

On Ethnoscience and Cognitive Anthropology

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Ethnoscience and Cognitive Anthropology grab me. Of all the schools of anthropological theory so far, I cannot find much in it to disagree with. It seems logical and closer to reality than most. It is true that when descriptions of culture are couched in terms of native thought, they become much more alive, and mirror reality much better than ethnographic descriptions that reproduce that reality. I think it is also true to a certain extent that “replicating the classification system of any language would give [anthropologists] the ability to view the world in the same way as native speakers of that language” (McGee & Warms).

However, as Edward Said has warned, no amount of study by colonizers could adequately mirror the cultures of the colonized. Therefore I think that only the science of anthropology in the hands of the “natives” (and that term has a derogatory ring to it) themselves could fully, finally, be accurate descriptions of cultures, and only those “native” anthropologists coming together to determine what it is that makes up the theory of culture from there could say that they have truly arrived at ethnographic descriptions that reproduce reality. As to when the second could come about we cannot tell.

While it is true that a scientist foreign to a place sees more facets than a native to the place would, it is also true that the native knows his culture like his insides more than any foreigner, no matter how scientific, could. Arriving at full-blooded ethnographic descriptions is therefore a matter of arming “natives” in the science of anthropology. Here I could recall Datu Victorino Saway, the current chief of a tribe in Mindanao, who has attained a Ph.D., presumably from a U.S. university. At the moment Datu Saway comes closest to a genuine “native” already armed with some scientific tools. I have not yet affirmed if that tool is anthropology. But if it is, then certainly he could mirror his own reality much better than any Margaret Mead could. This does not mean, of course, that all his conclusions will necessarily be true; they should be subject, like all scientific conclusions, to further test and verification.

For Filipino culture in general, I think that we already have the full battle arsenal. If all the anthropologists we have that have been trained here and abroad would dare to study Filipino national culture, and come up with their hypotheses, we would garner a rich storehouse of knowledge about ourselves indeed.

One weakness of Tyler and the cognitive and ethnoscientific anthropologists, however, is their conception of culture being “created sui generis,” with “no predictable effect on the ‘real world’” (McGee & Warms). I think this is a fallacy. All things are interrelated, especially things within a given phenomenon. Tyler and Conklin’s analysis of language must be properly combined with the materialists’ and ecologists’ view of culture as adaptive to be fully useful to the construction of the metalanguage desired by Tyler (a metalanguage, by the way, that must include not only his study of languages but theories of kinship, religion, political and economic systems as well). It is not only that social being determines consciousness; consciousness can also become a material force. That is the true dialectic of society, a pair of opposites that is not only binary, but, exercising influence on each other, dialectical, and, moreover, dialectically grounded on material reality.