natural ties of affection and morality found in the family. Through Durkheim, this vision of the communal came to be applied wholesale to the model of traditional society.

It is true that we are bound to invent the *Other* the same way that important historical events are reinterpreted every few generations by asking a new set of questions about them, because the explanatory function of the *Other*, whether located in time or space, is that of a mirror. While it is also undoubtedly true that more and more precise instruments of measurement tell us ever more about the mirror's surface, the surface itself never ceases to be reflective for all that. Anthropologists forget at times that they paint the portraits of exotic societies by numbers and I am not only referring here to economic anthropologists; it is easy for us to be taken in by the fiction that there are no numbers, unaware that the forms and shapes we fill with local color are drawn from our own social categories. By transforming the personal experience of cultural differences into an anthropological analysis, fieldworkers go through what the great social theorists have imaginatively gone through when they created the categories of sociological thought. Anthropologists in the field reinvent the sociological wheel and so free themselves at the same time from some of its limitations. Now aware of the precariousness of sociological concepts, having experienced in the flesh, as it were, *them* and *us*, the *traditional* and the *modern*, they realize that for better or for worse anthropology is, like all the other social sciences, half-science and half-ideology. Anthropology is part of an informed social commentary on our

society: it is a discourse on ourselves, though not exclusively that, in the guise of a description of other societies. Anthropologists are thus essentially the moralists of the 20th century.

However, acknowledging that others can never be apprehended totally in their own terms, the way they perceive themselves, is no cause for despair. Refining the model of the *Other* projected by our own established social categories forces us, albeit only indirectly, to become conscious of our unexamined received ideas. This is only one step away from challenging our own discourses.

The people we study can also go through an anthropological experience. I was baffled for a long time by the behaviour of a few Erakor elders who came to see me, prior to my leaving the village, to thank me for what I had taught them. Now I had made it a rule not to interfere in village life to the point of rarely venturing an opinion about anything. When asked specifically for my views, I would confine myself to hopeless academic ditherings of the "on the one hand, but on the other hand . . ." sort. What could I have possibly taught those who instructed me? It was clear that villagers knew very little about anthropology. All they could observe was the way I inquired about their past and their present. But my investigation was thorough enough that they could follow the questions I asked and in turn ask themselves, "Now, what is the point of asking about that?" It was a case of one question leading to another. Following at one remove my line of inquiry, from behind the scene as it were, they were able to obtain a series of negatives of the image of the community I would eventually develop in my work. What we shared was a method, a systematic inquiry into their social universe. This led them to develop a model of their society that was different from the one available in their traditional social commentary or again different from the one provided by missionaries or other Europeans. We did not reach the same conclusion though I shall never know what they arrived at. How could it be otherwise, as they were viewing the stage from behind the backdrop? However, they could see masses and connections being made between them, get a sense of social relief, and draw a sociological map. What they and I shared was a method of assembling phenomena through logical links, the result of which was a sociological landscape whose shape they had not known before. This is what I had "taught" them. They had in some ways objectified themselves and thus achieved a certain distance from their own culture.

It is not my intention to present what are after all failures in the field as scientific success and more sensitive persons might not have made the same mistakes. But they would have had to make some in order to gain an anthropological experience: other cultures seem to be one of the few things one learns almost entirely through negative reinforcement. As Burridge (1975) points out so aptly, fieldworkers need to compromise their cultural integrity.

Anthropology demands a willingness to surrender one's intellectual correctness, even rectitude. With culture as with love, the true meaning of fidelity can only be known after having been unfaithful.

I hope to have shown in an unpedantic way how knowledge is achieved in anthropological research. Inducing cultural reflexivity in ourselves and others may well be anthropology's principal and most valuable contribution. It remains at any rate a substantial scientific achievement.

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Notes

1. This article was originally written for a book on fieldwork experiences intended for both a professional and general audience. As such, the ideas are presented in a discursive form. Those interested in more conventionally presented scholarly work on the Melanesian village described here should consult Philibert 1981, 1982a, 1982b, 1984a, 1984b, 1986, 1988, 1989.
2. By Tradition and Modernity, I do not mean the construct, more ideological than scientific, so dear to Parsonian sociology and Redfieldian anthropology. These opposite terms refer to ways of conceptualizing *us* and *non-us*, to the philosophical problem of how to think the cultural *Other*. A French anthropologist has this to say on this issue, "Et voilà qu'après la Femme, le Fou, et l'Enfant, une quatrième figure de l'Altérité surgit face à ce que la société occidentale définissait comme la Normalité: c'était le Sauvage. Et à l'instar des trois autres figures, ce Sauvage était muet, c'est-à-dire qu'il pouvait supporter un, et même plusieurs discours stéréotypés. Alors le Sauvage, le radicalement Autre, se vit investi des angoisses les plus profondes et des utopies les plus folles de l'Occident moderne. Un Occident en proie à un enchaînement de crises, non seulement politiques et économiques, mais avant tout crises de valeurs morales et spirituelles" (Rognon 1988: 6-7). "And so after the Woman, the Mad Man and the Child, here we have a fourth face of Otherness in opposition to what Western civilization considered Normality: the Savage. And like the other three, this Savage was voiceless,

that is to say he could become the bearer of one or more stereotyped discourses. So the Savage, the radically Other, came to embody the deepest anxieties and the wildest utopias of the modern Western world. A world fallen prey to a series of crises, not only political and economic, but above all crises of spiritual and moral values." (My translation.)

