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CULTURAL RELATIVISM AND UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS

by Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban



[Editors' Note: December 1998 marks the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On December 11th, The Washington Post (p. A52) reported President Clinton's public announcement of a Genocide Early Warning Center as well as a new interagency group to monitor U.S. compliance with human rights treaties; new Immigration and Naturalization Service guidelines to make it easier for children to file political asylum claims; and increased funding to organizations that treat torture victims. At the ceremony, Mrs. Clinton spoke out against the treatment of women in Afghanistan who are not allowed to work or attend school. "We must all make it unmistakably clear this terrible suffering inflicted on the women and girls of Afghanistan is not cultural, it is 'criminal'."]

Today, cultural relativism is experiencing a period of critical self-examination within the field of anthropology.

Cultural relativism asserts that since each culture has its own inherent integrity with unique values and practices, value judgments should be withheld or suspended until cultural context is taken into account. What members of one culture might view as strange and bizarre in another culture (for example, polygamy, body tattooing, or strict dietary laws) can be understood best within that culture's context. Theoretically, anthropologists always should be observers and recorders not evaluators of other peoples' customs and values.

While some anthropologists would still agree with this view, others, both inside the field and outside, especially in the arena of human rights, are challenging this concept.

It is important to state at the outset that universal human rights and cultural relativism are not philosophically or morally opposed to one another. The terrain between them is fluid and rich.

Anthropology's Role in Human Rights

Historically, anthropology as a discipline declined to participate in the international dialogues that produced conventions regarding human rights, mainly due to philosophical constraints stemming from cultural relativism. This meant that anthropology's voice was not included in the drafting of human rights statements such as the United Nation's "Conventions for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women" (1979) or the "Rights of the Child" (1989).

The world has changed since the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association decided in 1947 not to participate in the discussions that produced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), used subsequently as a foundation for opposition to authoritarian and politically repressive regimes. Since then some anthropologists have been active in cultural survival and human rights of threatened groups.

As I explained in my article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, anthropologists "are in a unique position to lend knowledge and expertise to the international debate regarding human rights." And, in fact, anthropologists have spoken out against reprehensible practices such as genocide. They have testified in U.S. courts against government rules that impinge on the religious traditions or sacred lands of Native Americans. But there are other

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human rights issues, from domestic abuse to female circumcision to culturally based forms of homicide, about which anthropologists have remained silent. Thus, anthropologists have not built up accumulated experience in the area of human rights informed by cultural relativist considerations (1995:B1-2).

This article is an attempt to lay out some of the basic issues and considerations in this arena, looking at the intersection of cultural relativism and the human rights issues that have gained more public awareness than ever before.

The Limits of Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism may be taken to extremes. Some argue that since cultures vary and each culture has its own unique moral system, we cannot make judgments about 'right' and 'wrong' in comparing one culture to another. Thus, one cannot reject any form of culturally acceptable homicide—for example, infanticide, senilicide, or 'honor' killing of women in Mediterranean and Middle East societies for alleged sexual misconduct—on moral grounds because cultural acceptance or condemnation are equally valid. This extreme relativist position is actually a form of absolutism with which few anthropologists would agree. Anthropologists did not defend Nazi genocide or South African apartheid with cultural relativist arguments, and many have been critical of relativist defenses especially of Western practices they see as harmful, such as cultural institutions emphasizing violence.

The truth about our complex world of cultural difference is that moral perplexity abounds. The ability to accept that another person's or culture's position with which one disagrees is nevertheless rational or intelligible lays the basis for discussion of differences.

Relativism can be used as a way of living in society with others. An egalitarian relativist sees all human beings as moral agents with equal potential for making ethical judgments. Though moral judgments in and of themselves are not scientific, they can be socially analyzed. That is, relativism and universalism in cultural values or practices (including international standards of human rights) need not be opposed morally, but they can be discussed, debated, and assessed by the social sciences, including anthropology.

Relativist Challenge to Universal Rights: Islamic Societies and the West

In the conflict between cultural relativism and universal rights, one area where there is a seeming clash between cultures and a war of words is where the West meets the Islamic world. The highly politicized context of this oppositional discourse and occasional real warfare reminds us of another kind of cold war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. The subjective perceptions of morality and immorality, of right and wrong, on both sides can be so powerful that objective discourse and cultural negotiation may seem impossible.

Islamic governments from Iran to Afghanistan to Sudan have claimed cultural and religious immunity from international human rights standards. For example, the perceived Islamic responsibility to protect women by restricting their activities has been asserted in defense of public morality. This stand has been criticized in the context of Western human rights and feminism. Islamic philosophers and political activists may deny that a woman can be a head of a family or a head of state. Their position violates international standards of women's rights and human rights, particularly as outlined in the United Nations 1979 "Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women." Muslims in several states, however, have disregarded the advice of these religious figures when they made Benazir Bhutto Prime Minister of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and Tansu Cillar and Sheikha Hassina the respective heads of state in Turkey and Bangladesh. Western nations actually have proportionately fewer female heads of state and may be accused of hypocrisy in their finger pointing at the Islamic world.

During the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, positions on women's rights expressed by some Muslim activists diverged from the majority feminist view. Debates over sexual and reproductive health and over sexual orientation as universal rights of women met with opposition not only from Muslim nations, like Iran and Egypt, but also from the Vatican and other Catholic representatives at the conference. In the end, disagreements were aired that proved not to be destructive and there was frank acknowledgment that reasonable persons (and by extension, cultures) could disagree. This is a relativist solution to different views about "universal rights" of women. But consensus was achieved on a host of other

issues, including: 1) opposing all forms of violence against women, 2) opposing female genital mutilation, and 3) identifying rape during armed conflict as a war crime, and, in certain cases, a crime against humanity. Relativism expressed with respect to the religious sentiments of some delegates eased the negotiated terrain and permitted dialogue that achieved consensus on many other points while allowing reasonable difference to be asserted on other matters.

