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Introduction

This book is about Central Asia, where I lived and worked for a total of four years (spread out across twenty). It is also about culture—not Central Asian culture(s) but culture as a theoretical concept. This is not to say that readers of this book will not learn something about Central Asia as a region or Central Asians as people. I describe the speech and actions of diverse individuals—whether American, European, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, or other—*in* Central Asia. For reasons that relate to my perspective on the culture concept, however, I do not intend these descriptions to be representative of broader cultural, ethnic, or regional rubrics.¹

Few theoretical concepts in the social sciences have been discussed as exhaustively as culture, and I realize some readers will find my interest tiresome. In defense of my project, I can offer that my interest was inspired by my ethnography. Like many cultural anthropologists, I believe an ethnographer must allow their data to guide them to the most appropriate theories, rather than choose their theories in advance. When I worked in the Kyrgyzstani development sector as an educator (before studying anthropology), I often found myself discussing “Central Asian culture” and how it needed to be changed. Later, as a student of anthropology, I again found myself talking about culture, but it now meant something very different. My goal in this book is to describe this difference and explore what it reveals about conceptions of human diversity and social change. In this Introduction I offer a brief historical survey of the culture concept in anthropology and address why that history is relevant to a study of the development sector in Central Asia.²

CULTURE AND ANTHROPOLOGY

The culture concept has long been viewed as American cultural anthropology's signature contribution to intellectual discourse. Ironically, a British anthropologist is credited with claiming the term for the discipline. Sir Edward Tylor wrote that culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" ([1871] 1920, 1). His oft-quoted definition lacks nuance; it is a clumsy list of seemingly random social institutions rather than a systematic theoretical position, but a few of its assertions persist: culture is created and maintained by groups of people, not individuals, and culture is learned from others, meaning the attitudes and habits it prescribes are not instinctual. Hidden in this definition, unfortunately, is the nineteenth-century understanding of "Culture" as an ideal form of human society to which all groups (read: "races") strive and only some achieve.

The most offensive elements were stripped from the culture concept by Franz Boas, a brilliant scientist, tireless empiricist, and founder of the American school of "historical particularism." Boas spent his formative years in Germany where he studied under the ethnologist Adolf Bastian. Bastian rejected universal evolutionary narratives and emphasized the uniqueness of individual societies (Eriksen and Nielsen 2013, 28). Boas brought this perspective to North America, where he spent time living with indigenous populations in Canada and the Pacific Northwest. His understanding of culture was shaped by those experiences, as well as his encounter, in the United States, with antisemitism so virulent it almost derailed his career. In his scholarship, Boas dispensed with "Culture," an ideal way of life all groups can aspire to and replaced it with "cultures," diverse societies' unique lifeways, which are determined by environment and history. Boas's intervention irrevocably changed the study of human society; it shifted anthropologists' attention to differences rather than similarities and added the much-needed sensibility of cultural relativism.

Boas's students refined his understanding of culture, assuring its dominance in North American anthropology. One of his most celebrated students, Ruth Benedict, described cultures as historically determined, integrated wholes. For Benedict, culture was "a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action" (1934, 46). Shaping the pattern of each culture was an underlying psychic tendency, a dominant personality trait that determined the society's "major drives" and "traditional obsessions" (1934, 245). When a group encountered unfamiliar beliefs and practices, it incorporated them into its culture, like new threads being woven into an existing fabric (1934, 47).

The next major revision of the culture concept occurred with the rise of symbolic anthropology, in the 1960s. Symbolic anthropologists, such as

Clifford Geertz, argued that cultures (still bounded, integrated wholes) are not collections of practices or psychological tendencies, but systems of symbols. These systems of symbols, which Geertz called “webs of significance,” were part of a uniquely human project of meaning-making. Culture’s symbols were a source of orientation; they “put a construction upon the events” of a person’s life (Geertz [1966] 1973a, 45).

Geertz’s insights were informed by his rejection of facile distinctions between biology and culture. He rejected the assumption, common at the time, that culture is one in a series of “layers” of the human experience—the others being social, psychological, and biological—that could be studied independently. Culture is not an overlay, something to be noted and dispensed with so as to expose the universal psychological and biological predispositions underneath, he argued. He commented further, “culture, rather than being added on, so to speak, to a finished or virtually finished animal, was ingredient, and centrally ingredient, in the production of that animal itself” ([1966] 1973a, 47).

