

WHAT MAKES HUMAN DIFFERENCES INTO CULTURAL DIFFERENCES?

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“A historian may be deaf”, said Raymond Firth (1951: 19), “a jurist may be blind, a philosopher may be both, but it is essential to an anthropologist to hear what people are saying, to see what people are doing”. In his words we still hear the echos of what Jarvie (1964) has named ‘The Revolution in Anthropology’, a ‘revolution’ which was ignited by Malinowski’s clarion call:

(to) go out into the villages, and see the natives at work in gardens, on the beach, in the jungle; (to) sail with them to distant sandbanks and to foreign tribes; and (to) observe them in fishing, trading, and ceremonial overseas expeditions (Malinowski 1961 (1922): 126-127).

Countless anthropologists have followed Malinowski’s ‘revolutionary’ appeal, going out to hear what people were saying and to see what people were doing. Their approach — which eventually would be recognized as *the* anthropological approach — was arrived at by converting practical needs into methodological virtues. Basically it was constituted by three perspectives: (1) the outsider’s perspective; (2) the cultural perspective and (3) the comparative perspective. The anthropologist who went out to the field stayed isolated with ‘his’ tribe for quite some time, having just himself for his main instrument of research. This being the situation, there was nothing for it but “to talk to the man in the paddy or the woman in the bazaar, largely free-form, in a one thing leads to another and everything leads to everything else manner” (Geertz 1985: 623). From this forced, ‘existential’ outsider’s perspective he gradually tried to clarify what goes on (...), to reduce the puzzlement” (Geertz 1973: 6).

Like the outsider's perspective, the cultural perspective resulted 'logically' from the (isolated) situation in which the anthropologist found himself in the field.

Those people with pierced noses or body tattoos, or who buried their dead in the trees, may never have been the solitaries we took them to be, but *we* were. The anthropologist who went off to the Talensi, the tundra or Tikopia did it all: economics, politics, law, religion; psychology and land tenure, dance and kinship; how children were raised, houses built, seals hunted, stories told. There was no one else around, save occasionally and at a collegial distance, another anthropologist (Geertz 1985: 623; italics in original).

The culture concept provided the brackets round the puzzle and the key to its solution. It told the anthropologist the Shakespearian wisdom that "(t)hough this be madness, yet there is method in't". That is to say: it provided him with a coherent object of study (Herbert 1991: 150). And it allowed him to present his experiences in a form the home-front could understand. Eventually "(t)he concept of culture has come to be so completely associated with anthropological thinking", Roy Wagner (1975: 1) rightly said, "that (...) we could define an anthropologist as someone who uses the word 'culture' habitually".

It may be clear that the 'professional stranger', who had to rely on his own experiences, had no choice but to use the tacit knowledge of his own culture as a point of reference when studying the target culture. It may even be maintained that only the culture shock involved in his 'being out there' taught him to see the 'natural' things he had learned at his mother's knee as part of his *culture*. This is not to say that Lévi-Strauss was right in arguing that ethnographic work by its deepest logic expresses hostility towards the ethnographer's own society (Lévi-Strauss 1955). But it *is* to say that by its deepest logic-of-the-situation the outsider's perspective and the cultural perspective are inherently comparative.

Culture and human differences

However, halfway the four decades that separate us from Firth's echos,

'The Revolution in Anthropology' eventually lost its momentum. From the end of the 1960s onwards the once so 'revolutionary' anthropological endeavour has come under severe attack for a peculiar intermingling of political, moral and epistemological reasons (for an analysis of this peculiar intermingling see Van den Bouwhuisen, Claes and Derde 1995). One of the effects of these criticisms has been the outbreak among the anthropological community of a fast-spreading "epistemological hypochondria concerning how one can know that anything one says about other forms of life is as a matter of fact so" (Geertz 1988: 71). Maybe, it was argued, ethnographics do not offer a window to the culture of the other, as 'revolutionary' anthropologists had always pretended. Maybe these 'ethnographic worlds' are just *imaginary worlds*, literary fictions, in which 'the other' is nothing but an artefact of the text in which he takes shape (McGrane 1989; Mason 1990; cf. Coward and Ellis 1977: 45-66). Maybe, for short, 'revolutionary' anthropologists actually *had* been blind to what other people were doing and deaf to what these people were saying.

In the wake of these criticisms belief in the descriptive adequacy of the culture concept has been undermined up to the point that it has been suggested — at least from the European side — that perhaps we better give up "this largely *American* distinction" (Goody 1993: 10; emphasis added) altogether (*ibid.*: 19). Of course Goody's picture of the object of anthropology, neatly divided by the Atlantic into 'social' and 'cultural', stretches the truth. But, for sake of the argument, let us hold on to it for a while, and ask what is the gist of Goody's criticism. "If the cultural is granted distinct analytical status", says Goody, "that does not necessarily make it a suitable field of disciplinary concentration" (Goody 1993: 11). And why does it not? It is, says Goody, because what the culture concept refers to is nothing but *an aspect* of the social.

In a widespread European view, culture is seen as the content of social relations, not as some distinct entity (...). That is to say, it is the 'customary' part of social action, not one which constitutes the entire field of study and about which one can have a separate body of theory. (...) *(I)t is hard to see any advantage that has accrued from treating the ideational level, including the level of symbols and meanings, as a distinct domain (ibid.; emphasis added).*

In the italicized sentence we see the core of the misunderstanding. Cul-

ture is taken to be that part of the world that was carved out to fit “the structure of departments at Harvard University” (*ibid.*: 10).

Those who follow Talcott Parsons call for the recognition of a separate field of ‘cultural’ studies concerned with the analysis of ‘symbols’ and ‘meaning’, a field that stands opposed to, or at least distinct from, the social (...). (...) (Accordingly) psychologists were allocated the personality system, sociologists the social, and ‘cultural anthropologists’, as they are often known in the States, the cultural (*ibid.*).

