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The Invention of Culture

Second Edition

With a New Foreword by Tim Ingold

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Introduction

There are sciences whose “paradigms,” blocks of theoretical precept and precedent that define the orthodoxy of what Thomas Kuhn calls “normal science,” maintain a frozen immobility until their underpinnings are melted by the heat and pressure of accumulated evidence, and a plate-tectonic revolution results. Anthropology is not one of these. As a discipline, anthropology has its history of theoretical development, of the ascendancy and antagonism of certain orientations, a history that, indeed, manifests a certain logic or order (which is discussed in Chapter 6). For all the unanimity it commands, however, this flux of ideation might as well be described as a pure dialectic, a play of exposition (and denial) by disparate voices, or an eclectic accretion of all and sundry into the textbooks. What is remarkable about this is not so much the persistence of theoretical fossils (a persistence that is the stock-in-trade of academic tradition) but the failure of anthropology to institutionalize this persistence, or indeed, to institutionalize a consensus at all.

If *The Invention of Culture* shows a tendency to assert its opinions, rather than arbitrate them, then this reflects, at least in part, the condition of a discipline in which a writer is obliged to distill his own tradition and his own consensus. Beyond this, the tendency relates to

some of the assumptions in the first three chapters and to the *raison d'être* of the book.

A major concern of my argument is to analyze human motivation at a radical level—one that cuts deeper than the very fashionable clichés about the “interests” of corporations, political players, classes, “calculating man,” and so forth. This does not mean that I am blissfully and naively unaware that such interests exist, or unconscious of the practical and ideological force of “interest” in the modern world. It means that I would like to consider such interests as a subset, or surface phenomenon, of more elemental questions. It would be, therefore rather naive to expect a study of the cultural constitution of phenomena to argue for “determination” of the process, or of significant parts of it, by some particular, privileged phenomenal context—especially when it argues that such contexts take their significances largely from one another.

This, then, is the analytical standpoint of a book that elects to view human phenomena from an “outside”—understanding that an outside perspective is as readily created as our most reliable “inside” ones. The discussion of cultural relativity is a case in point. Something of a red herring for those who want to argue for the pervasiveness of socioeconomic pressure, or against the possibility of a truly antiseptic scientific objectivity, it has been introduced here in what appears to be a controversially idealistic manner. But consider what is made of this “idealism” in the ensuing discussion, where “culture” itself is presented as a kind of illusion, a foil (and a kind of false objective) to aid the anthropologist in arranging his experiences. It is, of course, possible that the question of whether a false culture is truly or falsely relative has some interest for the truly fastidious, but by and large the ordinary premises for a vigorous, satisfying debate about “cultural relativity” have been obviated.

The tendency to sidestep, to obviate, to “not deal with” many or most of the chestnuts of theoretical hassling in anthropology, maddening as it may be to those who have their terrain scouted and their land mines set, is an artifact of the position I have taken. It is not, aside from this, part of a willfull policy to rebuff anthropology or anthropologists, or to beg spurious immunity for a privileged position. In choosing a new and different terrain, I have merely exchanged one set of problems and paradoxes for another, and the new set is every bit as formidable as the old. A thorough examination of these problems would be helpful, as would a marshalling of evidence for and against my position. But arguments and evidence belong to a different level of investigation (and, perhaps, of “science”) than the one undertaken here.

This book was not written to prove, by evidence, argument, or example, any set of precepts or generalizations about human thought and action. It presents, simply, a different viewpoint for anthropologists, adumbrating the implications of this viewpoint for a number of areas of concern. If some or many of these implications fail to accord with some area of "observed fact," this is certainly because the model was deduced and extended outward, not built up by induction. Although it goes without saying that some deal of circumspection is crucial in model making of this sort, that the "rapport" is in the model, not the details, the procedure is ultimately that of Isaac Newton's famous dictum: "hypothesis non fingo." "I frame no hypotheses," the founder (and latterly, it seems, the "inventor") of exact science is reported to have said, indicating that he wrote his equations and deduced the world from them. I would add that the ability to see this as a humble, sober statement of procedure, rather than as vainglory, is a test of one's capacity for "outside" perspectives.