Geertz’s argument was informed by archaeological evidence suggesting that *homo sapiens* did not evolve biologically and later acquire culture; instead, culture emerged in connection with distinct biological changes that occurred in the course of human evolution.³ Geertz explained, “Between the cultural pattern, the body, and the brain, a positive feedback system was created in which each shaped the progress of the other” ([1966] 1973a, 48). As our cognitive capacities increased, we were able to give up genetic control over our behavior (i.e., instinct) in favor of a fitter adaptation: behavioral flexibility.⁴ This, however, left us dependent on shared symbolic systems that make sense of the world and our place in it. Geertz wrote, “Undirected by culture patterns—organized systems of significant symbols—man’s behavior would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions, his experience virtually shapeless” ([1966] 1973a, 46). Culture, as a system of symbols, does not *impose* behaviors on us, Geertz clarified, but by giving meaning to our experiences *guides* our behavior ([1966] 1973a, 45). To serve this function, culture depends on sociality; it does not exist in individual brains but is produced as individuals engage with each other in a social environment (1973, 11).

CULTURE AS PROBLEM

In the 1970s and 1980s, the growing influence of feminism, postmodernism, and post-colonialism forced anthropologists to confront unacknowledged abuses of the discipline. Although the Boasians had largely corrected for earlier generations’ complicity in “scientific” projects to defend racism, the

discipline was complicit in colonialist projects that were informed by the same racist assumptions. This soul-searching uncovered the uncomfortable truth that anthropologists still tended to come from American and European (read: wealthy, industrialized, imperialist) states and work in places that had been forcibly occupied by those states. This realization led some critics to single out ethnography as a mercantilist venture whereby a foreigner (the researcher) exports a valuable commodity (information) from a defenseless society and uses it to produce objects of value (books and articles) (e.g., Lewis 1973, 584). From outside the discipline, observers wondered whether anthropology could ever overcome its dependence on these exploitative relationships (e.g., Said 1989).

Ethnographers who were not paralyzed by these condemnations experimented with corrective responses.⁵ One response was to add reflexivity to scholarly writing. At its extreme, this response produced monographs that were more confessional memoir than scholarly ethnography (e.g., Briggs 1970; Rabinow [1977] 2007). Another response was to reimagine the field site, replacing the essentializing village ethnography trope with multi-sited projects (Bernstein 2013; Gupta and Ferguson 1997a; Ho 2006; Marsden 2016). Still another was to reconceptualize the ethnographic subject by writing ethnographic biographies, intimate accounts of an ethnographer's interaction with one individual (e.g., Crapanzano 1980; Dwyer 1982; Herzfeld 1997b), or auto-ethnographies, which placed the ethnographer's experience at the center of the study (Reed-Danahay 1997). A final response was collaborative ethnography, which involved informants in the construction of ethnographic texts (e.g., Shostak [1981] 1983).

This experimentation forced anthropologists to rethink the discipline's theoretical foundations. Anthropologists and observers alike began to recognize that anthropology's focus on culture predisposed ethnographers to represent complex, heterogeneous, dynamic societies as simple, homogeneous, changeless entities whose borders were coterminous with the ethnographer's chosen village, island, or ethnic group (Gupta and Ferguson 1997a, 1997b; Said 1989; Wolf [1982] 1997, 6). They complained that previous theorizations of culture—Benedict's patterns, Geertz's webs—always turned it into a thing: a changeless, bounded object waiting to be observed and preserved by the intrepid researcher. They argued that this approach obscured these societies' complex histories, internal diversity, and relations with other societies and instead produced essentializing and exoticizing representations, which reinforced European and American prejudices. Edward Said asked, "Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or religion, or civilization) a useful one, or does it always get involved either in self-congratulation (when one discusses one's own) or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the 'other')? Do cultural, religious, and racial differences matter more than socio-economic categories, or politicohistorical ones?" (1978, 325).

In recent years, a number of anthropologists have defended the culture concept in the face of these criticisms. In *Culture: The Anthropologist's Account*, Adam Kuper argues that the culture concept remains “the only way we know to speak about the differences between the peoples of the world” (1999, 212). Similarly, Arjun Appadurai writes, “The most valuable feature of the concept of culture is the concept of difference” (1996, 12). Sherry Ortner, about whom I say more below, pledged her loyalty to the culture concept and proposes a “new-old concept of culture” (2006, 14).