This ironic depiction of the traditional opposition between British social anthropology and American cultural anthropology certainly has a point: disciplinary allotments often do play an important role in defining objects of research. This goes for culture as well as for other phenomena. Goody’s depiction nevertheless completely passes over the fact that from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards ‘culture’ has gradually become one of the main concepts with which Western man has described his historical self-consciousness (Lemaire 1976: 39 *ff.*). The question is: what kind of *experience* did it express? Obviously it could express a lot of different experiences, as “even before the last decade of the eighteenth century, the proliferation of meanings led the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder to remark of ‘culture’ that “nothing was more indeterminate than this word” (Barnard 1968: 614). We need not go into details here. For the present purpose it is sufficient to conclude that these various meanings all aimed at expressing (and strengthening) a sense of identity by appealing to (and intensifying) *an experience of difference*.

Culture: the lack of theory

This is not the place to reiterate and discuss all the criticisms that have been voiced of the culture concept during the past decennia. In this paper I will focus instead on one issue that has received little attention so far, taking for my point of departure Kroeber and Kluckhohn’s (1963: 357) conclusion that the absence of a viable *theory* of culture is the main source of problems with the culture concept. As these authors rightly argue “(c)oncepts have a way of coming to a dead end unless they are

bound together in a testable theory (*ibid.*). Put differently, the main source of problems with the culture concept is that we lack a testable theory specifying what makes differences between groups of people into *cultural* differences. Consequently the culture concept is used in almost as many ways as there are authors (*cf.* Keesing 1974: 73, note 2). Only a testable *theory* can remedy this conceptual proliferation and allow us to describe particular differences between groups of people as *the facts of a culture* (Vermeersch 1977).

Of course the space available here is not sufficient to develop such a theory. Nor am I so presumptuous to pretend that I could do so all on my own. What I *can* do in this paper, however, is contributing some conceptual material to the project of formulating a testable theory of cultural differences, a project which is currently being carried out at the *Department of Comparative Science of Cultures* at the University of Gent. I will argue that one of the major shortcomings of the culture concept as it has been used in anthropology until now is that it has no adequate way of describing *differences* between groups of people. This is because a logical feature of relations of similarity and difference is systematically overlooked, *viz.* that these relations *are not transitive* (Hesse 1974: 13-14). One of the few authors who, to my knowledge, have seen this point is Balagangadhara, who in his '*The Heathen in His Blindness ...*', *Asia, the West and the Dynamic of Religion* (1994) has argued that if cultures are different, we at least have to allow the possibility that experiences of otherness may also be different (Balagangadhara 1994: 512). A viable theory of cultural differences, then, has to take into account the implications of the intransitivity of relations of differences and similarities. How can this be done? I will develop some ideas on this issue by comparing two ways in which cultural differences have been described in 'revolutionary' anthropology. The first one I take from Evans-Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1937). As Barnes (1974: 27) has rightly remarked, this work is effectively the standard example for use in discussions of this kind since it has played an essential role in the British 'rationality debate', which followed the publication of Winch's paper 'Understanding a Primitive Society' (1964; reprinted in Wilson, ed. 1970).¹ I will show that Evans-Pritchard's approach is incoherent by its own standards and examine the reason why it is. Next I will discuss an alternative approach, which I take from Deborah Tooker's description of the Akha of Northern Thailand (Tooker 1990). I will show

that Tooker's approach is not based on the kind of presuppositions which caused Evans-Pritchard so much trouble. Consequently Tooker is able to describe the Akha as different from the West in a way which is not constituted by a *Western* sense of difference. I will conclude this paper by answering the question what can be learned from this comparison as regards the formulation of a theory of culture.

The Azande Poison Oracle

One particular case from Evans-Pritchard's voluminous book on Zande witchcraft, oracles and magic that has attracted a lot of attention concerns the Azande poison oracle.² It is on this case that I will focus here. The poison in question is called *benge*. It is the extract of a wild forest creeper (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 314). *Benge* was administered to a fowl and a question answerable by a simple 'yes' or 'no' was then addressed aloud to it (*ibid.*: 295 *ff.*). The fate of the chicken was taken to be the answer of the oracle. Certain checks were built in this procedure, however. The *benge* was tested before it was used in the oracle (*ibid.*: 281). And questions were always put twice, in such a way that if a fowl died in the first test, another fowl had to survive the second test for the judgment of the oracle to be accepted as valid (*ibid.*: 299). (For further details see Evans-Pritchard 1937: 258-351.)

Before discussing the poison oracle, Evans-Pritchard thinks it wise to address the home-front by saying:

I must warn the reader that we are trying to analyse *behaviour rather than belief*. Azande have *little theory* about their oracles and do not feel *the need for doctrines* (*ibid.*: 314; emphasis added).

Some pages later he expresses the same warning in even stronger terms ('little theory' is replaced by 'no theory' now). This time, however, he adds an important piece of information concerning the traditional status of the oracle.

Azande have no theory about it; they do not know why it works, but only that it does work. *Oracles have always existed and have always*

worked as they work now because such is their nature (*ibid.*: 320; emphasis added).³

In fact, says Evans-Pritchard, Azande are interested in the poison oracle only as part of their tradition.

Proper *benge* is endowed with potency *by man's abstinence and his knowledge of tradition* and will only function in the condition of a seance (*ibid.*: 314; emphasis added).

After having said this, however, Evans-Pritchard immediately equates tradition with traditional *beliefs*.

(I)t is necessary to point out that Zande *ideas* (emphasis added) about *benge* are very different from notions about poisons prevalent among the educated classes of Europe. To us it is a poison, but not to them (*ibid.*: 314). It is certain that Azande do not regard the reactions of fowls to *benge* and the action of *benge* on fowls as a natural process, that is to say, a process conditioned only by physical causes. (...) Indeed, we may ask whether they have any notion that approximates to what we mean when we speak of physical causes (*ibid.*: 315).

No doubt the educated classes of Europe have often shown a very good understanding of the nature of poison. But why would a Zande have a very different notion of it? Evans-Pritchard is ambiguous about this point. On the one hand he cannot but admit that Azande actually have a "crude common-sense notion of poisons". They know that certain vegetable products can be lethal without attributing supra-sensible properties to them (*ibid.*). They also know that *benge* is poisonous. On the other hand, however, unlike educated Europeans, Azande "have no *idea* that it might be possible to kill people by adding it to their food" (316; emphasis added). But then again, sometimes a fowl that has been used in an oracle is eaten. When this is the case the fowl is cleansed of poison first: neck and stomach are removed. "(T)his action", Evans-Pritchard has to admit, "would imply a knowledge of the natural properties of *benge* that they refuse to allow in other situations" (*ibid.*: 317).

