THE STRUCTURE OF SUBJECTIVITY : PROBLEMS IN ETHNOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION

I

We are familiar with the frequent criticisms that have been made of early 'Culture and Personality' theory as it was represented in the early thirties by Benedict, Mead and Bateson. Such criticisms were directed against the over-emphasis on the homogeneity of a given population, the failure to provide adequate statistical evidence for some of the more general assertions about dominant personality types, the ethnocentric values involved in their descriptions of these societies and the heavy dependence upon popular psychological categories when classifying human types. The common thread which strung these criticisms together was their emphasis upon the nature of the language which this group of anthropologists used to describe culture.

Thus we have comments like this, by Barnouw:

> Because of Margaret Mead's way with words, her books are much more readable than the standard enthnographic monograph. But her literary approach carries certain dangers. Like an official guided tour, it leads the reader to view the culture in a particular way. This is most evident in Mead's description of the Tchambuli. Here Mead does not give us the news straight; she editorialises throughout, with her conclusions being constantly embedded in the ethnographic description. (Barnouw 1963:88)

The entire enterprise was dominated by a subjectivity that was cause for suspicion and many studies were done which threw justifiable doubt on the relationship between the data that was available on the societies studied and the impressionistic, if not cavalier, conclusions presented by these anthropologists. But here again we can see that the arguments often revolved around the use of language, as for instance in Jessie Bernard's criticism of Mead, where she attacks the use of certain adjectives:

> Would everyone who saw what Miss Mead saw, agree with the observations uponwhich she based these conclusions? ... would everyone agree that women who devoted themselves cheerfully, happily, and efficiently to feeding and nursing children, growing and cooking food, to plaiting mosquito nets, women whose attitudes towards men were kindly, tolerant and appreciative were masculine? I for one found myself constantly confused between facts Miss Mead reported and the interpretations she made of them. I would not consider Tchambuli men effeminate on the basis of the data she presents, nor do the women she describes seem masculine. (Quoted in Barnouw 1963)

One of the responses to this kind of criticism was a move towards more empirical testing - research tests, thematic apperception tests, drawing tests, etc. - and also the beginnings of an attempt at theorising more stringently the terms of reference used in describing behaviour through a dialogue with psychoanalysis. The intuitive description of the emotional bases of society was seen to be inadequate.

One of the ways in which we can characterize this shift in emphasis is as an attack upon a particular use of language in the social sciences: a mode of description was being rejected as more subjective than any other. It is significant, I think, that with this shift in the use of description by the anthropologist came a shift in the object of his analysis and a move away from the representation of standardised emotional patterns within a culture towards an emphasis on child-rearing practices and the inter-action between the individual and the culture; it was a move away from description towards explanation.

The interesting point is, however, that the language of these anthropologists was not so very different from that of anthropologists working in more respectable fields such as kinship, politics, and religion. Literary description, based upon completely untheorised psychological and emotional categories, provided the backdrop to most traditional enthographies. Perhaps the difference was that in other cases they were just a backdrop to the more formal relations posited between theoretical concepts, while for these early 'Culture and Personality' anthropologists these descriptions actually constituted and contained the object of analysis. One of the major failings of these anthropologists was that, although the processes of description and representation were clearly at the heart of their project, they did not make a real attempt to understand the nature of literary language. Bateson, who, as we shall see, was interested in the problem, appeared to accept the impossibility of finding a solution. The consequences were three-fold: these works could no longer be read without scepticism; their mode of description was rejected in favour of a more empirically based science which nevertheless was still dependent upon such descriptive conventions at a deeper level; and, finally, with this shift in the form of the discourse, the particular object of analysis was lost.

In this paper I shall attempt to indicate the remedy for some of these problems. The issue of subjectivity in description is clearly of importance to anyone involved in writing enthography. An examination of these early attempts at description may throw into relief aspects of our work today which have been rendered mute by more dominating concerns. It is clearly not enough to isolate individual statements and evaluations as subjective, since such statements provide the very bedrock upon which the 'Culture and Personality' school was founded. These limited criticisms need to be replaced by a more comprehensive theory of language and the processes of signification in anthropology.

