

The Anthropology of Experience

Edited by Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 1986

Part I: The Concept of Experience

1. Edward M. Bruner: *Experience and its Expression*

The relationship between experience and its expressions is always problematic. It is impossible to know completely someone else's experiences. Everybody tells a story differently and stresses other aspects of the experience. That is why Dilthey suggested to instead study and interpret and study the expressions of the experiences, like the representations, performances and texts. We understand others on the basis of our own experience. That inner experience can in its turn be influenced by culture. So next to reality, there is experience and expression. Experience is how reality presents itself to our consciousness, expression is how this individual experience is framed and articulated. In expressing you will have to decide on a beginning and an end of your 'story', you'll have to cut a unit out of the continual flow of life. According to Dilthey we can never experience this flow that life is directly. By studying culture through its expressions the basic units of analysis are established by the people that are being studied rather than by the alien observer. We are then interpreting the people as they are interpreting themselves, through art and cultural expressions.

2. Victor W. Turner: *Dewey, Dilthey, and Drama: An Essay in the Anthropology of Experience*

We make sense of experiences by matching them to what culture and language have brought us from the past, to cultural values and beliefs. Turner refers to John Dewey and Wilhelm Dilthey. Dilthey and Dewey described life as "pulsating and rhythmical", as a combination of breaks and re-unions. "Moments of fulfilment punctuate experience" wrote Dewey, and "the passage from disturbance into harmony is that of intensest life". Dilthey viewed experience as an eruption from routine and saw in it an urging towards expression. Dewey said that works of art are "celebrations, recognized as such, of ordinary experience". Turner explains how experiences that stand out have a structure with a beginning, middle and end. They start with shocks of pain or pleasure that summon up precedents and likeness from the past. They make us need to find meaning in what has so disconcerted us, and here for we try to put past and present together. This is how experience urges us toward expression. According to Dilthey, art depends on this urge to confess or declare. He stresses that the aesthetic is born from sensible human experience and does not spring from some platonic ideal. Turner then elaborates on his work on 'social drama': the solving of social conflicts by ritualised redressive action like law, religion, or other ceremonies, and how this process is affected by the culture. He states that in different cultures theatre does not arise from imitation of some kind, but is as a redressive ritual a part of this process of social drama.

3. Roger D. Abrahams: *Ordinary and Extraordinary Experience*

Nowadays we acknowledge that all life involves the construction of agreed-upon fictions and so we focus on the self and on experiences. But 'experience' is a very American term. It's Americans who are so preoccupied with experience, who hunger for it and are obsessed with novelty. This notions of experience may affect our theories about experience. The process of observing and reporting does alter the significance and perhaps the meaning of the activities. There is a double consciousness of experience: we participate in the action but also report about it, we are part of it but are also detached witnesses. In the field ethnographers have to be aware of themselves and their experiencing and understanding, and how their subjects experience themselves and us. As with every experience, we have one eye on the past and the other on the future. We model our actions after prior texts and previous accounts of similar experiences and we also change our actions with reference to the future. According to Abrahams there are two types of experiences that 'stand out': those arising directly out of the flow of life, with little explicit preparation, and those we plan, with fixed parts and roles. In spite of the differences between of feeling and apprehension between everyday experiences and those arising from the most important moments in our lives, American culture chooses to optimise the ease of passage between the two states by almost secretly 'preparing' spontaneous experiences. The appearance of spontaneity is being identified with notions of the authentic self. Abrahams point here is that ethnographers who wish to work on an anthropology of experience must understand their own predisposition when judging acts of others. Abrahams pleads for an approach that sees both the larger and smaller experiences as creative achievements. Each experience, planned for or not, is interesting insofar the planning produces some sense of discovery, some appearance of spontaneous exchange of energies and information with others. An anthropology of experience might look for the ways in which the ordinary and the extraordinary coexist.

4. Frederick Turner: *Reflexivity as Evolution in Thoreau's Walden*

Frederick Turner notes in his paper that Henry David Thoreau's 'Walden' was written at the same time as 'League of the Iroquis' by Lewis Henry Morgan and the creation of Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics, both important to anthropology. This was in a nineteenth-century America where reflection became very important. Turner points out that the analysis of personal experience lies at the core of not only 'Walden' but anthropology as well. In the field an anthropologist is in dialogue with himself as much as with others, and field experience is then also a "personal voyage of self-discovery". Anthropologists go to a foreign country to become better observers of other people, Thoreau went to a familiar land to become a better observer of himself. The distance travelled is secondary to the processes involved, and those processes are similar in anthropology and in 'Walden'. Thoreau might have found a very adequate interpretation for how anthropologists use the term 'experience': "when we are truly experiencing we are growing by a reflective process in which we are only separated by our consciousness from nature in order to share in nature's own creative process of self-transcendence" (F. Turner, p. 93).

