

Concept of culture in anthropological studies



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While culture may be an increasingly popular concept in public discourse, anthropology has instead seen a steady movement away from culture. This essay will first seek to understand the disillusionment amongst anthropologists towards culture. I will then argue that while culture may have ceased to be a useful analytical concept for anthropology, it remains more important than ever as an ethnographic object of anthropological study. Therefore, this essay will argue while culture as the primary organizing concept of anthropology is faulty, the concept should be saved, as it remains uniquely powerful in enabling anthropology to address the challenges posed in the 21st century.

The concept of culture remains problematic in anthropological discourse as it assumes a self-other distinction, enforcing separations that inevitably establish a sense of hierarchy. Through the inherent construction of the “other”, culture as an anthropological theory helps produce and maintain difference (Abu-Lughod, 1991: 470). The portrayal of the other as fundamentally different from the anthropologist reinforces notions of a unitary and homogenous culture and denies the other a history. Notions of culture hence continually enforce the incarceration of the native in time and space (Gupta & Ferguson 1997: 43). The non-Western other becomes spoken for by the Western self who gathers and detaches diverse experiences and facts from their original temporal value, giving them ‘enduring value in a new arrangement’ (Clifford 1988: 231 in Abu-Lughod, 1991: 471). This is exemplified through the state-sanctioned promotion of aboriginal culture in Australian schools. Through state attempts to “revive” aboriginal culture, aboriginal culture comes to represent otherness, replaying the colonial

dynamic of the state and the other. Instead of promoting aboriginal culture, the state produces its own imagination of indigenous culture. What were once 'symbols within another order of meaning' become signs of a generalized Indigeneity, the master signifier that is a valued element within a hegemonic Western imaginary (Cowlshaw, 2012: 405). In attempting to promote multiculturalism, the Australian state instead fetishizes difference and romanticizes otherness, reducing culture to 'a tag for ethnic identity and a license for political and intellectual separatism' (Turner, 1993: 414). Therefore, culture, thought of as a finite resource and overemphasizing difference, reproduces and conceals systems of domination, and hence is not worth saving.

Culture as a theoretical concept affixes boundedness and homogeneity, ignoring that social reality is characterized by variability and individual agency. Culture thus fails to account for the plurality and diversity of the human experience. In locating sex differences in culture, feminists seek to build and reform social life in line with a perceived "women's culture" (Abu-Lughod, 1991: 470-1). However, proposals on a women's culture almost always build upon values traditionally associated with Western women (Abu-Lughod, 1991: 471). This valorization by cultural feminists thus 'leave in place the divide that structured the experiences of selfhood and oppression', perpetuating the problem of inequality faced by women by generalizing the experience of womanhood. The experiences of trans women, and women of colour, for instance, are always different from those of the white, middle-class, heterosexual woman (Abu-Lughod, 1991: 468). Similarly, masculinity and femininity do not have the same meanings in other cultures, nor do

women's lives in the Global South resemble that of Western women (Abu-Lughod, 1991: 468). Crucially, the notion of a women's culture ignores that 'experiences have been constructed historically and have changed over time' (Abu-Lughod, 1991: 471). Cultural feminism, in relying on notions of authenticity and the return to positive values not represented by the dominant other, falls into the trap of essentialism. Anthropologists should instead write against culture to confront the issues of domination and generalization the concept encompasses. Culture in failing to acknowledge the variability of the lived experience, is therefore not worth saving, serving merely to reproduce systems of inequality.

Furthermore, culture as conceived in courts of law is not worth saving. Culture as objective evidence demands reification. The idea of culture implies an expectation of roots, and a stable, territorialized existence (Clifford, 1988: 338), assuming cultural communities are clearly bounded and internally homogenous. Exemplified through the case for Mashpee tribal status and identity, this rigid view of culture ignores the diversity between and within communities, affixing static identities to individuals who are made to choose between being "American" or "Indian", with progress towards citizenship assuming a steady movement away from native tradition (Clifford, 1988: 341). The court in failing to acknowledge that 'institutions of culture and tribe are historical processes, tendentious and changing' (Clifford, 1988: 339), reiterates the problematic view that cultural identities must be grounded in a primordial, biological identity (Good, 2008: s53). The 'essentialising proclivities of law itself' (Good, 2008: s52) meant the court often resorted to cultural essentialism to conceal the 'optative and

