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Essay

In Search of New Ethics in Inter-cultural Relations

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A Japanese girl student, who had spent several weeks in Peshawar as a volunteer on a medical team of Japanese doctors, told us about a frustrating experience she had there. A Moslem father came to the medical center with his daughter, who was suffering from a tumor on her back. However, the father refused to allow his daughter to be examined by a male doctor. The Japanese girl took the doctor's place and reported her observations to the doctor, who stood behind a curtain. The doctor concluded that an operation was necessary, but the Moslem girl declined to be operated on by a non Moslem. And so they left the center without getting treatment. Afterward the Japanese girl wondered if she was right to have let them go, how she should have handled the situation, and what could serve as a guideline for her.

Cultural anthropologists have been busy redefining the ethics of "understanding others". The naive scientism which believed in the neutrality of describing the "other" culture chosen as a "field of research" has been heavily criticized because of the power structure implied in the hierarchical structure between the observer and the observed. What had been praised as scholarly contributions were shown to reveal hidden desires of domination. The innocence of the eye in fieldwork has been called into question. Instead of being a privileged observer, the anthropologist at work is observed with(out) curiosity by the community of people who welcome him/her.

This shift in observation has created a kind of cognition crisis among some cultural anthropologists with regard to ways of "understanding others". Experimental ethnographers attempted to reproduce dialogues with informants as constituting their immediate field experience,

but this revealed instead the fictionality of the "immediacy". Archeological ethnographers tried to reexamine the practices/customs of their ancestors, but by accusing one's ancestors one cannot be exonerated of one's own "crime". Instead of this "autopsy", performing ethnographers theatricalize the "crime" by ostentatiously demonstrating the criminality of the act of "rewriting culture", but this self-reflective self-accusation is simply a reversed self-justification played out in a fictional and self-fabricated lawsuit court trial.

What is wrong with these vicious circles of introspection? Surely, the search for a "politically correct" way of "describing" other cultures implies positionality of the describer. And since there is no neutral describer, the question becomes for whom the information is encoded and to whom it is sent. If the destination is only the community of specialized cultural anthropologists, the issue come to a dead end. But who is entitled to represent which culture? This is an essentialist question. Are "Westerners" not qualified to "understand" Japanese culture? Can the Moslem people only understand Islam? What is the status of a secular Arabist's interpretation of the holy Islam? As we can see, ethnic identification can be used in political manipulation.

The question of "understanding" can no longer be regarded as a simple epistemological problem, as is shown by the dilemma the Japanese girl student experienced in Peshawar. If we "understand" the Moslem father and daughter's refusal of surgery, should we refrain from medical intervention? What are the conditions to be taken into account in the case of cultural intervention? A research project aimed at investigating the possibilities for a new framework of ethics in cross-cultural exchanges seems to be desperately needed.