More common, however, are works in which anthropologists uphold critics' rejection of the culture concept. In “Writing Against Culture,” Lila Abu-Lughod acknowledges that the culture concept has helped theorists talk about difference and resist ethnocentrism, but it has also encouraged a simplified—which is to say dehumanizing—construction of the “other” (1991, 144–46). Theorists who rely on the culture concept focus on certain types of difference—those that separate the theorist from the theorized other—and ignore other types, such as psychological, class, and gender differences that do not map isomorphically onto geographical boundaries or ethnic divisions, but that might usefully reveal other dimensions of diversity and inequality. Abu-Lughod argues that this focus allows the anthropologist to construct the society being analyzed as ontologically other and internally homogeneous, while the anthropologist and their reader share a sense of their own society as familiar and heterogeneous. She believes this regressive politics of ethnography can be avoided if anthropologists write “ethnographies of the particular,” that is, works that focus on individuals and events rather than groups and trends (1991, 149). Her own ethnography, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (1986), offers an intimate portrait of one Bedouin family. In spite (or because) of its particularity, the ethnography makes readers feel they know and understand life in the broader Bedouin community of which Abu-Lughod's family is a part.⁶

A related critique of the culture concept says it does not facilitate a rigorous account of power and inequality. This dissatisfaction has led many anthropologists to neglect culture for other analytical concepts, such as ideology, hegemony, discourse,⁷ structures of feeling, and habitus. Interest in habitus, understood as the “permanent internalisation of the social order in the human body,” is particularly strong (Eriksen and Nielsen 2013, 159). Marcel Mauss had used the term in his discussion of bodily disciplines and their variations in different societies ([1934] 1973). The idea was developed further by Norbert Elias, who described habitus as the deeply ingrained feelings, thoughts, and behaviors one learns from earliest childhood—what we might call, colloquially, “second nature” ([1939] 2000, 117).

Habitus entered anthropology thanks to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu described habitus as “a subjective but not individual system of

internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class and constituting the precondition for all objectification and apperception” ([1972] 1977, 86). If Geertz’s culture is a “control mechanism,” which puts limits on behavior, Bourdieu’s habitus is a “generative principle,” which allows “regulated improvisations” ([1972] 1977, 78). In Bourdieu’s “practice theory,” action (also known as “practice”) is neither the strict execution of rules and norms nor behavior ungoverned by rules and norms. Habitus imposes on the body the structural constraints of the material and social worlds, while also accommodating some strategic flexibility. Later theorists also called attention to Bourdieu’s idea of “hexis,” the embodied dimension of habitus⁸ (Bourdieu [1972] 1977, 87; see also Abu-Lughod 1989, 296; Mahmood 2001; Starrett 1995).

Although practice theory remains popular, many anthropologists dislike its reliance on unconscious conditioning, complaining that this renders habitus (in theory) mostly inaccessible for conscious examination by the acting subject and limits agency (e.g., Blum 2016, 23; Mahmood 2001, 838). Sherry Ortner writes,

One question lurking behind all of this is whether in fact *all* practice, everything everybody does, embodies and hence reproduces the assumptions of the system. There is actually a profound philosophic issue here: how, if actors are fully cultural beings, they could ever do anything that does not in some way carry forward core cultural assumptions. On the more mundane level, the question comes down to whether divergent or nonnormative practices are simply variations upon basic cultural themes, or whether they actually imply alternative modes of social and cultural being. (1984, 155)

Here, Ortner suggests that the vocabulary of practice theory does not facilitate discussion of the flexibility of cultural systems or the relationship between culture and agency. Ortner is also concerned that practice theory has encouraged theorists to focus on power and domination. She urges anthropologists to apply practice theory’s insights to other human experience, such as “cooperation, reciprocity, and solidarity” (1984, 157).

Ortner proposes her “new-old concept of culture” in a recent collection of essays in which she integrates symbolic anthropology and practice theory (2006). In her understanding, culture is useful as long as we also talk about power and the way culture restricts (or produces) agency, offers templates for resistance, and imposes hierarchies. She defines culture as “the (politically inflected) schemas through which people see and act upon the world and the (politically inflected) subjectivities through which people feel—emotionally, viscerally, sometimes violently—about themselves and the world” (2006, 18). Ortner’s discussion is a brave attempt to prevent the further divergence

of the two theoretical perspectives of symbolic anthropology and practice theory. Whether or not it is successful, it is a useful reminder that theorists should spend less time arguing about how to refine specific theories and more time drawing creatively on available theories in order to illuminate the human condition.

