



Letters

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letters

Global alliances and local mediations

Stuart Kirsch (A.T., August 1996), writes of a 'global alliance of landowners, ecological activists, anthropologists and lawyers' in the noble battle to control the wanton behaviour of multinational mining companies. But what exactly do *anthropologists* contribute to this struggle? What weapons, tactics or strategies make them especially useful to the alliance? Kirsch does not really answer these questions in his own account of the dispute between the Yonggom people and the operators of the Ok Tedi mine.

Modesty may have prevented the author from explaining that his own role in the negotiation and settlement of this dispute has involved the provision of his expert advice to the mining company as well as to local community leaders and their legal representatives. I do not mean to suggest that Kirsch has a skeleton in his closet, since I myself was partly responsible for persuading the company to engage his services as a consultant back in 1992. His value to the company was naturally due to his prior ethnographic knowledge of the Yonggom people, but he would obviously not have accepted the assignment (nor would I have suggested it) if he had thought that it entailed a betrayal of these people's trust, and *that is why* he was still able to command the attention and respect of company executives (or at least some of them) even after he had started working with the lawyers and other activists who have recently given the company so much trouble.

The lawyers took Kirsch on board as a potential expert witness in matters of 'custom', but the case was settled before such matters ever came before the court, so we shall never know if the expert input of the anthropologist would have had any great bearing on the outcome. Considering Ron Brunton's contribution to the same issue, we may note here that the role of anthropologists in legal confrontations between mining companies and Australian Aboriginal communities is liable to be more significant, more contentious, and more divisive for the discipline, than any equivalent role in a Papua New Guinean context. One reason for this is that the provenance and significance of 'sacred sites' are a major issue in the Australian political setting, but a relatively minor one in Papua New Guinea. In the Ok Tedi case, the question before the courts was the compensation due to certain landowning communities for the physical damage done to their subsistence resources, and this is not a question to which ethnographic knowledge is more obviously relevant than other kinds of scientific (especially biological) knowledge.

According to Kirsch, anthropologists 'are in a good position to analyse the social costs of environmental problems and to suggest potential remedies', but he fails to point out that the main customers for this kind of analysis in Papua New Guinea are the mining companies themselves. In which case, we should recognize that anthropologists may do more for the 'indigenous people' of Papua New Guinea in their capacity as honest brokers in the negotiation of development or compensation deals between mining companies and local communities, than in their capacity as 'advocates' for an anti-corporate alliance. Although I have no doubt that Kirsch did contribute in a number of ways to the formation of one such alliance, I expect he would agree that most of the stakeholders in this political setting know that lawyers make better advocates than anthropologists.

If that is the case, anthropologists may do themselves and their discipline a greater service by presenting themselves as the stakeholders with the special ability to persuade all other stakeholders to take better account of each others' mutual interest. Anthropology is still seen in Papua New Guinea as the kind of knowledge which is very useful, perhaps even essential, to the negotiation of mineral resource development projects on the 98% of the land which still belongs to customary landowners. The mining companies know they need the help of the anthropologists, and anthropologists do not have to sacrifice the interests of indigenous peoples in order to provide this assistance, mainly because the indigenous peoples in this political setting do normally want the development which mining companies can provide – though not at any price – and will sometimes trust anthropologists who work for mining companies to represent also the community interest; though this demands a great deal of ethical and political sophistication from the anthropologists themselves.

My fear is that Kirsch may have underestimated, even if he has not intentionally disguised, the real importance of his own involvement in the settlement of the Ok Tedi dispute, as an honest broker and anthropologist. If anthropologists conceive themselves merely as the 'allies' or 'supporters' of the righteous and indigenous, they may be missing an opportunity to do (and claim) something which is far more effective in its practical outcome, even if it is harder to defend in the global tribunals of political correctness. □

