Chapter 15

Mediated encounters with Pacific cultures: three Samoan dinners

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INTRODUCTION

The economic and epistemological aspects of Captain Cook's voyages addressed in this volume by historians are echoed by the themes of discovery and misunderstanding discussed by Ingjerd Hoëm. In my comments, I will first briefly expand on the parallels between voyages of discovery and anthropological fieldwork and then present a more recent but equally emblematic example of a mediated encounter with a Pacific culture from my own research experience.

THE VOYAGE AS DISCOVERY

The first theme, metaphor, and parallel that I see emerging here is centered around the voyage as discovery. Travel, which right away evokes the theme of landscape, a theme recurrent in Hoëm's account as well as in other papers in this volume (Martin Kemp's, for example), is typically seen and experienced as an epistemological quest, not only to learn new facts, see unknown places, and meet unknown people, but also to reflect and thus learn more about the world, nature, and culture, and ultimately ourselves.

The parallel here between eighteenth-century voyages and nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthropological endeavors is unquestionable. The impulse underlying Banks's vision of Cook's voyages as, among other things, ways of becoming familiar with the *distant past* is not different from that of Franz Boas who, as thesis advisor, sent off the young Margaret Mead to Samoa in the 1920s. It is the same thirst for familiarization of the past that has for over a century characterized anthropology's quest for ways of living and ways of seeing the world that could explain how or why we have come to see it the way we do. Whether or not the anthropologist accepts the logic of an evolutionary paradigm in his work, distance is a criterion for acceptability in ethnographic projects.

THE TAMING OF THE DISTANT PAST

A theme mentioned by David Miller in his discussion of the creation of centers of calculation[1] is the taming of distant parts. Distance in space is often equated with distance in time. Thus, the distant past, in order to be conquered, must also be made to appear stable. One way to do this is to reduce landscapes to maps, flora to drawings and paintings, human beings to faces on paper, and their actions to narratives or, more specifically, texts.

This theme is also found in the history of anthropology, where we see a continuous attempt (or temptation) to define culture as stable. Ferdinand de Saussure's synchronic view of *langue* – language system – at the beginning of the twentieth century becomes a few decades later the starting point for structuralist anthropologists of various sorts to reframe the primitive/civilized dichotomy in terms of binary oppositions such as cold and hot, simple and complex, egalitarian and hierarchical. Contemporary cultural anthropology has been struggling with the need to introduce the concept of process in the analysis of culture: in the 1960s, with Victor Turner's emphasis on the dynamism of structure and antistructure[2] and, more recently, through the implementation of praxis-oriented paradigms – namely, the analytical concepts of practice[3] and habitus.[4] But the temptation to go back to stationary, stable sets of oppositions or to taxonomical lists is still very great in the social sciences – existentialist revivals notwithstanding.[5] It has often been through the explicit search for static classificatory systems that anthropology has tried to gain an honorable place among the social sciences. It is sufficient here to mention the enthusiasm surrounding ethnoscience in the 1960s (for example, the study of hundreds of color terminologies in search of universals). In these cases, the native categorization of nature as an already-made artifact, a souvenir malleable to scientific investigation, is hard to resist. How many words for *snow* among the Eskimos – two, nine, twelve? As carefully documented by Laura Martin, the number seems to grow from the introductory undergraduate courses to popular literature. How many words for *banana*, *leaf*, *tree*, *green*, *pigeon*? One could fill a library and, certainly, a curriculum vitae with these questions and their tentative answers.

But everything we have learned so far tells us, or rather cautions us, that those terms, those oppositions, must be seen in the context of specific uses, of specific practices. In the last two decades a different paradigm has emerged in anthropology (based on the work of innovative thinkers in other fields, such as Wittgenstein, Bakhtin, Gadamer). Language itself is now seen as a set of practices, culture as a dialogue; and any system of abstractions is believed to be an ideological product. This is even more the case nowadays when the natives can "talk back," or even become our fellow citizens, our

neighbors, and, sometimes, our students. Then, rather than of *structure*, it makes more sense to talk, with Bakhtin, of *heteroglossia*, that is, of conflictual interpretations, linguistic paradoxes, orders in the making.