I shall take excerpts from two works, Mead's Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies and Bateson's Naven, as my object of study, but shall also refer in some detail to Benedict's Patterns of Culture as this has much in common with the other two books and as both Mead and Bateson explicitly acknowledge its influence upon them. I shall concentrate upon those passages where Bateson and Mead attempt to describe the 'ethos' of the society, 'ethos' being understood as the culturally standardized form of the emotional life of a society. (We shall see very shortly the difficulty that these anthropologists themselves had in defining precisely the object of their descriptions.) Firstly, I shall outline an epistemological framework within which I believe these three works to have been written. This will lead to a discussion of the way in which 'subjectivity' is constituted within that framework, and, finally, I shall discuss the implications that this kind of analysis of subjectivity has regarding the epistemological status of the objects of anthropological knowledge.

II

We can accept that the distinction between the 'reality' and its representation in ethnography is problematic. The underlying premise of this paper is that we never have access to pure 'data' - such access is always mediated by some theoretical construct, however crude. Nonetheless, we do have to admit that there is a radical distinction between the existence which we impute to our data and the written form of the ethnography. One of the interesting qualities of ethnography is that itis continually appropriating reality. It attempts through language to create a society so complete as to accommodate our disbelief. We can see this perhaps more clearly when we contrast ethnography with the sociology monograph based upon empirical research and packed with tables, statistics and structured samples, where the attention of the reader is continually drawn towards the relationship between the sociologist and his data, towards the actual mechanism of the production of knowledge. The traditional ethnography may contain statistics, case histories and so on, but these are derived from a world which has already been constructed for us by the anthropologist and for which the terms of its construction have already been accepted. The distinction between the two kinds of study is a subtle one but it is also important for it implies that in the ethnography our epistemology may be as much a construction within the narrative as it is a decision made on theoretical grounds.

The anthropologists that we are dealing with here seemed to recognize this fact implicitly in that they located the problems that they encountered in coming to grips with the concept of 'ethos' firmly at the level of representation. In 1942 Bateson and Mead collaborated on a photographic analysis of Bali in an attempt to experiment with new forms of representation, having admitted that they had failed to describe 'ethos' adequately through words alone. They summed up their previous attempts as follows:

> During the period from 1928-1936 we were separately engaged in efforts to translate aspects of culture never successfully recorded by the scientist, although often caught by the artist, into some form of communication sufficiently clear and sufficiently unequivocal to satisfy the requirements of scientific enquiry. "Coming of Age in Samoa", "Growing up in New Guinea", and "Sex and Temperament" all attempted to communicate those intangible aspects of culture which had been vaguely referred to as its ethos. As no precise scientific vocabulary was available the ordinary English words were used, with all their weight of culturally limited connotations, in an attempt to describe the way in which the emotional life of these various South Sea peoples was organised in culturally standardised forms. This method had many serious limitations; it transgressed the canons of precise and operational scientific exposition proper to science; it was far too dependent upon idiosyncratic factors of style and literary skill; it was difficult to duplicate and it was difficult to evaluate. (Bateson & Mead 1942:xi)

It is interesting to note the reference to 'ethos' as one of 'those intangible aspects of culture'. It was as though it could only come into existence through being described adequately. Indeed this is one of the implications of the position that was being taken up.

In this period Bateson and Mead were concerned more with the process of description than they were with explanation, in representing 'ethos' as an entity in the world rather than in accounting for its existence. Naturally there were historical antecedents to this kind of study - the psychological portraiture of different peoples was nothing new - and Benedict, the inspiration for both Mead and Bateson, saw her work very clearly as slotting into the historical Boasian perspective of American anthropology at that time. Yet these traditions represented descriptive modes of discourse too and could not provide an explanatory structure within which the description could be located nor any theoretical concepts which would provide and epistemological basis for it. The result was that it was the form of the description itself which had to shoulder the burden of legitimating its own object.

Let us turn back to these attempts to represent the 'ethos' of society and see what evidence there was in the works themselves that the anthropologist was finding the concept problematic. Bateson was the only one of the three who was concerned explicitly to discuss the methodological problems associated with the concept of 'ethos', but there is evidence at an implicit level in the work of both Mead and Benedict that they found the concept difficult to justify theoretically. This difficulty is one of the principal clues to the epistemological framework underlying these works.