**Universal Rights Challenge Relativism:
Female Circumcision**

One of the most culturally and emotionally charged battlegrounds where the cultural relativist confronts the advocate of universal human rights is the issue of female circumcision or FGM (female genital mutilation)*. Female circumcision is the removal of all or part of the clitoris and/or labia. The issue of female circumcision has set Western feminism against African cultural traditions and Islam, and has pitted Muslim against Muslim and African against African. Despite female circumcision's prevalence in African Islamic societies, it is also found in some non-Islamic, African contexts and is rare in Islamic contexts outside Africa. There is no consensus among Muslim scholars or among African Muslims about whether female circumcision is mandated by religion. Religious interpretation in the Sudan as early as 1939 determined that female circumcision is only "desirable" (manduh), and not compulsory (Fluehr-Lobban, 1987: 96), while in 1994 the late Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar Islamic University in Cairo, Gad al-Haq Ali Gad al-Haq, called female circumcision "a noble practice which does honor to women." His chief rival, the Grand Mufti of the Egyptian Republic, said that female circumcision is not part of Islamic teaching and is a matter best evaluated by medical professionals (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 13, 1995, section A-3).

I have previously written about confronting my own personal struggle between cultural relativism and universal rights regarding female circumcision in the Sudan (Fluehr-Lobban, 1995):

For nearly 25 years, I have conducted research in the Sudan, one of the African countries where the practice of female circumcision is widespread, affecting the vast majority of females in the northern Sudan. Chronic infections are a common result, and sexual intercourse and childbirth are rendered difficult and painful. However, cultural ideology in

the Sudan holds that an uncircumcised woman is not respectable, and few families would risk their daughter's chances of marrying by not having her circumcised. British colonial officials outlawed the practice in 1946, but this served only to make it surreptitious and thus more dangerous. Women found it harder to get treatment for mistakes or for side effects of the illegal surgery.

For a long time I felt trapped between my anthropological understanding of the custom and of the sensitivities about it among the people with whom I was working, on the one side, and the largely feminist campaign in the West to eradicate what critics sees as a "barbaric" custom, on the other hand. To ally myself with Western feminists and condemn female circumcision seemed to me a betrayal of the value system and culture of the Sudan which I had come to understand. But as I was asked over the years to comment on female circumcision because of my expertise in the Sudan, I came to realize how deeply I felt that the practice was harmful and wrong. In 1993, female circumcision was one of the practices deemed harmful by delegates at the International Human Rights Conference in Vienna. During their discussions, they came to view circumcision as a violation of the rights of children as well as of the women who suffer its consequences throughout life. Those discussions made me realize that there was a moral agenda larger than myself, larger than Western



culture or the culture of the northern Sudan, or of my discipline. I decided to join colleagues from other disciplines and cultures in speaking out against the practice.

The Anthropologists' Dilemma

The sense of paralysis that kept me from directly opposing female circumcision (FGM) for decades was largely attributable to my anthropological training grounded in cultural relativism. From a fieldworker's standpoint, my neutralist position stemmed from the anthropologist's first hand knowledge of the local sensitivities about the practice, along with the fact that dialogue was actively underway in the Sudan leading in the direction of changes ameliorating the practice. While I would not hesitate to criticize breast implants or other Western surgical adjustments of the female body, I withheld judgment of female circumcision as though the moral considerations were fundamentally different. My socialization as an anthropology undergraduate and graduate student, along with years of anthropology teaching, conditioned a relativist reflex to almost any challenge to cultural practice on moral or philosophical grounds, especially ones that appeared to privilege the West. However, I realized that a double standard had crept into my teaching. For example, I would readily criticize rampant domestic violence in the U.S. and then attempt to rationalize the killing of wives and sisters from the Middle East to Latin America by men whose "honor" had been violated by their female relation's alleged misdeeds, from flirtation to adultery. Of course, cultural context is critical and the reading of cultural difference our stock-in-trade. One may lament the rising divorce rate and destruction of family life in the U.S. while applauding increasing rights for judicial divorce for Middle Eastern women. At times relativism may frame and enlighten the debate, but, in the end, moral judgment and human rights take precedence and choices must be made.

What changed my view away from the conditioned relativist response was the international, cross-cultural, interdisciplinary dialogue that placed female circumcision on a level of such harm that whatever social good it represents (in terms of sexual propriety and marriage norms), the harm to the more basic rights of women and girls outweighed the culturally understandable "good." Moreover, active feminist agitation against female circumcision within the Sudan

has fostered the kind of indigenous response that anthropologists like, so as not to appear to join the ranks of the Western feminists who had patronizingly tried to dictate the "correct" agenda to women most directly affected by the practice. Women's and human rights associations in the Ivory Coast and Egypt, as well as the Sudan, have also called for an end to female circumcision, while the Cairo Institute for Human Rights reported in 1995 the first publicly acknowledged marriage of an uncircumcised woman. In other words, a broad spectrum of the human community has come to an agreement that genital mutilation of girls and women is wrong.

The Changing U.S. Legal Context

Beyond these cultural and moral considerations is a changed legal environment in the U.S. and elsewhere. The granting of political asylum by the U.S. government in 1996 to Fauziya Kasinga, a Togolese woman who argued that her return to her country would result in the forcible circumcision of her daughter and thus violate her human rights, was a turning point. Prior to this decision, articles had appeared in American law journals arguing for the U.S. to follow the examples of France and Canada and "legally protect" women and girls at risk by criminalizing female circumcision and by extending political asylum. Authors also argued against the cultural relativist or traditionalist justification for female circumcision. Typical customary cultural arguments in defense of female circumcision include: it is a deeply rooted practice; it prevents promiscuity and promotes cleanliness and aesthetics; and it enhances fertility. Defenders of the practice, female and male, African and Western, inevitably invoke cultural relativism and ethnocentrism. Opponents argue that while the morality and values of a person are certainly shaped by the culture and history of a given society, this does not negate the philosophical theory that human rights, defined as the rights to which one is entitled simply by virtue of being human, are universal by definition. So, although human behavior is necessarily culturally relative, human rights are universal entitlements that are grounded in cross culturally recognized moral values. In response to the relativist argument, Rhoda Howard writes that the "argument that different societies have different concepts of rights is based on an assumption that confuses human rights with human dignity" (1986:17). Further, for non-anthropologists, especially moral philosophers and legal practitioners, evocation of relativist arguments as a 'defense' or excuse for violence,

injustice, or other social ills is patently offensive. "Cultural values and cultural practice are as legitimately subject to criticism from a human rights perspective as a structural aspect of a society. African 'culture' may not be used as a defense of human rights abuses" (Howard, 1986:16).

