

A Future For Ethnology: Applying the Anthropology of Omer Stewart

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Dr. Robert Hackenberg was awarded the Omer Stewart Award by HPSfAA for 1997. This award was presented at HPSfAA's annual meeting in Estes Park, in April of 1997. This is Dr. Hackenberg's response.

Opening Remarks

Your decision to present me with the Omer Stewart award has a bit of historical significance. I am the last cultural anthropologist in the Colorado department to have been employed by Omer while he was serving as Chairman. My job offer came not as the result of a national search but a friendship formed at the Lexington meetings of the SfAA in 1965 where we both presented our recent work on Native American tribal development: his on the Southern Ute and mine on the Papago. Our discussion continued in the bar after the session (where an endless flow of Kentucky bourbon was supplied *gratis* by the University), and on the flight back home. When we parted company at Chicago, I had the job.

Omer and I were both founding members of the High Plains Society in 1980, and it is fitting for me on this occasion to acknowledge the many substantial benefits I have derived from this organization. Your many contributions to my career advancement began in 1990 when I provided the Keynote Address, "Applied Anthropology for Tomorrow," at your annual meeting at the Bethlehem Center which you later published in your journal (Hackenberg 1990).

In the following year at Charleston, two distinguished members of our organization, Mary Granica and Mark Grey, recruited others from among my former students (now colleagues) to dedicate and present two sessions in my honor at the Memphis meetings of SfAA, held in 1992 and given the mysterious title, "Accountants Die in Bed". HPSfAA saw to it that these papers were published as a special *festschrift* issue (Granica 1994). It was preceded in your journal by my concluding remarks at Memphis, "Reflections on the Death of Tonto," (1993) which by now has become my best-known paper of the decade.

In 1995, Deward Walker and Carla Littlefield of High Plains conspired to designate me as Keynote Speaker at the Albuquerque meetings of the Society for Applied Anthropology and, once again, to publish my address entitled "Setting Up Shop in the Global Market Place" (Hackenberg 1995). Finally, last year, Don Stull, Mark Grey and Mary Granica (all High Plains members) worked their magic one more time to persuade SfAA to name Beverly and me as the joint recipients of the Malinowski Award to be presented in San Juan in March, 1998.

Since Omer Stewart was the recipient of the Malinowski Award in 1983, I can close this introduction by noting, once again, that I follow in his footsteps. So it is fitting that I should reflect on some aspects of his work in what follows here tonight. Perhaps I should begin by explaining my title, "A Future for Ethnology." From his first published work in Kroeber's series of Culture Element Distributions (Stewart 1941) to his last capstone volume, *History of the Peyote Religion* (Stewart 1987), Omer was an ethnologist. But definitely not of the archival variety. During the course of his long life he learned to turn the comparative method, the primary tool of ethnology, into an instrument for the practice of applied anthropology.

Omer Stewart and the Comparative Method

The comparative method has a long history of use and abuse among anthropologists. Boas (1896), in a famous essay on its so-called limitations, rejected it because of its identification with 19th century stage theories. These were little more than speculative attempts to formulate global processes of cultural evolution. Radcliffe-Brown condemned them with the label of "conjectural history." Boas sought to salvage both comparison and history by confining studies to

relationships between adjacent cultures. The unit of comparison was the culture trait described by field work among living tribal members, and "history" was taken to mean the paths over which traits were presumed to have been borrowed or exchanged. The method was given its definitive formulation by Sapir (1916) in "Time Perspective in Aboriginal American Culture," and its definitive application in Leslie Spier's monumental *Sun Dance of the Plains Indians* (1921).

When Kroeber assumed the chairmanship of the Berkeley department, he attempted to employ regional culture history on a grand scale by recording trait inventories of all western tribes of Native Americans and publishing them in the series mentioned above titled *Culture Element Distributions*. Each of Kroeber's (and Lowie's) graduate students were assigned to a tribe and the data they recovered were woven into a dissertation. Omer Stewart's assignment was the Northern Paiute, and his story became his first major publication. Because the tribes were perceived as vanishing under the impact of acculturation, there was a sense of urgency about this undertaking. Priceless information was being systematically recorded to serve as the raw material for hypothesis testing for centuries to come.

The comparative method of Boas, like those which preceded it, had fatal defects which have consigned it to the archives. First, it assumed that cultures could be treated as units of conformist behavior imposed on all their members. Hence Mead's (1933) (in)famous assertion that one member could be taken as a valid sample of a culture. When Sapir (1938) exploded this notion with his famous essay built around Two Crows, the Omaha Indian who consistently denied the ethnographic assertions of others, the assumption crumbled. Second, the method strove to record and report traits as they existed in that changeless and timeless era "before the coming of the white man." And so the myth of "the ethnographic present" came to life.

For the last half-century we have followed Omer Stewart in rejecting both of these assumptions. Instead, like Omer, we have first become preoccupied with the variations in behavior among individuals which is the source of culture change. Second, we have followed him in recording dated events pertaining to those individuals--the time series from which actual histories of change can be constructed. The

comparison of these histories, in turn, permits the recognition of cultural processes which, then and now, is the primary goal of applied social science.