Benedict's concept of 'configuration' was the forerunner of the concept of 'ethos' which was coined by Bateson in Naven, and it was this concept which was acknowledged by both Bateson and Mead as being the core insight upon which they were trying to elaborate. A cultural configuration was, for Benedict, the result of a well-integrated culture selecting, from an infinite number of traits and elements of behaviour, just a few. Through this process of selection and emphasis, a patterning or 'configuration' could be discerned which was more than the sum of individual parts. Thus:

> A culture, like an individual, is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action. Within each culture there come into being characteristic purposes not necessarily shared by otner types of society. In obedience to these purposes, each people further and further consolidates its experience, and in proportion to the urgency of these drives the heterogeneousitems of behaviour take more and more congruous shape. T ken up by a well-integrated culture, the most ill-assorted acts become characteristic of its peculiar goals, often by the most unlikely metamorphoses. (Benedict 1961:33)

She explains this process of selection through drawing an analogy with linguistics. Just as, out of a chaos of potential sounds made by man, in every society a few are selected to act as significant units in order to provide the bases for a language which will be meaningful and intelligible, so, out of the infinite variety of human potential in any one society, certain aspects are selected and emphasised to produce a coherent and intelligible configuration.

Benedict herself recognized the inadequacy of this teleological and 'animistic' kind of description and protests a number of times that this process of integration is 'not in the least mystical'. In drawing an analogy between the distinctive configuration of a culture and the distinctiveness of style in architecture, she says:

> When we describe the process historically, we inevitably use animistic forms of expression as if there were choice and purpose in the growth of this art form. But this is due to the difficulty in our language-forms. There was no conscious choice and no purpose. What was first no more than a slight bias in local forms and techniques expressed itself more and more forcibly, integrated itself in more and more definite standards, and eventuated in Gothic art. (Benedict 1961:34)

We can see here that even when she is most conscious of the forms of expression that she is using she finds that she cannot express herself in any other way.

What is perhaps more interesting is that these same forms of expression are adopted wholesale by Mead, albeit more colourfully. Mead really explores and emphasizes the metaphorical level of this kind of analysis:

> When we study the simpler societies, we cannot but be impressed with the many ways in which man has taken a few hints and woven them into the beautiful, imaginative social fabrics that we call civilizations ... Each people makes this fabric differently, selects some clues, ignores others, emphasizes a different sector of the whole arc of human potentialities. Where one culture uses as a main thread the vulnerable ego, quick to take insult or perish of shame, another selects uncompromising bravery ... etc. (Mead 1963:2)

Apart from some references to Benedict's work, Mead does not attempt to talk directly and explicitly about the concepts of 'configuration' or 'ethos'. All her refernces to the concepts are implicitly expressed in this metaphorical vein. The notion of society as a fabric woven by universal man is perhaps the most dominant image in the book, but another widespread and obviously closely allied image is that of the society as a text or book which is being written by man, a drama unfolding with recurring motifs.

She refers, for instance, to the phenomenon of sex-differences in society as 'one of the themes in the plot of human society'.

Both of these writers, as we can see, experience some difficulty in expressing the object of their analysis theoretically; the one complaining about the inadequacy of our language forms, the other turning to the more explicit use of metaphor as an alternative to a more analytical exposition. This difficulty in expression does, I think, have important implications for the epistemological status of their analyses. Although they resort to this metaphorical use of language, if we are to believe Benedict, because there is no other option, the metaphors themselves structure the relationship which the reader, as the implicit knowing subject of the text, has to the culture being described. Just as, through the process of selection, language becomes intelligible, so, out of a similar process of selection, cultures 'become intelligible'; configurations, according to Benedict 'give form and meaning' to customs that would otherwise appear diverse and incomprehensible. It seems to me that Benedict here equates knowledge with 'intelligibility'; the role of the reader of her text is to 'understand' the configuration in the way that he might understand a language. He will then have knowledge of the culture. Similarly, if we take Mead's metaphors of the literary text or the tapestry, her reader is required to read society as he might a book, to find it intelligible, as he would a piece of literature or the pattern of a tapestry. Moreover, we should note that one of the qualities of the concept of 'intelligibility' as used by them is that it

assumes a prior notion of the object of intelligibility being represented to us. Literature, tapestries, architecture, these are all in their way 'representations'. The term 'configuration' itself indicates the way in which the society is 'figured to' the observer. An epistemological framework underlies these texts in which the relationship of the reader to the society is not created theoretically as that of the knowing subject to the object of analysis, but as that of the reader to a text or representation.