There is nothing particularly African, Sudanese or Nigerian about violence or injustice. This is true of violations of human rights whether they are in the form of arbitrary arrest, detention and torture inflicted by the state, or female circumcision imposed by custom. Moreover, many African progressives have taken an active role in evaluating the contemporary legitimacy and relevance of cultural practices arguing for the retention of useful traditions and the abandonment of practices that inflict harm or injury. Ethnic scarification has all but disappeared among peoples for whom this practice was routine only a few generations removed from the present day. And the fact that female circumcision is an ancient custom found in many diverse cultures does not legitimate its continued persistence (Lawrence, 1993:1944).

Beyond the standard of harm evoked in this argument, it is increasingly evident that attempts to justify the control of female sexuality—whether using aesthetics, cleanliness, respectability or religious ideology—increasingly are being questioned and rebuked in different cultures and cannot be sustained as a justification for the continuation of a harmful practice.

Anthropologists' Expert Testimony

I had the opportunity to offer expert testimony in an Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) case involving application for asylum and withholding of

deportation for a Nigerian family. The case revolved around the issues of Muslim persecution of Christians and the fear of female circumcision for the two young daughters of the parents, the wife having already undergone circumcision. My testimony involved responding to questions about female circumcision from the attorney for the Nigerian family and the judge. I was examined and cross-examined especially on the issue of the probability that the girls would be circumcised in their home community in northern Nigeria even if the father and mother opposed this.

Interestingly, after the 1996 Kasinga case, the U.S. State Department issued guidelines to the INS and its courts suggesting that uncircumcised girls would not be at risk if their fathers opposed the practice. I explained that on the basis of my knowledge of the practice in a comparable African Muslim context, female circumcision is the province of female kin. There is no assurance, given the influence of extended family ties, that the girls would be protected on the strength of their parents, or just their father's, opposition. The matter of the state protecting the girls was moot given its lack of interest in regulating matters of "custom" and Nigeria's poor human rights record. Even in the Sudan, where female circumcision has been illegal since 1946, there has been little or no enforcement of the law. I was not asked if I believed that female circumcision is a violation of human rights, women's rights, or the rights of the child. At a subsequent hearing, the mother, who had been circumcised as a child, testified about her fears of her daughters' forcible circumcision or, if no circumcision were performed, of their inability to be

(Continued on page 16)



TEACHER RESOURCES

Teaching Materials:

◆ The Society for American Archaeology offers the following teaching materials: *Teaching Archaeology: A Sampler for Grades 3 to 12*; *Classroom Sources for Archaeology Education: A Resource Guide*; and *Guidelines for the Evaluation of Archaeology Education Materials*. Send \$5 for shipping and handling for one item; 50 cents for each additional item, to: Society for American Archaeology, 900 Second St., NE, #12, Washington, DC 20002-3557.

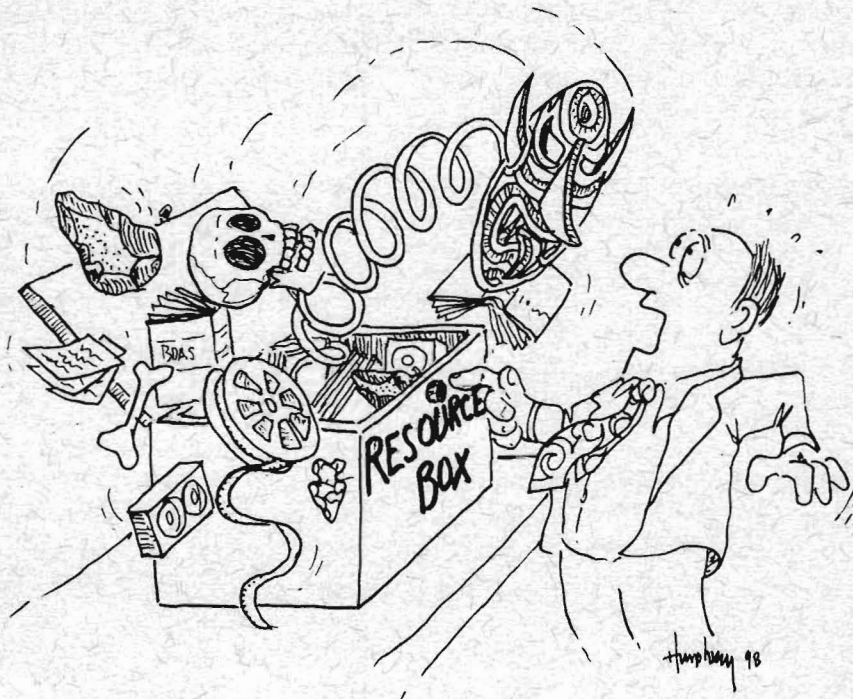
◆ Learn how seventh grade anthropology teacher Joan Brodsky-Schur engages her students in "fieldwork" in the classroom in "From Fiction to Field Notes: Observing Ibo Culture in *Things Fall Apart*" (*Social Education*, Nov/Dec 1997).

◆ "Educational Innovation: Learning from Households," a 32-page special issue of *Practicing Anthropology* (vol. 17, no. 3) edited by Norma González, describes five elementary teachers' experiences carrying out ethnographic research in their students' homes and communities and developing and implementing curriculum units based on their research. Copies are available for \$5 each (\$4 for orders of 10 or more). Order from the Society for Applied Anthropology Business Office, P.O. Box 24083, Oklahoma City, OK 73124. For Visa or MasterCard orders, call (405) 843-5113. Also check their website at www.telepath.com/sfaa.

◆ Cultural Survival's Curriculum Resource Program, in partnership with teachers, develops educational materials for grades 6-12 designed to raise awareness about indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities, and human rights. Available topics are Rain Forest People and Places, The Chiapas Mayas, and Aboriginal Australia. The materials

are self-contained and include maps, photos, and other classroom aids. These materials are available on the web at www.ca.org, or write, Cultural Survival, 96 Mount Auburn St., Cambridge, MA 02138; (617) 441-5400; email: csinc@cs.org.

◆ The AAA's Council for General Anthropology has three modules on physical anthropology for college and senior high school students (see the Fall 1997 issue of *AnthroNotes* for descriptions) and a new cultural anthropology module titled "Marriage and Kinship in (North) India" by Serena Nanda (John Jay College). This six-part module introduces students to Indian marriage



practices through classroom exercises, film, assigned reading material, and classroom discussions. Students can compare these practices with those in North America. Another module, "The Kin Game," similar to the television game Jeopardy, encourages students to talk

about their own kin. These free modules can be reproduced for classroom use and are available from Patricia Rice at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV 26506 or email: price@wvu.edu.