Obviously Evans-Pritchard — a 'revolutionary' anthropologist if ever there was one — has great trouble in understanding the poison oracle

against the background of Zande culture. "It is not always easy to reconcile Zande *doctrines* (sic!) with their behaviour and with one another", he says (*ibid.*: 317; emphasis added). This, however, is an odd complaint as some pages before he has warned his reader that he was trying to analyse *behaviour* rather than belief. Azande, he just told the homefront, have no theory about their oracles and do not feel the need for doctrines. So what is the point of trying to reconcile something which is not there, with the behaviour one is observing? Nevertheless, despite his own warning, this is exactly what Evans-Pritchard keeps doing:

Azande observe the action of the poison oracle as we observe it, but their observations are always *subordinated to their beliefs* and are *incorporated into their beliefs* and made to explain them and justify them (*ibid.*: 319; emphasis added). As a matter of fact, Azande act very much as we would act in like circumstances and they make the same kind of observations as we would make. (...) But Azande *are dominated by an overwhelming faith* which prevents them from making experiments, from generalizing contradictions between tests, between verdicts of different oracles, and between all the oracles and experience (*ibid.*: 318; emphasis added).

The conclusion cannot be avoided that Evans-Pritchard is inconsistent by his own standards. After announcing that he would focus on *behaviour*, he is focusing on *beliefs* instead. What can be the source of this ambiguity?

Beliefs and Actions

Evans-Pritchard's ambiguity has to do with what he perceives to be the lack of coherence between Zande beliefs on the one hand and between Zande beliefs and behaviour on the other hand. What does this incoherence boil down to? There are two issues involved here, the first of which causes Evans-Pritchard little trouble because he can easily explain it. This first issue concerns the fact that Zande beliefs often seem to contradict each other. Like Goody would do after him (see Goody 1977) Evans-Pritchard explains *this* lack of coherence of the Zande 'belief-system' from the lack of literacy.

(T)he contradiction between (...) beliefs and (...) observations only become a generalized and glaring contradiction when they are recorded side by side in the pages of an ethnographic treatise. (...) But in real life these bits of knowledge do not form part of an indivisible concept, so that when a man thinks of *benge* he must think of all the details I have recorded here. They are functions of different situations and are uncoordinated. Hence the contradictions so apparent to us do not strike a Zande (*ibid.*: 319; emphasis in original).

So the apparent incoherence of the Zande 'belief-system' can — partly at least — be attributed to the fact that Zande beliefs have never been recorded and systematized in a manner which is only possible in a literate culture. The implicit assumption is that, were these beliefs written down and systematized, then the contradictions would be apparent to the Azande. In this view it is *literacy* that advances coherence and rationality (see Goody, ed., 1968; Goody 1977; 1986; 1987).

The second issue involves the supposed lack of coherence between Zande beliefs and actions. It is this second issue which is the real source of Evans-Pritchard's difficulties with grasping the poison oracle against the background of Zande culture. In order to compensate for what Zande culture allegedly had left off, Evans-Pritchard took the trouble to record and systematize Zande beliefs and subsequently invited his informants to draw conclusions from them. Thus he asked them what would happen if *benge* were administered to a fowl without a question being put? (Tradition says that *benge* is only effective if a question is addressed to the oracle.) Or if more *benge* was administered to a fowl than the dose prescribed by tradition? Or if *benge* were added to the food of an enemy? His efforts, though, were in vain. He could only come to the conclusion that the Azande were not interested in this kind of problems at all.

The Zande does not know what would happen, he is not interested in what would happen, and no one has ever been fool enough to waste good oracle poison in making such pointless experiments, experiments which only a European could imagine (*ibid.*: 314; emphasis added). (...) Were a European to make a test which proved Zande opinion wrong they would stand amazed at the credulity of the European who attempted such an experiment. If the fowl died they

would simply say that it was not good *benge*. The very fact of the fowl dying proves to them its badness (*ibid.*: 315).⁴

Why, Evans-Pritchard wondered, were the Azande not interested in drawing the kind of conclusions a Westerner would draw or in 'scientifically' testing their oracle? He concluded that the explanation must be that Azande are "dominated by an overwhelming *faith*" in tradition (*ibid.*: 318). They "make the same kind of observations as we would make", but these observations "are always *subordinated to their beliefs*" (*ibid.*). So, for Evans-Pritchard it is not so much their *actions* that make Azande different from 'us Westerners'. In fact Azande "act very much as we would act in like circumstances". What makes them different though is their traditional *beliefs*. Their actions are "subordinated" to these strange beliefs and it is *this* that accounts for their behaviour. If you would accept these strange, traditional beliefs, these "mystical notions" (*ibid.*: 320), you could not but admit that *in these terms* Azande "reason excellently" and "display great ingenuity in explaining away the failures and inequalities of the poison oracle and experimental keenness in testing it" (*ibid.*: 338; emphasis added). But, of course, as a Westerner you cannot accept these beliefs because they are obviously mistaken.

Are Zande Beliefs 'Objectively Irrational'?

Most participants in the British rationality debate — in which the Zandecase played a prominent part — were in agreement that Zande oracular beliefs are 'objectively irrational', although there were some differences among the authors about what rationality criteria they exactly fail to meet. Mainly it is the 'closed' character of the beliefs attributed to the Azande which was held to be objectively irrational. Azande are supposed to maintain their beliefs in oracles and witchcraft against experience by a series of *ad hoc* arguments which render them irrefutable. In this sense Zande culture is supposed to be different from Western, scientific culture. As Robin Horton put it:

(I)n traditional cultures there is no developed awareness of alternatives to *the established body of theoretical tenets*; whereas in scientifically oriented cultures, such an awareness is highly developed.

(...) (A)bsence of any awareness makes for an absolute acceptance of *the established theoretical tenets*, and removes any possibility of questioning them. In these circumstances, the established tenets invest the believer with a compelling force (Horton 1970: 153-4; emphasis added).