Let us turn now to Bateson's attempt to pinpoint the nature of ethos in Naven. He is more methodologically sophisticated than either Benedict or Mead and it is significant, I think, that he introduces the concept in terms of a theorisation of the relationship between description and reality.

He introduces us to his work with some conjectures as to the differences between what he terms scientific and artistic techniques of description. Each, he claims, is ultimately attempting to achieve the same end,

> to present the whole of a culture, stressing every aspect exactly as it is stressed in the culture itself, (so that) no detail would appear bizarre or strange or arbitrary to the reader, but rather the details would all appear natural and reasonable as they do to the natives who have lived all their lives within the culture. (Bateson 1976:1)

The 'scientists', whose representatives in this case are the 'Functionalist School' of anthropologists, attempt to describe each society as a whole 'interlocking nexus' in 'analytic, cognitive terms' and, therefore, according to Bateson, tend to concentrate upon those aspects of the society which lend themselves to this type of discourse. The scientist's basic purpose, he says, is to make the unconscious and unknown explicit and comprehensible; for this reason he is unable to make use of the subtle and implicit techniques employed by the artist to communicate the emotional tone of a society:

> He (the artist) is content to describe culture in such a manner that many of its premises and the interrelations of its parts are implicit in his composition. He can leave a great many of the most fundamental aspects of culture to be picked up, not from is actual words but from his emphasis. He can choose words whose very sound is more significant than their dictionary meaning and he can so group and stress them that the reader almost unconsciously receives information which is not explicit int he sentences and which the artist would find it hard - almost impossible - to express in analytic terms ... If we read 'Arabia Deserta' we are struck by the astonishing way in which every incident is informed with the emotional tone of Arab life. More than this, many of the incidents would be impossible with a different emotional background. Evidently then the emotional background is casually active within a culture, and no functional study can ever be reasonably complete unless it links up the structure and pragmatic working of the culture with its emotional tone or ethos. (ibid:1-2)

Once again we note the assumption that it is only through literary representation that we can come to grips with 'ethos', but here there is a sharper focus on the problem and one can see quite clearly the extent to which 'ethos' actually seems to be conceptualised as a literary convention. The 'emotional tone' that he is referring to here is clearly a literary creation - it can be analysed out in terms of just those poetic devices of rhythm, metaphor and intonation which he itemises above. He then assumes that this set of devices corresponds to an entity in the 'real' world.

The only indications that we have of the existence of 'ethos' are firmly embedded in the structure of the description.

This equation between society and representation is one which occurs again and again throughout these three texts at varying levels of explicitness and metaphor, and I emphasize it here because it seems to me to represent the basis of an epistemological position which is clearly an integral part of the description being constructed. It we were to take a very crude distinction between those who saw the source of knowledge as being the object in the 'real' world and those who saw knowledge as produced in theoretical discourse, our three anthropologists could perhaps be put into a third category in which the source of knowledge is not to be found in the theoretical implications of language but in its representational function.

Let me try to sum up some of the points which I have made in this section. I tried to emphasize the difficulty which each of these writers had in specifying explicitly the object of their analysis. Each of them adopted a slightly different approach to the problem, Benedict using analogy to convey the nature of a 'configuration', Mead using metaphor, and Bateson using the analysis of literary devices. Common to each of these strategies, however, was the inherent ambiguity concerning the distinction between reality and representation. If we follow through the implications of this ambiguity we see the shared epistemological framework underlying their work; it was as though they felt that through the techniques of representation they could encapsulate society to the extent that society was almost indistinguishable from the representation itself. 'Knowledge' for them was not something which was theoretically constructed; it was more closely allied to the 'understanding' of a text, and it was therefore in the production of 'intelligible' representations that 'knowledge' was ultimately located.

I should not like to defend this epistemological position myself, but I feel it is important nevertheless to make it explicit as a basis for our reading of the texts. The level of 'representation' in these works has a very particular epistemological function; one way of handling the forms of 'subjectivity' that we encounter in these texts is to understand the way in which it is constituted within the narrative at the level of representation. This is what I shall try to do.