Any structuralist analysis of the cultural organization of space makes sense only when matched with a set of context-creating values. Oppositions such as back and front, the bush and the sea, the center and the periphery, all embody ways of being and ways of judging one's own and others' acts.[6] They are different because situations are different. Agency needs both structural regularities and the freedom (or the impulse?) to break them. The fact that violation is possible, that's what matters. The fact that the gift may *not* be returned is, as Bourdieu suggested, what gives meaning to the transaction. The fascination with the Other, the social being from a distant past as encountered in a journey of discovery, offers the same challenge: will our categories apply, will we be able to reduce the differences to mere variation of some underlying ur-plan where everything fits?

But the paradoxes of Samoan (or of any other) culture, the Mead–Freeman debate, the misunderstandings – or what sociolinguist John Gumperz calls "crosstalk"[7] – are treated as exceptions only when their original social contexts are reframed as models of one-to-one relationships between nature and culture. We should know by now that such relationships only temporarily and inadequately live in linguistic classifications or in other symbolic representations. In the everyday life of any known community, the boundaries of nature and culture are renegotiated through big and small, visible and invisible, rituals of passage, of incorporation, of familiarization.

APPROPRIATION

Appropriation is manifested in several ways both within and between cultures.

First, within a culture, appropriation implies both an economical and an affective element. The connection between land and family in Polynesia has been highlighted by Ingjerd Hoëm, who discussed the relation, in Tokelau, between *fenua* (land) and *kaiga* (extended family or descent group). The power of the council of elders in Tokelau consists of access to and control of land and its products, as well as the right to demand from others the necessary labor for generating and collecting those products.[8] These observations point to an essential element both of the sociopolitical and the symbolic order, namely, the fact that the affective and economic ties within a given kin group are not just represented but constituted by its ties to land and hence to landscape. How could we otherwise even start to explain the fact that the view of a landscape may move someone to tears or that certain plants and trees may represent or evoke a sense of peace or serenity? We

leave or discover in them memories of past activities and sentiments shared with others and with a self which is different from whatever we are now. The dead inhabit the landscape, and therefore rocks, streams, and trees might tell us stories about our ancestors. It is the kind of narrative found in Australian Aborigines' paintings, some of which have been displayed in the West. But, beyond this, the landscape itself defines the boundaries of our social and economical resources, the ability that we and our children will have to maintain certain claims to systems of exchange, or "sharing," as in the case of the Tokelau economy.

Second, one should not forget that in relations between cultures the appropriation takes two directions. Just as the Other's natural and cultural manifestations must in some way or another fit into our own, so must our presence, whether as explorers or anthropologists, fit into the Other's landscape. The metaphor, or dimension, I would invoke here is not so much that of exchange or gift as that of the problematics of boundaries. As van Gennep taught us in his *Rites of Passage*,[9] either the stranger can be dealt with as coming from the sacred "outer world" – in which case he is a god or godlike – or he can be identified with the impure, profane, and unlawful outside – in which case he must be either purified through a rite of reincorporation or eliminated. In the case of Captain Cook in Hawaii or that of De Langle, captain of the *Astrolabe* on La Pérouse's expedition, in Samoa, the two models merge in their circumstantially different but equally emblematic deaths. Such episodes can be seen as pivotal acts (or blows) in a long series of exchanges (or challenges). But, more importantly, they can be seen as statements about the limits of any encounter, as reminders of the danger implicit in any attempt to appropriate natural or cultural resources we do not (and cannot) understand – an existential theme lucidly discussed by the Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino.[10]

Finally, the appropriation of nature is a way of appropriating a culture, reincorporating it into a different, usually a Western, logic. There is no question that certain objects (rocks, plants, birds) are more easily appropriated than others and therefore that explorers as well as, later, anthropologists, have tended to take back similar objects or similar representations of those objects, through drawings and paintings. Another set of *mirabilia* includes tattoos and body mutilations. The facial tattoo of the Maori struck the imagination of the early explorers. The leg and abdomen tattoos of the Samoans and Tokelauans still shock and amuse tourists and ethnographers. Mutilations and alterations of the human body are effective ways of establishing both a personal and a social, collective, memory. When portrayed in drawings, they become metacomments, memories of memories, flashes of stories no one can completely recall.

