

■ READING 1

An Appropriate Role for Postcolonial Applied Anthropologists

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Applied anthropology became a recognized discipline in the prewar colonial epoch. Indeed, during the 1920s and 1930s colonialism and its concomitant commercialism seem to have shaped the various roles that applied anthropologists have assumed: trouble-shooting, management consulting, government administration, research and development. The thesis of this paper is that many applied anthropologists are still operating in the colonial harness. However, clinical anthropology provides a theory and method by which applied anthropologists can break away from outmoded models and assume a professional role in keeping with the changed problems and perspectives of the postcolonial era.

This thesis will be discussed in historical perspective as follows: (1) applied anthropology under the colonial yoke; (2) the search for an appropriate postcolonial role; (3) review of fundamentals: the natural history approach; (4) development of multidiscipline research; (5) some empirically based generalizations; (6) emergence of a deductive working hypothesis; (7) an appropriate role for postcolonial anthropologists; and (8) summary.

**APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY
UNDER THE COLONIAL YOKE**

The term *colonial yoke* is used here in a broad sense. Politically the expression refers to the superimposition of foreign rule by a few commercially dominant nations over most of the world's culturally unique, geographically rooted peoples, an era that lasted from one to several centuries. The term is also used to denote a dated way of behaving, thinking, feeling, and evaluating based on the assumption, often unconscious, that a human community or individual can be shaped, according to preconceived exotic norms, by superimposed, culturally alien forces.

From countless case studies made in many parts of the world, however, we have discovered that even when foreign administration succeeded in enforcing a kind of superficial conformity, according to its own policies and programs, in the behavior and productions of a subject people, such outward expressions barely concealed the hostility, conscious and unconscious, that it engendered. Mental illness and the arresting or regression of personality maturation according to native patterns, often accompanied conforming behavior.¹

It is not necessary to specify in detail how anthropologists have been employed in colonial situations both abroad (as in the British, Dutch, and American colonial services) and at home (as in the Mexican, Canadian, and United States administration of American Indian populations and tribes). The point to be emphasized is that while trouble-

shooting may have somewhat decreased, most of these approaches are still in use among applied anthropologists. For example, James A. Clifton (1970), in his recent volume of readings in applied anthropology, illustrates three types of involvement.

The first is the well-known postwar administration of the United Nations Trust Territory of Micronesia as described by Homer G. Barnett (1956). In this case the anthropologists worked on behalf of their client, the United States High Commissioner of the territory. Their role was to act as government consultants and liaison officers with the native population and to assist in planning and implementing official policy and programs for developing the economic resources and encouraging self-government in the area.

The second case is that of the famous Hacienda Vicos, Peru, described by Allan R. Holmberg (1965). Here the anthropologist assumed the role of *patrón* of a hacienda, leased by Cornell University from Peruvian owners for purposes of "research and development." Although the anthropologist-*patrón* and his associates formulated the basic goals of the project before it commenced, they gradually worked their Indian peons into leadership and decision-making roles. Finally, through the expropriation of the land by the Peruvian government, the Vicosiñas themselves were able to purchase the hacienda on reasonable long-range terms.

The third case is the much-publicized Fox Project, directed and described by Sol Tax (1958) and his associates. Although this project started with a philosophy tinged with the "development" concept, the anthropologists assuming the role of "learning while helping," its meticulously described and evaluated strategy shifted during the fieldwork. Eventually the idea of "concerned interference" in the lives of the Fox Indians was rejected in favor of planned action to increase "the areas of free choice available to the Indians and of helping the Indians understand better the choices available" to them (Peattie 1960:300-04).

All of these cases reveal overtones of the "colonial yoke" to a greater or lesser degree. They were motivated by an intent to bring about "introduced" or "directed" change in the cultures of the communities under consideration. They were imbued with value judgments stemming from a "development" philosophy. But the very terms, *underdeveloped* or *undeveloped* peoples, imply that such groups are somehow deficient from the Westerner's viewpoint. As an informant from a new nation recently freed from colonial political status remarked, "These words reveal a belief that something is wrong with us." Even a change in semantics from "underdeveloped" to "newly-developing," suggested by George M. Foster (1962:ix), does not disguise the widely held premise that such peoples are all in need of guidance, health care, technological development, and cultural change.

THE SEARCH FOR AN APPROPRIATE POSTCOLONIAL ROLE

Whether or not we accept this premise, all three cases demonstrate some degree of awareness of the need for a more appropriate postcolonial role for the applied anthropologist (Lewis 1973:591). In his discussion of "the ethics of helping people change," Foster (1969:174-79) shows a fine sensitivity regarding the problem of professional role but he

does not succeed in elucidating an orientation entirely free of the “colonial yoke,” according to the present thesis.