◆ "Teaching from Objects and Stories: Learning about the Bering Sea Eskimo People," published in *Smithsonian in Your Classroom* (January/February 1998), is free by writing to the Smithsonian Office of Education, A&I Bldg. 1163, MRC 402, Washington, DC 20560; fax: (202) 357-2116; www.educate.si.edu.

◆ Looking for classroom activities for Northwest Coast cultural traditions? Nan McNutt has produced activity books for ages 9-12 that have been reviewed and tested by tribal members and include artwork by Native

artists. *The Bentwood Box*, *The Button Blanket*, *The Cedar Plank Mask*, and *The Spindle Whorl*, published by Sasquatch Books in Seattle, WA, contain an illustrated story; activities and puzzles; a parent-teacher guide; and a full-color, pull-out insert with which children can make a paper model of the book's subject. Available for \$10.95 each at local bookstores or contact Nan McNutt directly for a 20% teacher discount. Write: Nan McNutt, 12722 39th Ave., N.E., Seattle, Washington 98125; or email her at nmcnutt@worldnet.att.net.

Publications:

◆ "Is it Race?" has been a recent theme of the American Anthropological Association's *Anthropology Newsletter* (1998-99). In over 70 articles, anthropologists discuss race and human diversity. The AAA is making these articles available for \$10, payable by Visa or check. Contact the AAA Membership Office on email: members@ameranthassn.org/ or by calling (703) 528-1902, ext. 9. The AAA Statement on Race, published in the September issue of the *Anthropology Newsletter*, is also available on the AAA web site: www.ameranthassn.org/ under "government relations." A new book on race, *Cultural Intolerance: Chauvinism, Class, and Racism in the United States* (Yale 1998), by Mark Nathan Cohen, received the Bruno Tolerance Book Award from the Simon Wiesenthal Center this fall.

◆ *Careers in Anthropology* by John T. Omohundro (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1998) is a practical and informative workbook that explains what anthropology is, what anthropologists do, career opportunities (starting at the B.A. level), how to begin job hunting, and how to get hired. The book contains exercises to help you determine if a career in anthropology is for you.

◆ *Teaching Anthropology Newsletter* is a free publication that promotes the teaching of precollege anthropology. The Fall 1997/Spring 1998 issue mentions the National Association of Biology Teachers position statement on the teaching of evolution and World Wide Web sites teachers might wish to consult on the topic. To subscribe, write: TAN, Department of Anthropology, Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia B3H 3C3; mlewis@shark.stmarys.ca.

◆ Look for the May/June 1998 issue of *The Social Studies* that includes a "Special Section on Anthropology in the Classroom," with articles by Thomas Dynneson,

Ruth Selig (*AnthroNotes* editor), KC Smith, and Jane White.

◆ *Teaching About Evolution and the Nature of Science* (140 pp.) is a new publication of the National Academy of Sciences. Chapters include: Why Teach Evolution?, Major Themes in Evolution, Evolution and the Nature of Science, Evolution and the National Science Education Standards, Frequently Asked Questions, Activities for Teaching, and Selecting Instructional Materials. Available from the National Academy Press, 2101 Constitution Ave., N.W., Box 285, Washington, DC 20055; (800) 624-6242 or (202) 334-3313. Also available online at www.nap.edu/reading room/books/evolution98.

◆ *Teaching Anthropology: SACC Notes* (TASN), the publication of the Society for Anthropology in Community Colleges (SACC), a section of the American Anthropological Association, is published biannually. Precollege teachers are encouraged to subscribe to TASN, which reports on current issues in the five fields of anthropology, on new teaching resources, as well as on activities of SACC and on papers given at SACC's annual conferences. Non-members of SACC may subscribe to TASN by contacting the editor, Lloyd J. Miller, Des Moines Area Community College, 2006 South Ankeny Boulevard, Ankeny, Iowa 50021; (515) 964-6435; email: LJMIL@aol.com. To be added to SACC's list serve, email: pops@gwis.com. SACC members are available to assist teachers in curriculum planning for social studies courses, which usually employ anthropological topics and concepts.

◆ Check out *Anthropology Explored: The Best of Smithsonian AnthroNotes* as a possible classroom textbook/reader. See page 19 for ordering information. The book received a positive review by David Gellner in the *Times Literary Supplement* (London: Oct. 20, 1998, p. 32): "Many of the chapters on archaeology or evolution contain interesting updates, which give a sense of the progress of these kinds of anthropological study through conjecture and refutation.... The book provides a sense of a massive anthropological profession, secure in the use of basic concepts, largely unruffled by the deconstructive, postmodern concerns that are some of its elite members' most influential exports...." See Spring 1998 issue of *AnthroNotes* (page 19) for information on requesting an examination copy for classroom use.

TEACHER'S CORNER: EXPLORING HISTORIC CEMETERIES

by Ann Palkovich



In the Washington metropolitan area during the 16th, 17th, and early 18th centuries, as in most towns in the United States, "graveyards" were located in churchyards and usually near the center of town. However, overcrowding of graves and new sanitation laws mandated the closing of most of these early "graveyards" by the 1850s. The new cemeteries were located on the periphery of towns—distinct and separate from the focus of activity among the living. By the mid-19th century, a new genre of formal cemeteries was being established in America. (The Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, MA is one of the earliest examples of these new burial places.) Most existing cemeteries in the Washington metropolitan area were created during this time and are generally referred to as "rural cemeteries." What was this new genre?

The newly established 19th century "cemeteries" (replacing earlier terms such as "graveyards") were not simply a place to inter the dead but represented a new type of cultural institution. Cemeteries were now formally designed to resemble gardens. The dead were not simply interred but memorialized. New rules

defined such things as the proper care of the grounds and the appropriate attire and demeanor while visiting the cemetery.

The boundaries of most 19th century rural cemeteries are marked, for instance, by fences or shrubbery. Often a centrally located entrance leads to symmetrical paths or roadways that divide the cemetery into sections. These sections may be further divided into family plots or other areas (e.g. military graves). Planting may mark sections, plots or individual graves. Such features set off the individual graves as well as the entire cemetery, both physically and visually, from the surrounding area.

