

Culture and Chaos, Myth and Practice

Some version of the tale of the “stranger king” is told in virtually every culture in the world. It is the story of an immigrant king who deposes the former ruler and marries his daughter. Although the versions differ with regard to details, the basic story line is as follows: “The heroic son-in-law from a foreign land demonstrates his divine gifts, wins the daughter, and inherits half or more of the kingdom. Before it was a fairy tale, it was a theory of society” (Sahlins 1985: 82). Accounts of the stranger king have been retold numerous times in anthropological works (Frazer 1911–1915; Hocart 1969, 1970). Marshall Sahlins (1985: chapter 3) devoted an extended essay to such beliefs, with an emphasis on those from Fiji and Hawaii. Sahlins provided the groundwork for the study of anthropological history in this study. He demonstrated how belief in a stranger king not only justified king/subject relations but also structured the reactions of native peoples during initial contacts with Europeans.

I have commented on similarities between Sahlins’s account of Hawaiian interactions with Captain James Cook and Taíno interactions with Christopher Columbus (Keegan 1992). Columbus’s activities brought him headlong into the Taíno myth of Caníbales (mythical Caribs) and the Spanish myth of cannibals. Just as Cook’s expedition to Hawaii led to his association with the god Lono, the Taínos identified Columbus as a Caníbale. To complete the circle, the Taíno cacique—and Columbus’s main protagonist—Caonabó was identified as a Caníbale (Spanish for Carib) by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, one of the principal Spanish chroniclers (chapter 2).

Although the story of the stranger king has been discussed many times, it is worth one more outing. First, anthropological history fits well with emerging themes regarding the role of culture. Sahlins (1985) clearly illustrated how all aspects of a society converge at the point of social reproduction. Beliefs play a central role in coordinating often disparate goals and objectives of both individual agents and more general structures defined by economy, polity, demography, and sociology. In this regard, Patrick Kirch (2000) has done a fine job of translating anthropological history (*a là* Sahlins) into an archaeological context. My first objective in this book is to situate the theme of anthropological history in a different context by outlining what I see as an emerging

theory of *culture*. My portrait of the theory may not match that of others, but I propose it as one means of integrating divergent approaches in anthropology and archaeology.

Second, if mythology, beliefs, worldviews, or whatever else we want to call them are truly a theory of society, then these must be given primary attention in efforts to re-create the past. Instead of treating myths as *ad hoc* justifications for anthropologically constructed categories, we need to reverse the causal arrow and view myths as structuring social reproduction. Thus my second objective is to show how myth structured initial contacts between the Taínos and the Spanish and how myth and practice provided identities to the main characters.

A somewhat tangential example is worth mentioning. One of the major unresolved issues in Caribbean archaeology is the identity of the Island Caribs. It is often repeated that the Island Caribs claimed that they came from South America and that in their encounters with Arawakan groups in the islands they ate the men and married the women (Rouse 1948). This story can be recognized immediately as a version of the story of the stranger king. Yet in this case the lack of a formal social hierarchy in Island Carib society seems to have allowed every man to be a “king.” In other words, it is not one male leader who fulfills the role, but all Island Carib men who participated in eating the Arawak men and marrying the Arawak women.

The purpose of the story was to define the origins of the people who told it. The story justified the Island Carib invasion of an already occupied territory and proclaimed that they were fierce. It also justified their resistance to the Europeans who would supplant them and sent the message that they would violate customary human behavior by eating their enemies. Because there is no clear evidence for cannibalism among the Island Caribs, this story can be viewed as just that: a story. To the Spanish, Caribs were the “fierce people.”

Third, if myths play a central role in reproducing society, then we should expect physical representation of the social theory that they describe. It is possible to claim that the Taíno stranger king is nothing more than a story. It is worth testing this conclusion, however, and seeing whether or not ethno-historic and archaeological correlates support the actualization of the story. In the present case I argue that Caonabó, the stranger king, really did come to Hispaniola from a foreign land. Moreover, not only his history but also Taíno myths and the structure of Taíno society in general were codetermined.

Finally, and in its own way, archaeological practice reproduces the myth of a stranger king. Although our subjects are dead, we approach them with our own beliefs about who they were and who we are. We invade their sites—which, at least in this case, are in exotic locations—and set ourselves to the

tasks of Dr. Frankenstein. We follow the precepts of our beliefs: we make topographic maps, reconstruct the environment, define community plans, classify material remains, and try to breathe life into the past. Thus my fourth objective is to include the archaeologists in my story.

This is not a book with a beginning and middle, although it does have an end. I often feel that theory gets in the way; yet it is essential to understanding the mindset of the author, especially because no anthropologists share the same conception of culture. Therefore I begin with my view of culture, how it got there, and where I see it going.

Culture and Chaos

Marvin Harris once told me that in his opinion archaeologists were the last of the cultural anthropologists. This comment, which I heard him repeat on later occasions, was always something of a source of pride. Yet I also found his comment ironic. On the one hand I could see his point: because there were no longer any pristine cultures untainted by Western culture, the only way to study such cultures was through archaeological methods. Moreover, Harris felt a certain kinship with archaeologists, because many of the “New Archaeologists” enthusiastically adopted his cultural materialism. This outlook remained relatively strong in archaeology even in the mid-1980s. It may be tempting to date the New Archaeology to Lewis Binford’s articles published in the 1960s (see Binford 1972). Frank Hole’s editorial in *American Antiquity* (1978), however, shows that the battle between old and new was anything but over by that time.