This empirical and inductive path toward building the ethnographic record in order to formulate limited generalizations has been sanctified by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as grounded theory. Grounded theory, in turn, became the ancestor of the family of qualitative methods in which the present generation of graduate students is instructed. Despite the fact that he reached the age of 83 before departing this life in 1991, Omer worked and wrote right up to the end. And the subjects which preoccupied him justify designating him as a contemporary rather than a historical figure and deserve a reflective glance from us here tonight to see what we might learn from them.

Omer had a lifelong concern with three subjects which are featured in the headlines and television specials today: the preservation of the environment, the empowerment of local communities, and the issue of government accountability. I will offer a brief review of his cutting edge treatment of each of these subjects.

Omer first attracted national and international attention in the mid-1950s for an ecological hypothesis which would have done credit to his first professor, Julian Steward at the University of Utah. He developed a co-evolutionary argument which maintained that food collecting tribes determined the distribution and density of the plant and animal life on which they depended by their continuous introduction of fire into the environment.

His knowledge of the Intermountain West convinced him that edible seeds, forage grasses and pinon nuts could only thrive in the presence of occasional burning. The fires that escaped Indian camps and swept across the plains thinned competitive foliage and deposited nutrients contained in layers of ash.

His argument (Stewart 1954, 1956) enraged generations raised on the image of Smokey the Bear, urging one and all to prevent forest fires. Later research has proven him correct. It was the failure to implement a policy of controlled burning that led to the Yellowstone conflagration of a decade ago. In its wake the U.S. Forest Service now takes the position that many varieties of flora and fauna are in better shape

because of it. His advocacy of the beneficial uses of fire was his first venture into the field of public policy, an occupational area more supportive of anthropologists today than forty years ago.

Toward the end of his life Omer's work came to the attention of Henry Lewis, an ecological anthropologist at the University of Alberta. Henry, who visited us here and presented his research results several years ago, took the fire-ecology hypothesis to Australia and demonstrated its positive environmental impact in areas still occupied by aboriginal food collectors. Like Omer, he concluded that fire played a substantial role in maintaining a sustainable subsistence environment.

Omer Stewart and Community Empowerment

Omer was always available for a guest lecture on his best-known research subject: the peyote religion. At least some of us here today can half-close our eyes and see him coming through the door in his Ute head-dress, carrying his drum and wearing the special insignia of the Native American Church: a peyote button in his lapel. The highlight of his lecture was the performance of peyote songs for which he provided the accompaniment.

While the peyote religion was the subject of his research, the Native American Church was the object of his one-man crusade. Among Indian tribes from Oklahoma to the Southwest, small self-selected groups were forming as congregations of the peyote religion. The members pledged themselves to a strict code of personal behavior which included ending alcohol abuse. The ingestion of peyote was the key ritual sponsored by the Church, and the federal government had determined that it should be classified as a controlled substance--an illegal narcotic.

It was clear to Omer that there was no Church without peyote, and no effective treatment of Indian drinking other than the Church. To empower Native American communities of church members to continue treating themselves, he participated in a number of court cases brought against the government for suppression of religious freedom. And, as most of you know, he won. Once again, a research problem involving the use of the comparative method, supplemented with the historical record, emerged with important policy implications.

Perhaps because he was an active member of the ACLU, Omer contested one more issue of Native American empowerment. He fought for the right of Indians in federal prisons to practice religious services of their choice. And after another series of court appearances, he prevailed.

Omer Stewart on Government Accountability

To some, the history of relations between Indian tribes and the federal government describes a trail of broken treaties. Most of the discord was generated by the differential claimed to exist between lands aboriginally used or occupied and lands ultimately included in reservations. In 1946, Congress established the Indian Claims Commission to adjudicate these differences. While no lands were to be returned, tribes could claim compensation (dollar value) for their losses. Sums involved were substantial. An early award, made to the Uintah and Ouray Utes of eastern Utah in the 1950s, was \$30 million.

Anthropologists were retained by tribes as expert witnesses, and Omer Stewart offered to represent a number of tribes in the Great Basin. Claims in the Intermountain region presented special difficulties because most tribes were foragers without locations which could be designated as permanent residences. A further problem arose from the ICC's requirement that tribes demonstrate exclusive use of territories included in a compensation claim. Omer's skills as both ethnohistorian and comparativist were perfectly suited to assemble and present his evidence.

To my knowledge, Omer never lost a case. He was particularly satisfied by the outcomes of cases in which the defendant, the U.S. Department of Justice, was represented by Julian Steward, the acknowledged "final authority" on the tribes of the region, and his former teacher. Omer called attention to the work of the Commission in a number of journal articles and contributions to the popular press (Stewart 1970, 1978). His argument that the government must be held accountable for its actions, and particularly for presumed violations of the rights of minorities, has become a prominent policy position with the passing of the years.

