

TIME PERSPECTIVE IN ETHNOGRAPHY¹

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There is less agreement than one might expect among anthropologists regarding the importance of time relationships in their data, and it may be well to begin this discussion of time perspective in ethnography at a level of definition where we can expect rather general agreement, with the statement that human beings and human behavior exist only in time. In a study of any aspect of human culture, then, time is a factor which is always present. This fact does not necessarily make it imperative for us to take a time factor into account in such a study, however. If the culture we are studying is not changing in time, then the time factor is constant and it can be ignored. If the culture is changing, it becomes very difficult to justify ignoring this fact in any description or analysis of it. For anyone undertaking ethnographic field work, then, it becomes very important to decide whether the culture to be studied is changing or is not changing. Even if we pick a base date in the past and say that we want to describe, not the culture of today but that of 1895, we need to know whether the culture was changing in 1895 or not.

The problem is more complicated still, from the field worker's point of view, for he is studying the culture of men and women of varying ages whose behavior is conditioned at least in part by previous experiences back to the time of their birth. If any changes have taken place in the culture within the lifetime of the people living at the time to which the description refers, these changes will be part of their immediate experience and must be recorded as part of the background of their behavior. It is probably safe to say that the ethnographer needs to know whether any change has taken place in the culture he is studying in a period of 60 to 80 years immediately preceding the date of the description, because, if any change did occur within this period, it is directly relevant to his problem of description.

If my reasoning so far is sound, we have grounds for expecting that any thoughtful ethnographer would concern himself with the question of whether or not the culture he studies has changed in the immediate past and that he would include some remarks on it in his report. Logically, such remarks might take one of three forms. The ethnographer might say that he had investigated the matter and concluded that there had been no change within the relevant period so that he felt safe in ignoring this factor. Or, he might say that he had tried to make such an investigation and been unable to secure the data needed in spite of conscientious efforts. Finally, because he had investigated and had found that changes occurred, he might simply include a discussion of such changes as they fitted into his descriptive data. I am, of course, speaking of studies which are primarily descriptive rather than of monographs devoted explicitly to problems of culture change. In recent years a few monographs have appeared embodying an approximation to the third alternative treatment of the problem suggested above, but even in the best of such reports the reader does

not get the impression that the ethnographer was giving systematic attention to the recording of recent changes as part of his general investigation. It is not hard to find reports in which not even the possibility of change is mentioned. There are also statements in some of our theoretical literature to the effect that knowledge of changes is not relevant to studies of cultural function. What is going on in anthropology?

One of the things that is going on is that many anthropologists operate at least part of the time on the unstated and usually unconscious assumption that cultures other than our own, and small rural communities even in our own culture, do not change at all or change so infrequently and so slowly that the problem of change can safely be ignored when a time-span as short as 80 years is being considered. The fact that lack of short-term change is being assumed rather than determined by investigation is worth emphasizing; I know of no case where evidence for lack of change is discussed. The assumption of the short-term changelessness of other people's cultures goes back, of course, to the theories of cultural evolution current in the late nineteenth century; it provided the logical basis for the famous "comparative method" in which the world's cultures were to be arranged in a series according to their degree of similarity to our own and used to reconstruct earlier stages in the development of our culture for which written records are lacking. It was only possible to explain the European Palaeolithic by 19th century Tasmanian culture by assuming that there had been no change in Tasmanian culture since the end of the Pleistocene, to give an extreme example.

It is not the purpose of this paper to undertake a general criticism of evolutionary theory. It is pertinent, however, to ask whether we have grounds for assuming that any culture has not changed over any period of 80 years for the purposes of planning a job of ethnographic field work, whatever our beliefs about long-range cultural processes may be. Most ethnographers get into their notes only those things which they see or ask about, and it could happen, and probably has happened, that investigators who assume that there has been no recent change in the culture they are studying record none and are confirmed in their beliefs in cases where fairly substantial changes have, in fact, occurred. On the other hand, an ethnographer who accepts the possibility that there might have been recent changes and looks for them, is in an excellent position to find out if they have occurred or not.