One of the few deviating voices in the debate was that of the sociologist of science Barry Barnes, who argued that Horton's description of cultural differences in terms of 'open' and 'closed' societies does not hold much water. When we put these rationalist distinctions under a microscope, he claimed, they will turn out to be matters of degree, not of essence. So when we look open-mindedly, the alleged cultural differences between scientist and primitive are fading away (Barnes 1969: 97). We will find that Lévi-Strauss's description of the 'savage mind' as the mind of a *bricoleur* (Lévi-Strauss 1966) does apply as well to the mind of the scientist (Barnes 1969: 98-99; 1973: 187).

(A)s the objective irrationality of Azande is generally held to consist in their 'ad hocery', one might compare their beliefs (...) with the beliefs of classical physics and the 'ad hocery' of Planck and Lorentz. Sociologically, the situations are amorphous (Barnes 1972b: 378).

What we have here, then, are two opposing views of cultural differences and similarities. What both views have in common, though, is that the nature of cultural differences and similarities can be described in terms of *beliefs*. The majority point of view has it that the difference between Western culture and 'traditional cultures' is defined by the fact that Western beliefs are open to rational criticism, while 'traditional cultures' are 'closed' because they are dominated by an 'overwhelming faith' in beliefs that have been handed down of old. Put differently, according to this view the difference between Western and 'traditional' culture is constituted by the fact that Western culture has *institutionalized* rationality (Jarvie 1984) while 'traditional cultures' have not. The minority view — represented here by Barnes — plays down the alleged cultural differences by arguing that, from a sociological point of view, Western culture is not that 'open', while 'traditional cultures' are not that 'closed'.

Noble though the latter strategy may seem at first sight, the question

should be raised nevertheless whether a strategy aiming at *reducing* the differences between cultures is helpful in understanding these cultures *in their own terms*? My claim is that it is not. If we really are to understand cultures against the background of the experiences of their members, we should not reduce cultural differences, but magnify them instead. Let me explain.

The Principle of Humanity

Both the majority and the minority views outlined above are formulated within the same frame of reference, which is founded upon some or other variant of what Grandy (1973) has called the Principle of Humanity. This noble point of departure requires that in an anthropological description of other cultures “the imputed *pattern* of relations among beliefs, desires and the world be (described) as similar to our own as possible” (Grandy 1973: 443; emphasis added). This Principle, says Putnam, is:

the basis of all the various maxims of interpretive charity or ‘benefit of the doubt’, such as ‘interpret them so that their beliefs come out reasonable in the light of what they have been taught and have experienced’, or Vico’s (...) directive to maximize the *humanity* of the person being interpreted” (Putnam 1981: 117).

According to Steven Lukes this point of departure “prescribes the minimizing of unintelligibility — that is, of unintelligible agreement and disagreement” (Lukes 1982: 264). It has, Lukes goes on to say, “the singular virtue of being the principle we do in practice apply in *the interpretation and translation of beliefs*” (*ibid.*; emphasis added). If Lukes is right and this is what we, that is we anthropologists, are actually doing, then my suggestion is we better stop doing it. Instead of minimizing unintelligibility, let us start *maximizing* it for a while, for the benefit of our discipline. Why? The answer is in the last italicized passage of the Lukes-quotation, which expresses the supposition that the description of a culture in the language of another culture is basically a matter of *translation of beliefs*. It was this supposition, I submit, which kept Evans-Pritchard from understanding the Zande poison oracle against the background of Zande culture. We have seen that, despite his warnings that

Azande have no theories about their oracles and do not feel the need for doctrines, and despite his intention to concentrate on behaviour and not on beliefs, Evans-Pritchard still could only conceive Zande behaviour as "subordinated to *beliefs*" and guided by "an overwhelming *faith*" in tradition. Likewise Robin Horton, referring to Evans-Pritchard's study, maintained that 'traditional cultures' are 'closed', because there is no developed awareness of alternatives to "the established body of *theoretical tenets*". If these examples are representative — my claim is that they are — the conclusion must be that the presupposition that all cultures do have 'an established system of beliefs' and that they can be adequately described by explicating these beliefs, which 'somehow' guide the behaviour of the participants, has great impact on the intellectual conscience of Western anthropologists. Apparently it is inconceivable to them that behaviour is *not* ultimately, somehow guided by 'a system of beliefs'. *That* is why they will assume that a culture can be described in terms of these beliefs. What at first sight may strike the eye as "madness" will appear to have "method in't" as soon as the anthropologist has penetrated the 'system of beliefs' behind it. The Zande case, however, has taught us so far that this supposition will lead the anthropologist into serious trouble in that not his object but he himself will appear as incoherent, maintaining simultaneously that the people he is describing have no theories but are nevertheless guided by them. Logically the anthropologist has two alternative ways of responding to this difficulty.

1. He can hold on to the assumption and try to formulate a hypothesis to the effect that his incoherence is only on the surface because 'somehow' the members of this culture are indeed guided by beliefs. (This is what Evans-Pritchard did by maintaining that the Azande were guided by faith in traditional beliefs.)
2. He can doubt the validity of the assumption and raise the question what a culture would look like in which human actions are not guided by beliefs.

My appeal to magnify cultural differences and to maximize *unintelligibility* — at least temporarily — implies a choice for the second alternative. As I am well aware of the controversial nature of this claim, let me explain its meaning by an example. This will show that an appeal to *maximize* unintelligibility is not a plea to give up a comparative science

of cultures, but a definition of its epistemological preconditions.

The Akha Zan

In a splendid paper Deborah Tooker (1990) has given us an example of the way in which an anthropologist can avoid misleading analogies with her own culture when describing other traditions. Drawing on ethnographic material from the Akha of Northern Thailand and some other Asian societies, she shows that in the Akha relation to tradition beliefs and theoretical tenets are not relevant.

Tooker begins by establishing that in Akha language there is no equivalent for the Western terms 'religion' or 'ethnic'. The closest Akha term, which combines connotations a Westerner would call 'religious' with connotations a Westerner would call 'ethnic', is a word meaning 'types of people' (Tooker 1990: 800).

For the Akha, 'types of people' are distinguished by their *zan*. Identity switches are seen as switches of behaviour or *zan* whereby one 'becomes' (...) one of another 'type of people' (...). A switch of ethno-religious identity is *not* a statement that one's beliefs (...) have changed, but rather a statement that one's behaviour (one's *zan*) has changed" (*ibid.*).