contested nature of cultural practices' (Good, 2008: s56), ignoring the complexities surrounding Mashpee identity building. By demanding the reification of culture, the court decreed that 'Indian identity had to exist as an objective documentary fact persisting through time', ignoring the reality of a long relational struggle to maintain and recreate Mashpee identity that began with the first contact with settlers and continue to this day (Clifford, 1988: 339). Mashpee Indians in arguing for tribal status found themselves instead 'trapped by the stories that could be told about them' by the Western other (Clifford, 1988: 342). Therefore, the law's reifying approach to culture is not worth saving insofar as it results in distorted understandings and miscarriages of justice (Good, 2008: s57), leaving no place for the subtlety and complexities of the anthropological study of culture.

While 'a return to cultural accountancy as the signature of a quintessentially anthropological contribution to the understanding of a phenomenon' is deeply problematic, through dialectical engagement with the sociomaterial, and framed in appropriate theoretical terms, culture remains critical in making sense of the world and hence worth saving (Comaroff, 2010: 529). Anthropologists progressively speak of the cultural, and not of culture, using culture in its adjectival form to describe a contingent process but not as an abstract noun (Comaroff, 2010: 526). Instead, a Boasian view of cultures as 'products of highly contingent histories, and fusions of elements, which originate in different times and places' is needed (Barnard & Spencer, 2010: 117). Indeed, the case for Mashpee identity and tribal status, when analyzed anthropologically, reveals how events are 'always mediated by local cultural structures' (Clifford, 1988: 344). Mashpee identity should be understood as '

a series of cultural and political transactions' instead of 'all-or-nothing conversions', where Mashpee Indians live and act between cultures in a series of ad hoc engagements (Clifford, 1988: 342). Culture, viewed as a fluid entity, and understood with reference to the complex and multilayered mediations in which it is situated, thus reveals the 'irreducible plurality of human societies', all distinct and equally valuable (Barnard & Spencer, 2010: 170). To abandon talk of 'cultures' altogether because of its taint of essentialism, but to retain use of the adjectival 'cultural' as some anthropologists have advocated, is to abandon the critical pluralizing element of the modern anthropological usage of the term (Barnard & Spencer, 2010: 175). Hence, the concept of culture remains worth saving.

Moreover, despite anthropological disillusionment with culture, culture remains worth saving insofar as it remains useful as a political tool. "Culture" is no longer the property of anthropologists, but has become a tool used by everyone to make sense of an increasingly complex and changing world (Comaroff 2010: 526). Anthropologists may have discarded the notion of culture as a discrete, bounded entity rooted in a particular territory, yet it is precisely this definition of culture which the public demands (Brumann in Sahlins, 1999: 403). This is crucially illustrated through the rise of nationalism, brought about by fears surrounding transnationalism. As actual places and localities become progressively blurred and indeterminate, 'ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become ever more salient' (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997: 39). The displacement experienced due to changing boundaries results in nostalgia for an imagined, original state of being. Imagined communities are attached to imagined places when displaced

peoples organize themselves around imagined homelands in a world that seems ‘ increasingly to deny such firm territorial anchors in their actuality’ (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997: 39). Though imagined, these ideas of culture are not imaginary and have political force, allowing for the construction of a homeland by displaced peoples. Instead of studying ‘ culture’ as a subject, anthropologists should study how culture as an object continues to have pragmatic usage in the world (Sahlins, 1999: 412). Culture, far from isolating anthropological analysis from the world of politics, provides a link between them (Barnard & Spencer, 2010: 175). By understanding the centrality of culture in public discourse, culture as the object of anthropological analysis continues to offer new insights, and is worth saving.

In the final analysis, this essay rejects culture as a bounded, homogenous and reified entity. Through acknowledging its plurality and variability, the concept of culture remains useful as an ethnographic object for anthropological study. Culture, and all of its history, as an artifact of anthropology, should anchor the discipline, but no longer foreground it, allowing anthropologists to effectively address questions of evolution, patterning and continuity over time and across species. Therefore, reworking the traditional concept of culture is useful, but retaining it is essential.

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