The theoretical diversity of anthropology makes it difficult to generalize critically about the field, however apt certain critical apprehensions of the drift of theorizing might be. Thus, although it seems that much of anthropological theorizing acknowledges cultural relativity simply in order to transform it into something else (not excepting the present symbolic theory), there have certainly been approaches (that of Franz Boas for instance) that do not do this. Again, the tendency, cataloged in my discussion of "The wax museum," to analogically discover (and evidentially confirm) gadgetries of computer programming and primitive cost-accounting, or grammars and dogmatics of social life, is, while still disturbingly rampant, certainly not universal in modern anthropology. I will acknowledge that a certain oversimplification in this respect, as well as others, may have resulted from my critical lumping together of certain approaches and has led to a wholly unintentional neglect of a number of promising directions and writers in anthropology.

Another point that may strike the reader as poor strategy, or perhaps as thoughtless perpetuation of an all-too-common error, is the opposition of Western conventionalism to the characteristic symbolic differentiation preferred by "traditional" peoples—including "tribal" societies, the ideologies of complex, stratified civilizations, and of certain classes in Western civil society. That the distinction is more involved than simplistic "progressive-conservative" dichotomies, aptly parodied by Marshall Sahlins as "the West and the Rest," should be evident from the discussion in Chapter 5. My argument, in brief, suggests that the differentiating mode of symbolization provides the

only ideological regime capable of managing change. Nonstratified, decentralized peoples accommodate the collectivizing and differentiating sides of their cultural dialectic in an episodic alternation between ritual and secular states; highly developed civilizations secure the balance between these necessary halves of symbolic expression through the dialectical interaction of complementary social classes. In both instances it is sharp, decisive acts of differentiation—between sacred and secular, between class properties and prerogatives—that serve to regulate the whole. But modern Western society, which Louis Dumont accuses of “shamefaced stratification,” is critically unbalanced: it suffers (or celebrates) differentiation as its “history” and counterbalances the marathon collectivism of its public enterprises with semiformal and shamefaced competitive ploys in all shades of gray, and with the desperate buffoonery of advertisement and entertainment. I would argue that we share with the Hellenistics of Alexandria, and with predialectic phases in other civilizations, a transient and highly unstable orientation. It is, however, part of a model, and most assuredly not a position assumed out of convenience.

In the inspiration and development of its theoretical program, *The Invention of Culture* represents a generalization of the argument in my monograph *Habu: The Innovation of Meaning in Daribi Religion* (Chicago 1972) and is an effort to situate his argument within the context of the symbolic constitution and motivation of actors in various cultural situations. Specifically, it builds upon the central idea of *Habu*, that all meaningful symbolizations compel the innovative and expressive force of tropes, or metaphors, because even conventional (referential) symbols, which we do not ordinarily think of as metaphors, have the effect of “innovating upon” (i.e., “being reflexively motivated as against”) the extensions of their significances into other areas. Thus *Habu* derives cultural meaning from creative acts of innovative realization, building metaphor upon metaphor in such a way as to continually divert the force of earlier expressions and subsume it into newer constructions. The distinction between conventional, or collective, and individuating metaphors is not lost, however; it provides the axis between socializing (collective) and power-compelling (individuating) expressions. (In this respect the model resembles, and is doubtless indebted to, the discussion of “universalization and particularization” in Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind*.) Beyond this, the collective aspect of symbolization is also identified with the moral, or ethical, mode of culture, standing in a dialectical relation to that of the factual. (Cf. Clifford Geertz’s essay “Ethos, World View, and the Analysis of Sacred Symbols” in *The Interpretation of Cultures*.)