Thus to be an Akha ethnically is: to practise Akha *zan*. Roughly *zan* can be translated as 'tradition'. The term covers a set of practices which a Westerner would characterize as heterogeneous.

Zan includes things that we would term religious practices, such as how to worship spirits, how to honour the ancestors and how to carry out rituals, but it also includes what we would call technological practices such as how to plant rice properly, how to construct a house, where to keep domestic animals, or how to boil eggs. In addition, *zan* includes rules for action, such as how to take rice out of the rice steamer, how to interact with your father-in-law, what kind of clothes you are to wear and at what age, or in what order you are to marry in relation to your siblings (*ibid.*: 803).

For the Akha, you cannot *believe* or *not believe* in *zan*. You can only 'carry' or 'not carry' *zan*, like a mule can carry or not carry a load of rice (*ibid.*). 'Carrying' Akha *zan* makes you into an Akha; not 'carrying' Akha *zan* makes you into someone else. If you do not carry Akha *zan*, you are not permitted to live in an Akha village. Conversely, if you do not live in an Akha village, you cannot, for the most part, 'carry' Akha *zan*, since the proper structure is not there, and the proper people are not present (*ibid.*: 805).⁵ Behaviour is evaluated as either correct or incorrect in relation to *zan*. The Akha frequently argue about how to carry out *zan* properly. In this they focus on the appropriateness of behaviour (as opposed to the truth value of conceptions relating to it). For the Akha, truth and falsehood are not an issue, as far as *zan* is concerned (*ibid.*)

Thus, if one carries out the proper procedures with the proper speech attached in the proper circumstances with the proper participants, one is 'lining up' with *zan* (*ibid.*).

The Akha are by no means exceptional in this. Similar observations have been made by Watson (1988) for ancient China, by Lewis (1980) for contemporary New Guinea and by the historian Robin Lane Fox for ancient Rome (Fox 1988). Like Tooker, Watson opposes the Chinese emphasis on 'orthopraxy' (correct practice) to the Western emphasis on 'orthodoxy' (correct belief).

(T)he proper performance of rites in the accepted sequence, was of paramount importance in determining who was and who was not deemed to be fully 'Chinese'. Performance, in other words, took precedence over belief — it mattered little what one believed (...) as long as the rites were performed properly. (...) (T)he ideological domain in China does not assume universal belief or unquestioned acceptance of the truth (Watson 1988: 4 and 10).

Likewise, speaking about ancient Rome, Robin Lane Fox asserts:

By modern historians, pagan religion has been defined as essentially a matter of cults. (...) Pagans performed rites but professed no creed or doctrine. They did pay detailed acts of cult, (...), but they were not committed to revealed beliefs in the strong Christian sense of the

term. They were not exhorted to faith (...) (Fox 1988: 31).

And in his discussion of the Gnau ritual of penis bleeding, Lewis noticed that the Gnau (who live in the West Sepik Province of New Guinea), when asked why they practised this ritual usually gave “no reason but tradition, that it was the right thing to do, one that their forefathers had taught them” (Lewis 1980: 2).⁶ Sometimes, however, they did give a reason, but in those cases “*they did not overtly link the custom and the reason*” (*ibid.*; emphasis added). In his discussion of the ritual Lewis comes to the conclusion that “(w)hat is clear and explicit about ritual is how to do it — rather than its meaning” (Lewis 1980: 19).

‘Beliefs’ are inferred

Just like the Zande, the ancient Chinese, the ancient Romans and the New Guinea Gnau, the Akha have no theories about their traditional practices nor do they express a need for doctrines on this point. Unlike Evans-Pritchard (and many other anthropologists), however, Tooker was very much aware of the fact that the ‘beliefs’ and ‘theoretical tenets’ Western anthropologists are trained to *infer* from the behaviour they observe are just that: *inferred* beliefs which probably tell us more about the anthropologist’s own culture than about the culture she is studying. She endorses Dan Sperber’s warning that:

It is a truism — but one worth keeping in mind — that beliefs cannot be observed. Ethnographers do not perceive that the people they study believe this or that; they infer it from what they hear and see. Their attributions of beliefs are therefore never uncontroversial. Both the way in which the content of a belief is rendered and the description of the people’s attitude as one of ‘belief’ are open to challenge (Sperber 1985: 45).

Tooker noticed that when she did what she was trained to do, *viz.* when she inferred Akha ‘beliefs’ from their rituals, myths or statements of ritual specialists “ordinary villagers would often contradict those inferred ‘beliefs’ or just be uncertain about them *without showing any desire for certainty*” (Tooker 1990: 813; italics in original). Unlike Evans-Pritchard,

though, Tooker did not conclude from this that the Akha 'belief system' was 'incoherent'. On the contrary, she decided that if the Akha have no specific theories about their traditional practices, no 'dogma's so to speak, then the Akha relation to tradition should better *not* be described in terms of a 'belief system', because 'belief system' presupposes a web of propositions in which a certain account of the world is confirmed as true. Put differently, in terms which are mine, not Tooker's: as the Akha, or for that matter the Zande, the Gnau, the ancient Chinese, and the Ancient Romans, have no *epistemic attitude* towards their tradition (towards the world?), describing their relation towards tradition in terms of a system of *beliefs* would amount to imposing a misleading analogy on it.

Another misleading analogy Tooker refuses to make is Horton's characterization of 'traditional societies' as 'closed'. The problem with this characterization, she says, is that while the 'traditional' may rightly be associated with a certain type of rigidity, Westerners are inclined to immediately associate this rigidity with inflexible *beliefs*. In fact, she goes on to assert, the situation may be quite reverse (*ibid.*: 815). If so inclined, the Akha may speculate freely about the meaning of traditional practices and many *different* answers may be given. This does not concern the Akha at all as long as traditional practices are carried out properly. So, indeed Akha society is less 'closed' than Horton would have it, but for a different reason than Barnes did presume. Speculation is free because it has no consequences for public behaviour. Beliefs about 'how the world is' have no bearing on the way an Akha should *behave* properly (*ibid.* 813).