Nineteenth century cemeteries distinctly differ from earlier American graveyards. The differences are not limited to changes in gravestone styles, epitaphs, and symbols. Earlier graveyards express mortuary ideology and attitudes of death through individual graves. Rural cemeteries cannot simply be analyzed or understood as clusters of graves. Individual graves are an integral part of the overall cemetery "design." Interpretation of these



19th century cemeteries must, therefore, not only account for the variety among individual graves but also for the overriding common elements expressed in all such cemeteries.

Class Exercise

The exercise below focuses on historic cemeteries. These cemeteries provide historic archaeologists with an interesting opportunity to examine how artifacts (in this case gravestones) vary at different times and in different places. Such variations often reflect how a culture is changing, how cultures differ from one another, and how artifacts reflect these changes and differences. To understand differences in gravestones, archaeologists observe both the individual markers and the larger context or setting of these graves. In general, they ask how important are artifact patterns and the context of these patterns to archaeological interpretations.

Select a cemetery to study and answer the questions for each part of the exercise.

1. What is the name of this cemetery? Spend about 15 minutes just walking around the cemetery. Pay particular attention to fences, paths, paved drives, chapels and other buildings, plantings, and other features of the landscape. Identify the boundaries of the cemetery. Is it marked by a fence, sidewalk, shrubs, or in some other way?
2. Make a rough sketch map showing the location of the fences, paths, and other features you have identified. Note the earliest and most recent gravestones and sketch in their locations. Does the cemetery seem planned or are the graves located haphazardly?
3. Using a standard form (see below), record 20 gravestones. Try to find different styles of gravestones to record. Do you find certain gravestone styles in only some areas of the cemetery and not others? Are these styles associated with only certain time periods? What does this tell you about the size of the cemetery at different times and how gravestone styles changed over time?

In metropolitan Washington, the most common gravestone styles are tablets, obelisks, blocks, and slabs. Occurring in the late 18th century to the mid-19th century, tablets are single vertical stones that average two to four inches in thickness and are made of limestone, marble, or sandstone. These stones, often with a sculpted top, are placed directly in the ground with no bases used.

All the surfaces of these stones have been cut (or finished) but not polished.

Shaped like the Washington Monument, obelisks, usually made of marble, are tall and square in cross-section and dominate gravestones in the late 19th to early 20th century. The obelisk may be topped with an urn, ball (known as an orb), or other figure and may have one or several bases of varying sizes. While most gravestones are lettered only on the front, obelisks may show lettering on all sides.

Blocks, which are square gravestones, vary in size, may or may not have bases, and generally show cut but not polished surfaces. Made of a variety of different stones, these markers are characteristic of the 20th century. A variation of a block stone, the pulpit style marker has a slanted face on which is carved the individual's name, other information, and decoration. Made of marble or granite, pulpit stones rest on bases.

Slabs typify the 20th century and are still the most common gravestone used today. Slabs, often composed of granite, are usually placed vertically on a base and vary in thickness from six to eight inches. While the front of a slab is polished, the sides and sometimes the back are roughhewn.

Other gravestone styles may be noted as well—elaborate figurative sculptures, crude stones, or simple wooden crosses. Often greater numbers of unusual gravestones are found during transition periods from one general style (e.g., tablets) to another style (e.g., obelisks).

Initial studies of local 19th century cemeteries have yielded some unexpected results. The striking similarity among contemporaneous cemeteries representing distinct socioeconomic and religious groups proved the most surprising observation. Formally marked boundaries, landscaping, symmetrical paths, and, in particular, the style of grave markers and the stone from which they are carved create a uniform visual impression. Economic class or religious affiliation are not immediately apparent. This suggests that the accepted "rules" for rural cemeteries—that is, how the grave is to appear in the landscape and the elements which it must contain—superseded differences within society. Only when individual grave data are examined do differences in community and religious cemeteries become evident. Contrasts in epitaphs, religious

symbols, decorations, and the spatial arrangement of graves seem to be the ways in which class structure and religious affiliations are expressed in these 19th century cemeteries.

4. Locate at least five gravestones, from different time periods, which have epitaphs. What do these epitaphs say? What might they reflect about attitudes toward death? How does the use of epitaphs and what epitaphs say change over time? What might this mean?

5. Locate a family plot or several gravestones with the same surname. Do you think these individuals are related or are husband and wife? How can you tell? Are other relatives buried in the same area? Are these family burial areas more common in earlier graves or more recent graves? What might this tell you about the changing use of family plots over time?

6. Select five gravestones with men's names and five gravestones with women's names from different time periods. How are men's and women's gravestones similar? How are they different? What might this tell you about the changing roles and statuses of men and women over time?

Questions 1 and 2 are designed to have you take a close look at the cemetery and to notice the importance of elements other than just the gravestones themselves. Question 3 treats each gravestone as an artifact and focuses on the same kind of details an archaeologist would find useful in understanding how artifacts reflect

or holiday decorations of graves. Comparisons of different parts of the same cemetery or of different cemeteries are also interesting. Students can then change over time. Questions about particular aspects of the cemetery, similar to 4, 5, and 6 can be added or substituted. For example, you can examine the special features of military gravestones or children's gravestones summarize their findings in a concluding essay, or share their insights in a roundtable class discussion.

Readings:

Aries, Philippe. 1981 *The Hour Of Our Death*. Alfred Knopf.

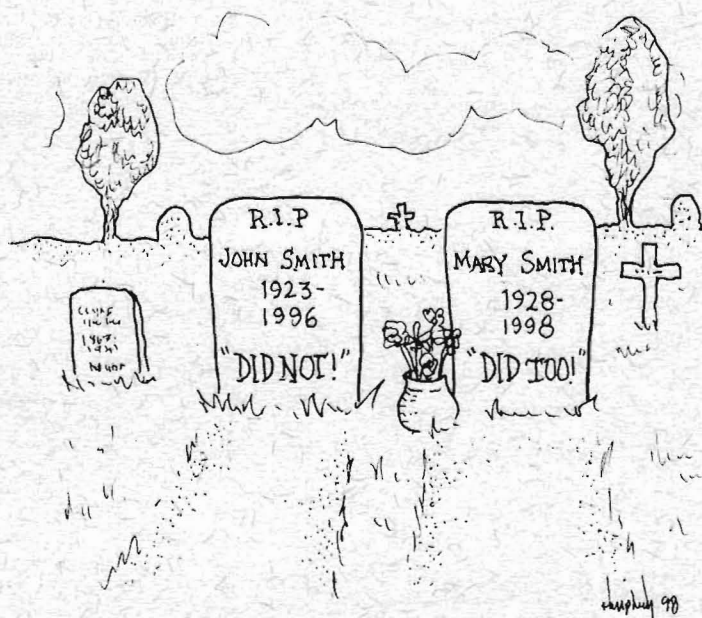
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[Editors' Note: Also of interest is the journal *Markers* published by The Association for Gravestone Studies. Check out their web site at www.berkshire.net/ags/.