III

In this section of the paper I shall be dealing with the text as a system of signs within which the object of analysis is constructed and through which the relationship of the reader to this object is controlled. In reading a text, the reader enters into what may be called a 'narrative contract', and has to accept the relationship posited by this system of signs between himself and the object of analysis. We shall refer to the reader in this relationship as the 'knowing subject'. One of the ways in which this relationship is controlled is through the manipulation of the 'persona' in the text, or, as I shall refer to it, of the 'narrative subject', the seeing eye. We shall concentrate on the way in which, in this kind of discourse, the attention of the reader is directed towards the relationships between elements of the analysis at the level of signification rather than at a theoretical level, that is the way his attention is directed toward the medium of the representation.

We shall see that one of the effects of this shift of focus is the fusion of the narrative subject and the knowing subject of the text.

I shall begin by looking at the way in which a description of a particular 'ethos' is built up in one of these texts. Let us take as our main example the ethos of Iatmul men as it is described by Bateson in Naven. The dominant theme that runs through the 'ethos' is felt by Bateson to be pride. It is interesting to note here that I refer to this as a theme, where perhaps I should refer to it as the dominant emotion. This ambiguity in my understanding of 'pride' as used by Bateson is, I suggest, representative of an ambiguity in the text. For the techniques of representation themselves continually shift the level of analysis from the object of reference to its representation, away from the signified to the signifier. One is led to the conclusion that pride exists in Iatmul culture in much the same way that its existence is constructed within the pages of a novel.

The analysis begins with a description of the men's ceremonial house. Bateson points out that the men are occupied with violent, spectacular and dramatic activities which are centred in the ceremonial house, in contrast with the women who lead more routine and practical existences around the dwelling house. He maintains that the contrast between ceremonial house and dwelling house is fundamental for the culture and thus that it serves as the best starting-point for ethnographic description.

Through drawing an opposition in this way between the two sites of activity, Bateson alters the significance of his description. He is not only describing a building in which certain activities connected with this will take place; the description of that building is also, at another level, a description of the ethos itself. He has drawn our attention back to the level of the signifier. Thus he writes:

> The ceremonial house is a splendid building, as much as a hundred and twenty feet in length, with towering gables at the ends. Inside the building there is a long vista from end to end down the series of supporting posts as in the nave of a darkened church; and the resemblance to a church is carried further in the native attitudes towards the building. There is a series of taboos on any sort of desecration. The earth floor must not be scratched nor the woodwork damaged. A man should not walk right through the building and out at the other end ... he should turn aside and pass out by one of the side entrances. To walk right through the building is felt to be an expression of overweening pride - as if a man should lay claim to the whole building as his personal property.(ibid:123)

It is quite clear, I think, that this house is not merely a building in which the man's activities take place, one which evokes certain emotions in him. It is also a symbol for us of the ethos of manhood in Iatmul culture. The ambiguity is in the question of whether it is symbolic for him in the same way as it is for us. Clearly we have to accept that there is a distinction between this kind of simple metaphor and the structuring of the emotions of an Iatmul man; nevertheless Bateson is trying to draw a parallel between the two. Reality has become appropriated by the domain of representation and we, the readers, in our role as knowing subjects, learning about the ethos of Iatmul man, having become absorbed by the narrative subject of the text who stands inside this building, appreciating its immensity, its imposing atmosphere. It is impossible to convey these dimensions of spatial grandeur - the towering gables, the long vistas, etc. without submitting oneself to the conventions of space and time that dominate this narrative subject. It is, then, in this ambiguity between the levels of representation and reality as revealed in the ambiguity between the narrative and the knowing subject that we come to 'know' 'ethos'.

Let us follow the description through a little further. The behaviour that takes place in this ceremonial house is nothing like the behaviour expected in a church, despite the initial comparison. For here there is a mixture of 'pride and histrionic self-consciousness'. In describing this behaviour Bateson admits that in the absence of any 'proper technique for recording and any language for describing human behaviour and gesture' he has had to evoke concepts of emotion and to 'use terms which strictly should only be used by observers about their own introspections'. Thus:

> An important man on entering the ceremonial house is conscious that the public eye is on him and he responds to this stimulus by some sort of over-emphasis. He will enter with a gesture and call attention to his entrance with some remark. Sometimes he will tend towards harsh swagger and over-consciousness of pride and sometimes he will respond with buffoonery. But in whatever direction he reacts, the reaction is theatrical and superficial. Either pride or clowning is accepted as respectable and normal behaviour. (ibid:124)