Part II: Narrative

5. Renato Rosaldo: *Ilongot Hunting as Story and Experience*

Rosaldo argues that more attention should be given to the stories people tell themselves about themselves by giving the example of the Ilongot Hunting stories. He compares the two notions of ethnographic description: ethnoscientific models of analysis and detailed

monographs as versions of realism, to question how anthropologists should represent other people's lives and the reasons for living it like they do. In ethnography hunts are often reported without the excitement that is an important compelling part of it. Here narrative does provide a rich source of knowledge about the significance people find in their workaday lives, often by revealing what it is that can make life worth living. The significance Ilongot men seek in hunting derives more from how they think a good story is made than from the techniques usually put forward in ethnographic realism. The stories highlight the discrepancy between experience and its expression. The everyday is transformed into the extraordinary through the telling of the story. The stories are not about the daily routine but rather stress breaks from daily life, putting the hunter on centre stage. The stories do not mirror the actual hunt, but what happens on a hunt is partly determined by what makes a good story because this is also a measure of the success of the hunt. For the Ilongot the central qualities of hunting are alertness and quick improvisation. When responding to a challenge in this manner, Ilongot huntsmen experience themselves as the main character in their own stories. So an Ilongot hunting story is true not only in reference to the reality but also in fidelity to the cultural conventions of narration and prior stories.

6. Edward M. Bruner: *Ethnography as Narrative*

Bruner states that ethnographies are guided by an implicit narrative structure: they are stories told about the peoples studied. Ethnography itself can be studied as a discourse, as a genre of storytelling. The story of the past, present and future of the Native American culture has changed several times. First the past was glorious, the present disorganised, and the future held assimilation, true to the American dream. In the 1970's the world was changed, there was a new idea of equality and the narrative structure became that the past was exploitation, the present resistance movement and the future as ethnic resurgence. Writing on Indian culture in the 1930's and 1970's was based on these different narrative structures; first the tribes were seen to be on a certain point on their way to assimilation, later they were labelled by their proximity to ethnic resurgence. This is an example of how the present is given meaning with a certain future and an interpretation of the past in mind. Narrative structures serve as interpretative guides, and we might start research with a certain story already in our head. Ethnographer and informant also come to share the same narratives, so that Indians might act out the resistance narrative planned for them by American ethnographers. Both anthropologist and native informant participate in the same symbolic system. Only in a later time period, in a different social place, can we be able to see these narratives for what they are: social constructions.

Part III: Images

7. James W. Fernandez: *The Argument of Images and the Experience of Returning to the Whole*

Fernandez' paper is about how the experience of 'wholeness', the experience of coherence and relatedness that emerges in social movements is generated. It is 'pictured'. This experience happens particularly in 'revitalizing' movements that are designed to overcome feelings of fragmentation, alienation, and disorganisation. Based on his work on revitalization movements in Africa he labels the mechanisms that lead to the conviction of wholeness as "the argument of images". He states that ideas do not have the primacy we attribute to them, so he suggests to turn to organizing images as pictorializations of domains of experience. The conviction of wholeness is the product of imaginative visualisation or pictorialising, rather than from linguistics. Religious movements for example always mix metaphors so that the interaction between the tropes gives people the impression of coherence and wholeness. He argues that tropes fashion experience, but that we can also ask the question if experience

fashions tropes. Fernandez believes that prior images from sociohistorical experiences are brought forward and predicated on the subjects of a religious movement, subsequently becoming the basis of the performance. That performance then refashions the image, which then will become the basis of future enactments.

8. Bruce Kapferer: *Performance and the Structuring of Meaning and Experience*

Kapferer starts his paper with questions on phenomenology: how individuals transcend their aloneness in the world and come to share live experience. We act as if we really share experiential worlds, while each has its own experience. How do we do this? Kapferer thinks that it is accomplished by participating in cultural expressions. Only we do no longer assume that there is a spontaneous sharing which appears automatically when people find themselves together, participating in an event. By analysing Sinhalese exorcism he looks for the ways that can make us understand how this sharing is created. In the music and dance of the exorcism the particular is universalised and the universal is particularised. What is commonly called a 'ritual' consists of different languages of expression and communication: dance, liturgy, song, plastic arts, music, drama,... with a dynamic interplay between them. Each objectifies experience in its own way. Kapferer sees 'text' as the whole of structural principles that order a rite. Performance then unifies the text and the enactment and can be realised in a variety of forms. Performance is therefore critical in the analysis of meaning and experience.