An earlier version of this teaching activity appeared in *AnthroNotes*, vol. 8 (2), spring 1986. This and other *AnthroNotes* teaching activities are available free-of-charge by writing: Teacher's Packet in Anthropology, Anthropology Outreach Office, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560-0112. This packet serves as a companion to the book *Anthropology Explored: The Best of Smithsonian AnthroNotes*, available from the Smithsonian Institution Press (1-800-782-4612). Book royalties support the printing costs of *AnthroNotes*.]

INDIVIDUAL GRAVE DATA

Recorder's Name _____

Date _____ Observation _____

Cemetery _____

Photo: B/W _____ Color _____ Sex _____ Age _____

Map/Location _____ Born _____ Died _____

Foot Stone Description

Plot Marker (Single/Multiple) Description

Grave Marker (Permanent/Temporary)

Shape	Material	Construction
<input type="checkbox"/> Tablet	<input type="checkbox"/> Wood	<input type="checkbox"/> Unfinished
<input type="checkbox"/> Tablet-like	<input type="checkbox"/> Cement	<input type="checkbox"/> Hand-made
<input type="checkbox"/> Vertical Slab	<input type="checkbox"/> Metal	<input type="checkbox"/> Formally constructed
<input type="checkbox"/> Obelisk	<input type="checkbox"/> Stone	<input type="checkbox"/> Carved
<input type="checkbox"/> Block	<input type="checkbox"/> Granite	<input type="checkbox"/> Molded
<input type="checkbox"/> Triangular Block	<input type="checkbox"/> Marble	<input type="checkbox"/> Soldered
<input type="checkbox"/> Horizontal Slab	<input type="checkbox"/> Slate	<input type="checkbox"/> Cast
<input type="checkbox"/> Pulpit	<input type="checkbox"/> Limestone	<input type="checkbox"/> Cut
<input type="checkbox"/> Figural	<input type="checkbox"/> Other	<input type="checkbox"/> Polished
<input type="checkbox"/> Sarcophagus	<input type="checkbox"/> Unidentified	
<input type="checkbox"/> Cenotaph	<input type="checkbox"/> Field Stone	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other		

Grave Adornment

Permanent	Temporary	Individual	Ritual/Seasonal
<input type="checkbox"/> Potted Plant	<input type="checkbox"/> Flowers	<input type="checkbox"/> Fresh Flowers	<input type="checkbox"/> Easter
<input type="checkbox"/> Plantings	<input type="checkbox"/> Wreath	<input type="checkbox"/> Plastic Flowers	<input type="checkbox"/> Christmas
<input type="checkbox"/> Religious Marker	<input type="checkbox"/> Other	<input type="checkbox"/> Wreath	<input type="checkbox"/> July 4th
<input type="checkbox"/> Military Marker		<input type="checkbox"/> Child's Toy	<input type="checkbox"/> Memorial Day
<input type="checkbox"/> Other		<input type="checkbox"/> Other	<input type="checkbox"/> Other

Marker Dimensions: Height: _____ Width: _____ Thickness: _____

Inscription (Front/Back):

Design/Decoration:

AFRICAN JAMBOREE

by Bernard Wood



It was the largest scientific gathering ever held in South Africa—the Dual Congress of the International Association for the Study of Human Paleontology and the International Association of Human Biologists—bringing over a thousand scientists from more than 75 countries to meet in Johannesburg the last days of June and the first few days of July. The Dual Congress was a marvelous way to celebrate the contributions Africa has given humanity. Without Africa, after all, there would have been no human evolution as we know it nor any human biology. The venue also reminded us that civilization means much more than cultural complexity. It means a proper respect for human dignity and a real understanding of the benefits and responsibilities of our unusual evolutionary history. We saw both of these in evidence in the “rainbow” coalition that is the new South Africa.

Human biology (the study of the patterns of variation in human physiology and morphology) and human evolution (the study of human evolutionary history) should be intellectual bedfellows, and a few scientists have international reputations in both fields. The doyen of this distinguished group, Phillip Tobias, predictably reminded the participants of the important role Africa has played in human prehistory, a role which Tobias had a major part in establishing. He also informed us that a very recent study implied that Africa also played a crucial role in the origin of mammals.

Tobias, emeritus professor of anatomy at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, is the president of both organizations, and he used his dual presidency to propose a joint meeting in the “new” South Africa. Organizing such a meeting is a tough assignment in any context, but to do this in a country



facing economic and social "growing pains" was a special challenge, but one to which the nation and its scientists rose. From the words of the Minister who spoke at the opening ceremony to the inevitably more emotional speeches at the closing banquet, it was clear that South African politicians had achieved a perspective on the apartheid years that made them into statesmen and stateswomen. It was a perspective that had a perceptible maturity and moral strength, and it made many of us from so-called "more developed" countries yearn for men and women of equivalent stature to be our political leaders.

Why do scientists attend a continual round of meetings, each packed full of formal presentations? Small workshop meetings are designed to bring together scientists in a particular specialty, to help individuals present new research findings or plan new directions or avenues for their research. But large conferences are not designed to accomplish anything quite so tangible as developing new research direction. Such large meetings are different; they are much more like "jamborees," meetings of enthusiasts who come together to share mutual interests. But we never call them jamborees. Perhaps it would be more difficult to raise the airfare to go to a "jamboree" than to the more lofty sounding "Joint Congress."

To use a nautical metaphor, people do not attend conferences to plot a new course for their research; they go to check their present bearings, to make sure that the assumptions they made when they plotted their present course of research are still valid. Such meetings are also a fine opportunity for younger researchers to make the personal connections that are so valuable in science so that when you need data or tips about a better method, you can call up someone you have met face to face. At this most recent Congress, there was little science presented, but I took a young post-doctoral researcher with me and in the few short months since the Dual Congress he has begun two new collaborative projects resulting directly from contacts made at the meeting, probably over a beer late in the evening.