The bridgehead established for tribes in the land claims cases has been broadened to include other

accountability issues. Anthropologists' testimony has been specially effective in the matter of access to ritual and ceremonial sites which are located on federal land beyond reservation boundaries. Both Deward Walker at Colorado, and Richard Stoffle and his team at Arizona, have perpetuated and expanded the work of Omer Stewart in this area. Once again, the work is comparative and historical with policy implications.

At the recent Seattle meetings of SfAA, I organized a session on applied aspects of political ecology--a framework within which much of this discussion would fit comfortably. The contributors were all staff members of the Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology. Nieves Zedeno, from Richard Stoffle's group, gave an excellent paper entitled "Landmark and Landscape: A Contextual Approach to the Management of American Indian Resources." It argues that Native American strategies for the use of a landscape are not confined to enclosed or bounded space, but also include external and discontinuous locations such as ceremonial sites. She argues for revision of federal policies to incorporate Indian concepts. Her data were drawn from historically grounded comparisons of the Northern and Southern Paiute. Omer would have been on his feet leading the applause.

And the issues surrounding government accountability to Native Americans ascended to a more inclusive level with the passage of the Native American Graves and Protection Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990. The law provides for the return of human remains and associated artifacts to tribes validating their claims with historical, archaeological or ethnographic evidence. Once again, applied anthropologists find themselves in demand.

Daniel Matthews, a recent recipient of a Ph.D. from CU-Boulder under Deward Walker's direction, wrote his dissertation on NAGPRA issues (Matthews 1997). They were raised in the course of a proposed settlement by the Bureau of Land Management with the Shoshone-Paiute tribes of the Upper Basin concerning remains and artifacts presently interred on federal land.

In his dissertation Matthews squarely confronts an anthropological dilemma. The process of repatriation could remove anthropological materials from laboratories and museums where they were available for scientific research. But the law takes the position

that NAGPRA recognizes the claims of the rightful heirs to these materials. As Matthews interprets it, human and civil rights of descendants are found to take priority over the objections of scientists and scholars. Once again, I am sure that Omer Stewart, despite his lifelong allegiance to anthropology, would have sided with the Shoshone-Bannock in this dispute.

As a footnote, I should add that both Nieves Zedeno and Daniel Matthews are Omer Stewart's intellectual grandchildren. For he worked with their academic parents, Richard Stoffle and Deward Walker, on research which involved the Northern and Southern Paiute, and the Shoshone-Paiute tribes. His methods, his policy concerns, and work with the peoples and cultures of greatest interest to him have taken on even greater vitality after his departure from the field. The tree he planted at the site of the HPSfAA meeting in Broomfield in 1990 to symbolize the vitality of this group may not have survived. But his living legacy continues to thrive and inspire others, even though they may be unaware of the extent of their debt. To Omer, that would not have been very important.

And the Future of Ethnology?

The comparative method, the platform on which ethnology has been erected, doesn't get a lot of fan mail these days. But, despite the best efforts of the postmodernists, it still has some advocates. My review has attempted to use the work of Omer Stewart to illustrate that the comparative approach, enriched by the historical record, can yield both processes and policy analysis. And policy recommendations which are based on this analysis are the business of applied anthropology.

One of the classics produced by an anthropologist during the present decade is Robert Netting's *Smallholders, Householders: Farm Families and Ecology of Intensive, Sustainable Agriculture* (Stanford, 1983). It is a heroic comparative historical undertaking. It draws upon carefully contextualized materials from three continents to support the argument that small-scale agriculture has not been eclipsed by corporate farming in terms of efficiency, productivity or sustainability. Its abundant policy implications for development planners earned its author an appointment to the National Academy of Sciences. Its opening chapter characterizes the work as "An Ethnological Essay."

As some of you know, Paul Bohannan has served me well as a source of concluding quotations for much of the past decade. So I was not surprised to turn to his latest book, *How Culture Works* (1995: 164-165), and find the following:

Comparison is a useful exercise because it allows social scientists and policy makers to examine the way different peoples, each with different cultural traditions, have handled problems similar to the one at hand . . . We can use the traditional anthropological tool of comparison as a mode for examining immensely important questions that haunt us today: how many times in history . . . has submerged ethnicity emerged when empires fall? What are the implications?

The comparative method has not been significantly used outside anthropology. But using it could help create a data base from which a more sophisticated social science could emerge.

The advantages of comparison are straightforward, but two considerations have to be examined. First of all, most anthropological comparisons have in the past been made on the basis of morphologically described structures rather than processes . . . We need, instead, the continuity of processes revealed by moving pictures. Second, comparisons should no longer be considered a goal in themselves--as the end product. Anthropologists must take an active role in the next step: the role of comparison in policy science . . . If they can do that they will be heard. If they can't, they have nothing worthwhile to say."

Omer Stewart is not the author of that statement which, at base, is a powerful defense of ethnology today. But he could have been.

Notes

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