Part IV: Reflexivity

9. Phyllis Gorfain: *Play and the Problem of Knowing in Hamlet: An Excursion into Interpretive Anthropology*

Gorfain explains how Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' can be read as a story about anthropologists as both makers and students of the texts they examine: isn't Hamlet about the gap between behaviour and its meanings, between the immediacy of experience and the shaping of experience into transmittable forms? Anthropologists find that their own knowledge of society can be seen as a story of stories, and so does Hamlet. The inquiry is inherently reflexive, just as Hamlet is a reflexive text. By comparing the workings of anthropology to Hamlet, Gorfain tries to reveal the mechanisms of artifice: in play, in social life and in ethnography we create a genealogy of audiences by making meaning through revision.

10. James A. Boon: *Symbols, Sylphs, and Siwa: Allegorical Machineries in the Text of Balinese Culture*

Boon argues that in Bali culture is symbolic in all domains, not only in art and religion. He claims that we must take culture as a text, rather than concentrating on the texts produced by culture. For Boon politics and the events from everyday are as symbolic as theatrical rites. The different domains of culture do not simply reinforce each other like matching building bricks. They can even contradict, like the systems used in Balinese society for status ranking. It is the continual play between what Boon calls (status) 'Machineries' that provides the dynamics and openness of culture. For Boon cultures operate in certain respects like texts, and a 'text' is "in a state of continual production; it is not a fixed re-production of something outside itself that it merely refers to".

11. Barbara Myerhoff: "Life not Death in Venice"

Myerhoff talks about cultural mirroring in a highly self-conscious society. Elder Jews in California, were mostly born in Eastern Europe, emigrated to the North of the US, and when retired moved South. They are East Europeans, religious Jews and modern Americans at once. They decided to tell their history in their own way so that it would be accepted or at least acknowledged by outsiders. She gives this as an example of how people make sense of themselves and construct their culture in the process. They organised ceremonies, for example to 'bind someone up with the ancestors' and decided to paint a mural of their culture. This depicts scenes from their past present and future, scenes from old Europe, the Mayflower, New York and the Statue of Liberty. They used Hebrew, English and Yiddish signs and thus made an amalgam that incorporates all layers of history. Just like in other cultures they 'constructed' theirs with historical elements from different eras and sources, and just as in other cultures the 'performance' helped them to believe in the construction.

Part V: Enactments

12. John Stewart: *Patronage and Control in the Trinidad Carnival*

Carnival is one of those systems that not only reflects but also shapes a people's idea about themselves and their society. Stewart studied how French settlers, English and French planters, Africans, Indians and Creoles, participants from different social groups have experienced the Trinidad carnival in different historical periods and different political atmospheres. The organisation, experience and perception of the carnival changed drastically throughout history, from fancy festival to a time of riots to a tourist spectacle largely depending on elements of power. How one experiences carnival depends very much on one's ideology and position in the system. In carnival, all layers of history are represented, as well as all socio-political contradictions. Changes in the carnival may be recognized as occurring between the two poles of social ideal and social reality, with a tendency to reject insistence on either extreme. If everyday tensions are too fully expressed in the carnival, it is reduced to disorder. If harmonious integration or performance for outsiders is overemphasized, carnival loses its ritual vitality.

13. Barbara A. Babcock: *Modeled Selves: Helen Cordero's "Little People"*

Helen Cordero was a Cochiti potter who with her ceramic forms revitalised traditional Pueblo pottery. Her pottery ("Little People" she calls the figurines) show that tradition is a construction and we can not assume its continuity. She often made storytellers and related figurines, inspired on her grandfather who was also a storyteller. Babcock interviews Cordero on the origins of her often biographical work and the relation to Pueblo culture. Storytellers shape and reshape their own culture as they tell and retell their stories. Another theme of the paper is that material objects too, can be studied as 'texts', as representations of cultural and personal experience.

14. Richard Schechner: *Magnitudes of Performance*

Schechner's paper is an exploration of aspects of the magnitudes of performance from the standpoint of individual experience and returns to the question what ordinary everyday behaviour is in relation to acting as performed by professional actors. For this schechner looks at two main acting methods: Stanislavski's "emotional recall" which was later adapted

to Actors' Studio 'method acting', and the mechanical, physical acting employed by the Balinese and by the Hindu Indians in their classical dance-dramas. Schechner concludes that actors feel exactly the same when using either strategy, which raises questions on the emotional aspects of performance and of 'real life'. He suggests that there is not much difference between ordinary behaviour and professional acting. Do people use the Stanislavski-Strasberg method in everyday life? Maybe actions can generate emotions: if we act happy we become happy. Emotions then are brought about in both performers and audience because there is some sort of universal language of emotion encoded in our brain. All people are able to, maybe need to, "act" out behaviour that they have learned in the past and mix it with new behaviour according to the circumstances.