As its epistemology, *The Invention of Culture* situates its argument *within* the *Habu* model and undertakes a radical exploration and development of the implications of the model. The series of interrelated and interlocking implications is presented in Chapter 3, and, despite the hazards of jargon in the necessary cross-referencing of special terms, it is presented “all at once.”

The more significant additions to the *Habu* model include, first, a clarification of the contrasting effects of conventional and differentiating symbolization. As parts of the dialectic, they necessarily symbolize each other, but they do this in different ways. Conventional symbolization draws a contrast between the symbols themselves and the things they symbolize. I call this distinction, which works to distinguish the two modes in their respective ideological weightings, contextual contrast. Differentiating symbols assimilate or encompass the things they symbolize. I call this effect, which always works to negate the distinction between the modes, to collapse them, or derive one from the other, obviation. Since these effects are reflexive (i.e., that which “is symbolized” works its effect, in turn, upon that which symbolizes), all symbolic effects are mobilized in any act of symbolization. Hence, the second addition, is that the awareness of the symbolizer must be concentrated upon one of the modes at any given time. Focusing attention upon this “control,” the symbolizer perceives the opposite mode as something quite different, an internal “compulsion” or “motivation.” The third addition is that every “culture,” or significant cultural class, will favor one symbolic modality as the area appropriate to human action and regard the other as manifesting the “given” or “innate” world. Chapter 4 explores the significance of this for human motivational and personality structure, and Chapter 5 develops a model of cultural integration and evolution based on contextual contrast and obviation.

The “episodic” operation of the dialectic in tribal or acephalous societies is, except for its theoretical underpinnings, closely parallel to the model of balanced symmetrical and complementary schismogenesis presented by Gregory Bateson in “Epilogue 1936” of his book *Naven*. This doubtless reflects my familiarity with, and admiration for, Bateson’s work. Less obvious is the inadvertent similarity between Dumont’s homo hierarchicus/homo aequalis contrast and the pointed comparisons I make between “relativized” modern American society and the dialectically balanced social orders of older civilizations. The dialectic of social classes envisioned here owes most perhaps to Dumont and to David M. Schneider and Raymond T. Smith’s remarkable *Class Differences and Sex Roles in American Kinship and Family Structure*.

The notion of a cultural dynamic based on the mediation of realms of human responsibility (and nonresponsibility) is less easily traceable to other sources. The issue has received further treatment in my article “Scientific and Indigenous Papuan Conceptualisations of the Innate” (see Bayless-Smith and Feachem, eds., *Subsistence and Survival* [Academic Press 1977]) and in Dr. Marilyn Strathern’s “No Nature, No Culture: The Hagen Case” (forthcoming). My book *Lethal Speech: Daribi Myth as Symbolic Obviation* (Cornell 1978) carries the point further in its development of the radical implications of obviation, as the extended, or processual form of trope. *Lethal Speech* is “about” obviation, as indeed *Habu* is about metaphor, and *The Invention of Culture*, concerned as it is with the relation of these forms to convention, thus becomes the middle term of an unintended trilogy.

My use of the term “invention” here is, I think, much more traditional than contemporary “bolt-from-the-blue” stereotypes of lucky cavemen and accidental discoveries. Like invention in music, it refers to a positive and expected component of human life. The term seems to have retained much of this same sense from the time of the Roman rhetoricians through the dawn of early modern philosophy. In the *Dialectical Invention* of the fifteenth-century humanist Rudolphus Agricola, invention appears as one of the “parts” of the dialectic, finding or proposing an analogy for a *propositus* that can then be “judged” in reaching a conclusion—rather in the manner in which a scientific hypothesis is subject to the judgment of “testing.”