The point to be stressed is that if an anthropologist rejects the value-loaded philosophy of “development” with its implications of the need for cultural change on the part of new nations, he or she has no alternative but to look for an appropriate professional role conspicuously free of the “colonial yoke.”

REVIEW OF FUNDAMENTALS: THE NATURAL HISTORY APPROACH

One way to begin such a search is by reviewing fundamentals. At the risk of spelling out the obvious, let us consider the origins of modern ethnographic research.

Until recent decades (and even today among some practitioners of the discipline) anthropology has been considered to represent the emerging science of humankind. It has not only essayed to combine biological, sociocultural, and humanities approaches in the study of human groups, it has also staked its maturation on empirically based methods and generalizations. Indeed it may be distinguished from other disciplines centering on *Homo sapiens* by its emphasis on first-hand fieldwork (i.e., ethnography) on human communities in their natural and social settings. Isolated natural laboratories where human groups have gained a foothold have been sought as the locus of research. For this purpose the classic natural history approach, with its four traditional phases of investigation—general description of observed phenomena, classification, comparison, and empirically based generalizations—was borrowed from Charles Darwin and other classic natural historians. Each of these scientific investigators carried under one hat the elements of several field disciplines, including biology, geology, botany, and zoology, as well as ethology and eventually ecology.

The rationale behind this type of field research is that deductive hypotheses, based on inductive generalizations rooted in first-hand observations in situational context and, capable of scientific verification, will in time emerge. The best example of the process is of course Darwin’s theory of organic evolution based on natural selection.

DEVELOPMENT OF MULTIDISCIPLINE RESEARCH

As ethnology based on ethnographic fieldwork developed, the kinds of information needed about a community under investigation expanded spatially, temporally, and in psychological depth. The number of disciplines needed by the investigator increased in complexity and degree of specialization. No longer, it was felt by some anthropologists, could all this expertise be mastered by one person. If ethnology was to aid in developing a unified science of humankind, fieldworkers would have to cooperate in multidisciplinary teams.

The use of several methods by professionals from many disciplines working together on the same unit of research has afforded the opportunity for students of the human group to obtain many viewpoints on a single complex event (a human community) in its natural setting in space and time virtually simultaneously.² The resulting multifac-

eted perspective has yielded new insights into the processes of culture change in depth and suggested the probability that such students might before too long develop the tools and the analytical skills to forecast correctly the probable behavior of known groups under certain likely conditions.

SOME EMPIRICALLY BASED GENERALIZATIONS

By these two approaches—ethnography as natural history and as multidiscipline research—ethnologists have long since found that a culture is not merely a heterogeneous collection of customs, beliefs, attitudes, and values, as was once assumed. It is to a degree consolidated; that is, its component parts are internally related to one another. But the discovery to be emphasized is that a culture is patterned by the behavior of its members. The people of the community, creating and expressing a lifestyle by their actions and productions, are the active agents in making, adapting, and structuring their lifeway in relation to their attempts to resolve their living problems—past, present, and future.

Thus, each culture, viewed as a whole, is a unique creation of the group whose lifestyle it expresses. Most important to the applied anthropologist, however, is that such a culture can be changed, over the long haul, only by the group members themselves. The culture-creating propensity of a people as a problem-solving device is the innate, uniquely human activity that differentiates human beings irrevocably from all other organic phenomena. Animals have social systems, child training patterns, communication devices, and many other attributes formerly considered uniquely human. But the community's culture-building proclivity, exhibited by no other species, is humanity's most significant characteristic. Herein lies the most *human* power and the unique genius of *Homo sapiens*.³

Contrary to popular stereotypes, the propensity of people living in groups that inhabit diverse ecological niches of the world to create distinctive lifestyles appropriate to their needs, has evidently evolved adaptively through natural selection, according to the Darwinian theory. The cultures themselves change but do not evolve, except by rather far-fetched analogy. To talk about cultural evolution, or social progress, as these terms are generally used is, in the light of worldwide ethnographic findings, grossly misleading.

EMERGENCE OF A DEDUCTIVE WORKING HYPOTHESIS

From the above-stated empirically based generalizations and others derived from field-work on human communities in many parts of the world, a deductive working hypothesis has emerged that may help to clarify an appropriate postcolonial role for applied anthropologists. Since this has already been described in detail elsewhere, I shall merely summarize it here.⁴

Populations of the species *Homo sapiens* tend to seek out viable, culturally congenial niches and to settle into them. Once established they explore the habitat and, by a process of trial and error, decide how its natural resources may be used for their purposes. On the basis of preferred patterns expressed in the culture that the founders have brought

with them, or borrowed from their new neighbors, community members organize themselves to solve their practical living problems in the new locale. These include obtaining and distributing balanced nutrition and craft productions so as to enhance group welfare without exhausting their essential resources. They try to foster and control the reproductive habits and size of their population in relation to their total living arrangements and the changing environment in situational context. They also activate and empower their leadership for decision making regarding essential group tasks. For these purposes, they build, adapt, and consolidate their culture as a problem-solving device, uniquely fashioned to cope with their particular living problems within the limitations and potentials of their specialized habitat. And they devise symbolic media: language, rhythmic movement, song, myth, ceremony, to communicate with one another and to train oncoming generations in order constantly to revise and to perpetuate their culture.