There is also no question that there is a pragmatic relationship here

between what can be brought back, appropriated, and the technologies, or "equipment,"[11] available for such a task. After pencil, paper, and watercolors, the camera, the tape recorder, film, and more recently video technology have changed our notions of what we can appropriate. These tools can be seen as ways of reducing the distance from the Other, from the distant past. But what are the consequences? What are the transformations implicit in these processes?

Tools have changed our expectations about what we are likely to find, what is reportable, showable, and what we can impose on others to make them the prey of our eyesight. Tools not only shape what we can observe, record, store, and then retrieve. They also do something more important: they have preferences, or – to use a term from Gibson's ecological approach to perception[12] – they "afford" different objects of study. If not creating our data, the tools we use typically favor certain human activities over others. In the work of documenting other cultures, the instruments of study become thus an important constraint on our ability to see first and document later other ways of living, speaking, being.

To illustrate this point, I will give an example of the use of video technology from my own fieldwork.

THREE SAMOAN DINNERS

In 1988, I returned with my wife and co-researcher, Elinor Ochs, to the village in Western Samoa where we had done fieldwork in 1978–79 and in 1981. This time I had a video 8 camcorder with me. More importantly perhaps, we found electricity in the village. I could easily recharge batteries and I did not have to worry about letting the camera run for hours. As part of a comparative project on talk at dinnertime in different cultures,[13] we decided to videotape dinners. We ended up recording three of them. This is the story of those recording sessions and what I learned from them about encounters, voyages, and science.

The videotaping of the first dinner was a real disaster, a true ethnographic misunderstanding. The family in this case was that of a chief and they treated us for what we were, namely, foreign visitors, respected guests. This meant that we could not be observers but only participants and, as it turned out, not very happy ones. After a very long prayer – a virtuoso performance by the host's son-in-law, a student in the theological college in American Samoa – we were offered food. I first said, "No, no, you eat, we are just here to watch and film." But seeing the disappointment in the chief's wife's face, I gave up and quickly retreated to a much less confrontational "Okay, let's eat." While the trays of food were being brought in and I was already starting to worry about the formal thanking speech I was certainly expected to per-

form at the end of the meal, I whispered to Elinor, "So much for cinéma vérité." She replied, "This *is* cinéma vérité!" We were indeed treated for what we were, the *papālagi*, the foreigners who burst (*papā*) through the sky (*lagi*), this time in a jet plane, and required all the honors the hosts could bestow. The actions, the food, the gestures – everything was in fact appropriate to the context: a dinner with honorable guests from abroad (*mālō mai fafo*). The videotape, though, was lousy. I left the camera running on the tripod. Being busy with the food, I couldn't control what was being recorded. Furthermore, the event was clearly staged *for us*. When, between the long silences, there was talk, it was directed *to us*. I had not gone to record "us with the natives," but that's what I got. Given the multiplicity of roles I had to play, I wasn't even able to include ourselves in the picture.

Trying to learn from our first big disappointment, we got geared up for our second attempt. "It will be different," I promised.

The second dinner was indeed different. This time, to avoid the same experience we had the first time, I carefully explained what we wanted to the people we were going to visit and videotape. "Do not prepare any food for us! Just act as if we weren't there. In fact we are not even going to come inside the house." This was an untitled's family. The house, a traditional Samoan *fale* with no walls and a thatched roof supported by wooden posts, was small. When the time came, at seven o'clock, they turned on a dim light bulb hanging from the ceiling. The parents sat down while the two children brought in the food and distributed the trays. There was a shorter prayer than the one we recorded during our first dinner, and there was informal dinner talk. Little talk about us. Some neighbors came by, said good-bye, and left. Others came and stayed. The party became more numerous and more chatty. Everyone seemed fairly comfortable, and I knew that what I was getting was the closest thing we would ever get to what happens when we are not around: an informal dinner of a Samoan family, with friends and laughter, with interesting details about the latest village gossip. At one moment, I had goose bumps. "This is perfect," I thought.