Bateson's protestations that we have not yet developed the right techniques for recording this kind of behaviour seem to me to miss the point. The manner in which he has described it here cannot be dismissed for it is integral to his purpose. Furthermore, I would argue that the concept of 'ethos' that he is attempting to describe is actually made present by the conventions he is employing in this kind of narrative. We rapidly move, in the passage, from the abstract 'universal' Iatmul man to a very particular one. The narrative definitely takes place from within the ceremonial house itself and we identify quite vividly with this hidden narrator who watches, interprets and evaluates. Once again we have been drawn away from our position as neutral observers and into the drama itself; we are sharing the emotional categories that are shared by the participants themselves - or are we? Again, I think, we have the same ambiguity. It is only a narrator who can move so adroitly from the experience of self-consciousness felt by a man entering the room to the observation of his behaviour as he does this, making the latter symbolise the former and thus setting up a chain of symbolic interactions between behaviour and emotion. It is only a narrator who can demonstrate this kind of omniscience, and it is only because our data is constituted on the level of signification that such symbolic interaction between the elements of the narrative becomes possible. It is only through standing in the position of the narrator in the text that we can understand these emotional categories. Far from sharing the emotional categories of the participants themselves we are sharing a mode of representation of them through a narrator. Here we have the same fusion between representation and reality which we encountered above.

I shall take one final excerpt from this section on the ethos of 'pride' among Iatmul men, and I choose this one because it represents ethos as a collective phenomenon whereas hitherto the passages I have dealt with have treated it either as a symbol or as an individual experience. This annotated excerpt deals with the debates taking place in the ceremonial house:

> The tone of the debates is noisy, angry and, above all, ironical. The speakers work themselves up to a high pitch of superficial excitement, all the time tempering their violence with histrionic gesture and alternating in their tone between harshness and buffoonery. The style of the oratory varies a good deal from speaker to speaker and that of the more admired performers may tend towards the display of erudition or towards violence or to a mixture of these attitudes ...

> As the debate proceeds, both sides become more excited and some of the men leap to their feet, dancing with their spears in their hands and threatening an immediate resort to violence; but after a while they subside and the deabate goes on. This dancing may occur three or four times in a single debate without any actual brawling, and then suddenly some exasperated speaker will go to the 'root' of the matter and declaim some esoteric secret about the totemic ancestors of the other side miming one of their cherished myths in a contemptuous dance. Before his pantomime has finished a brawl will have started which may lead to serious injuries and be followed by a long feud of killings by sorcery. (ibid:126-7)

Bateson claims that the emotions manifested in this debate have their centre in pride. I find it difficult to accept this as an analytic statement about the events described; it seems to me to be much more of a literary gloss upon a pattern of images. The scene itself has been isolated as though by dramatic criteria with an introduction, a middle, a climax and even an epilogue, as we see the speakers work themselves up into a frenzy, dance threateningly during the speeches, declaim the esoteric secret which begins the climactic brawl, and finally embark upon a long feud. The pace and action of the passage follows this dramatic structure, the level of general pandemonium increasing and then reaching a steady plateau until the tension is suddenly snapped by the exasperated speaker who reveals the totemic secret. It is instructive to note, I think, that, as the drama approaches its climax and the men break into their threatening spear dances and unpleasant brawls look dangerously near to the surface, the 'hypothetical' nature of the scene appears to break down. The detail becomes more and more precise and particular, and it is unclear whether the scene is being represented in the more general ethnographic present or whether this is a particular event being described in the continuous present. Whereas we began the passage with the sense that this was to be an abstracted representation of an hypothetical event based upon the anthropologist's accumulated knowledge, we discover that the particularity of the description has taken over and we are once again identified with a narrative subject observing an event in process. It seems that it is only possible for us to appreciate this 'proud' ethos through this sort of staged drama.

This shifting of emphasis towards the level of signification is also typical of Mead's writing. Mead describes the Mundugumor tribe of New Guinea as a hostile, suspicious and violent people. It is through adjectives like these that she attempts to capture the ethos of the people, to create a moral atmosphere which will encapsulate every shade of feeling, behaviour and social structure. Ethos, for Mead, is something parallel to atmosphere, but if we analyse the representation of atmosphere in her work we begin to recognize it once again as a narrative construction based upon a particular formation of the narrative subject. Let us look first of all at the way in which she introduces us to the tribe.