Thus, a human population is conceived as one unit among a number of transacting species, each with its own biogram, forming a local ecosystem in a worldwide network of such systems. Such a natural biosystem tends in isolation through time to consolidate itself in the direction of optimum control of its future function. Other species use natural mechanisms for this purpose but the human population uses both natural and cultural devices.

This theory, it should be noted, affords no basis for the concept of a lineal evolution of society, the Western thought pattern underlying "development." In both its unilineal and its multilinear versions, this stereotype has long since been disproved by empirical evidence. It tends to persist, however, as a convenient rationalization for action in the colonial tradition.

An example will suffice. It is well known that, in developing his thesis, Karl Marx was influenced by the three-phase theory of unilinear social evolution elaborated by Lewis H. Morgan. Beginning in 1869 Morgan, an American lawyer and student of ancient society, corresponded with Lorimer Fison, a Wesleyan Methodist missionary in Fiji, about Fijian organization and land ownership. Fison's description, used as the prototype for Morgan's "Middle Period of Barbarism," was accepted not only as a model for unilinear evolutionists but also as an orthodoxy by which to administer land rights and social relations in the British Crown Colony of Fiji (France 1969:117). Despite the fact that its limitations and inaccuracies have been demonstrated, it has also been used extensively as a norm by which to judge the validity of subsequent research in the area.

In the deductive hypothesis summarized above, however, the biologically based concept of "homeostasis" replaces that of "social evolution," "development," and "progress" in popular Western ideology. Homeostasis, conceived in this context, may be defined as a universal process by which a human population adapts itself to its changing natural and social situation and tries to resolve its basic problems as a group by tailoring and consolidating its culture toward optimum future function (Thompson 1969b). The effects of this process are most easily recognized in populations that have been isolated geographically or socially. Once identified, however, they may be detected in every human group, rural and urban.

Investigation of the homeostatic process demands a research model with directional dynamic, and with temporal as well as spatial dimensions. The concept affords a research tool to investigate feedback relationships between the behavior of a human population and its productive and reproductive institutions under favorable conditions. It postulates a cultural change process that discards as irrelevant a limited, linear, sequential concept of "cause and effect" and a simple additive scale for measuring cultural health and maturity. Rather, it projects a norm for evaluating group growth and maturation in terms of in-

creased biocultural adaptation, consolidation, and balance in the transaction of a human population with its environment.

AN APPROPRIATE ROLE FOR POSTCOLONIAL ANTHROPOLOGISTS

According to the present thesis, a human society, whether a small group, community, region, state, or nation, is viewed as its own innate problem-solver. In the postcolonial world each such unit is considered to be a potentially independent entity, both culturally and politically. When specialized information or consultation is needed the society itself becomes the appropriate client that may solicit or hire professional services to meet its needs.

When the expertise of an anthropologist is solicited by such a client a crucial question arises. How can his or her professional role be defined to fully use the client group's culture-creating and culture-changing proclivities and its intimate acquaintance with its own problems in its changing day-by-day situation? How can the anthropologist's role explicitly complement and underwrite the client's function to make and implement its own decisions and to bring about changes in its lifestyle? How can that role reinforce the client's inevitable responsibility as the only agent that can succeed, over the long term, in solving its own problems?

According to present perspectives, an applied anthropologist may not appropriately assume the part of an administrator, developer, manipulator, "do-gooder," or missionary. He or she sets no goals, engineers no solutions, activates no policies. In fact, personal politics and morality are irrelevant to professional performance.

If hired by a client group, an anthropologist should be equipped to provide services as a consultant and to supply information and options requested by the client, on the basis of first-hand experience and research as well as professional training and worldwide perspectives. Thus, his or her designated role will be one of understanding in depth the group's condition in its ongoing life situation, and of clarifying its realistic choices of action under likely future situations. Whether or not the client group acts on this information, and if so how, is in no way part of the anthropologist's professional problem from the present viewpoint. It would be highly improper and probably harmful—perhaps even fatal—to the well-being and maturation pattern of the client society for an outsider to interfere with its decision-making and action prerogatives.

This definition of an applied anthropologist's role leads directly to a clinical approach to the practical problems of a client community. Indeed, a clinical approach to such problems involves adding a final step to the classic ethnographic method. Having placed in an ethnographer's custody its traditions, laws, genealogies, skills, and arts—perhaps even its ceremonies and secret wisdom—the community may now regard him or her as a basic cultural resource, even its ultimate authority on custom. Thus, by common consent, many ethnographers are fully qualified for the role of community consultant to the group under investigation. By this final step, the relationship between unit of research and ethnographer changes to one of client to consultant and prognosticator.