(W)hile, on the one hand, there is no great concern about 'beliefs' attached to *zan*, *precisely because* this concern is lacking villagers did not hesitate to make alternative statements about the meaning of *zan*, thus illustrating a sceptical capacity. They were not, however, concerned about which statement was the 'true' interpretation, and which statements were false (*ibid.*: 814; italics in original).⁷

On the nature of 'meaningful action'

At the end of her paper Tooker suggests that one way in which we can

describe cultural differences is by using 'relationship to tradition' as a comparative term (*ibid.*: 816). This seems a useful suggestion, as 'relationship to tradition' was the issue that gave Evans-Pritchard so much trouble in understanding the Zande poison oracle against the background of Zande culture. Can we understand Evans-Pritchard's difficulties against the background of *his own* culturally defined relationship to tradition?

Obviously Evans-Pritchard was taking the *structure* of the relationship to tradition as a constant, which is constituted by two assumptions:

1. Tradition is defined by a set of beliefs.
2. Human actions are the expression of underlying beliefs. (So, traditional behaviour is the expression of beliefs that are handed down by the ancestors.)

As an illustration of the crucial importance of the second factor, let us look briefly into Peter Winch's criticism of the way in which Michael Oakshott in his paper 'The Tower of Babel' (1948-9) has defined moral action. In this paper Oakshott distinguished two forms of moral action, *viz.* (a) "the reflective application of a moral rule" and (b) "a habit of affection and behaviour" (Oakshott, quoted by Winch 1958: 58). In habitual morality, Oakshott says, there is no question of consciously applying a rule of behaviour nor of expression of a moral ideal. Habitual moral action consists of acts, according with certain habits of behaviour, which are not learned by precept but by "living with people who habitually behave in a certain manner" (Oakshott, quoted by Winch 1958: 58). It is the second category to which Winch objects. In this category, he says, Oakshott is wrongly *blurring the boundary between human learning and animal learning*. Of course Winch is not denying that humans do acquire routines. But he emphasizes that routine behaviour should not be *explained* (ultimately that is) as a matter of habit or routine.

It is only because human actions exemplify rules that we can speak of past experience as relevant to current behaviour. If it were merely a question of habits, then our current behaviour might certainly be influenced by the way in which we had acted in the past: but that would be just a causal influence" (Winch 1958: 62).

From the fact that Winch links rules to reflexion it appears that he conceives of rules as essentially *discursive*. To be sure, Winch faithfully follows Wittgenstein by stating that rules “arise in the course of conduct”, but to this he adds that:

the nature of conduct of which they arise can only be grasped *as an embodiment of those principles* (emphasis added). The notion of a principle (...) of conduct and the notion of meaningful action are *interwoven* (Winch 1958: 63; italics in original).

Winch’s argument enables us to unearth the cultural presuppositions underlying Evans-Pritchard’s difficulties in understanding the Zande poison oracle against the background of Zande relation to tradition. Two basic assumptions are important here:

1. Human behaviour differs from animal behaviour in that it is meaningful.
2. Meaningful behaviour is the expression of a rule that can — in principle — be rendered propositionally.

Conversely, these assumptions read that if behaviour can not be conceived of as the expression of propositional knowledge this behaviour is not meaningful and therefore not fully human. The Principle of Humanity, however, which from the Enlightenment onwards has inspired the western conception of *anthropos* requires that we “maximize the humanity” of the others being interpreted by “interpret(ing) them so that *their beliefs* come out reasonable in the light of what they have been taught and have experienced” (emphasis added). This is what Evans-Pritchard did and this is why he failed in understanding the Azande against the background of *their* relationship to tradition. Maximizing intelligibility — at least in this case — proved to be a counter-productive strategy.

Changing the terms of description

In the West tradition is basically defined in terms of traditional *beliefs*, and traditional behaviour is taken to be an expression of these beliefs. This is to say that traditional behaviour presupposes knowledge of these be-

liefs. Put in a more general way: (traditional) behaviour presupposes *propositional* knowledge. Therefore the Western relationship to tradition can be defined as an *epistemic* one.

The traditions described by Evans-Pritchard, Tooker, Watson, Lewis and Fox, however different they may be in other respects, have one thing in common: they have no epistemic relationship to tradition. So the conclusion must be that 'revolutionary' anthropology, by concentrating on the beliefs of societies with a non-epistemic relation to tradition, has changed the former's terms of description beyond recognition.

By thematizing (tradition) as (a) belief-guided and theoretically founded set of practices, the very terms of description (are transformed). Practical certainties are provided with something they never had or never needed: a theoretical foundation (Balagangadhara 1994: 367).

How then should the relationship to tradition of these societies be described? Defining it as 'non-epistemic' would again depict it in function of a Western template. As 'orthopraxy' seems to be the main focal point of this relationship, maybe 'performative' would be a proper term to describe it. However, this is only a name and a name does not tame the obscureness of this unknown attitude. Fortunately not, I hasten to add. One of the preconditions to get out of the stalemate into which 'revolutionary' anthropology has boxed itself is that we (that is: we *Western* anthropologists) are prepared — at least temporarily — to maximize *un-intelligibility*, instead of reducing other cultures to mirror images of the West in the name of a Principle of Humanity, noble though it may sound. We do not have to *grant* the others 'humanity'. They *are* fully human but they are *different* from us. It is *us* (us Westerners) that have this peculiar problem to understand human differences. As a part of our religious heritage we believe that all men are created equal. That is why the Principle of Humanity applies to them all. But how do we know? How are we so well acquainted with 'creation' that we can so dogmatically assert this 'equality of Man'? (Please note that I am talking here about similarities and dissimilarities and *not* about the moral and political problem of equivalence!) We have *no idea* how it must be to live in a society in which actions are not guided by beliefs but by tradition. But this is no reason to deny its existence because such a society would not be fully 'human'. We simply should acknowledge that we have no idea. Of

course we would like to know (although we do not have to *like* what we will see). That is why we badly need descriptions of these experiences against the background of these cultures themselves. We have to be told what a performative relation to tradition boils down to at an experiential level because *we have no idea*. So a *conditio sine qua non* for turning anthropology into a viable comparative science of cultures is that members of other cultures participate in this project by not simply adopting Western concepts (and implicitly adopting the assumptions clustered around them) but by digging into the descriptive resources of their own cultures. A comparative science of cultures can only take off when it has at its disposal "multiple descriptions given by members from different cultures of both themselves and others against the background of their own cultures" (Balagangadhara 1994: 441). As for instance Deborah Tooker has proved, neither the colour nor the passport of the social scientist matter much here, except the ability to describe socio-cultural phenomena against the background of culture-specific experiences (*cf.* Pinxten et al 1988: 21). The strategy to maximize *unintelligibility* is directed at the acknowledgement that cultures are *profoundly different* and that at the moment we do not even know what these differences consist of.