The conference had its amusing moments. A TV company was making a program about Elaine Morgan, author of the "aquatic ape" hypothesis. The hypothesis maintains that this is a scenario that would explain a range of alleged human peculiarities, from the distribution of body fat to the direction of hair on our backs. She argues that support for her hypothesis ranges from the absence of

any evidence for human origins between five and eight million years, to the association of the earliest hominids after 5 mya (million years ago) with lake shore locations. The difficulty with the hypothesis is that it is one of a number of superficially attractive explanations of the events of human evolution that, for the present at least, are not testable and do not deserve to be labeled a "hypothesis." Other arguments are more plausible: there is little fossil or geological evidence of any kind for the period between 5 and 8 mya in Africa, and stable lake shores are more likely than many other environments to accumulate bones over time, whether from predation or from natural deaths.

The TV program's thesis was that science is a cosy male clique that has systematically and ruthlessly given the "cold shoulder" to Ms. Morgan and her hypothesis, primarily because she is a woman, and, secondarily, because she is outside conventional academia. Those who have met Elaine Morgan will know that she is a tiny doughty sparrow of a lady whose advanced years have not dimmed her, or her supporters' abilities to literally pin you against the wall so that she, or they, can make their point. Any refutation to Morgan comes less from an "anti-Morgan" conspiracy than simply from a strategy for survival! At the meeting, the session that Elaine Morgan was to speak at was quite ruthlessly stage-managed with "planted" questioners whose interventions would ensure that the conspiracy thesis would be supported by the session itself.

What was the Congress like for me, a British born and trained paleoanthropologist, formerly Dean of the Medical School at the University of Liverpool, and currently holding a joint appointment at George Washington University and the Smithsonian Institution. Like many of those attending, I presented a 20-minute talk and was the coauthor on another talk and poster. I also organized one of the 18 half-day colloquia, titled "The Diversity of Early *Homo*." I was asked to do this because one of my research interests focuses on the early stages in the evolution of our own genus, *Homo*. Some of the papers in the colloquium, mine included, reiterated material that is soon to be published, but two of the contributions were original and thought-provoking. Not a bad ratio of "pain to gain."

I had not expected a theme to emerge from the colloquium, but it did. The point of my contribution

was that since the very first fossil species was attributed to our own genus *Homo neanderthalensis* in 1864, we have been redefining *Homo* to make it more and more inclusive. In my paper I tried to make the case that as it is presently defined, *Homo* makes little sense as a genus. In technical terms, it is not a "clade" as it is not currently limited to the descendants of one common ancestor but includes species from several related lineages. Nor is it a "grade," for it includes species that show a variety of adaptations, rather than species that have common diets, habitats, or locomotor patterns. For example, *Homo habilis* still maintained a considerable ability to use its arms, hands, and feet for scrambling around in trees. I argued that to ensure that *Homo* is both a clade and a grade two of the most ancient species presently assigned to it, *Homo habilis* and *Homo rudolfensis* (see *AnthroNotes*, spring 1996) need to be excluded. As a result, *Homo ergaster*, also known as "early African *Homo erectus*," would be the most primitive and oldest (ca. 2.0 myr) member of *Homo*. If the label *Homo* is restricted to committed bipeds with high quality diets and an ability to disperse over large areas, then the emergence of our genus was as recent as 2 mya. This would mean that as the first stone tools occur prior to this date, they were made by a creature that was still, in terms of adaptations, an australopithecine.

What was intriguing was that two other talks in the colloquium, by Leslie Aiello and Susan Anton, set out the details of research on hominid adaptations and on dispersal patterns, respectively, that was consistent with my hypothesis. On the basis of body shape (large gut, not waist) and size (small), Aiello argued that the australopithecines shared a lower "quality" (high bulk,

low energy per gram) diet with *Homo habilis* and some apes, while *Homo ergaster*, with a taller, leaner silhouette, had made a transition to higher dietary quality. Anton used information on body mass, home range and diets in primates to suggest that *H. ergaster*, with its larger body size and quite different diet, would have been the first member of our lineage with the ability to travel and spread over large areas without much diversification into different forms. This major transition point in human evolution resulted in the first hominid dispersals out of Africa by as early as ca. 1.8 mya.

As with most meetings, my ability to sustain a fresh mind for each session fell off alarmingly as the days went by and 'people fatigue' set in. The most interesting conversation of my five days was on the bus-ride back to the airport!

Conferences rarely follow any predictable pattern, and some of one's most productive research liaisons may be over dinner. At least the venue for this Congress, Sun City, gave us little other than gambling as alternatives to the sessions. Never believe anyone who attends a conference in Paris and then claims he or she went to every session! Scientists are human too.

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SHAKING THE FAMILY TREE

(*"Human Rights" continued from page 5*)

married in Nigeria as they would be socially unacceptable women. These arguments persuaded the judge in 1997 to suspend deportation and to consider a positive case for asylum for the family.

"Avoidance of Harm" Key Standard

Harm may be considered to take place when there is death, pain, disability, loss of freedom or pleasure that results from an act by one human upon another (Gert, 1988:47-49). It is the notion of harm done to individuals or groups that can be used to explore the terrain between universal rights and cultural relativism. *When reasonable persons from different cultural backgrounds agree that certain institutions or cultural practices cause harm, then the moral neutrality of cultural relativism must be suspended.* The concept of "harm" has been a driving force behind the medical, psychological, feminist, and cultural opposition to female genital mutilation.

Avoidance of harm has been the key concept in the development of ethical guidelines in medical and biological research and also in federal regulations regulating research in the behavioral sciences (Fluehr-Lobban, 1994:3). Philosophers have also refined concepts of harm and benefit; however, the discussion more frequently occurs around the prevention of harm rather than the promotion of benefit.

Even the most experienced anthropological field worker must negotiate the terrain between universal rights and cultural relativism with caution, to avoid the pitfalls of scientific or discipline superiority. The anthropologist is capable of hearing, recording, and incorporating the multiple voices that speak to issues of cultural specificity and universal human rights, as some have done admirably (Dwyer, 1991). When various perspectives are taken into consideration, still in the end a judgment may have to be made when harm is a factor.