EMBODIED VIEWS OF CULTURE

One of practice theory's most important contributions was to expose how existing theorizations of culture depended on Cartesian mind/body dualism. These theorizations viewed culture as the product of the glorious human mind, the means by which the human intellect confronted and held at bay the threatening, uncontrollable, and chaotic natural world and the pesky, instinctual demands of the body.⁹ This dualistic thinking informed anthropology from its founding, but it was reinforced by the growing influence, in the mid-twentieth century, of cognitivism. Cognitivism holds that the human being is divided into a body (a passive, sensing device, which accumulates information) and a mind (an active, data-processing device). Thinking occurs when the mind processes the body's sensory information using preexisting conceptual schemata. Cognitivism encouraged anthropologists to view culture as a body of information that exists in and is processed by the mind.¹⁰

Cognitivism's influence on anthropology was limited, thanks to the rise of postmodernism and related schools of thought. Postmodernism encouraged anthropologists to interrogate the subject/object dualism that informed ethnographic representation and, by extension, the mind/body dualism that had long informed theories of culture. A new generation of anthropologists questioned the bases of these dualisms by revisiting theories of perception. One example is Tim Ingold, who draws on the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, an early twentieth-century philosopher (Ingold 2000a, 2000b). In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962), Merleau-Ponty argued that Western philosophy's subject/object dualism reflects a misunderstanding of perception. He constructed an alternative, non-dualistic account of perception, arguing that perception occurs in the course of a "turning toward" of perceiver to perceived. There is no separation between perceiver and perceived in this process, just intersubjectivity (Csordas 1993, 149). The perceiver's experience of separation from the perceived arises in the course of conscious reflection, which occurs after perception.

Ingold traces Merleau-Ponty's influence on the social sciences through the work of James Gibson, who strongly opposed cognitivism and founded the school of ecological psychology. In *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Gibson argued that the organism and the environment are "an

inseparable pair” ([1979] 2015, 4). An organism is not “a discrete entity,” but “a node in a field of relationships,” the organism-environment system (Ingold 2000b, 4; see also Michaels and Palatinus 2014). Perceiving and thinking, therefore, should not be viewed as operations of a self-contained mind that happens to be connected to a mobile body, but “the developmentally enhanced achievements of the whole organism-person, at once body and mind, positioned within an environment” (Ingold 2000a, 294). Perception is not an operation of the mind on information from the body but an “intentional movement of the whole being (indissolubly body and mind) in its environment” (Ingold 2000b, 166). According to cognitivism, objects we encounter in the environment have no meaning until our mind attaches meaning to them. According to Gibson, this is backward; objects in our environment always *already* have meaning by virtue of the fact that they are in our environment ([1979] 2015, 28).

These insights are echoed in recent work by psychologist Merlin Donald. Donald’s extended examination of consciousness, *A Mind So Rare: The Evolution of Human Consciousness* (2001), is woefully neglected in cultural anthropology, considering how deftly it grounds common anthropological concepts—selfhood, agency, and creativity, among others—in the latest research on human evolution and the biology of consciousness. Donald argues that human consciousness has roots in an older, mammalian brain, which is fundamentally sensory and embodied (2001, 134–35). Like all mammals, humans rely on perceptions to establish a unified sense of self as an extended body in space. Donald calls this self the “egocenter” (2001, 135). This egocenter is “nothing less than the integrated neural footprint of our embodiment, a deeply rooted perceptual and motor phenomenon” (2001, 135). In animals, the egocenter is the basis of perceptual awareness. In humans, it is also the basis of our unique capacity for self-consciousness. The egocenter is the embodied grounding of an individual’s (symbolic) awareness of its participation in external events (2001, 136). In other words, even abstract thought is rooted in embodiment; thought originates in a physical self and always relates back to that physical self.¹¹

Although interest in embodiment has grown in the humanities and social sciences in recent decades, in some disciplines its insights remain controversial. One such discipline is evolutionary psychology, the study of how evolution shapes human psychology (and by extension human behavior).¹² Evolutionary psychologists believe the genome is a detailed blueprint for an organism. Organismal development, in their understanding, is a simple process of turning information from the genes into physical structures, down to the tiniest microstructures of the brain. This is referred to as the “modular view of mind” because it claims that the brain comprises separate parts (modules), that these modules are individually coded for in the genes, and that

each module is evolved to facilitate specific psychological processes, from cognitive processes like language and mathematical computation to affective processes, like romantic love and religious conviction¹³ (Karmiloff-Smith 2000, 173–74). This view asserts, furthermore, that since human psychology is determined by brain structures, and brain structures are determined by the genes, human behavior is largely genetically determined.