The development of an interest in studies of diffusion in the early part of the present century produced no sudden abandonment of the assumption that cultures other than our own change little. The retention of this particular evolutionary premise led the diffusionists to concentrate on discussion of changes which were relatively remote in time, while their ethnographies remained timeless. The outstanding statement of American diffusion theory is, of course, Edward Sapir's "Time perspective in aboriginal American culture", published in 1916. This work occupies 74 pages in the 1949 edition, exactly three of which are devoted to methods, such as documentary evidence and native testimony, which might be expected to yield data on recent changes. In the comments on documentary evidence,

the emphasis is on the use of historical records over 100 years old; in those on native testimony, it is on legends and traditions of the relatively remote past. I have an impression that Sapir would have admitted rather readily the possibility that recent changes might have occurred in a given North American Indian culture, if he had been asked in so many words; the fact remains that in practice he ignored it.

The influence of the same assumption that cultures other than ours change slowly or not at all can be traced in the acculturation study movement which has been so influential in American anthropology since the early thirties. Although the pioneers in this movement were motivated in part by dissatisfaction with the timeless atmosphere of many ethnographies, they were primarily interested in one particular type of change, that resulting from the influence of one culture on another, and tended to ignore internal innovations. Furthermore, in practice, most acculturation studies have been concerned with the impact of our own culture on some other under such conditions of pressure that the influence was heavily in one direction. It has been easy for devotees of acculturation to qualify the old assumption only slightly, acting as though they assumed that cultures other than our own changed slowly or not at all except under pressure from us, when they changed rapidly in the direction of assimilation. Whatever the theory, anthropologists have always shown a strong tendency to ignore the problem of recent change in culture in their practice of ethnographic field work, the one situation in which evidence for or against such change could be rather easily collected.

There is nothing particularly difficult or even unfamiliar about the basic methods that an ethnographer needs to apply in the study of recent change; some of them have been used for special purposes in ethnographic work for the past fifty years, and the rest were developed in acculturation studies. All that is needed is a little ingenuity about combining them and extending their application, and there is no reason why such ingenuity should not be forthcoming as soon as field workers recognize the importance of the problem. Some suggestions, stemming in part from my own experiences studying the Andean Indian community of Guambía in Colombia, may help to clarify this point.

The problem, essentially, is to reconstruct as much as possible of the cultural history of the community studied in the period remembered by the members of it who are living at the time the study is made. The cultural history of earlier periods is, of course, an interesting and important subject for investigation, but it is less immediately relevant to the problem of description and the available evidence is likely to be more limited.

The reconstruction of recent cultural history is likely to be most successful when the ethnographer is studying a functioning community and describing it as of the date of his study. Under these circumstances, the investigator can depend entirely on the testimony of his informants if written records are lacking, or combine his interview data with anything he can glean from written sources if the latter exist. The key to the

procedure is to collect numerous detailed biographies and personal reminiscences, with special attention to the informant's experiences with any cultural changes that have taken place; much valuable descriptive information should result from such biographies in addition to the historical testimony they furnish. Reminiscences by informants of key figures recently dead are also important, and all this biographical information can be kept in order if systematic genealogical records are being secured at the same time. Another important line of investigation is the history of individual objects or particular institutions. In taking notes on buildings, for example, it may well be possible to determine the age, circumstances of construction, history of repairs, and changes in use by questioning the occupants or other informants who know something about it. This sort of investigation will often lead to information about changes in architectural style that would otherwise have escaped the ethnographer's notice. Smaller objects, such as textiles, utensils, weapons, and boats can be treated the same way. In suggesting a study of the history of institutions, I am thinking of the possible importance of historical data about schools, public offices, associations, periodical ceremonies, markets or stores, local industries, dances, and many other similar matters.

There is no reason why the ethnographer should feel that all he can get in this way is a myth about the past, that particular distortion of it which his informants have developed. By asking specific questions, following many different lines of investigation, and working with a number of informants of different backgrounds, the ethnographer should have an excellent chance of reconstructing what actually did happen as well.