We should not assume, however, that this final step will be easy. Indeed it is quite the opposite, as anyone who has attempted it can attest. It is well known that most of the world's nations prefer to do their own research and consultant work. When they hire

outside specialists they usually turn to lawyers, political scientists, or technicians. Because the crucial importance of cultural factors in decision-making processes at all levels of complexity is not generally recognized, the role in modern nation building that anthropologists are equipped to play is often overlooked. Besides, their historic link with colonialism may work against them. But as the colonial experience recedes and the significance of cultural research becomes clearer the situation of applied anthropologists may be expected to improve, provided we continue to upgrade our skills in relevant directions. Role clarification is an indispensable first step.

Meanwhile a few veteran anthropologists are blazing a new trail in applied anthropology. For example, the people of the Pacific Trust Territory, inhabiting what will soon become the last area under a United Nations Trusteeship,⁵ are grappling with difficult decisions. Leonard E. Mason, an anthropologist well known for his first-hand reports on Micronesians, has made his extensive knowledge of the territory and its problems available to the local inhabitants (and other interested parties) as they work out a constitution and negotiate with United States government officials regarding their future political status.⁶ Whether such services will be sought by Micronesians, however, remains to be seen.

A clinical approach in ethnography has many other potentials. In 1973, for example, Iceland notified the United States that it would like the 1951 North Atlantic Treaty Organization agreement revised so that American troops stationed on the island would be withdrawn. This happens every three or four years. The problem has been diagnosed as the need to draft a treaty that will satisfy not only the security needs of the alliance but the talents of the Icelanders as well (Thompson 1960).

On the basis of ethnographic research we know that this small nation (population about 210,000) has devised some extraordinary means of identifying, training, and using its human resources. This skill, which eases human relations and gives dignity to the individual, could be worked into the NATO draft agreement so that its participants would be committed to respect one another and use their available talents regardless of population size and existing power structures. Thus, the unique assets of a small nation and its potential contribution to a large international organization would be formally recognized and a step toward mutually satisfactory peaceful relations would be taken. A significant move in this direction might be made if the United States would grant Iceland's recent request to employ Icelanders rather than Americans on nonmilitary, nonstrategic jobs at the Keflavik Air Force Base.

SUMMARY

To recapitulate, in the postcolonial world two crucial questions arise regarding application of a multidisciplinary ethnographic approach and its factually based findings to contemporary social problems. First, how can a client community's situation be formulated to foster and use the problem-solving and culture-changing assets of its members? Second, if a client group is accepted as the decision maker and active agent of change, what should be the role of an applied anthropologist in relation to it?

According to the present clinical approach, it is suggested that, on the basis of professional training and eye-witness experience, an applied anthropologist may aid a client group as consultant by defining the group's practical options in local, regional, national,

and global context. Using understanding of group behavior in the context of its ongoing life situation, a clinical anthropologist may predict, within certain limitations, the probable effect that the selection of each option would have on the client community were it to be selected and implemented by the membership. Choice of a preferred alternative and its enactment, however, should remain the prerogative and responsibility of the client.

Notes

1. See, for example, Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (1950); Alice Joseph, M.D., and Veronica Murray, M.D., *Chomorroos and Carolinians of Saipan: Personality Studies* (1951); A. Irving Hallowell, "Ojibwa Personality and Acculturation" (1952); and the monographs of the Indian Education, Personality and Administration Research. Thus see Alice Joseph, Rosamond Spicer, and Jane Chesky, *The Desert People: A Study of the Papago Indians* (1949); Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton, *The Navaho* (1946); Dorothea Leighton, M.D., and Clyde Kluckhohn, Ph.D., *Children of the People: The Navaho Individual and His Development* (1969); Dorothea Leighton and John Adair, *People of the Middle Place: A Study of the Zuni Indians* (1966); Gordon Macgregor, *Warriors without Weapons: A Study of the Society and Personality Development of the Pine Ridge Sioux* (1946); Laura Thompson and Alice Joseph, *The Hopi Way* (1967); and Laura Thompson, *Culture in Crisis: A Study of the Hopi Indians* (1973).
2. For a well-known example of the use of multidiscipline methods, see two related monographs by Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton (1946, 1969).
3. For an elaboration of these points, see Laura Thompson, *The Secret of Culture: Nine Community Studies* (1969a).
4. For an elaboration of this hypothesis, see Laura Thompson, *Toward a Science of Mankind* (1961), and "Some Limitations of the Peasant Concept" (1970:75-76).
5. Termination of the New Guinea Trusteeship is in transition.
6. Personal communication, Leonard E. Mason.

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