

GUEST EDITORIAL

The Skills and Work of the Anthropology

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According to the accepted wisdom, poets should be especially facile with language and stretch our vision with freshly cut images. Historians, with their knowledge of past events, offer a wise and sweeping view of human change and continuities. Physical scientists, who have analytical yet creative minds, bring us discoveries and insights about the natural world.

What about anthropologists? Have we any finely honed talents and gifts for the world? In my view, anthropology is the most demanding of all the disciplines, but the skills of the anthropologist and the rewards receive little publicity.

The well-known image, repeated in popular films and the *National Geographic*, is partially true. Anthropologists do not have to be fearless explorers, but it is challenging to live in the humid rain forest, on the hot savannah, or on giddy slopes ten thousand feet above sea level. Undertaking field research requires physical stamina and wry if not perverse pleasure at having to make sudden changes in one's diet and life-style. Fieldwork is hard.

But the struggle against adversity soon loses its glitter, and I have found that the anthropologist's romance is more subtle and internal. My excitement comes not from uncovering a stone or lost city, for these are only lifeless residues, but in discovering the patterns that other humans have made in and of their lives. People leave their traces in history, and they inscribe their imaginative faculties in their world. The anthropologist often has the special privilege of discovering a different pattern of life—a marriage form, a religious belief, a way of securing the necessities of life. Eventually, we may find that some of these patterns are repeated time and again, but because they are human products, their discovery is more fundamental than in the natural sciences. One hot and muggy summer in Panama, I was thrilled to realize that relations among parents, godparents, and godchildren in Latin America (the *compadrazgo*) is a kind of mirror reversal of the ties found between nuclear family members. Two decades later, when I heard Colombian country people talk like European economists of several centuries past, I feverishly set off on a five-year voyage through historical texts—and the Andes of Colombia.

Because anthropology is the study of human life, the anthropologist needs to know a little something about everything—from psychology to legal history to ecology. Our field equipment is primitive, for we rely mainly on the eye, the ear, and the tongue. Because ethnographers carry few tools to the field and the tools they have can hardly capture the totality of the situation, the background and talents of the researcher strongly determine what is "seen" and how it is understood. But the field experience itself has a special impact, too. I studied economic practices

in Panama because I was trained to do so, but the field research forced me to alter all the notions I had been taught. Most of them were useless! Anthropologists try to open themselves up to every facet of their field situation and to allow its richness to envelop them. In this, the tasks of the anthropologist are very unlike those of the normal laboratory scientist: the anthropologist can have no predefined hypothesis and testing procedures. The best equipment an ethnographer can possess is a "good ear" and patience to let the "data talk."

This is not all. In the field, anthropologists carry out intense and internal conversations with themselves. Every observation, whether clearly seen or dimly realized, must be brought to consciousness, shuffled about, and questioned. Only by recognizing and acknowledging their own incomprehension can anthropologists generate new questions and lines of inquiry. In the solitude of the field, the anthropologist must try to understand the limits of her or his knowledge, have the courage to live with uncertainty, and retain the ambition to seize on openings to insight. But field studies constitute only a part of the total research process. Once home, the field notes have to be read and reread, put aside, and then rearranged. The anthropologist is a pattern seeker, believing that within the data human designs are to be found. The task is like solving a puzzle, except that there is no fixed solution and the puzzle's pieces keep changing their shapes! With work and insight, however, a picture—an understanding or an explanation—begins to emerge.

Eventually, the results of all these efforts are conveyed to others, and so anthropologists also need to have expository skills and persuasive powers, for they have to convince others of their picture and of their viewpoint about how cultures and social lives are put together.

The skills needed to be an anthropologist are as limitless as the cultures we study. Could any discipline be as challenging or rewarding? In this lies the fascination and allure of anthropology.