



Book Review

That complex whole: culture and the evolution of human behavior by Lee Cronk.
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Reviewed by Scott MacEachern

Lee Cronk's book *That complex whole* is about a variety of different kinds of culture wars, some restricted to an academic milieu and others well-known fixtures of public discourse in the United States and beyond. Most directly, it addresses a perennial debate in cultural anthropology: how should anthropologists define human culture, its boundaries and roles in human existence? Beyond that, it looks at the disciplinary split that runs through the different sub-fields of North American anthropology, one that distinguishes researchers who define themselves as scientists from those who take a more humanistic view of anthropological goals and procedures. Finally, and most indirectly, the book offers a perspective on the arguments over cultural practices and values that periodically – or perhaps constantly – ring across Western societies. The book raises a set of important questions about the relations between evolutionary theory and cultural anthropology and is well written and accessible, so that one would expect it to be a useful text for undergraduates and the general public. Unfortunately, its treatment of anthropological theorizing about culture is weak, and creates a distorted view of the history and state of the art of

this work. Such difficulties might perhaps be expected in a text written by someone outside the discipline (see for example Pinker 1997, 2002), but are less understandable when they come from the pen of an anthropologist.

Cronk begins the book with an observation, and a claim. The observation is one instance of an ethnographic commonplace: people say one thing, but actually and systematically do another. The Mukogodo pastoralists in whose Kenyan communities Cronk did his fieldwork express a preference for male children over female children, but treat their daughters somewhat better than they do their sons. Examples of such contradictions can be multiplied, and Cronk cites a number of such examples, from other parts of Africa, from Asia and from the United States. Based on his research, he posits that in the Mukogodo case the favoritism shown toward daughters is an example of an evolved human tendency to favour children with the best prospects, especially in marriage, in later life.

The hypothesis is an interesting and useful one. It could be – and probably is being – extended by fieldwork in other societies where similarly gender-differentiated prospects exist.

Cronk emphasizes the variety and importance of human universals, and believes that the ubiquity of these characteristics is in great part the result of evolutionary processes similar to those at work among the Mukogodo. *That complex whole* makes an effective case for greater integration of explanations derived from evolutionary biology into anthropological explanations. This is an important point, and deserves to be emphasized: there is no doubt that received wisdom in cultural anthropology has been unduly suspicious of such explanations over the last decades. In this context, the book works quite well.

Cronk makes a rather larger claim, however: he says that cases like that of the Mukogodo undercut the utility of a portmanteau model of human culture first formulated by Edward Tylor in 1871 and dominant – indeed, almost unchallenged – in cultural anthropology from that day to this. According to Tylor’s (1871: 1) definition, culture is “...that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” The Mukogodo and other such cases undercut the Tylorean model because they illustrate the problems involved in assigning a cultural explanation to a behaviour when behaviour is itself identified as a component of culture – that is, in explaining something in terms of itself. According to Cronk, anthropologists over the last 130 years have been largely content to explain peoples’ behaviour by saying that culture made them do it, ignoring conflicts between explanation and behaviour, ignoring biology and over-emphasizing the diversity of human cultures across the globe. Cronk’s solution is to excise behaviour, and the material results of behaviour, from the anthropological definition of culture, leaving only the ideational elements, socially transmitted information (p. 12) that may partially determine the patterns of human action.

There are a number of problems with this claim, and with Cronk’s definition of culture.

The cultural relationships between meaning, action and justification have been a constant theme in anthropological theorizing, and continue to be so today. A very few examples, out of many, must suffice. Franz Boas dispersed a unitary culture concept geographically, historically and in explanatory terms, arguing both that cultural elements had to be explained with reference to local conditions and that anthropologists of his time were drastically overestimating the role of biology in determining human behaviour on an individual and racial level – as, indeed, they most certainly were (Boas 1938, 1940). Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969 [1949]) examined widespread cultural configurations, notably kinship terminologies and systems of myth, as the products of fundamental structures of the human mind¹. Similarly, the idea of cultural universals did not spring full-blown from the forehead of Donald Brown into the pages of his book *Human universals* (1991). Even Brown – no friend of cultural anthropology on this issue – noted that much of the data he used derive from fieldwork and comparative research undertaken by anthropologists. In fact we see considerations of the importance and origins of such universals through the last century (e.g. Wissler 1923, Kidder 1940, Murdock 1945, 1949, Kluckhohn 1953, Redfield 1962), as well as discussion over the roots of such universals, environmental, biological and/or cultural.

There have been a whole variety of debates through the last thirty years about the culture concept, both in the general (a fundamental human characteristic) and specific (the cultural configurations associated with a particular human group) senses of the term. Cronk notes papers by Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) and Geertz (1973); to this we might add Goode-nough (1957), Kroeber and Parsons (1958), White (1959), Weiss (1973), Moore (1974), Schneider (1976), Rogers (1988), Abu-Lughod (1991) and Brightman (1995), with Bruman (1999) perhaps too late for inclusion in this book. Many, many other papers could be added

to that list. Not all such papers need be real additions to knowledge, of course – some may be distractions or diversions – and they come to a variety of conclusions. However, they certainly do not indicate that anthropologists have been chattering complacently along using Edward Tylor's definition of culture for the last 130 years. Cronk's treatment of cultural relativism (p. 109-118) is similarly decontextualized, ignoring the vast amount of anthropological debate about the relations between analytical and ethical relativism that has taken place over the last eighty years.

