



Going to the End of the Road

On Saturday, April 17th, anthropologist Julie Campbell will present a seminar, “Cultures in Transition”, at Concord House. In her presentation, she will share the voluminous research and photographs that she has acquired over 30 years in her studies of traditional cultures in Asia and North America. The study of such cultures, nearly invisible and facing extinction, has become an established part of anthropology since its academic birth in the 19th century. Giving identity and reasoned understanding of indigenous and traditional cultures has provided an alternative, empirically based concept of culture that contrasts with the idealized concept of the 18th century. In that era, culture was thought to represent the ideals or the “classical” standards which art and lifestyle should reflect and be guided by.

This “high culture” was appropriated by social elites and used to distinguish their values and behavior from those of ordinary folk or “inferiors” whose lifestyles were looked down upon. During the 19th century this concept of a “high culture” morphed into claims of racial or ethnic superiority whereby Europeans and North Americans could justify their conquests and exploitation of the peoples of Africa, Asia and South America. Since then many factors have brought about a karmic adjustment among the nations and peoples of the world. By the late 20th century, globalization has redirected wealth, health

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and power to some considerable extent, and nation-states that once were colonial masters such as Great Britain and the Netherlands have taken a modest and vulnerable place in the community of nations. The emergence of China and India as centers of global wealth and influence accentuates a reversal of the old imperial order but has not stopped the pressure of Westernization, now called modernization or globalization on the indigenous peoples of Asia hidden in scattered enclaves. The less developed in terms of modern technology and moneyed wealth may experience a relentless pressure to change and learn to live a “modern” life.

Cultural anthropologists have done much to help us understand that traditional does not mean ignorant or primitive in the derogatory sense. They have taught us, perhaps too thoroughly, the concept of cultural relativity and confronted us with the axiom that we cannot presume to know a culture from the position of an outside observer. Cultures are to be understood from within, e.g. from the perspective of those socialized into a culture and who are active participants in its evolving uses. Steeped in empathetic sensitivity as well as knowledge of the cultures they attempt to study, anthropologists build bridges to the outside world and try to tame the advocates of the latest version of “high culture”.

We have benefited from their rich descriptions of traditional cultures and from the recognition that the history of man is a history of remarkable ingenuity, adaptation and unspoken wisdom by those with limited resources or no visible symbols of worldly power. We may puzzle over the customs and practices that betray our norms of human dignity. Recently a report on the effort to reduce maternal mortality in the remote villages of Peru revealed that the women would only consent to giving birth in hospitals after Doctors recognized and allowed some of their traditional rituals to be practiced in the birthing rooms. Are we too superficial in our observations? We use import stores to dress ourselves and decorate our homes with the crafts of traditional people. But do we understand deeply the values and the ecology represented in the life-style of these remote indigenous peoples? Do we see their humanity and not just an image of a foreign culture?

Do we see the pain and hope they feel because of the cultural transitions brought upon them?

Currently, a great deal of attention is focused on the principle of assistance espoused by Greg Mortenson in his efforts to build schools in Central Asia. His is a commitment to go to “the end of the road” first and assist those absolutely without resources and who receive NO help from governments and NGOs. Without presuming that we are the bearers of cultural assistance, can we find a way to empathetically go to “the end of the road” relative to our psychological habitat and include the peoples of remote and disappearing cultures in our conceptions of the human community? Do not they have something to contribute to an emerging world culture? Is there not a richness and mystery to traditions that have survived so long? Perhaps, answers to some of these questions will emerge from our thoughtful participation in the seminar presented by Julie Campbell, a longstanding student of traditional cultures.

Institute of World Culture

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