It should even be possible to build up a fairly detailed chronology. If the people studied do not keep a count of years, the genealogical method can be made to yield a close approximation of one, with some special attention to its chronological aspects such as the intervals between births. For example, in a large family with parents still at middle age there may well be married older children while the youngest is still suckling. By questioning about months elapsed between the births and the stage of development reached by the next older child when a new one was born it should be possible to determine the approximate intervals and give a rough birth date for each child. The interval between marriage and the birth of the first child will give the date of marriage. Several such genealogical chronologies taken down for neighboring or related families can be cross-checked by asking a mother which neighbor's child was born just before hers, and so forth, and by such comparisons the dates for each separate chart can be made more precise. All notable events in the family's experience such as marriages, deaths, serious illnesses, strokes of good or bad fortune, moving of residence, etc., should be related to the basic birth series chronology. Events of public importance such as wars, famines, epidemics, floods, storms, eclipses, droughts, changes of authority, and rare ceremonies can be used as keys to cross-check genealogies from families that have little direct contact with one another. With patience and care a chronology built up in this way can be brought to a point where any event which an informant can recall as associated with any other event can be dated at least to the year for some time into the past.

For almost a century now it has been rather difficult to find a community for which there were literally no written records for the recent past. Even where the members of the community do not write themselves, they have some contacts with missionaries, traders, travellers, soldiers, or administrators who do. Usually only a small part of the available written records are of any real use to the ethnographer, but that small part may yield priceless information, especially if checked against the testimony of informants. The ethnographer must expect to have to do his own searching in this material, for his chances of finding a trained historian who is willing to work on them are practically non-existent. The techniques are not especially difficult and have been mastered by many students of acculturation.

Documents which may be of interest may be found in formally organized archives, or they may be in private hands. Any local institution, such as a school, store, court, or place of worship, may have a file of correspondence and other records; it is especially important to determine whether any systematic records of births, marriages and deaths are being kept. Private individuals may have diaries, old letters, accounts, and legal papers which are well worth examining. One of my Indian informants in Guambía showed me an account of the expenditures at an old funeral which suggested a number of important questions about changes in funeral practice.

I have not found that a decision to collect data on recent cultural history adds substantially to the task of field work. Historical questioning cannot be separated from descriptive questioning, and the practice of following historical leads nearly always turns up additional descriptive information that would otherwise have been missed.

Two cases from my own experience in Guambía will furnish an appropriate conclusion to these remarks about the importance of recording data on recent history in ethnographic field work. The first is in the field of costume. Nearly all women in Guambía and some of the men wear an elaborate and unusually shaped hat which does not fit the head but rests on top of it, where it is held in place by a chin cord. This hat is wide and flat and is made by sewing a flat braid into a spiral. The hat is entirely unlike any headgear known to have been used by any other people, Indian or white, that the Guambians might have come into contact with, and it was natural to assume, as anthropologists often do assume in such cases, that the hat was an old aboriginal trait handed down from the time of the Spanish conquest. A little questioning, however, revealed that many of the older people could remember when this type of hat was not used, and they described to me two successive earlier styles of hat, one of which survives to the present as a part of the special wedding costume. Both the earlier types of hat have obvious European prototypes. In this particular case I was unable to find out anything about the circumstances under which the present hat style was invented, but there seems little doubt that it was a local invention and one that cannot be attributed to the influence of the dominant whites.

The second case involves potatoes. One of the earliest historical references to potato cultivation describes it for a district not far from Guambía to the south, and it seems highly probable that the potato was a staple in Guambía at the time of the Spanish conquest as it is today. When a visiting botanist started asking me questions about potato varieties, I discovered that my descriptive notes on the subject were not adequate and started to catalog the varieties now being cultivated. My best informant mentioned that one of the varieties he was describing had been brought recently from a neighboring valley, and it occurred to me to ask questions about the history of the other varieties as well. It turned out that all seven of the varieties now being cultivated had been introduced through native initiative within the last twenty years and that the circumstances of each introduction were reasonably well known to my informant. I was also told about two older varieties, believed to be extinct, which were remembered from earlier years, and one newer variety which had been tried but failed to catch on. Since this experience, I have been wondering how often students of native agriculture in this hemisphere have assumed that the present distribution of some American plant will tell them where it was used in the sixteenth century. Knowledge of the experimentation with new varieties which has gone on recently in Guambía has also affected my estimate of my informants' attitude toward farming in general. I doubt if there is anything unique about the situation I found in Guambía.

ENDNOTE

1. Read before the Annual Meeting of the Western States Branch of the American Anthropological Association, Stanford University, December, 1952.