Invention being largely undetermined for the ancients as well as the medieval philosophers, it fell to the mechanistic-materialist world view, with its Newtonian determinism, to banish it to the realm of “accident.” Beyond this, of course, there is the inevitable temptation to co-opt accident itself (i.e., entropy, the measure, *please*, not of randomness, but of our ignorance!) into the “system,” to trace its blind fencing with “necessity” in evolutionary studies, to play the “life-insurance game” with subatomic particles, to write the grammar of metaphor or the braille of nonverbal communication, or to program computers to write blank verse (almost as badly, at times, as human beings have been known to do). But co-opting, or predicating, invention and dealing satisfactorily with it are two rather different matters.

There was a certain inevitability, in any event, to the encounter between the anthropology of symbols and the “black hole” of modern symbolic theory—the “negative symbol,” the trope, which generates (or obliges one to invent) its own referents. *The Invention of Culture* appeared in print at roughly the same time as three other, remarkably different soundings of the black hole: D. Sperber’s *Rethinking Sym-*

bolism, Fredrik Barth's *Ritual and Knowledge among the Baktaman*, and Carlos Castaneda's *Tales of Power*. For Sperber, the black hole is not so much a gravity well as an obscuring dust cloud. It amounts to the place where reference stops; "knowledge" is achieved in the formation of a metaphor, but it is a knowledge forged on a personal level in imitation of a more broadly held "encyclopedic" (i.e., conventional) knowledge. Sperber understands perfectly well that a metaphor presents a challenge, that one must, as Castaneda's confidants would have it, "win the knowledge for oneself." But the result, to judge from his conclusions, is more a counterfeit than an invention. Invention cannot reveal, and thereby create, the world for Sperber as it can for Piaget, because it plays such a poor second to "real" knowledge.

Baktaman culture, in Barth's account, is very nearly the opposite of this. Although he tacitly admits that meaning is constituted through metaphor, the metaphor, in the utter absence of shared assumptions or associations, is built upon shared sensations—the dew upon the grass, the redness of pandanus fruit, and so forth—in a kind of "dumb barter" of semiological tokens. Conventional signs, far from attaining currency through the continual reshuffling of metaphors, are swallowed up in the secrecy of their formation, and what "knowledge" there may be is hoarded and confided in dribbles to initiates. Like radio messages sent between black holes, very little gets through. Even granting Barth a modicum of rhetorical license for exaggeration, however, one is forced to ask, amid such hermetically sealed vacuums of self-interested noncommunication, just whom the Baktaman think they are keeping their secrets from.

After all that has been written about the conjectural sources of Castaneda's writings, all that one can do is extend to them the same professional suspension of disbelief one would grant to an ethnographer reporting on some exotic African or Far-Eastern belief system. The exquisitely self-contained and dialectical model presented in *Tales of Power* looks like a "Buddhist" rejoinder to the "Hinduism" of the Aztec theology of Moyucoyani (the god who "invented himself," from the Nahuatl verb *yucoyo*, "to invent") described by Leon-Portilla. But even if Castaneda had "invented" the whole thing himself, the timeliness of this exemplar of the anthropology of symbols would be significant. For the *nagual* (power, "that with which we do not deal"), in its opposition to the *tonal* ("everything that can be named," convention), is the cleanest expression of the negative symbol that we have. It is the thing that *makes* metaphor but always escapes in its expression. (And here it might be helpful to recall that the Middle-American cultures share with the Indian culture the distinction of having in-

dependently originated the symbol of the zero, the “negative quantity.”)

I have, with evident bias, discussed these three contemporaries of *The Invention of Culture*, not because of any failings or advantages they may have, but because, for all their differences of approach or epistemology, they comprehend the properties of the negative symbol in precisely the same way. The differences arise in what is made of these properties and how their relation to conventional symbols is effected. To treat invention as symbolism manqué, to regard it as spurious knowledge, as Sperber does, is to subvert the most powerful thing there is for the afflatus of a knowledge-proud civilization. To treat it, as Barth does, as a true “black hole,” invention that devours convention, is, while admittedly a superb demonstration of the tendency of negative symbolization, a kind of abdication of the human situation. One might, indeed, contrast Sperber and Barth as “subjective objectivism” and “objective subjectivism,” respectively.