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Aspirations to universalism

In response to the editorial on 'The religious provenances of anthropologists' (A.T., August 1996): first, the implications of Jonathan Benthall's statement that, for cultural anthropology, '...the presumption of a transcendent objectivity appears to lead to sterility' are very great. The debate over the disciplinary status of anthropology (objective or subjective, science or art?) has recently engaged scores of American anthropologists in heated and protracted exchanges – published by the AAA *Anthropology Newsletter* all through the 1995-96 period. In these post-modern times this is possibly *the* core issue in anthropology, and how one addresses it may well determine the future of the discipline – as forcefully pinpointed in the motion selected by the University of Manchester's GDAT for this year's discussion. My own position on this issue¹ is sympathetic to Kilani's perspective, but also incorporates the Habermasian insistence on the value of 'communicative rationality'. This is not as contradictory as it may seem. Rather, it is built around the acknowledgment that cultural factors do colour our perception, cognition and expression – including the kind of anthropological practice we engage in – but it also takes into account that through reflection and systematic analysis we can both understand and describe the characteristics of the cultural prism through which we experience the world. This is what I define as 'subjective objectivity', and 'insider anthropology' in its disciplinary application.

Second, as to whether 'aspects of Euro-American aspirations to universalism ... may prove to be provincial', I would like to emphasize 'aspects'. To assume that all human beings are *capable* of the type of culturally-mindful communicative rationality I describe above is the only perspective that can support both respectful tolerance for cultural differences and universalism. This is the universalism some of us still associate with the much maligned 'Enlightenment Project'. When Locke said '*Sapere aude!*' he meant that 'daring to know' can be liberating. There is no Western provincialism in this exhortation, but its application did develop in social and historical circumstances in which the scientific method came to be the only guarantee of democratic knowledge, and the most necessary liberation was the one from the intellectual constraints imposed by religious ideology. In this respect, then, Western secular society is less imbued with 'unexamined Judaeo-Christian values', as some non-Western intellectuals argue, than with an aspiration to contain the excesses of intolerance those values have historically

created. It is precisely the acknowledgment of this heritage that makes Westerners uneasy about religiously-rooted epistemologies such as the one Kilani proposes (and caused the reticence about discussing one's religious background which Firth pointed out). In other words, the Western experience with Christian 'universalism' has been so poor that on the one hand we tend to make a fetish out of science, and, on the other, we see the separation of church and state as indispensable to the protection of democratic rights. However, members of other civilizations do not need to share these views in order to engage in a universalist dialogue based on communicative rationality. Admittedly, there may be societies that do not encourage or permit such forms of dialogue – even among their own members (as convincingly argued by Simon Harrison in his article on the management of knowledge, A.T., October 1995). Obviously they have the right to refrain from engaging in it; but assuming that such a dialogue *can* be established derives from what we now know of the characteristics of the species as a whole, not from some culture-specific or ideological bias.

Third, mention of Lévi-Strauss's 'almost hostile' reaction to Islamic cultures, explained in *Tristes Tropiques* on the basis

of the Muslim 'rejection of otherness', deserves expansion. In *Conversations with Lévi-Strauss* (Chicago U.P., 1991), there is an interesting passage in which Didier Eribon's questions elicit Lévi-Strauss's admission of feeling a natural sympathy for some cultures and antipathy for others (pp.151-2). As an example of the latter, he refers to a certain 'distaste' for the Arab world and recalls mentioning it in the last chapters of *Tristes Tropiques*. However, he then goes on to qualify his statement by mentioning that every anthropologist sooner or later encounters a cultural group for which antipathy is felt. This is not a trivial point. The phenomenon of cultural antipathy – or, as I prefer to call it, the 'syntonic/dystonic cultural reaction' – affects everyone, including the most relativist of anthropologists, and needs to receive much more attention and analysis. This is especially important because effective universalism has to seriously contend with this reaction, which may be difficult to do if, as my research suggests, cultural syntony and dystony are more likely to be triggered by behavioural than by ideological factors. In other words, and to refer again to Western views of Islamic intolerance, these views may be caused by a misreading of culture-specific patterns of behaviour that have in fact little to do with religious ideology. Consequently, our

insistence on relating intercommunal conflict to value differences may hinder our ability to identify, and resolve, the real sources of conflict. In any case, though, whenever a specific perspective – be it Christian, Islamic, Hindu or, indeed, Afrocentric or Sinocentric – is used as the measure of all others, the universalist principle is gravely compromised. The belief in the empirically-documented capacity of human beings to transcend their community-specific perspectives and to engage in constructive intercommunal dialogue is *qualitatively* different from the belief in the superiority – or worse, sanctity – of the perspective characterizing a particular community. In this sense, and to paraphrase the conclusion of the editorial, paying a visit to the nearest temple or mosque may be stimulating to anthropologists just because, behind the great diversity of religious rituals, they may detect the common core of human rationality which gives them shape. □