I take a different tack here by focusing exclusively on the part of this discourse developed in the 19th century by social theorists such as Durkheim and Tönnies and by pointing out that l'*Homme Sauvage* and l'*Homme Moderne* must be thought together because they were invented together; however, I do not on the whole disagree with Rognon who believes that anthropology is too often "un appendice des débats idéologiques internes à l'Occident" (Rognon 1988).

3. Mauss' idea that gift giving was central to the social integration of the egalitarian societies found in Melanesia remained the dominant focus of research for a long time. Anthropologists working in Melanesia have only recently turned their attention to forms of social inequality. This is the result of: (1) the influence of neo-Marxism which focuses on production rather than exchange; (2) the impact of gender studies which have analyzed sex-based forms of alienation and exploitation in the region; (3) a growing awareness of the tie between knowledge and power.
4. Cargo cults are a variety of millenarian movement predicting as well as bringing about a Melanesian version of the Second Coming. Given the centrality of the transactional mode in Melanesian cultures, this brave new world in which economic, political and moral equality with whites will be finally achieved takes on a singularly "materialistic" expression: it consists in obtaining from ancestors or traditional deities free access to Western manufactured goods, in other words the key to the cargo.
5. The "field" was for me a peri-urban village located near the capital of a South Pacific country called Vanuatu. It is an archipelago of 80 islands stretching 700 km between the Solomon Islands and New Caledonia with a population of almost 140 000 inhabitants. Prior to acceding to independence in 1980, this group of islands, then called the New Hebrides, was a colonial oddity, being administered jointly by France and Great Britain under the status of a Condominium.

This cumbersome, bicephalous administration developed as a series of short term solutions to economic, political and strategic problems encountered by both Powers in the region from the 1870s to 1914. In other words, it was never meant to work and it would not be far wrong to describe the workings of the Anglo-French Condominium in the terms that Dr. Johnson reserved for female preachers: "[it] is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well: but you are surprised to find it done at all" (MacClancy 1980; Philibert 1981).

All decisions concerning the native inhabitants (ni-Vanuatu, people of Vanuatu) had to be taken jointly by both Powers to be legal. Since France and Great Britain had different economic and strategic interests in the territory, not to mention different colonial policies toward indigenous peoples, the end result was near-terminal administrative paralysis. The country's colonial experience was one of administrative neglect for the greater part of its history followed by a period of benevolent paternalism from the 1960s until independence. Native reactions to 75 years of ineffectual colonial rule have ranged from self-imposed social and cultural isolation from foreign influences to the enthusiastic adoption of Western religious, economic and political constructs.

The strategy pursued by Erakor villagers, the village in which I carried out fieldwork, has been one of receptivity to European influences and in this sense they have been entrepreneurial from the start. They were the first on their island to accept Christian missionaries in 1845 and, under the influence of a Canadian Presbyterian missionary who lived in the village from 1872 to 1902, they abandoned a great number of traditional practices such as the use of magical stones, intertribal warfare, dancing, polyg-

yny, men's houses, etc. As a trade off, they gained a powerful ally in the Presbyterian mission which protected the villagers in the frontier situation prevailing in the last quarter of the 19th century. Just as importantly, the mission provided a social and intellectual framework that allowed villagers to react effectively to the colonial context. As early as 1910, encouraged by the mission, villagers had started to develop coconut groves and to sell their own copra as an alternative to wage labour on European plantations. Fifty years later, they were among the first ni-Vanuatu to participate in the tourist industry.

Erakor villagers have long followed their own ideology of modernization, at first phrased in a Christian idiom and expressed today in terms of economic development and a rise in standards of living. They are the modernization autodidacts of Vanuatu. This is the reason I went to Erakor, as few anthropologists had studied this sort of social world in the early 1970s. The village is what scholars used to call an acculturated community until the notion of tradition itself became problematic. (See Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Keesing and Tonkinson 1982; Philibert 1986.)

I spent 24 months in all in Erakor during three sojourns made between 1972 and 1983. It is the second largest village community in Vanuatu with a population of 1000 inhabitants (1983) living on land covering an area of 1400 ha; the village is bordered on the northern and western sides by a lagoon where villagers find fish and shellfish. Households are involved to varying degrees in subsistence gardening (slash-and-burn cultivation of root crops mostly), with a majority of them self-sufficient with regard to native products. Besides producing coprah and marketing produce in town, villagers are involved in wage labour in the three hotels located across the Erakor lagoon and in town. Wage labour represents the main articulation between the village economy and the national one. In 1983, 243 adults were wage earners.

Though villagers are no longer peasants, they have not become proletarianized. They have retained some corporate solidarities and the sort of political discourses associated with communal ownership of the means of production. (See Philibert 1981, 1988.) My anthropological fascination with Erakor comes from the fact that the ideological reproduction of such a hybrid sociological form can never be assured for very long and that, as such, it is an ideal place to analyze cultural continuity.

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