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CULTURE AND ETHNIC IDENTITY: THE CASE OF THE LAHANAN OF ULU BELAGA

Jennifer Alexander

INTRODUCTION

The development of social anthropology over the past two decades might well be seen as the refinement of increasingly complex understandings of the concept of culture. While contemporary anthropologists agree on the centrality of the culture concept to their discipline, there has often been rather less agreement on how the concept should be defined or how it might best be used in investigating the ways of life of other peoples. In his well-known and highly regarded book, *Mirror for Man* the American anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn listed no less than eleven definitions of culture ranging from "the total ways of life of a people", through "a way of thinking, feeling and believing", to a "set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to other men" (1949). But despite this apparent diversity the definitions do have something in common and it is possible to make some general statements about culture with which anthropologists would agree. Or at least most anthropologists, most of the time.

There is a tendency in popular discourse to equate culture with the expressive arts. When we talk of a people's culture we often mean their music, their dances, their carving and painting, perhaps their pastimes and sports, even their ceremonies. The common distinction between popular culture and high culture is based on this view and further incorporates a judgement that some artistic purposes and products are superior to others. It is important to stress that the anthropological concept is not limited to these aspects of culture; and nor does it involve moral or other evaluations.

This is not to deny the centrality of the expressive arts within cultures. Dances, music and other artistic endeavours are not only entertainments which provide opportunities for individuals to demonstrate their talents and skills, they are also a major means by which societies represent their ethnic identity both to themselves and to their neighbours.

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But in anthropological terms the expressive arts are only a small part of any culture. Farming techniques and styles of houses; kinship systems and ideas about cosmology; ways of paddling a longboat or using a chainsaw; methods of weaving a mat or pruning a pepper plant; none of these is inherently more cultural than another. It is the totality; the totality of

ideas, beliefs, feelings and ways of acting which comprise a culture. To be a Lahanan is not only to know what a *tilung* is: it is to know how to build a *tilung*; how to behave in one; and, above all, to be a member of one.

It is common for elements of a particular culture to be shared with neighbouring societies, and not uncommon for particular elements to be shared by a great number of cultures, but any particular culture is always unique. At first glance the societies of Ulu Belaga appear to share the same culture: they farm in similar ways; they share similar residential arrangements; and have similar social structures. Closer acquaintance, however, reveals often subtle but always significant differences in each of these areas.

The most obvious cultural differences in the Ulu Belaga are linguistic: small societies with populations of around five hundred have retained their own language, even though they must use other languages to communicate with outsiders and have incorporated many words and phrases from these languages into their own. This is not an unusual situation, for survivors of cultures which have been destroyed by conquest or assimilation often retain their language after much else has been lost. In Australia, for example, where the Aboriginal people have been subjected to two hundred years of often harsh rule by European settlers, more than 100 languages have been fully described by linguists although in some cases only a single speaker of the language is still alive.

Most anthropologists see language as central to culture. A widely accepted contemporary definition, usually attributed to the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz but which can be traced in its essentials to the 19th century German sociologist Max Weber, defines culture as a "web of meanings". In this view culture is the set of symbols by which members of a community assign meaning to their own actions and to the actions of those around them. For the anthropologist learning a culture has a lot in common with learning a language; it is not enough to learn a list of words, one also needs to understand the grammar within which words are combined in sentences. But while learning a culture presupposes learning a language, it is not limited to this. Understanding another culture requires an appreciation of such things as when it is appropriate to laugh and when to cry, how you should stand when talking to your father, and what feelings you should have towards your mother's brother.

Conceptualizing culture as a web of meanings, a totality, does not mean that all aspects of a culture are tightly integrated; that all members of a culture think the same way; or that cultures are static and unable to change. Not all speakers of a particular language have the same vocabulary and they may disagree quite vehemently about the correct forms of grammar. So too with culture. Not only are some aspects of culture the domains of specialists, but other domains are fiercely contested with little agreement over correct practices: One reason for this is that cultures do not determine the ways in which individuals think: all cultures contain radicals and conservatives, traditionalists and modernists. Indeed culture is best described not as how people think, but as what people think with: culture is the set of categories with which people interpret the world around them.

For these reasons no culture is static. Even those cultures which are commonly described as 'traditional' are constantly changing. While any community places a high value on its own history and seeks culture