Case Study: Domestic Abuse

The concept of *darar* in the Arabic language and in Islamic family law translates as harm or abuse and is broadly applied in Islamic law (Shari'a) and specifically in three different cultural settings which I have studied, in Sudan, Egypt and Tunisia (Fluehr-Lobban, 1987). *Darar* comes from the same root as that which is used to describe a strike or a physical blow. However, *darar* in Muslim family law as a ground for divorce has been

interpreted to include both physical harm and emotional harm, the latter usually described as insulting words or behavior. It is probably most clear to make a determination between human rights and cultural practice when physical harm or abuse is taking place. It is simpler to stand against physical abuse of women within a marriage. Indeed, Western ideas of physical and mental cruelty as grounds for divorce mesh well with the concept of harm as reflected in "talaq al-darar," divorce due to harm or abuse. A woman who comes to court, alleges harm, proves it with her own testimony or that of witnesses, and is granted a divorce is probably a woman who has experienced the abuse for some time and is using the court, as women often do in Muslim settings, as a last resort.

The divorced husband often does not acknowledge the harm, as is frequently the case with abusive husbands in other countries where the "right" of a husband to discipline a wife is a cultural norm. A relativist position might attempt to split the difference here between the cultural "right" of the husband to discipline a wife and the wife's right to resist. Moreover, the relativist's position would be upheld by cultural institutions and persons in authority, judges for example, with the legitimate right to enforce the norm of "obedience" of wives. My own research shows that wives have often "disobeyed" their husbands and repeatedly fled from abusive domestic cohabitation (Fluehr-Lobban, 1987:120-25). Historically, the frequency of such cases in the Islamic courts led to practical reform favorable to abused wives whereby "obedience" orders to return to their husbands were issued a maximum of three times only. Ultimately, in the Sudan and in Egypt the "house obedience" (Bayt al-ta'a) law was abolished, largely due to feminist agitation and reformist political pressure.

The cultural "right" of a man to discipline, slap, hit, or beat his wife (and often by extension his children) is widely recognized across a myriad of different cultures throughout the world where male dominance is an accepted fact of life. Indeed, the issue of domestic violence has only recently been added to the international human rights agenda, but it is firmly in place since the Vienna Conference of 1993 and the United Nations Beijing Women's Conference in 1995. This relatively new dialogue intersects at a point where the individual rights of the woman clash with a potential cultural defense of a man practicing harm, and is a dialogue that anthropologists could inform and enrich tremendously

by their first hand knowledge of community and family life. Violence against women, against children, against people, is not acceptable on moral grounds nor is it defensible on cultural grounds, although an examination of its many expressions and facets is very useful knowledge for both social science and public policy. The future development of a cross-cultural framework analyzing domestic violence would serve both scientific and human rights work.

Conclusion

The terrain between universal rights and cultural relativism can be puzzling and difficult to negotiate, but the use of the idea of the "avoidance of harm" can help anthropologists and others map out a course of thinking and action. We are coming to the recognition that violence against women should be an acknowledged wrong, a violation of the basic human right to be free from harm that cannot be excused or justified on cultural grounds. Likewise, children in every culture have the right to be free from harm and to be nurtured under secure and adequate conditions. Understanding the diverse cultural contexts where harm or violence may take place is valuable and important, but suspending or withholding judgment because of cultural relativism is intellectually and morally irresponsible. Anthropologists cannot be bystanders when they witness harm being practiced upon any people they study.

Anthropologists can aid the international dialogue enormously by developing approaches to universal human rights that are respectful of cultural considerations but are morally responsible. For anthropologists a proactive interest and participation in human rights is desirable. Areas of human rights that might come to our attention in our work include cultural survival, rights of indigenous peoples, defense against 'ethnic cleansing', or interest in the rights of women and children and persons in danger of harm. Instead of the more usual negative reaction to public disclosure of gross violations of human rights, anthropologists could position themselves to play an "early warning" role that might prevent or ameliorate harm to human beings. Simplistic notions of cultural relativism no longer need impede the engagement of anthropologists in international human rights discourse.

In this spirit anthropologists could be among the best brokers for inter-cultural dialogue regarding human rights. We have moved beyond the idea of a value free social science to the task of developing a moral system at

the level of our shared humanity that must at certain times supersede cultural relativism. Reassessing the value of cultural relativism does not diminish the continued value of studying and valuing diversity around the globe.

Anthropologists can lend their knowledge and expertise to the international discussion and debates regarding human rights by playing a brokering role between indigenous or local peoples they know first-hand and the international governmental and non-governmental agencies whose policies affect the lives of people they study. Anthropologists also can write or speak out about human rights issues in public media where their expertise might inform positions taken by human rights advocacy groups, or decisions made by governments or other bodies that affect the well-being of people they study. If they choose, they can provide professional advice or offer expert testimony where culturally-sensitive matters intersect with human rights issues, such as with female circumcision, or with a cultural defense or justification of domestic violence. In these and other ways anthropologists can engage with human rights issues without the limitations that cultural relativism may impose.

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AnthroNotes editors apologize to Clark Graham, author of "High School Maritime Archaeology Program" in the Spring 1998 issue of *AnthroNotes*. The corrected article is available on the web site listed above.

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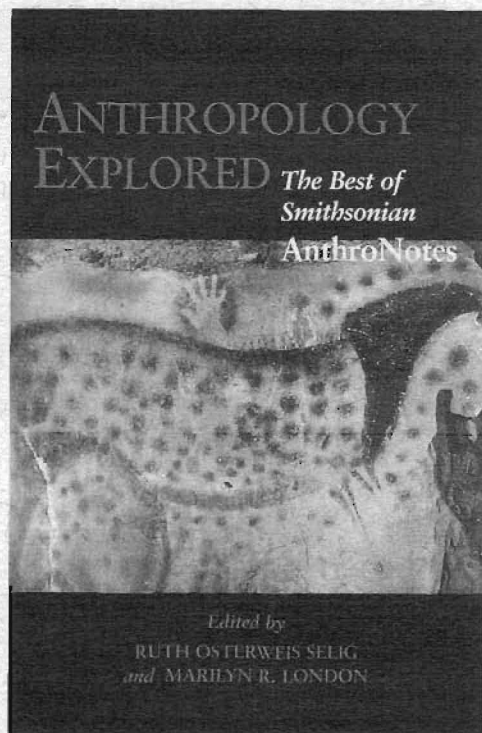
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