Learning and meta-learning

What are the implications of this argument for the development of a theory of culture, specifying what makes human differences into *cultural* differences? The prospects for such a project may now seem even less promising than before, as we have to take into account the intransitive nature of relations of similarity and difference, a logical point that has been systematically overlooked until now. So we have to take into account that the way in which culture A differs from culture B is different from the way in which culture A differs from culture C, *etc.* Not only that. When we have come this far, should our conclusion from the comparison between Evans-Pritchard's and Tooker's analysis not be that the *experience* of difference is intransitive too? That is to say: should we not decide that the differences between culture A and B are *experienced* differently by members of both cultures? Now, if culture A is a culture with an epistemic attitude to tradition and culture B is a culture with a

performative attitude, we can predict that in culture A the differences between both cultures will be experienced as a dissimilarity of *beliefs*. However, in what way differences are experienced in culture B we do not know, until the members of this culture will describe their experiences for us. If such is the situation, how then are we to formulate a theory of culture when even the basic materials are not available? It is this problem which the Department of Comparative Science of Cultures at the University of Gent is currently trying to tackle. Although this project is still under construction, it is possible nevertheless to give a provisional outline of the basic principles which guide it. Briefly put, these principles are the following.

It is possible to formulate a theory of culture which takes into account the intransitive nature of relations of difference by conceiving of cultures in terms of learning processes and meta-learning processes. Following Balagangadhara (1994: 442), I will broadly define learning as "the way in which an organism makes its environment *habitable*". Learning, for short, is "an activity of making a habitat" (*ibid.*). In order to make a habitat, a human being has to cope with two kinds of environment: (a) nature and (b) human groups. All human beings learn how to make a habitat when they are socialized into members of some group. In the available literature socialization is mostly depicted as a set of processes in which the resources of the group are transmitted to the learning human being. There is, however, another aspect involved in socialization which is often overlooked. By focusing on the transmission of the resources of the group, the socialization process is conceived of exclusively from the vantage-point of the socializing agents. When looked at from the point of view of the human organism who is being socialized, though, the picture is slightly different. This human organism is not only instructed in the lore of his group. It also learns *how to learn*. (Let us call this learning how to learn 'meta-learning'.)

The Nicomachean Ethics as an anthropological source

At this point I have to introduce another element in the discussion. Although all human organisms have the genetically programmed capacity to learn, they are not genetically programmed to learn in any specific way (Balagangadhara 1994: 444). Part of the human genetic make-up is that

humans are able to learn in many different ways, producing different kinds of knowledge as a result. This fact has already been recognized by Aristotle, who in his *Nicomachean Ethics* distinguished three kinds of knowledge, viz. *epistèmè* ('contemplation'), *technè* and *phronèsis*. Although *epistèmè* was not the same as our 'theory' and *technè* was very unlike our 'technology' (see Caws 1979; Mitcham 1979), at least these terms do sound familiar. The third kind of knowledge, however, *phronèsis*, does not ring a bell at all. With this term Aristotle referred to a kind of prudential wisdom, to do with choice, a choice which is shaped by the social practices of the community (Bernstein 1983: 54). That is to say, the term referred to a kind of knowledge to do with *relation to tradition*. One could learn this kind of knowledge, said Aristotle, by letting oneself be guided by the experience and tradition of one's community.

(W)e ought to attend to the undemonstrated sayings and opinions of experienced and older people or of people of practical wisdom not less then to demonstrations; for practical experience has given them an eye they see aright (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI, 11; GBWW 8: 393).

This is not the place to discuss this issue at length. I only mentioned it here to draw attention to the fact that in the culture of which Aristotle was a member relationship to tradition was not taken to be guided by *epistèmè*, which, however different from our 'theory', anyhow was a kind of *propositional* knowledge. Relationship to tradition then was not an epistemic one. Again, we do not know what was the nature of the kind of "practical experience" Aristotle was referring to. Maybe it was kindred to the kind of practical experience that guides the performative relationship to tradition of the Azande, the Akha, the Gnaou, the ancient Romans and the ancient Chinese, or maybe it was not. At the moment we do not know. Only further research can tell us that. We do know, however, that in his culture the three kinds of knowledge which Aristotle distinguished existed separately from each other. Each was constricted to a different walk of life, so to speak. *Epistèmè*, for instance 'belonged' to the sphere of the *bios theorètikós*, while *phronèsis* belonged to the sphere of the *bios praktikós*. Man had to make a choice which one to follow. Man was free to restrict himself to the *bios praktikós*. In that case he could find fulfilment in the happiness of performing virtuous acts and win

the deserved renown of his fellow-citizens for that. But man could also aim higher by devoting himself to the *bios theorètikós* (Held 1995: 240-241). This higher aim, however, was supposed to be granted only to some, and these happy few, moreover, could not devote their lives *entirely* to contemplation, as their status as citizens required that they at least would perform a proper amount of virtuous public acts. When performing them, they could not be guided by *epistèmè* (which was only concerned with 'the unchanging'). In public life, they had to be guided by a kind of practical reason which told them what would be the proper conduct under the circumstances.

Cultures as configurations of learning

Back now to the issue of learning and meta-learning. When it is socialized, I argued, the human organism not only learns the lore of its culture. It also learns *how to learn*. If the lore of its culture is parcelled out over separate walks of life (as was the case in Aristotle's Greece), each with its own kind of knowledge, then the human organism, when being socialized, will learn different ways of learning. That is to say: it will acquire different meta-learning strategies, which should be applied according to the proper circumstances. So, for instance, in Aristotle's culture the member of the *polis* had to learn how to acquire *phronèsis* by learning 'practically' from people who were experienced in matters of public life. And, were he a philosopher, he had to learn how to learn 'theoretically' from wise men who were experienced in natural philosophy. Above all, however, he had to learn what particular learning strategy he should use under the proper circumstances. Theoretical learning, for instance, was of little use in matters of proper public behaviour.