We do not meet the Mundugumor in isolation; we move to them from our encounter with the Arapesh, a rather different, supposedly 'co-operative' society. A parallel is drawn between the narrator's experience of the society and the reader's experience of the text. Thus the book itself represents for us directly the period of time spent by Mead in fieldwork and we move with her from one society to another. The spatial domain through which she travelled is mirrored in the conceptual world of the reader by the transitions he must make in order to accommodate descriptions of such very different societies:

> In coming from the gentle Arapesh people to a group of cannibals and headhunters we made a transition between two ways of life so opposed to each other that every step by which we gradually learned the structure of Mundugumor life was puzzling and astonishing ... Although the reader has merely to shift his attention from one set of values to another, while we had to shift our actual adjustments to the daily life of a native people, nevertheless he will find that transition as difficult as we found it. During our first few weeks among the Mundugumor there was much that was startling, much that was incomprehensible. The violence, the strangeness of the motivations that controlled these gay hard arrogant people, came to us abruptly, without warning, as we studied their customs and watched their lives. In this chapter I shall present some of these startling occurrences, and unexpected phrasings of life, as abruptly, as inexplicably as they were presented to us. So perhaps the reader will be better prepared to understand the pattern of their lives, as it emerged from the first shock and perplexity of contact. (Mead 1963:167-8)

Here the fusion between representation and reality is spelt out and it is quite evident that, through a structured parallel between the two, it is hoped that knowledge will be produced. First of all, note the extent to which we are required to identify with the narrator in this passage. She takes us with her not only through space but through time, into the temporal dimensions through which she, herself, experienced these people. Through these the reader as knowing subject is led to identify with the narrative subject who controls these dimensions. These dimensions of space and time are, therefore, epistemological categories as much as they are descriptive ones.

The pages that follow this introduction are, she claims, devoted to the reconstruction of the experience which she, the fieldworker, had on first encountering these people. It is, confessedly, an impressionistic set of images, but it provides the cement which is to fuse the rest of her analysis. It consists of a set of diverse images of suspicious relations with neighbours, cannibalism, bodies falling in the river and decomposing, hasty, skimped funeral rites, raiding parties on defenceless homesteads, crocodiles in the ditches, gluttonous meals, isolated houses, catty chitchat amongst the women, and choruses of angry voices floating through the air. The only relevance that these events have for the reader is at a purely phenomenal level as impressions that were made upon the observer in the village and it is interesting to note that none of these events in isolation convey anything about the 'ethos' of the people; they are significant only in relation to eachother, as an accumulation of images. The narrative subject weaves between them an intricate net of cross-references and it is in this net that we capture the 'ethos' of the people. In other words this ethos appears to exist only at the level of signification.

Mead goes on to describe the social structure of the Mundugumor and the atmosphere which she has created earlier itself provides a mechanism for linking and giving significance to the elements of the society. Mundugumor social organization is, she says, based upon 'a theory of a natural hostility that exists between all members of the same sex and the assumption that the only possible ties between members of the same sex are through members of the opposite sex'. Now one might ask here - theory for whom? She gives no evidence that any such explicit theory is held by the Mundugumor themselves. This 'theory' is another element in her impressionistic evocation of atmosphere and her use of the term is another example of her tendency to deal with representations and knowledge as equivalents. The dominant form of social organization among the Mundugumor is what she calls the 'rope', composed of a man, his daughter, his daughters' sons, his daughters' sons' daughters, and so on, and it is this formation which expresses for her, in its implicit

opposition between man and son, the theory of hostility endemic in the tribe. This form of organization is as much an expression of Mundugumor 'ethos' as it is its cause. The interesting thing about this kind of text is that there is no structure of determination within it; for the relationships between elements we are dealing with are symbolic ones. Thus the way in which this 'rope' of relationships is experienced by the Mundugumor is not represented as a further level of analysis of the ethos which they share, but rather as a further expression of that ethos; the distinction between levels of analysis is unimportant for her - what seems to be important is purely that an extra layer of imagery should be built up. In this way a whole range of 'unnatural' relationships are emphasized: brothers attempt to trade their sisters for wives, daughters climb into the sleeping bags of their fathers, mothers plot against their daughters and fathers against sons. Moreover this picture is built up skilfully using all kinds of 'dramatic' techniques. When we take a sudden close focus on a cameo scene of the mother fearing that her daughter will be exchanged for a new wife, we feel the strong undercurrents of her emotions and the immediacy of her experience in her compound:

> The mother would like to see her daughter out of her way, and in her place a daughter in law who will live in her house and be under her control ... All her strongest motives, her dislike of the bond between her husband and her daughter, her fear of having that bond translated into the appearance of a young rival wife in the compound, her practised solicitude for her son - all are directed against letting her husband exchange the daughter for a young wife. (ibid.:180).