When we went home and looked at the tape, however, we realized it wasn't perfect after all. It was too dark. The camera had not intruded too much, I had not modified the context by changing the light with a brighter bulb, I had stayed outside of the house. But precisely for these reasons, the images were hard to decode and would be even harder to show to other researchers not familiar with the context. The more natural dinner was the more difficult one to show. It was far less than ideal as a piece of data for the gaze of Western social scientists.

I prepared myself for our third (and last) dinner. This time it was at the local pastor's house, with a family who knew us better than any other one

in the village did. Elinor had left, I was doing everything by myself, but I had time. I knew that people would wait for me to start. They accommodated to me and the camera in every possible way. They knew me very well, had seen me film and record many times; and all seemed extremely at ease with my presence. I was allowed to set the camcorder on top of a cupboard, on a tripod, to get a long shot of the entire family. As on a movie set, I had someone sit in different places to check whether I had to readjust the framing or the focus.

Rather than on mats on the floor, the family now ate at a long table. A strong light bulb was hanging right above it, and all the family members squeezed in to allow me to get everyone in the picture. The sound was perfect, the light was right, everyone was in the picture and amazingly comfortable with the camera. After a few seconds, I left the camcorder running and left the room.

Later, when I viewed the tape of this third dinner, I realized it was indeed the best. Finally, I had gotten what I was looking for. This was something of a level of observational quality that I could work on and show to my students and colleagues if I needed to. It was good, solid data. But when I began to study the interaction, what people were doing and saying, I also realized that there was something funny about their words, actions, and postures: it was the most Western of the three dinners. Not only were people sitting at the table, but the mother would ask questions (in Samoan) like "Who wants rice?" or "Who wants bananas?" Rather than being part of a hierarchically organized household, where children get whatever is available, sit quietly, and show respect for the guest, these kids were treated almost as equals. The more I looked at it, the more this dinner looked like one of those that Elinor had recorded in Los Angeles, among the white middle class. The "best" dinner was thus the one that looked the most like an American dinner. The best encounter had been with the family in the village that was the closest to the people we had left behind. The best account (at least on tape) was thus an account of a story already known, with less distant characters and more familiar lines.

EPILOGUE

What do we learn from this experience? What does it tell us about encounters with the Other, or, simply, with contemporary Pacific cultures? Clearly, the challenge for us is not to decide which dinner represents the "real Samoa" (although this is probably what a normative anthropologist like Derek Freeman would be inclined to do), but to be able to reconcile those three dinners, to accept, rather than hide or ignore, what, with Bakhtin,[14] we could call the

heteroglossia of table manners, or rather, in the first two cases, *floor* manners, as displayed in their sequential relationships. Those dinners or, rather, their participants, speak to us and give us current portraits both of the Other and of Us-Looking-at-Them. We learn not only that our technologies define the limits of our scientific gaze but also that they show which parts of the culture we are trying to describe have already become closer to us, so close in fact that we, and before us our tools, have no problems seeing, hearing, interpreting them. It might turn out that we can really see only those more familiar parts of the Other's culture; that these are the only aspects – for some the weaker, for others the more innovative ones – that we can really appropriate. We do indeed keep meeting ourselves in our voyages, don't we? And we are still struggling to understand whether and how we can do better than that.

NOTES

1 See the essay by Miller in Part I of this volume; and Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

2 Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969).

3 See Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

4 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).

5 Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's "Being and Time," Division I* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991).

6 Alessandro Duranti, *From Grammar to Politics: Linguistic Anthropology in a Western Samoan Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Bradd Shore, "A Samoan Theory of Action: Social Control and Social Order in a Polynesian Paradox" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1977); Bradd Shore, *Sala'ilua: A Samoan Mystery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

7 John J. Gumperz, *Discourse Strategies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

8 See Ingjerd Hoëm, "Sharing a Language – Sharing a Life? Aspects of the Relation between Language, Culture, and Society in Tokelau, 1986–88" (Master's thesis, University of Oslo, 1990).

9 Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

10 Ernesto de Martino, *La fine del mondo: Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali* (Turin: Einaudi, 1977).

11 Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

12 James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1986).

13 Elinor Ochs and Carolyne Taylor, "Science at Dinner," in *Texts and Contexts: Cross-Disciplinary and Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Language Study*, ed. Claire Kramsch (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1992), 29–45.

14 M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

VISIONS OF EMPIRE

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