

CONTENTMENT AND SUFFERING

CULTURE AND EXPERIENCE IN TORAJA

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-Book review by A. Kristiadji Rahardjo, MA

This interesting book is a result of the research conducted by Hollan and Wellenkamp in Toraja, South Celebes, 1982. It is a descriptive, person-centered ethnography of the Toraja that provides the central aspects of Toraja personal experience, including those relating to emotions, cognition, motivation, identity, and self. They also explore how and in what ways shared aspects of Toraja personal experience are related to their culture and society. This book focuses on how Toraja life is viewed and experienced from the individual's perspective. This book provides a particularly fruitful way of conducting field research in psychocultural anthropology.

This book is divided into two parts: 1) "basic psychocultural orientations", in which Hollan and Wellenkamp examine major themes in Toraja culture and experience, and 2) "suffering", in which they examine elements of Toraja discontent and suffering. In the first part, the authors present the discussion of religious, moral and philosophical orientations (chapter 1), a review and examination of focal interpersonal relationships (chapter 2), aspects of Toraja ethnopsychology: identity and self (chapter 3) and mental states and processes (chapter 4). In part two they examine indigenous conceptualizations of social and mental disorder and in other ways situate such phenomena both socially and culturally. They present the prevalent interpersonal concerns and anxieties (ch. 5), intrapersonal dysphoria and disorder, underscore that happiness and contentment can best be defined as the occasional and fleeting absence of suffering and hardship (ch. 6). Then, chapter 7 examines the ways in which Toraja villagers attempt to make sense of and cope with disorder and dysphoria. They sum up of

significant themes in Toraja culture and psychology and a discussion of how Toraja personal experience is both shaped by, and shapes, aspects of culture and society (ch. 8).

This book focuses primarily on shared aspects of Toraja personal experience, although it also describes elements of individual and intracultural variation as well. The purpose of this book is to suggest a way of examining personal experience cross-culturally.

Approach and paradigm

The approach that is used by Hollan and Wellenkamp is person-centered ethnography, which they explore how the Toraja life is viewed and experienced from the individual's perspective. It is a research approach in the psychocultural anthropology that reflects the interests of the field: 1) in the sociocultural influences on personal experience and individual psychology; and 2) in the personal and psychological influences on society and culture. The approach of psychocultural anthropology is a description and analysis of ethnopsychologies or indigenous conceptions of individual behavior and experience, including ideas and beliefs about the person, self, emotion, cognition, motivation, and other aspects of psychological process.

The focus of this research is on "experience-near concepts" that move someone closer to the personal experiences of the individual. The investigation of indigenous conceptions of personal experience must be complemented by the study of particular individuals' lives. A focus on particular individuals not only allows one to examine how people use public beliefs and symbols to make sense of their everyday experience, but it also allows one to explore aspects of personal experience that do not neatly conform to public, ideal conceptions (p. 7).

The importance of the methodological approach in psychocultural anthropology lies in documenting the varieties of indigenous psychologies, in

pointing out the futility of making “deep” psychological interpretations without a thorough knowledge and understanding of cultural context, and in broadening and correcting our own theories of human behavior and psychology (p. 7).

Method of research

The research that is conducted by Hollan and Wellenkamp, is based on an open interview and is combined with a standard ethnographic methods, including observations and interpretations of naturally occurring behavior in both ritual and everyday context of the respondents. They decide to choose the village of Paku Asu (in northwest Tana Toraja) as a research site and choose eleven villagers as respondents. In this research, they have explored the issues by asking individual respondents to reflect upon the respondents' life experiences, and by observing the ways in which the respondents use cultural and symbols to represent and make sense of their experiences. The researcher emphasizes the anthropological subjects as actors, actively and creatively engaged in the construction of meaning, rather than as passive recipients of a cultural tradition.

Although they suggest a spontaneity and personal reflection, they loosely structured the interviews around a checklist of topics. The checklist provides a minimal number of topics to be discussed with each respondent. They took the liberty of guiding conversation into the neglected area of interest and allowed the respondents to direct the flow of discussion. They tape-recorded all of the interviews with the respondents' permission.

The checklist, which covers a broad range of personal and social experiences, was amended to include experiences peculiar to the Toraja. The purpose in using the checklist is to insure that the interview materials from different individuals could be compared to one another and to similar data collected elsewhere (p. 9).

As part of the interview process, Holan and Wellenkamp also administer the Roschach test and TAT (Thematic Apperception Test) to each respondent, and they quote a few of these responses as well. However, they use the test results not as primary but as supplemental data. A considerable rapport with respondents is needed to administer psychological test and in-depth ethnographic work is essential to adequately interpret test results. They realize the challenges and limitations of the interview methodology and psychological test, but they believe that those provides one important means by which they can gather psychocultural data that is both sensitive to local conceptions of thought, emotion, and motivation, and yet standardized enough to allow for both intracultural and intercultural comparisons. By generating extensive verbatim transcript material of both the interviewer's questions and the respondent's answers, this format enables one to give direct, contextualized voice to the subjects of study that is beginning to be heard more in contemporary ethnographies (p. 10).

Conclusion and comments

This Hollan and Wellenkamp's book focuses on how Toraja life is viewed and experienced from the individual's perspective. It is a person-centered ethnography of Toraja, that explores the aspects of personal experiences (emotions, cognition, motivation, identity, and self). This book also investigates the emotional and cognitive "saliency" or "directive force" of cultural beliefs and symbols for particular actors. It shows that cultural beliefs and practices shape individuals' experience and behavior. It also show the important to realize that some aspects of a culture may be more instrumental in shaping personal experience than others, and that individuals may differ in the extent to which they "internalize" particular aspects of a culture.

The authors conclude that there are 17 themes or the personally salient aspects of life as experienced by the people of Paku Asu. In the remainder of the last chapter they explore a few of key themes in greater

detail, that are the emphasis on social harmony and nonaggression that coexist with interpersonal cautiousness and mistrust, the importance of emotional constraint, and the role of “emotion work” in maintaining such constraint, and the emphasis on suffering.

I am impressed for this book because it presents the person-centered ethnography of Toraja. This book is a result of the research conducted by Holland and Wellenkamp that is an excellent work in the field of psychocultural anthropology. Exactly, they could describe the personal experiences (including those relating to emotions, cognition, motivation, identity, and self) that are related to the culture and society of Toraja. The challenges and the limitations of the research or this book will not reduce its important meaning or the contribution for the ethnographical study. This book will be helpful for everyone who is interested on this study.

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