The modular view of mind, if taken seriously, has profound implications for the culture concept. It suggests that not only is the brain genetically programmed to learn (a) culture, it is hardwired to seek out specific, predetermined *types* of cultural content (kinship systems, moral systems, gender norms, religious ideas, etc.) that correspond to specific brain structures. Becoming a cultured being, according to this view, is a process of “filling a universal, genetically specified container with culturally specific content” (Ingold 2000a, 288; see also Donald 2008, 193).

Most cultural anthropologists do not take the modular view seriously because it conflicts with recent and compelling advances in our field, such as the recognition that social conditioning affects not just the mind but also the body, and the idea that culture resides not in people’s heads but in the social body, connecting individuals. Recent advances in the life sciences further challenge evolutionary psychology’s modular view of mind. These advances suggest that building an organism from a set of genes is not a straightforward process of translating genetic code into physical structures.¹⁴ Instead, development responds to and in fact depends on environmental inputs. This is especially true of the human brain, which recent research suggests is not structured after a predetermined plan, but plastic: human beings develop neurological structures as they experience the world¹⁵ (Donald 2001, 302; Karmiloff-Smith 2000, 177). Genes provide basic instructions for development, but otherwise the mind has to assemble itself with the help of inputs from the environment (Donald 2001, 208–9). Ingold describes brain development as “a matter not of acquiring *from* an environment representations that satisfy the input conditions of some preconstituted cognitive device, but of the formation *within* an environment of the necessary anatomy, neurological connections and musculature” that allow the organism to survive and thrive in that particular environment (2000a, 287).

A familiar example of brain plasticity is literacy; the brains of literate people develop neural pathways not found in the brains of illiterate people (Donald 2008, 193; Wolf 2007). If you live in a culture where literacy is widespread (which you probably do), you dedicated many years to learning the skill; you had to develop the necessary neural pathways and emotional and physical dispositions (Donald 2001, 302). Learning to read impacts the brain slightly differently when the learner is blind. In learners of braille, areas of the brain corresponding with fingertip sensation expand (Donald 2001, 210). Brain

plasticity is greatest in childhood but continues throughout an individual's life: start learning an instrument or doing crossword puzzles and new neural pathways will appear; start depending on a cell phone to remember phone numbers you used to memorize and existing neural pathways will atrophy.

Another reason to doubt the modular view is that evolution has not had enough time to create all the unique modules evolutionary psychologists believe humans alone possess. Almost every structure in the human brain has an equivalent structure in our nearest primate relatives (Donald 2001, 112). We are different from other primates not because we have unique structures but because of the different relative sizes of the structures we have in common¹⁶ (Donald 2001, 208). These small changes gave us a capacity for sociality with no parallel in the animal kingdom. All animals, other than humans, are unable to share ideas or thoughts; they rely almost entirely on biological adaptation. Even in other ape species, "every generation starts afresh because the old die with their wisdom sealed forever in their brains" (Donald 2001, 150). Humans, in contrast, have been able to "escape the autochthonous solipsism of the central nervous system" (Donald 2006, 18). As social beings with a capacity for symbolic communication, we can adapt more quickly, honing survival strategies in even the most dynamic environments. We try out different strategies for survival and share our discoveries, thereby adding to a dynamic storehouse of tested knowledge that benefits succeeding generations.

This corrected model of organismal development has important implications for the culture concept. First, this model illuminates the close interaction between biology and culture,¹⁷ as Geertz anticipated. Second, again echoing Geertz, this model asserts that culture is not located in or the product of individual minds; it is located in and the product of the social body. Donald writes, "The human brain is a poor thing on its own. . . . But joined to a community of its fellows, it has this remarkable capacity to create a community of mind, acquire symbolizing powers, and vastly expand the range of its own awareness" (2001, 326). Symbolic thought is a network phenomenon; it is produced by collectivities, not individuals. Symbols have one purpose: "to mediate transactions between brains" (Donald 2001, 150). Symbolic thought emerges only in groups; as sophisticated as it is, the human brain will not develop the capacity for symbolic thought if the human being it is attached to has no contact with other human beings (Donald 2001, 150, 324). Third, the new model asserts that culture is both the content (knowledge in the mind or behavior that manifests through the body) *and* the process of learning that shapes and is shaped by this knowledge.

This model suggests that distinguishing between the process of learning and its content is counterproductive and could lead to later conceptual mistakes. Culture, then, must be understood as a process we might call "sensitization" (Ingold 2000a, 289), "sensorimotor tuning"¹⁸ (Soliman and Glenberg