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1 Cf. 'Human Science', *Anthropology Newsletter*, January 1996, p.50; 'Introduction: Insider or Native Anthropology' in *Insider Anthropology*, ed. E.L. Cerroni-Long, *NAPA Bulletin* 16, 1995, pp.1-16.

news

CALLS FOR PAPERS

Anthropology & Medicine (formerly known as *British Medical Anthropology Review*) is now published by Carfax starting from 1997. Retaining its editor (Sushrut Jadhav) and reviews editor (Roland Littlewood) the journal now has a substantially broadened international editorial board. Published three times per year it will generate and expand upon the growing theory and research that links anthropology with medicine. Please submit manuscripts of between 5000-8000 words to: Sushrut Jadhav, The Editor, *Anthropology & Medicine*, Dept of Psychiatry, UCL Medical School, 48 Riding House Street, London W1N 8AA, UK. Tel: +44 (0)171 380 9292, Fax: +44 (0)171 323 1459, <jadhav@ucl.ac.uk>. Notes for contributors available at Web site <http://www.carfax.co.uk/anm-ad.htm> where subscription information may also be found.

Leslie E. Sponsel and Roy G. Willis, series editors for *World Heritage Studies on the Anthropology of Peace* (World Heritage Press), invite **manuscripts for publication**. Work should focus on relatively peaceful cultures and/or peace processes. Contact: Roy G. Willis, Dept of Social Anthropology, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH8 9LL, Scotland, UK. Among the other series of World Heritage Press are those in Human Rights, Ageing, Film and Culture, Social and Cultural Anthropology in India, Hindu Studies, Comparative Studies in Aesthetics, Culture, and World Literature, Political Communication, and

European Social and Cultural Anthropology. For more information, contact: World Heritage Press, 1270 St-Jean, St-Hyacinthe, Quebec, Canada J2S 8M2.

CONFERENCES – FORTHCOMING

The theme of the **American Anthropological Association's** Annual Meeting for 1996 (**San Francisco, 20-24 November**) will be 'Anthropology: A Critical Retrospective' (Program Committee Chair: Gwendolyn Mikell). The Distinguished Lecture will be given by Professor **Sidney W. Mintz**, on 'Sow's Ears and Silver Linings: A Backward Look at Anthropological Theory' (8 p.m., 24 November). The meeting will be larger than usual with an extra programme time slot on Sunday. Special theme-related sessions on: ethnographic research training; 'Development as ideology and practice: Africanist (retro)pectives'; North American Indians and American anthropology; *'The Chrysanthemum and the Sword at Fifty'*; 'anthropological reflections on culture and civilization: a retrospective of Columbia [University]'s legacy in anthropology'. Presidential sessions – designed for non-specialists – on 'Biological anthropology as anthropology: a critical retrospective' (organizer: Wenda Trevathan) and 'The place of archaeology in anthropology' (organizer: Elizabeth M. Brumfiel).

Annual awards: Distinguished Service Awards to **Barbara E. Harrell-Bond** (Oxford University) and **Patty Jo Watson** (Washington University, St Louis); Anthropology in Media Award to **Micaela**

di Leonardo (Northwestern). See Calendar for booking details.

The usual **Visual Research Conference** (Society for Visual Anthropology) held on the preceding Tuesday and Wednesday morning features panellists Richard Chalfen, Karl G. Heider, Allison Jablonko, Nancy Lutkehaus, David Givens, Suzanne Levine, Barbara J. Michael, Ira Jacknis, Peter Biella. No formal registration.

COURSES

The fourth **International Folklore Fellows' Summer School**, an international training course for the study of folklore and traditional culture, will be held at the Lammi Research Station of the University of Helsinki, **15-29 July 1997**. The general topic of the training course is **Tradition**, locality and multicultural processes, and it will concentrate on the construction of traditions in multicultural communities, the political use of folklore, and its role as a means of self-definition both in local communities and in the lives of families and individuals. The teaching language will be English. The deadline for applications is 31 October 1996. For information and application forms, contact: Folklore Fellows' Summer School, Dept. of Folklore, P.O. Box 3, FIN-00014 Helsinki University, Finland. Fax: +358 0 1912 2792.

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