

# Main Concepts and Research Traditions

## Commentary

Bo Lönnqvist

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The main questions in European ethnology today are: (1) Why do people behave in a certain manner? (2) How do they interpret and describe their world? (3) What are they looking for? These questions entail assessing *tradition* and *culture*. Tradition comprises more and more cultural patterns which are not visible, so we now have the broader but problematic *mentality* beside the concept of tradition. Passing phenomena may be expressions of a specific ideology and situation, seeming like tradition without being so in the conventional sense. Today's mixture of cultural patterns of short duration requires new methods of conceptual analysis. Subcultures come and go in quick succession. Information technology etches fleeting cultural patterns in the mind, and the border between real life and virtual reality is blurred.

*Professor Bo Lönnqvist, University of Jyväskylä, Department of Ethnology, PL35, FIN-40351 Jyväskylä.*

In his speech Tamás Hofer refers to the “latent ethnicity” of the researchers themselves. He notes that European ethnologists, on account of their varied cultural backgrounds, have a particular skill in applying a pluralistic approach to the interpretation of cultural behaviours.

Hofer thus also touches on the twofold nature (emic, etic) characterising a science based on fieldwork and participant observation, on face-to-face meetings between human beings. Such self-reflection has not previously been part and parcel of the positivistic scientific tradition, yet during the last decades it has increasingly come to the fore. But it also provides a connecting link with the pre-scientific stages of ethnology, seeing as Herder's historical principal method is based on “Einfühlung”, meaning the common human capacity to understand all kinds of human behaviour.

I would now like to discuss a few of the classical concepts in ethnology and their usability against the background of the ethnologist's double role in fieldwork. This means both closeness and distance, an insider's perspective simultaneous with an outsider's.

The main questions in European ethnology

of today can be formulated in the following questions:

- 1) Why do people act and behave in a certain manner?
- 2) How do they comprehend, interpret and describe their world?
- 3) What are they looking for, in other words, what means have we to analyse the central identity question Who am I?

Given the conceptual basis of ethnology, these questions entail an assessment of e.g. *tradition* and *culture*. In what sense are these concepts particularly useful in the changing world of today's Europe? It is apparent that the phenomenon called tradition comprises more and more cultural patterns which are not visible, not material, nor necessarily continuous. Consequently, beside the concept of tradition we now also have *mentality*, although with a broader but problematic coverage. Brief and passing single phenomena may occur as expressions of a specific tangible ideology and situation. These phenomena may have the character, or be given the appearance, of tradition, without being ac-

tually tradition in the conventional sense. This contemporary phenomenon, the mixture of cultural patterns of short duration, puts entirely new requirements both on the methods used and on our conceptual analysis. A great number of different short-lived subcultures keep incessantly replacing one another, for instance in the urban milieu. Information technology engraves cultural patterns in the mind, one on top of the other, at high speed, and at the same time the borderline between our life and a fictitious virtual reality is obscured. Umberto Eco has found that the mass media will on the one hand present the fictitious to us as being real, while on the other hand trying to convince us that what is real is in fact fictitious. The more of reality the TV screens communicate to us, the more filmlike everyday life becomes, so that in the end everything outside ourselves may seem unreal to us. The war on the TV screen, such as that of former Yugoslavia, and on the other hand the broadcast films of violence can be taken as a case in point. What is real? I have studied culture in school, and there, flightiness and frequently unreal images of the world are part of everyday life. This also creates new cultural patterns, such as a strong ritualization of daily life at school, but on the other hand also provides patterns of violent behaviour. Is it finally possible to find any kind of pattern in this continuous movement? Does tradition – the collective experience – have any meaning left?

And what is the relevance of the concept *culture* for the study and analysis of such a world? Among cultural anthropologists, discussion on the usability of the concept culture has arisen against global industrialization, urbanization, and the overpowering nature of the economic systems. How can one isolate a certain type of society, how can one delimit a specific culture? Subcultures, countercultures,

cultural encounters, cultural mixture, creolisation and globalisation all seem to be unending cultural processes. Is there any sense in looking for pattern and order, system and structure in the midst of all these processes? While the ethnologist sees culture as built on a situational and contextual basis, the individual dimension becomes increasingly focal. But if the analysis is focused on the creative individual alone, there will be lacunae in the holistic approach and the discovery of collective traditions and social patterns. It seems that here, too, the ethnologist has to move between two different processual cultural fields: on the one hand, individual activity as a continuous process of interpretation and creation, and on the other hand the more or less compartmentalised conceptual world we have been taught and which might be defined as tradition. There is a possibility that the *narration*, narrative culture or discourse analysis, will become an ever more important tool in the dialogue between the researcher and those studied.

If we embark on an increasingly querying research when applying the classical concept of culture, we also have to analyse the taboo areas of society and culture, and this we must do without the sensational approach of the mass media, which is based on shock. We are dealing here with a study of the borderlines of culture, of cultures in the process of expiration, and also with the limits of research. This again brings us back to the Janus face of ethnology. From being an institution in our society, ethnology will then take on the main role in querying society by means of problematizing its cultural behaviours. We cannot lock reality out by means of documenting and analysing it. Double roles, irony and self-reflection require other methodological approaches than for instance innovation and acculturation do. The moral dimension begins to permeate the role of the scientist.