When we look next to a culture with an epistemic attitude to tradition, all this is very different. As we have established, in such a culture meaningful human behaviour is supposed to be an expression of 'underlying' propositional knowledge. That is to say that in this type of culture the kind of knowledge embodied in *phronèsis* is *subordinated* to *theoretical* knowledge. A similar observation has been made by Gadamer as regards the subordination of both *technè* and *phronèsis* to 'theory'.

In all the debates of the last century practice was understood as *an*

application of science to technical tasks (...). It degrades practical reason to technical control (Gadamer, quoted by Bernstein 1983: 39; emphasis added).

In a similar vein Habermas has argued that in the West “we are no longer able to distinguish between practical and technical power” (Habermas 1973: 255).

This subordination of *freeness* to ‘theory’ in Western culture may explain the difficulties which Evens-Pritchard faced when he tried to ‘reduce the puzzlement’ of the Zande posion oracle. Azande have no theory about the oracle, he said. But then, how could their behaviour be explained? Obviously Evens-Pritchard was unable to see the Zande relationship to tradition as the embodiment of a kind of *knowledge*, acquired by attending to “the undemonstrated sayings and opinions of experienced and older people or of people of practical wisdom”. This ‘blindness’ was caused by the implicit presupposition that at least as far as the acquisition of knowledge is concerned all men are created equal (or, in a more fashionable jargon, that the learning capacities of all human beings are genetically programmed in the same way). As Tooker, Watson, Lewis, Fox and Aristotle have argued, however, this implicit presupposition is mistaken.

What then are the implications of these brief and tentative remarks for the formulation of a theory of culture? Given the fact that human beings are genetically programmed to learn, but that it is their group which teaches them *to learn in a specific way*, I suggest — following Balagangadhara 1994, chapter 11 — to describe a culture in terms of a specific *configuration of learning and meta-learning*. To give an example, this is to say that, for instance, Aristotle’s culture can be defined in terms of a specific configuration of learning and meta-learning processes in which each learning process applies to a particular walk of life. In these configuration a number of meta-learning processes (let us follow Aristotle here and suppose there are three) co-exist, no one dominating the other, each having its own walk of life for its domain.

Western culture, on the contrary, can be defined in terms of a configuration of learning and meta-learning processes in which one kind of learning and meta-learning (*viz. theoretical learning*) has gained dominance over the other ones. This is not to say that in Western culture these other kinds of learning have disappeared altogether. But it *is* to say that

in Western culture these other kinds of learning are 'subordinated' to theoretical learning and to the kind of knowledge produced by it. They have to express themselves in terms defined by theoretical learning. They have, so to speak, to pose as its *derivatives*. The effect will be that these other kinds of learning and the knowledge produced by them will be conceived of as *applications* of theoretical learning and knowledge.

Briefly put, the proposal put forward here says that the emergence and crystallization of a culture can be described in terms of the emergence and crystallization of a configuration of learning and meta-learning. The focus of culture studies should accordingly be on the different ways in which human beings acquire knowledge. This 're-focusing' of culture studies promises well the opening of a big black box, containing all kinds of treasures that have remained hidden until now. Human inventiveness and creativity may turn out to be much, much richer than we have dreamt of in our theories until now. Aristotle may only have seen a tiny sample. Human knowledge may turn out to be a gold mine, which has only been superficially explored to this very day. A crucial question which has to be answered, of course, is what brings about a configuration of learning and meta-learning? In the present paper this issue can not be discussed. (But see for some path breaking insights on this matter, Balagangadhara 1994, especially chapter 11.) The only claim I have made here is that by conceiving of culture in terms of a configuration of learning and meta-learning a testable theory of cultures can be devised, which can explain both fundamental differences between groups of people and the fact that differences are experienced differently. Such a theory will allow us to hold on to the Psychic Unity of Mankind (all men are genetically programmed to learn), while simultaneously allowing us to account for the fundamental differences between groups of people (man is not programmed to learn in any specific way). Moreover, such a theory will satisfy the conditions set forth by Raymond Firth. It will allow us to hear what people are saying, instead of hearing our own echos. And it will allow us to see what people are doing, instead of seeing our own after-images. At first we may not understand what we hear. We may not even believe our eyes. But this is no reason for 'epistemological hypochondria'. It is the precondition for a comparative science of cultures.

NOTES

1. To get an impression of the debate, see the papers in Wilson (ed.) 1970, Benn and Mortimore (eds.) 1976, Geraets (ed.) 1979, J.W. Meiland and M. Krausz (eds.) 1982 and M. Hollis and S. Lukes (eds.) 1982.
2. 'Zande' is the singular noun and adjectival form of the word and 'Azande' is the plural noun.
3. So strange is this lack of theory that on the next page Evens-Pritchard once more repeats his warning: "I must repeat that Azande themselves have no theory of oracles. Oracles can reveal hidden things to man. The Zande feels no need to explain why they can make their revelations. He never asks himself this question" (Evens-Pritchard 1937: 321-2).
4. In itself this argument is perfectly logical. It has the structure of the *modus tollens*. Evens-Pritchard acknowledges that Zande "mystical notions are eminently coherent, being interrelated by a network of logical ties, and are so ordered that they never too crudely contradict sensory experience" (Evens-Pritchard 1937: 320). However, he says, Zande presuppositions are wrong. "The Zande is immersed in a sea of mystical notions, and if he speaks about his poison oracle he must speak in a mystical idiom (*ibid.*).
5. A similar case from contemporary Japan was described by Sharon Traweek. In Japan "(p)eople who have been abroad for more than about five years are said to no longer have a Japanese soul (*ki*) and not to be able to lead other Japanese because they lack crucial skills (*hara-ge*); they and their children are generally treated with disdain, at best" (Traweek 1992: 457).
6. I would like to emphasize that to remark about a practice that 'it is the custom' is certainly to reflect on the status of the practice and not merely to report it (*cf.* Lloyd 1990: 20).
7. The same observation has been made for ancient Rome by Balagangadhara 1994 (chapters 2 and 9.5).

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