It is far from clear that the conceptual entanglements between culture and behaviour that Cronk traces to Tylor are actually the vital issue that he makes out. Most anthropological explanations of behaviour are rather more complex than the simple statement that 'culture made them do it': they usually involve interrelations between behavioural, ideational and sometimes material elements in a complex cultural system. We may also expect that non-cultural effects – environmental variability or the evolutionary heritage of humanity, for example – will influence such behaviours, and indeed anthropologists have routinely incorporated such elements in their explanations. (Cronk appears to believe [p. 25] that many anthropologists are infected with a '...cultural determinist dogma...' that leads them to believe that culture is '...all-diverse and all-powerful...' It would be interesting to know exactly who those people are.) Under such circumstances, human behaviour is not being explained in terms of itself to any greater extent than is, say, woodpecker behaviour when we observe that a woodpecker is a complex organism with physical and behavioural characteristics that are to a significant degree evolutionarily determined.

Cronk's divorce of behaviour from culture also raises questions about how the two mutually interact. Presumably culture is not simply *ex post facto* rationalization, a sort of cognitive side-effect of evolutionarily determined behaviour, and in fact Cronk notes a variety of cases

in which cultural circumstances affect human behaviour, often in complex ways. His attempts to grapple with how this relationship actually works are, however, not especially successful, and in some cases appear to over-simplify the work of other anthropologists. Thus, Cronk's approving reference to Clifford Geertz, as a prominent anthropologist who supports an ideational model of culture, obscures Geertz's considerably more nuanced analysis. The view of culture that Geertz (1973:5-12) proposes – in the text that Cronk quotes – is a semiotic one, and the relationship between signs and the exchange of signs is so close that Geertz declines to disconnect the two². Cronk's most sustained effort to explain how behaviour and culture interact is instead an excursion into meme theory – an excursion largely made possible by the fuzziness of the concept, and the absence of precise definitions of memes or the mechanisms by which they spread and affect behaviour. One would expect that the culture – behaviour relationship would be carefully analyzed in a text by an anthropologist who has argued that the two should be distinguished, but there is no satisfactory account of that relationship in *That complex whole*.

A book on this topic must inevitably take account of the controversies and political debates that have accompanied research in cultural anthropology through the twentieth century, and there is certainly nothing wrong with the fact that Cronk takes a position on these matters. However, the image of any discipline is likely to be tarnished if only the writings of its enemies and its extremists are taken into account: the claims that our lawns reflect evolutionary yearnings for the African savannas (Pinker 1997) or that Judaism is a group evolutionary strategy (MacDonald 1994), or even claims by anthropologists that work by evolutionary psychologists justifies rape, should probably not be taken as representative of the state of the art in evolutionary psychology as a whole. Cronk is far too ready to pass on critique of ethnographic research without consideration

of context: thus, he reduces (p. 19-20) the debates about Margaret Mead's work in Samoa to the observations that Mead had a viewpoint before she began her work (apparently Derek Freeman did not) and that one of her informants says that Mead was misled (apparently old women are less likely to fib than young ones). He also claims that Deborah Gewertz's research among Chambri people in Papua New Guinea proves that Mead's writings there were equally fantastical. In fact, Gewertz (1981:104) says that she does not think that Mead portrayed Chambri gender roles incorrectly, but rather that Mead's research must be understood in terms of the historical circumstances that the Chambri found themselves in during the 1930s.

One of the difficulties of writing a short introductory text must certainly be the necessity of simplifying complex debates, and deciding what material can be left out and what must be included accurately to reflect such debates. There is a very great need for a balanced examination of the intensely interwoven relationships between evolutionary and cultural influences on human behaviour, written by an observer hostile to neither the research undertaken by cultural anthropologists nor that of evolutionary psychologists and behavioural ecologists. Unfortunately, *That complex whole* is not that book. While it offers accessible access to some of the relevant research questions, it places them in a historical and theoretical context that does not reflect the diversity of anthropological opinions and approaches to this work.

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Notes

1. One problem with *That complex whole* is its near-total lack of attention to anthropology beyond the United States. It is difficult to understand why a text on this topic would include an

attack on postmodernism (p. 51) but no consideration – positive or negative – of Lévi-Strauss and other structuralists, who certainly had an influence on the development of Anglophone anthropological theory in the last half of the twentieth century.

2. It may be worth examining different metaphors used by Cronk and by Geertz in the text that Cronk refers to. Cronk (p. 12) likens culture to a recipe for a cake, and differentiates that from the cake itself and the act of baking a cake. Geertz (1973:11-12) uses a musical metaphor: "If...we take, say, a Beethoven quartet as [a]... sample of culture, no one would, I think, identify it with its score, with the skills and knowledge needed to play it, with the understanding of it possessed by its performers or auditors, nor ... with a particular performance of it or with some mysterious entity transcending material existence... But that a Beethoven quartet is a temporally developed tonal structure, a coherent sequence of modeled sound – in a word, music – and not anybody's knowledge of or belief about anything, including how to play it, is a proposition to which most people are, upon reflection, likely to assent."

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