What is ironic is that the New Archaeology largely abandoned the notion of culture. In fact, the concept of culture was the great divide between the old and the new. Whereas traditional archaeologists viewed culture as shared norms and beliefs, the New Archaeologists recast culture as an extrasomatic adaptive system (compare Rouse 1972; Binford 1972; Thomas 1979). Moreover, A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn (1952) had already identified over 200 discrete definitions of “culture.” Clearly what was needed was an operational definition, a behavioral definition whose correlates could be observed in the archaeological record rather than simply inferred. Thus we might not be able to say what people thought, but we could certainly describe how they behaved. It was in this frame of reference that processual archaeology developed.

Postprocessual archaeology emerged in response to the apparent fossilization of processual archaeology. While “North American archaeology . . . remained stubbornly ecological, evolutionary, and positivist,” postprocessualists embraced diversity (Hodder 1991: 39). There was a renewed interest in

culture, this time as meaningfully and materially constituted; and issues such as gender, power, ideology, text, discourse, rhetoric and writing, structure and agency, and history were pursued. Knowledge was recognized as the product of social forces rather than intellectual judgment (Bell 1994), and symbolic, structural, Marxist, contextual, and interpretive frameworks for studying the past were promoted (see, for example, Earle and Preucel 1987). The anarchy (*sensu* Bell 1994) that such diversity promoted was appalling. It promised archaeology without the safety net fastened to normative or adaptive anchors. What would prevent the discipline from falling into the abyss of relativism, from which no certain knowledge could be forthcoming?

My point is that the concept of culture was largely abandoned by American archaeologists in the 1970s (Flannery 1982). Even though approaches more receptive to the notions of culture have emerged, the concept itself remains buried. The new emphasis on social processes is more focused on how individuals navigate and negotiate their statuses and roles in a cultural context, rather than taking an interest in what constitutes culture. Moreover, it is my contention that postmodern archaeology has taken a “linguistic turn” down a blind alley. I offer the name “cultural archaeology” as an alternative turn, an about-face, a new philosophical foundation, and a framework for pursuing the topic so eloquently described by Sir Edward Burnett Tylor (1871: 1):

Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. The condition of culture among the various societies of mankind, in so far as it is capable of being investigated on general principles, is a subject apt for the study of laws of human thought and action.

As an undergraduate I had my first field school with the real Connecticut archaeologist and his skeptical graduate student (SGS) (see Flannery 1976). The behavioral model promoted by the SGS seemed to offer real hope for distinguishing the goals and structures of culture above and beyond the simple transformation of material remains through time. The approach created a methodological individual (remember that history is about people), however, and the notion of robots blindly following cultural, and especially ecological, imperatives soon turned sour. The door was opened for something new, and postprocessual archaeology walked in.

The main emphasis in the critique of the New Archaeology concerned its philosophical foundations. The postprocessual critique focused on what were identified as processual archaeology’s positivist roots and an adherence to inference as the means for proving propositions, especially those proposi-

Table 1.1. Hindu Cattle Complex

Attribute	Behavioral	Mental
<i>EMIC</i>	“no calves are starved to death”	“all calves have a right to life”
<i>ETIC</i>	“male calves are starved to death”	“let male calves starve when feed is scarce”

Source: Harris 1979: 38.

tions that served as general formulations. In this regard, Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley’s (1987) question of how many cases are necessary before a proposition is considered proven is apt. Shanks and Tilley, however, failed to recognize (or acknowledge) that at least some processual archaeologists had already abandoned inferential logic and had adopted Karl Popper’s (1962) refutationist logic (Bell 1994). According to the refutationists, nothing can be proven, only disproven. The number of cases supporting a proposition does not matter. Still, the refutationist approach suffers from serious epistemological problems as well. There is a real danger of proposing only trivial refutations, like those silly archaeological laws lampooned by Kent Flannery (1982). Moreover, if no proposition is ever proven, then how can we be confident of the accuracy of the surviving, unrefuted propositions? Are we merely waiting for someone to find the black swan that refutes our proposition that all swans are white?

The issue of what we accept as true is not trivial, and it has occupied the minds of philosophers for centuries. Some have attempted to circumvent the issue by restricting the focus of our investigations. Returning to Marvin Harris, he proposed that culture could be divided into four compartments. *Emic* and *etic* compartments recognize that different explanations derive from what is basically a contrast between insider and outsider views, while *mental* and *behavioral* fields contrast how people think with how they behave. For Harris, all that was open to scientific scrutiny was the *etic* and *behavioral* box. It is not surprising that such a restricted view of culture would attract staunch critics, especially when this reductionist view of culture processes was promoted as the primary means for explaining cultural phenomena. Clearly, a central goal of anthropology has always been to study culture in its totality.

If our desire is to study culture in its totality, then we must reject Harris’s reductionism. Moreover, if we also reject positivism as our guiding logic, and recognize that refutationist logic is only a partial corrective, then what paradigm is available to structure our inquiries and what criteria can be applied to guide us in choosing between competing theories and explanations? Currently the major trend has been a linguistic turn that has moved beyond the structuralist dialectic to embrace hermeneutic and other postmodern approaches.