In opposition and strong contrast to this we have the father's experience; the father's jealousy of his son's rival claim to the exchange of daughter for wife.

> Within his compound, as his sons mature, he sees a set of hostile camps developing; in each hut a disgruntled, superseded wife and a jealous aggressive son ready to demand his rights and assert against him a claim to the daughters. (ibid.)

Mead certainly demonstrates a vigorous creative imagination, but the obviousness of the literary conventions that she uses and the domination of the narrative subject who defines the timing and shape of the drama and peers inside the minds of the principal protagonists, prevents this passage from being what it might have been - an analysis of the effects of a particular social structure on the behaviour of individuals. What she does instead is to locate intelligibility, and thus the analysis, at the level of representation. We see this happening again and again; we are continually brought back from the beginnings of analysis to the narrative dimensions of time and space. Take this example of her description of the big men who take part in food exchanges in the village. These men are, she says, 'really bad', they are 'aggressive, gluttons for power and prestige'.

> These are the men for whom a whole community will mourn when they die; their arrogance, their lust for power, is the thread upon which the <u>important moments</u> of social life are strung. These men - each community of two or three hundred people boasts two or three - are the fixed points in the social system. They build their <u>compounds well and firmly</u>. There is a <u>strong palisade around them</u>; there are several strong houses; there are slit drums too big to be moved about easily.(ibid: 186-7; my emphasis)

The description has been brought back to the level of the phenomenal: a few moments in social life, a strong barrier around their houses, these are the really significant elements in the description, for these are the elements which reveal to us the level at which it is to be read.

Both of the passages which I have referred to here are representative of the kind of 'subjective' analysis which could always provide an easy target for critics. The kinds of conclusions which Mead and Bateson come to are hardly empirically verifiable. Their work does, however, throw an interesting light on the writing of ethnography. In attempting to isolate the aspect of society that they called 'ethos' they had continual recourse to a particular form of descriptive discourse. One of the primary features of this discourse was the ambiguity inherent in it between the levels of reality and representation. In our analyses of these passages we saw this ambiguity clearly expressed in the extent to which we were continually directed back to the forms of signification in the text, and in the way the narrative subject of the text and the knowing subject seemed to be fused. It was as though the theoretical relationships were being worked out at the level of 'representation' rather than through analysis. Indeed, I think I have demonstrated that the concept of 'ethos' was a function of these techniques of representation and only had any real meaning within this rather limited form of descriptive discourse.

IV

In my introduction I stated that one of the possible differences between 'Culture and Personality' studies like those of Benedict, Mead and Bateson, and other forms of anthropology was that the former took the form of the description as the subject of their analyses rather than merely as a backdrop. I now feel that we can perhaps put this statement more strongly: the phenomenon that we have been examining in this paper has demonstrated one level of the appropriation of reality that any ethnography practises - it is simply that this level is normally mute whereas here it is the dominant voice that is heard. The very existence of the traditional monograph as the dominant vehicle for anthropological analysis entails that the theoretical work is taking place within this kind of framework of representations.

A second point I should like to make is that, although I have tried to emphasize the purely 'descriptive' status of a concept like 'ethos', this does not mean that it should be completely dismissed. Since it is a product of our representations of society it is clearly of ideological significance for us and it is important to ask why we have this sense of 'ethos' - why does this concept appear to us as it does?

Having seen to what extent this kind of concept is embedded in a set of narrative conventions, I should like to ask finally whether we, as anthropologists, should not be more conscious of the power that this kind of use of language has to transform our ideology. Perhaps we need to be more adventurous. Bateson and Mead attempted in a later collaborative work to explore different forms of representation through the use of photographs. I do not think this attempt was successful partly because, although they recognised the need for such experimentation, an adequate theoretical framework did not exist at that time which could demonstrate the reason for such a need. I should like to think that the kind of paper that I have written here will be seen as part of the much larger contemporary movement towards a general critique of scientific language. In this context that kind of experiment in representation might be much more fruitful.

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