The dialectical approach, by contrast, subverts subjectivity and objectivity alike in the interests of mediation. Its stance, which has proven to be by turns maddeningly frustrating and tantalizingly obscure to critics of this book, is to assert some disquietingly subversive things about conventional knowledge, and some implausibly positive ones about nonconventional operations. Castaneda’s practice of this mediation, with its bizarre adventures among moths and acrobatic shamans, is in the service of an enlightenment as seductive and as practically unattainable as the *Zen satori*. Anthropology has traditionally set its sights somewhat lower, making a little *satori* go a long way. But the problems of following “the meanings made under the order of the tonal” are not without their contaminating effects on one’s prose style as well as one’s model.

Returning, then, to the issue of how my arguments are situated within the realm of theoretical discourse: the grave danger, especially given the abstract discussion of “culture” at the outset, is that some readers will want to align my position on the idealist/pragmatist axis. Like the phenomenologists and ethnomethodologists and *some* Marxist anthropologists, however, my stance has been to sidestep, to analyze, or to circumvent this axis, rather than to take up a position with respect to it. This means that, despite whatever analogies one might find with Alfred Schütz, with philosophical “construction of reality” models, or with the “synthetic a priori” of Immanuel Kant, this work is not “philosophical,” and it is not philosophy. It eschews, in fact, the ethnocentric “Questions” and points of orientation that philosophy deems so necessary in supporting (and defending) its

idealism. But it also means that, despite the important idiom of “production” in the second chapter, I have no interest in “left-flanking” movements that would bring the “realities” of hard-nosed production into the stale fora of academic discourse. Realities, Chapter 3 seems to tell us, are what we make them, not what they make us, or what they make us do.

Finally, since I *do* seem to be interested in symbols, some clarification on this much-belabored topic is in order. As should be evident from the exposition in the later chapters, I do not aspire (except, perhaps, conceptually) to a “language” that would talk about symbols, symbols-in-discourse, etc. more accurately, more precisely, or more fully than they “talk about themselves.” A science of symbols would seem to be as inadvisable as such other quixotic attempts to state the unstateable as a grammar of metaphor or an absolute dictionary. That is because symbols and people exist in a mediating relationship to one another—they are our besetting devils as we are theirs—and the question of whether “collectivizing” and “differentiating” are ultimately symbolic or human dispositions becomes hopelessly entangled in the toils of the mediation.

Have I, then, artificially exaggerated the polarities of human symbolization by imposing extreme contrasts and oppositions upon usages that are most often only relatively opposable, and even then debatably so? Of course I have, hoping that, like the tracery of semi-visible geometry that Cezanne introduced into his landscapes, this “imagery” would help us see the landscape better. Has this concerto for symbols and percussion too many notes, as was once said of Mozart’s music? Of course it has, and I would rather listen to Mozart.

Having by now completed what is largely the function of these introductions, which is to tell the reader what the book is not, we might consider the perennially “relevant” question of Lenin: what is to be done? Is a true anthropology like that envisaged by Kant and Jean-Paul Sartre, possible, or any nearer to realization than when I wrote this book? Perhaps. But since anthropology, like most other modern enterprises, is largely “about” itself, the better question would be, what would such an ideally constituted anthropology produce? (And the answer, of course, is “more anthropology.”) What, then, of the possibility of achieving a truly dialectical balance in Western society, of obviating the hopeless wastage of ideological and motivational canards and the “quantity for quantity’s sake” (this means “economic mobilization for its own sake”) of this miasma of warfare states? Apart from the fact that it will take care of itself (in what appalling ways we can only guess), the question of global improvement calls to mind the

plight of a Chinese poet. He lived in that great, sleepy time when Confucius and the *tao* had taken care of China's spiritual discords, and the mandarins took care of everything else. And he would wistfully imagine, when he saw a great cloud of dust rise against the horizon, that it was "the dust of a thousand chariots." It never was. We live in interesting times.